



## Workshop

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### “A Resolute Reading of Descartes”: Author Meets Critics

2–3 November 2022

In his “A Resolute Reading of Descartes” (2020), James Conant offers an original and thought-provoking new reading of Descartes’s challenging and controversial Creation Doctrine, along the lines of his “Resolute Reading of Wittgenstein.” While authors usually understand Descartes to be claiming in this doctrine that God could create the eternal truths—e.g., the laws of logic—in a totally different and (to us) unintelligible way, Conant argues that it should be read as only making a negative claim regarding our own abilities, not a positive one regarding God’s abilities. Accordingly, this doctrine should not be read as telling us anything about God’s ability. Conant also uses this reading to constitute the basis of Descartes’s evil demon scepticism, which makes it an instance of what he calls Kantian scepticism—as opposed to the dream scepticism, which is an instance of Cartesian scepticism. In this workshop, we propose to have both established and early career scholars engage with Conant’s resolute reading of Descartes and its historiographical implications and to have Conant himself respond to the critics.

#### Convenors

- Mahdi Ranaee (Universität Siegen)
- Stephan Schmid (Universität Hamburg)

#### Participants

- James Conant (The University of Chicago)
- Anil Gomes (University of Oxford)
- Stefanie Grüne (Freie Universität Berlin)
- Anat Schechtman (The University of Texas at Austin)
- Ariane Schneck (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München/Universität Bielefeld)

#### Venue

Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies | Jungiusstraße 11c | 20355 Hamburg | Room C319  
Please contact MCAS for registration and further information.

## Programme

Wednesday, 2 November 2022

<b>09:30–09:40</b>	<b>Welcoming Remarks</b> <i>Stephan Schmid (Universität Hamburg) and Mahdi Ranaee (Universität Siegen)</i>  <i>Chairs: Mary Peterson (Universität Hamburg) and Mahdi Ranaee (Universität Siegen)</i>
<b>09:40–11:10</b>	<b>Descartes’s Transcendental Deduction?</b> <i>Anil Gomes (University of Oxford)</i>
<b>11:10–11:30</b>	<b>Coffee Break (Room C315)</b>
<b>11:30–13:00</b>	<b>Descartes’s Ironic Rationalism? An Exploration of Conant’s Resolute Reading</b> <i>Stephan Schmid (Universität Hamburg)</i>
<b>13:00–14:00</b>	<b>Lunch Break (Room C315)</b>
<b>14:00–15:30</b>	<b>Logically Alien or Just Deceived? A Critique of Conant’s Reading of the First Meditation</b> <i>Mahdi Ranaee (Universität Siegen)</i>
<b>19:00</b>	<b>Dinner (“Abaton Bistro” Restaurant, Grindelhof 14a, 20146 Hamburg)</b> <i>For participants and invited guests only</i>

Thursday, 3 November 2022

*Chairs: Lukas Lang (Universität Hamburg) and Stephan Schmid (Universität Hamburg)*

**09:00–10:30**      **A Resolute Reading of Freedom and the Will?**  
*Ariane Schneck (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München/Universität Bielefeld)*

**10:30–10:45**      **Coffee Break (Room C315)**

**10:45–12:15**      **It All Depends: Infinity, Dependence, and Essence in Descartes’s Doctrine of the Eternal Truths**  
*Anat Schechtman (The University of Texas at Austin)*

**12:15–13:15**      **Lunch Break (Room C315)**

**13:15–14:45**      **Conant and Boyle on Kant’s Logic and the Laws of the Understanding**  
*Stefanie Grüne (Freie Universität Berlin)*

**14:45–15:15**      **Final Discussion**

**16:00**      **Coffee (“Pony Bar” Café and Bar, Allende-Platz 1, 20146 Hamburg)**



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**JEWISH SCEPTICISM**

## Abstracts

*Anil Gomes*

### **Descartes's Transcendental Deduction?**

James Conant's chapter "A Resolute Reading of Descartes" stresses the profound philosophical affinities between Descartes and Kant but notes, in passing, that these parallels "could be teased out in much more detail than would be appropriate here" (p. 509). My aim in this talk is to encourage Conant to do some of this teasing, in part by setting out one way in which one might try to find affinities between Descartes's project in the *Meditations* and Kant's project in his transcendental deduction of the categories. The starting point is Jim's observation that both Descartes and Kant share the thought that "philosophical reflection must take as its point of departure a spontaneous first-person point of view on myself from within my activity as a rational being" (p. 509). How close does Descartes get to Kant's project in the transcendental deduction and where do the differences lie? My hope is to explore some of the methodological similarities and differences between Kant and Descartes.

*Stefanie Grüne*

### **Conant and Boyle on Kant's Logic and the Laws of the Understanding**

In "Kant on Logic and the Laws of the Understanding," Matthew Boyle argues that Kant's conception of logic is less similar to Frege's conception than James Conant's "The Search for Logically Alien Thought" claims it to be. Boyle agrees with Conant that both Kant and Frege characterise logic as a science of the laws that the understanding should follow. Yet, as Boyle argues, in contrast to Frege, Kant takes it that this characterisation of logic is compatible with assuming that logic is a science of the laws that the understanding does in fact follow, as long as nothing interferes. Since our understanding is often influenced by sensibility, it is not always determined by its own laws. For this reason, Boyle's Kant can characterise logic as a science of the laws that the understanding should follow as well as a science of the laws that it does indeed follow, as long as it is not influenced by sensibility. In his reply to Boyle, Conant fully accepts and further elaborates this criticism.

In my commentary, I will argue that Boyle's and Conant's explanation for why the laws that logic investigates can be characterised not only as prescriptive but also as descriptive laws would not have been accepted by Kant.

*Mahdi Ranaee*

### **Logically Alien or Just Deceived? A Critique of Conant's Reading of the *First Meditation***

In his "Reply to Hamawaki," Conant offers a novel reading of the second sceptical argument of the *First Meditation*—what he calls the "evil demon hypothesis." According to this reading, this hypothesis raises the problem of the logical alien in an unusual form: Whereas in the familiar versions of the problem, the alien is imagined to be someone else, in the case of the "evil demon hypothesis" it is imagined to be the meditator herself. As I will argue, this way of reading the argument is both theologically and metaphysically loaded—for one thing, it assumes the Creation Doctrine. In this talk, I will offer an alternative reading of Descartes's second sceptical argument, which differs from Conant's in both its logical form and its metaphysical assumptions. In my reading, Descartes's sceptical argument does not raise a version of the problem of the logical alien, but a problem concerning the author of my origin. I will then contrast this reading with Conant's reading and use that opportunity to pose some critiques regarding his reading.

*Anat Schechtman*

### **It All Depends: Infinity, Dependence, and Essence in Descartes's Doctrine of the Eternal Truths**

Conant's multifaceted interpretation of Descartes's doctrine of the eternal truths centres on the notion of God as infinite, and hence as absolutely independent rather than dependent. According to Conant, a proper understanding of such (in)dependence, and so (by extension) the dependence of the eternal, necessary truths on God, yields the conclusion that God "cannot be shoehorned" by any modal operators, and thus that it is improper to say that God could—or could not—have made those truths false. While I agree that Descartes understands God's infinity in terms of absolute independence, it is not clear how Conant's interpretation accommodates Descartes's willingness to speak of God in modal terms, such as when (for example) Descartes says that God necessarily exists. I will draw on my previous work on the notions of infinity and independence to propose a different interpretation of the sense in which the eternal, necessary truths depend on God. This interpretation spotlights Descartes's

distinction between ontological dependence and causal dependence, where only the former is linked to essence. Attending to this distinction positions us to read Descartes as holding that just as created, finite substances depend on an infinite being, God, in a way that is consonant with both's substantiality, eternal truths depend on God in a way that is consonant with both's necessity.

*Stephan Schmid*

### **Descartes's Ironic Rationalism? An Exploration of Conant's Resolute Reading**

In his 1991 interpretation of Descartes's doctrine of eternal truths, Conant observed that his reading leads to the "irony" that the archetypical rationalist Descartes appears to "represent the position that even the most basic principles of reason are only contingently necessary truths." While Conant's resolute reading of Descartes (from 2020) frees Descartes's philosophy of *this* irony (since the resolutely read Descartes rejects the very question of the modal status of eternal and necessary truths), it renders Descartes's rationalism ironic in another way, or so I will argue. This is because on Conant's resolute reading, Descartes's principle of sufficient reason – his *ex nihilo nihil fit principle*, which is to guarantee the intelligibility of all things – turns out to be itself unintelligible since we cannot even sensibly ask why this principle holds rather than not, let alone understand why it holds.

*Ariane Schneck*

### **A Resolute Reading of Freedom and the Will?**

This contribution focuses on Conant's "resolute reading" as a methodology applied to Descartes. It first considers two senses in which Conant's reading of Descartes is resolute: 1) it takes seriously seemingly contradictory statements in Descartes without attempting to "explain away" one of the seemingly contradictory claims, and 2) it takes seriously Descartes's contention that one should not make positive or negative statements about things of which one has no means to acquire certain knowledge (e.g., what God could or could not have done before creation). After briefly going through Conant's resolute reading of Descartes's claims about the creation of the eternal truths and God's (in-)comprehensibility (and the connection between the two), I will apply the resolute reading as a methodology to Descartes's statements about human freedom and the human will.