

## The Creation of Necessity: Making Sense of Cartesian Modality

### Introduction

Descartes promotes two jointly puzzling theses that scholars have called, ‘peculiar’<sup>1</sup>, ‘strange’<sup>2</sup>, ‘incoherent’<sup>3</sup>, and ‘counter-intuitive’<sup>4</sup>:

- T1) God freely creates the eternal truths (i.e. The Creation Doctrine).
- T2) The eternal truths are necessarily true.

According to Descartes’ Creation Doctrine, God freely chooses which truths (including those of logic and mathematics) to make necessary, contingent or merely possible. However, the Creation Doctrine (CD) makes the acceptance of *T2* tenuous for CD implies that God could have acted otherwise—instantiating an entirely different set of necessary truths. Intuitively, though, this seems to make the eternal truths not really necessary after all! Commentators have sought various ways to harmonize these two theses without undoing Descartes’ other important claims.<sup>5</sup> Some have argued that Descartes did not hold to *T1* throughout his career.<sup>6</sup> Others have rejected *T2*, arguing that for Descartes, there are no necessary truths.<sup>7</sup> In the paper,

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Jolley, *The Light of the Soul: Theories of Ideas in Leibniz, Malebranche, and Descartes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> E.M, Curley, “Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths,” *The Philosophical Review* 93, No. 4, 1984: 569-597.

<sup>4</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Does God have a Nature?* Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980. Cited by Dan Kaufman, “Descartes’s Creation Doctrine and Modality,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 80, 2002, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Namely, Descartes’ *a priori* physics, his clear statements that God is not a deceiver, his view that clear and distinct ideas are a guide to truth, and Descartes’ arguments for the existence of God.

<sup>6</sup> A. Koyre, *Essai sur l’idée de Dieu et les preuves de son existence chez Descartes* (Paris, 1922), 19-21. Cited by Harry Frankfurt, “Descartes on the Creation of Eternal Truths,” *The Philosophical Review* 86, No. 1, 1977, 36-57.

<sup>7</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “Descartes on the Creation of Eternal Truths,” *The Philosophical Review* 86, No. 1, 1977, 36-57.

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“Descartes’s Theory of Modality,” Jonathan Bennett seeks to reconcile *T1* and *T2* by relativizing modality to human understanding. Bennett writes, “I submit that our modal concepts should be understood or analyzed in terms of what does or does not lie within the compass of our ways of thinking.”<sup>8</sup> So for Bennett, ‘impossible’ merely means that humans are unable to conceive otherwise: “‘impossible that P’ means that no human can conceive of P’s obtaining while having P distinctly in mind; and similarly for P’s possibility and its necessity.”<sup>9</sup> By making modality subjective, Bennett is able to make room for CD. He writes:

Given that all modal truths are at bottom truths about what we can conceive, and given that God made us how we are (this being a truism for Descartes), it follows that God gives modal truths their status as truths. He made it necessarily true that  $2+2=4$  by making us unable to conceive otherwise.<sup>10</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Although, Bennett’s attempt to reconcile *T1* and *T2* has many advantages, namely its ability to handle what he calls the “Bootstraps Problem,” it suffers from two fatal flaws: First, on Bennett’s view, the eternal truths are not truly eternal; and second, the eternal truths depend on human perception for their necessity—a view which Descartes explicitly denies. An additional concern for Bennett’s view is that it entails that Descartes overlooks the relationship between conceivability and actuality, silently embracing a brand of naturalized epistemology. Bennett attributes a kind of schizophrenia to Descartes because he never explicitly faces the consequences of his alleged modal conceptualism:

By keeping voluntarism [or CD] out of [the *Meditations*], Descartes helped hide from himself the split in his thought. Had he let it in, it would have...compelled him to become explicitly clear about how indubitability relates to truth. Perhaps Descartes was subliminally aware of this, that

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Bennett, “Descartes’ Theory of Modality,” *The Philosophical Review* 103, No. 4, 1994, 647.

<sup>9</sup> Bennett, *ibid.*, 647.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, *ibid.*, 649.

being why voluntarism does not show up in the *Meditations* or either of its cousins—the *Discourse on the Method* and the *Principles of Philosophy*.<sup>11</sup>

This is not exactly the most charitable reading of Descartes. We would hope that Descartes did not overlook the sweeping, systematic consequences of his supposed conceptualism. So all other things being equal, one might wish to avoid this result by searching for a different way to reconcile *T1* and *T2*. For the reasons listed above, I will argue that Bennett's interpretation cannot be right. After considering objections, I will offer my own reading of Descartes which reconciles *T1* and *T2* and avoids the problems that plague Bennett's account. But before proceeding, let us examine the textual evidence for *T1* and *T2*.

#### *The Creation Doctrine*

I have asserted in *T1* above that God freely creates the eternal truths. As stated above, this is part of Descartes' Creation Doctrine but what exactly does CD entail and how does it generate the difficulties mentioned above? One important part of the Creation Doctrine is that all things depend on God. Descartes writes in the *Sixth Replies*, "...there is nothing whatsoever that does not depend on [God]. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good" (CSM 2:293)<sup>12</sup>. Another important aspect of the Creation Doctrine is that God is the efficient cause of all things.

Descartes writes the following in a letter to Mersenne: "You ask by what kind of causality God

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<sup>11</sup> Bennett, *ibid.*, 652-653.

<sup>12</sup> All references to Descartes' writings come from either CSM: John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Duglad Murdoch (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volumes I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) or CSMK: John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Duglad Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

has established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as He created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause" (CSMK 3:25).

Last, and most importantly for our purposes, God freely creates the eternal truths. For Descartes, the concept of freedom was quite different from the received view (or St. Thomas' view).<sup>13</sup> For Thomas, God cannot help willing what is good, true and beautiful because these eternal truths are part of God's very nature and 'reside' in His intellect. Therefore, when God chooses to create, the choice to do so is free, but the choice of eternal truths is fixed by God's nature. In short, given the choice to create, God is not able to make the eternal truths other than what they are. For Descartes, this limits God's freedom and power and in addition, threatens His simplicity.<sup>14</sup> Because of this, Descartes believed that 'indifference' was required for divine freedom. He writes in the *Sixth Replies*, "As for the freedom of the will...It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen..."(CSM 2:291). Descartes goes on to explain that if God had beliefs about what was "good or true" before God willed them to be, He would be impelled by his beliefs to create accordingly and therefore, He would not be truly free:

...it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. I am

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<sup>13</sup> I label Thomas' position as the traditional view although other scholastics (Scotus and Suarez) differed in their creation doctrines.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Frankfurt argues that Descartes might have been motivated by concerns about God's simplicity when he formulated his Creation Doctrine: Descartes was concerned that by giving logical or temporal priority to God's intellect in creation, this entailed more than a distinction of reason in God. Therefore, Descartes might have formulated CD as a response to older scholastic views that he believed threatened God's simplicity.

not speaking here of temporal priority: I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of rationally determined reason' as they call it, such that God's idea of the good impelled him to choose one thing rather than another. (CSM 2:291-2)

Descartes is careful to emphasize the 'simultaneity' of God's believing and willing so that one will not necessitate the other. Therefore, for Descartes, God selects the eternal truths arbitrarily (or more fairly 'indifferently'): God is free to "make it not true that all radii of the circle are equal—just as free as He was not to create the world" (CSMK 3:25). The result of the doctrine of divine indifference is that God's power and freedom is unlimited. God is free to instantiate whatever mathematical, logical and moral truths he wishes. As we see in this selection from a 1644 letter Mesland, God even was free not to create the law of non-contradiction:

"The power of God cannot have any limits...[This] shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore he could have done the opposite" (CSMK 3:235).

And for Descartes, the result of God willing the law of non-contradiction, is that it 'becomes' necessary.

### *The Necessity of Eternal Truths*

In addition to being freely created, Descartes also believed that the eternal truths are necessarily true. In a 1640 letter to Mesland, Descartes writes that God willed "that some truths should be necessary" (CSMK 235). In addition, Descartes describes the eternal truths, such as the truths of geometry, as having "a determined nature, or essence, or form...which is immutable and eternal" (CSM 2:45). Although, it is important to note that Descartes probably didn't think of 'possible worlds' in the same way as contemporary metaphysicians, there are

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texts where Descartes speaks of the eternal truths holding in all possible worlds. For example, Descartes writes in the *Discourse on Method*, “I showed what the laws of nature were, and... to show that they are such that, even if God created many worlds, there could not be any in which they failed to be observed” (CSM 1:132). In addition to the passages listed above, there is also systematic, inter-textual evidence for Descartes’ belief in the necessity of eternal truths.<sup>15</sup> As E. M. Curley points out, Descartes’ commitment to true and immutable natures in the ontological argument, his acknowledgement that we clearly and distinctly perceive necessary truths, and his commitment to the *a priori* in his physics would all be undermined if the eternal truths were not truly necessary.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, in order to honor and not destabilize many of Descartes’ views, we must also accept *T2*.

#### *Bennett’s Conceptual Analysis of Modality*

As mentioned above, Bennett seeks to reconcile *T1* and *T2* through relativizing modality to human perception. He argues that since what is necessary is defined by what humans perceive as necessary, then God’s indifference in creation does not undermine the strong modal status that necessary truths require. To support this claim, Bennett points out that throughout Descartes writings is an “intensely subjectivist strand, in which issues about what is really the case are displaced by or even equated with issues about what to believe or about what can be believed.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Descartes stated quest in the *Meditations* is to find

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<sup>15</sup> Dan Kaufman, “Descartes’s Creation Doctrine and Modality,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 80, No.1, 2002, 24-41.

<sup>16</sup> E.M. Curley, *ibid*, 547.

<sup>17</sup> Bennett, *ibid.*, 651.

indubitable propositions to form a solid base for knowledge. So Descartes's works often emphasize perceptions of truth over truth *simpliciter*:

We should think that *whatever conflicts with our ideas* is absolutely impossible and involves a contradiction. (Emphasis Mine—CSMK 3:202)

There is no point in asking by what means God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight, and so on; for I declare that *this in unintelligible to us*. (Emphasis mine—CSM 2:294).

Also, in texts such as the following letter to Arnauld, Bennett argues that when God wills certain modal 'propositions,' what God is really doing is willing a determinate set of human mental faculties:

...I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or that one and two should not be three. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or an aggregate of one and two which is not three, and that such things involve a contradiction in my conception. (CSMK 3:358)

Bennett argues that Descartes is purposely pairing the statement: "It is not impossible for God to make an uphill without a downhill" with an illustration of that statement: "we cannot conceive of an uphill without a downhill."<sup>18</sup> According to Bennett, the pairing leads us to believe that the truth value of modal propositions is dependent on the human mind.

One key benefit of Bennett's interpretation, is that it addresses the 'Bootstraps' Problem—a problem that plagues all non-conceptualist interpretations, according to Bennett. The problem is that if God were free to choose any set of eternal truths, then God is then able to select those truths that guarantee *Himself* necessary existence. The flip-side of this, though, is that God was also free to choose his own *non*-existence. Descartes would have explicitly

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<sup>18</sup> Bennett, *ibid.*, 645.

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rejected such reasoning; but the difficulty is finding a principled and textually plausible way to insulate God's person from Descartes' Creation Doctrine. For Bennett, God's necessity just consists in our inability to conceive of God's non-existence. The Bootstraps problem is not a problem on Bennett's interpretation because it is meaningless for the conceptualist to ask if it is *ontologically* possible for God to bring about his own non-existence. Why? Namely, on a conceptualist framework, humans are not able to ask these questions. Some may object that this is not really a solution at all; because what is in question is God's modal ontology. But, to ask such a question is to pre-suppose non-conceptualism or commit a category mistake. Although it might be a misnomer to call Bennett's interpretation a 'solution' to the Bootstraps problem, it does at least untie that particular knot for Descartes. However, as we shall see next, by untying this knot, Bennett creates some additional tangles for himself.

#### *Objections to Bennett's View*

Although Bennett's interpretation has much in its favor, textual support, an interpretation that takes both *T1* and *T2* into account, and a solution to the 'Bootstraps' Problem, it suffers from some serious difficulties. As mentioned above, if Bennett's view is correct, Descartes would be guilty of ignoring the question of how our perceptions of necessity are actually connected to reality.<sup>19</sup> We won't rehearse this objection again, but will move on to two, more serious objections: First, on Bennett's view, the eternal truths are not eternal and second, the eternal truths are not dependent on God, but on his creatures. First, if the modal status of propositions depends on human perception alone, then the eternal truths cannot be

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<sup>19</sup> And if they are not, God is a deceiver.

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eternal for the obvious reason that humans are finite. This is a serious departure from Descartes' intentions. He is clear that the eternal truths have been true for all times (and/or have been timelessly true). And second, Descartes is clear that the eternal truths depend on God alone and not on his creatures. However, on Bennett's interpretation, the necessity of eternal truths depends on the persons who perceive them; their necessity is not dependent on God, but on created beings. Descartes, however, is clear that there is no thing that is not dependent on God.

The following texts provide evidence both for the eternity of the eternal truths, and their sole dependence on God: Descartes writes that "...we should not suppose that eternal truths 'depend on the human intellect or on other existing things'; *they depend on God alone*, who as the supreme legislator has ordained them from *eternity*" (Emphasis mine—CSM 2:293). Again Descartes is unequivocal about the dependence of all things on God when he writes, "...there is nothing whatsoever that does not depend on [God]. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good" (CSM 2:293). Additional evidence for the eternity and divine dependence of the eternal truths can be found in the *Fifth Meditation*:

When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determined nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is *immutable and eternal*, and which is not invented by me *nor does it depend on my mind*. (Emphasis mine—CSM 2:44-45)

And in Descartes' First Letter to Mersenne, he writes:

The mathematical truths that you call *eternal* have been laid down by God and *depend on him entirely*, no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed, to say that these truths are independent

of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and subject him to the Styx and the Fates (Emphasis mine—CSMK 3:23).

And in the Second Letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes:

The *eternal* truths...are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independently of him. If men really understood the sense of their words they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to God's knowledge of it...So we must not say this if God did not exist nonetheless these truths would be true; for the existence of God is the first and most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all others derive. It is easy to be mistaken about this because most people do not regard God as a being who is infinite and beyond our grasp, the sole author *on whom all things depend*. (CSMK 3:24)

So from the above, it is clear that Bennett's view cannot be right because the eternal truths must be both eternal and dependent on God alone.

Bennett, however, is not without a response. He argues that the first objection misunderstands the nature of his conceptualist account of modality. When the critic wonders if the eternal truths are actually/ontologically eternal, this very question presupposes a non-conceptualist understanding of modality. The conceptualist cannot countenance such a question: "Anything we say now about the modal status that a proposition had or does or will have, or would have if..., must be determined by our actual present intellectual limits."<sup>20</sup> Given these limits, the eternal truths *are* eternal—humans cannot conceive of a time when the eternal truths did not or will not hold. According to Bennett, this is all the content we are entitled to give the concept of eternity.

Although, conceptualism about modality may be a coherent position deserving of defense, it is a different question whether or not Descartes himself was a conceptualist. It seems that the most natural reading of the text (CSM 2:44-45, CSMK 3:23-24), would lead any

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<sup>20</sup> Bennett, *ibid.*, 664.

non-philosophically motivated reader to conclude that Descartes literally believed that the eternal truths have been true and will be true eternally.

Bennett does not directly respond to the second objection (most likely because his defense would be parallel to the defense already given above<sup>21</sup>) but focuses on a text that seems to explicitly contradict his position:

“Hence we should not suppose that eternal truths ‘depend on the human intellect or on other existing things’; they depend on God alone, who is the supreme legislator, has ordained them from eternity”

Bennett argues that Descartes only appears to contradict his conceptualist position, because he is replying to a critic who has asked if the “truths depend solely upon the intellect while it is thinking of them, or on existing things, or else they are independent...”<sup>22</sup> (CSM 2:281).

According to Bennett, Descartes’ response is that they do not depend on the human intellect *in this way*—while the intellect is thinking of the eternal truths. So he concludes that Descartes only appears to say that the eternal truths do not depend on the human intellect, but in fact, Descartes is only denying that they depend on the intellect while it is thinking of them.

Bennett’s reading of the above text is questionable: if Descartes wanted to say that the eternal truths depend on human perception and humans in turn depend on God, Descartes was philosophically sophisticated enough to unequivocally state this. Even if one grants that this is a plausible reading of this single text, Bennett doesn’t address all the other texts that seem to

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<sup>21</sup> If the eternal truths do not exist apart from created minds, then they cannot be independent of God. Because, as we already know, human minds are dependent on God. So it is not the case that the eternal truths exist independently of God. Perhaps it is for this reason that Bennett focuses on the single text where Descartes explicitly denies the dependence of the eternal truths on minds.

<sup>22</sup> This is Bennett’s translation of the Sixth Objections (CSM 2:281)

clearly state that the eternal truths depend on God alone (CSM 2:44-45, CSMK 3:23-24). It is strange that Bennett thinks that this single text is the only truly problematic text as the overall impression one receives from reading Descartes' theology is that everything, including the eternal truths depend on God.

There is a better way to account for the subjectivism that Bennett observes in Descartes. The first reason why Descartes often speaks in subjectivist language is because his project of methodological doubt required it. Bennett notes that the passages such as the above prioritize human subjective impressions: "Everything which *I...understand* is ...created by God so as to correspond...with *my understanding of it*" (CSM 2:54). It sounds at first as if God creates the world to match our perceptions. But this is taking Descartes too literally. Given the supremacy of God in Descartes' theology, it is unlikely that Descartes intended this interpretation. There is another explanation for the "intensely subjectivist strand"<sup>23</sup> that we find in Descartes. Descartes stated objective is to find solid, indubitable propositions on which to base human knowledge. If Descartes took the reliability of his perceptual faculties as basic, then there would be no need for that same level of subjective scrutiny that we see in the *Meditations*. In short, Descartes project of methodological doubt explains the subjective language that Bennett observes.

Second, it is the fact that certain things are necessary that we cannot conceive of them otherwise, not the other way around. Bennett has the causal direction backwards: Our concepts are not what 'create' necessity, but it is because God willed certain propositions to be

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<sup>23</sup> Bennett, *ibid.*, 651.

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necessary that we conceive certain things as necessary. Our understanding is constrained precisely because God has made certain things impossible (as well as possible, contingent, necessary etc.). Since God is not a deceiver, God is able to fashion our perceptual faculties in such a way so that they will correspond to what is real, modally or otherwise: "Everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it" (CSM 2:54). The reason our subjective modal impressions are the way they are is because God made modality the way it is. This accounts for the subjective-sounding language in a more textually accurate way.

*An Alternate Account of Cartesian Modality*

A more accurate interpretation of Cartesian modality would ideally embrace both *T1* and *T2*, while giving a plausible answer to the 'Bootstraps' problem. It was the original difficulty of reconciling *T1* and *T2* that motivated Bennett's conceptualism. But Bennett's route is not textually open to us. Therefore, there must be a way to coherently embrace both *T1* and *T2* while remaining a realist about modal truths. In order to bring the nature of the contradiction before our minds, let us suppose that the corollary of *T1* is *A* and the corollary of *T2* is *B*:

T1) God freely creates the eternal truths.  
A) God could have made it so that  $2+2 \neq 4$ .<sup>24</sup>

T2) The eternal truths are necessarily true.  
B) It is necessarily true the  $2+2= 4$ .

There is not an explicit contradiction in embracing *T1* and *T2* or *A* and *B* above. However, *A* does generate a contradiction with *B* if it is in fact the case that *A* entails *A'*:

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<sup>24</sup> Descartes writes that God could have made  $1 + 3 \neq 4$  and  $2 \times 4 \neq 8$ . (CSM 2:294, CSMK 3:358)

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A<sub>1</sub>) God could have made it so that  $2+2 \neq 4$ ,

A<sub>2</sub>) If God could have made it so that  $2+2 \neq 4$  then it is/ 'was' possible for God to make  $2+2 \neq 4$ .

A<sub>3</sub>) It is possible that  $2+2 \neq 4$ .

A') Therefore, it is not necessary that  $2+2=4$ .

Given A' and B, there is a clear contradiction:

A') It is not necessarily true that  $2+2=4$ .

B) It is necessarily true the  $2+2=4$

Stated in this way, A' and B involve an explicit contradiction. It seems that it cannot both be necessarily and *not* necessarily true that  $2+2=4$ .

For Descartes A' and B are not contradictory. This is because of the way that Descartes uses the modal terms that are involved in the supposed contradiction. In short, the modal terms Descartes uses are indexed to God's willing. So the sense in which Descartes uses, 'possible' or 'could' depends on what relation the term bears to God's willing. For example, in passages where Descartes is specifically addressing God's freedom in creation, modal terms used should be understood as indexed *sans* God's willing of the eternal truths. In other words, by formulating the Creation Doctrine, Descartes is imagining God 'before' He has willed what is to be necessary. Speaking in this way A' is true: God could have made it so that  $2+2 \neq 4$  and so it is not necessarily<sub>1</sub> that  $2+2=4$ . However, God has timelessly willed that  $2+2=4$  so *cum* God's willing the eternal truths, it is necessarily<sub>2</sub> that  $2+2=4$ . This makes B also true. So given the adjusted meanings of necessarily<sub>1</sub> and necessarily<sub>2</sub>, A' and B do not involve a contradiction:

A') It is not necessarily<sub>1</sub> true that  $2+2=4$ .

B) It is necessarily<sub>2</sub> true the  $2+2=4$ .

I am not accusing Descartes sloppy equivocation because Descartes only uses necessity<sub>1</sub> when he is speculating about divine freedom (or when he speaks about what is possible for God).

Because of this, the Descartes scholar can make a principled distinction between the two senses of 'necessity' that Descartes uses.

Some might argue that 'necessity<sub>2</sub>' is not what we mean when we call something 'necessary'. If a proposition could have been otherwise, then it is not really necessary.

Although we might wonder if Descartes' notion of 'necessity' is robust enough for us, Descartes would have been satisfied with his account of modality. This is because for Descartes, God's willing something to be a certain way is sufficient for it to be that way. When God willed  $[\ ]P$ , His will guaranteed that  $[\ ]P$ . So, necessity<sub>2</sub> is real necessity for Descartes. Some might object that Descartes is cheating—that his explanation seems cheap and unsatisfying. Descartes, however, is not being disingenuous. In fact it is what we should expect of Descartes given his Creation Doctrine—that all things originate from the will of God.<sup>25</sup> Descartes scholar, Dan Kauffman makes the excellent point that to expect to know why ' $[\ ]P$ ', beyond that God willed that ' $[\ ]P$ ', is to "expect something to which we are not entitled" because the question "Why did God do  $a$ ?" is in principle, unanswerable."<sup>26</sup> The question is unanswerable because if God had a reason for willing ' $[\ ]P$ ', then God would not be indifferent with respect to 'P'. Therefore, for Descartes, God's will is what distinguishes necessarily<sub>1</sub> 'P' and necessarily<sub>2</sub> 'P'. To require more of Descartes is to commit a category mistake.

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<sup>25</sup> Dan Kaufman, "God's Immutability and the Necessity of Descartes's Eternal Truths," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43, No. 1, 2005, 1-19.

<sup>26</sup> Kaufman, *ibid.*, 18-19.

If the above account of necessity is not convincing, there is another, related way to reconcile  $A'$  and  $B$ : this involves the way that we understand the phrase 'not true' in  $A'$  above. When Descartes speaks of what God could have timelessly willed, Descartes is speaking of a 'time' when nothing (short of God's existence) had a truth value. On CD one can infer that 'before' God's decision to will, all truth values were undefined. So for example, one might ask if  $2+2$  'did' equal 4 *sans* God willing it to be so; but since this proposition did not exist, it had no truth value. So  $A'$  is correct:  $\neg(2+2 \neq 4)$ , but not because it is false that  $\neg(2+2 \neq 4)$ , but because it is undefined that  $\neg(2+2 \neq 4)$ .  $A'$  and  $B$  seem contradictory because we are thinking in terms of 2-valued logic, but in situations like the one that Descartes is considering, 3-valued logic is called for.

In Saul Kripke's work on modality, he developed a 3-valued logic that is applicable to descriptions of modality in Descartes' Creation Doctrine. For Kripke, "'necessarily  $Fa$ ' means ' $a$  is  $F$  in every world where  $a$  exists.'" <sup>27</sup> So worlds where  $a$  does not exist, do not count against the necessity of  $Fa$ . So the world where God has not yet willed any proposition is a world where  $2+2 \neq 4$  because this proposition does not 'yet' exist. Necessarily  $2+2=4$ , is true because on Kripke's system of logic we are allowed to ignore worlds with empty domains—namely the world that existed *sans* God's willing mathematical propositions. Therefore,  $A'$  and  $B$  can both be true in 3-valued logical systems such as Kripke's.

### *The 'Bootstraps' Problem*

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<sup>27</sup> Gramme Forbes, *An Introduction to Modal Logic*, unpublished manuscript.

Last, what might we say about the Bootstraps problem? Could it be that, Descartes thought God was indifferent with respect to his own existence? Could God have brought it about that He did not exist? It seems that Descartes would have made every attempt to block this undesirable consequence of his Creation Doctrine. But he does not explicitly address this issue. There could be three reasons why Descartes did not address this: 1) Descartes overlooked this consequence of his Creation Doctrine 2) Descartes thought that the answer was obvious or 3) Descartes did not state the implications of CD because he was afraid of being charged with heresy. Descartes was too good of a philosopher to overlook such major implications for his view; therefore, either option 2 or 3 is likely. I will not embrace 2 or 3, but will argue that either option represents a solution to the 'Bootstraps' problem. It will be sufficient for our purposes to show that either 2 or 3 will work because my goal is just to demonstrate that there are better options than Bennett's conceptualism.

First, it is plausible that Descartes meant to have CD apply to God's own person. On this view God was indifferent with respect to his own existence: God was free to bring about His necessary existence or was free to bring about His own non-existence. There are texts that imply that Descartes must have meant this. In the *Fifth Meditation* Descartes' explains that our understanding of the necessity of God's existence is like the necessity of certain geometrical properties:

Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one that I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number. And my understanding that it belongs to his nature that he always exists is no less clear and distinct than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature (CSM 2:45).

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In the above text, our understanding of the necessity of certain mathematical truths is being paired with our understanding of God's necessary existence. However, as we have seen above, God could have brought it about that  $2+2\neq 4$ . This text seems to imply that if God's existence and the existence of certain mathematical properties are similar, then God could also have also brought about His own non-existence. This view has the advantage of straightforward consistency—Descartes does not need to make an exception for God's person in CD. Although this view seems to diminish God's supremacy, Descartes might argue that limiting God's freedom/power in any way (even his freedom to bring about his own non-existence) is limiting God's supremacy.

There is a second option. There are also hints in Descartes' writings that he did not believe that the Creation Doctrine applied to God's own existence. For instance, Descartes writes to Mersenne that "the existence of God is the first and most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all the others proceed" (CSMK 3:24). This seems to imply that God's existence is immune from the effects of CD—that God was not indifferent with respect to his own existence. Descartes also seemed to think (as can be seen in the above texts) that God could not have brought it about that there was a class of things that existed and did not depend on God's conservation. So Descartes also might have believed that God was not indifferent about the dependence of all things on Him. Another reason why we might believe that the above two propositions represent a higher-order necessity for Descartes, is that his argument for the existence of God depends on these propositions being true. If it were possible for God to instantiate the eternal truths and then bring about His own non-existence, then Descartes'

argument for God's existence<sup>28</sup> in the *Third Meditation* would fail. It might seem *ad hoc* for Descartes to make an exception to CD for God's existence. However, this exception is consistent with Descartes' theological views. God's existence and the dependence of all things on God was a foundational belief for Descartes. There are some beliefs that one takes as basic that cannot be further analyzed due to vicious regresses. For Descartes God was the absolute ground of being.

#### *Conclusion*

Bennett's approach to Cartesian modality is misplaced: One does not have to resort to conceptualism about modality in order to explain the subjective language found in Descartes or to reconcile Descartes' Creation Doctrine with the necessity of the eternal truths. After showing that Bennett's argument implies that Descartes held the non-eternality of the eternal truths and the independence of the eternal truths from God, I offered two arguments reconciling the Creation Doctrine with the necessity of the eternal truths. First, I showed that if one understands Descartes' use modal terms as indexed to God's willing then apparent contradictions vanish. Second, if one understands the truth value of modal propositions as non-bivalent (or as true, false and undefined), then one can also unravel the apparent contradiction. After arguing that one can reconcile Descartes' Creation Doctrine and the necessity of the

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<sup>28</sup> The argument for God's existence in the *Third Meditation* grounds God's existence is the dependence of all things on God.

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eternal truths without Bennett's conceptualism, I addressed the notorious 'Bootstraps' problem. I argue that there is textual evidence for two, opposite interpretations that 'solve' the 'Bootstraps' problem. Although, there is not enough space in this paper for a full-scale analysis of this problem, the point is that one does not need to resort to conceptualism in order to offer a consistent interpretation of Descartes.