

God's Immutability and the Necessity of Descartes's Eternal Truths

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DESCARTES'S DOCTRINE OF THE CREATION of the eternal truths (henceforth "the Creation Doctrine") has been thought to be a particularly problematic doctrine, both internally inconsistent and detrimental to Descartes's system as a whole. According to the Creation Doctrine, the eternal truths, such as the truths of mathematics and those concerning true and immutable natures, are freely created by God.¹ The Creation Doctrine has led several scholars to think that Descartes held (or was committed to) the view that the eternal truths are not necessary truths; in fact, there are *no* necessary truths if Descartes is correct.²

In this paper, I employ the following abbreviations:

- AT René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996). Cited by volume and page number.
- CSM René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1 & 2, John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Cited by volume and page number.
- CSMK René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volume III, John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Anthony Kenny, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Cited by page number.
- ST Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae* (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1964–81).

In some cases, my translation of AT differs from CSM/CSMK.

¹ In the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes lists "the proposition[s] *Nothing comes from nothing*, . . . *it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time; What is done cannot be undone; He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks*" as examples of eternal truths (AT VIII 23–24; CSM I 209). And in the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne, Descartes adds mathematical truths to the set of eternal truths. So, included in the set of eternal truths are strictly logical truths (e.g., it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time), conceptual truths (e.g., he who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks), synthetic *a priori* truths (e.g., nothing comes from nothing), and the truths of mathematics.

² For instance, Harry Frankfurt, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977): 36–57; Timothy Cronin, "Eternal Truths in the Thought of Descartes and of His Adversary," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4 (1960): 553–59, and *Objective Being in Descartes and Suarez* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1966). For arguments against this thesis, see Edwin Curley, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984): 569–97; and Dan Kaufman, "Descartes's Creation Doctrine and Modality," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 80 (2002): 24–41.

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In fact, however, Descartes held both of the following.

- (1) The eternal truths are freely created by God.
- (2) The eternal truths are necessarily true.

That Descartes held (1) is uncontroversial; in fact, it is the characteristic thesis of his Creation Doctrine. However, his commitment to (2) is more controversial. I believe the controversy surrounding (2) arises precisely because Descartes' acceptance of (1) is so uncontroversial. That is, some have thought that his acceptance of (1) eliminates any possibility of accepting (2). This view is mistaken. In several texts, it is clear that Descartes believes that the eternal truths are necessarily true; this is especially noticeable in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland (AT IV 118; CSMK 235). The task, then, is to account for the necessity of the eternal truths within the confines of the Creation Doctrine; that is, to explain the fact that (2) is true, given that (1) is true.³ Unfortunately, Descartes says precious little about this issue. To make matters worse, there is a scarcity of treatments of this issue in the literature; and the literature that does address this issue tends to treat it quickly and vaguely, perhaps recognizing the difficulty of addressing it in any detail. In this paper, I attempt to remedy this unfortunate situation.

I begin by examining the most prominent interpretation of Descartes's explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths: the Immutability Interpretation.⁴ This interpretation is given by Margaret Osler and most prominently by Edwin Curley.⁵ According to this interpretation, the eternal truths are necessarily true because they are created by God, and God's will is immutable. I will show that this interpretation is incorrect: It is either too weak to explain the necessity of the eternal truths or it is too strong in that it would commit Descartes to necessitari-

³ Notice that this task differs from the task of simply showing that (1) and (2) are *consistent*, a task which has been accomplished by Curley, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," and (hopefully) myself, in "Descartes's Creation Doctrine and Modality."

⁴ The fact that the Immutability Interpretation is the most prominent interpretation of Descartes's explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths does *not* entail that the Immutability Interpretation is widely given by Descartes scholars. Unfortunately, not nearly enough Descartes scholars have addressed this issue to enable me to claim that *any* interpretation is widely given. This, however, does not affect my claim that the Immutability Interpretation is the most prominent. The only other genuine competition for the title of "most prominent" is an interpretation based on the famous medieval distinction between *potentia Dei absoluta* and *potentia Dei ordinata*. This interpretation is given by James Petrik, who claims (correctly) to have found this interpretation in Spinoza's *Cogitata Metaphysica*, and is also given, in a sense, by Margaret Osler. See James Petrik, "Descartes on Divine Indifference and the Transworld Validity of the Eternal Truths," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 36 (1998): 417–32; Margaret Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and "Divine Will and Mathematical Truth: Gassendi and Descartes on the Status of the Eternal Truths," in Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene, eds. *Descartes and His Contemporaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 145–58. I do not have the space to argue for the following claim here, so an assertion will have to suffice: When everything irrelevant is stripped away from the *potentia Dei absoluta et ordinata* interpretation, it does not differ in any interesting way from the Immutability Interpretation. So, even the closest competition for "most prominent" is not interestingly different from the Immutability Interpretation.

⁵ Diluted versions of the Immutability Interpretation are given by Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 351; and Steven Nadler, "Scientific Certainty and the Creation the Eternal Truths: A Problem in Descartes," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 25 (1987): 176. Both Menn and Nadler argue that Descartes held that the eternal truths are *eternal and immutable* because they are willed from eternity by God's immutable will.

anism, a view he does not hold.⁶ I also show that some suggestions for salvaging the Immutability Interpretation fall short. In the final section I present an alternative interpretation. My interpretation has a firm basis in Descartes's texts, does not have the shortcomings of the Immutability Interpretation, and has several virtues of its own.

I. IMMUTABILITY

Before examining the role, if any, that God's immutability actually plays in Descartes's explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths, it may be helpful to have a working account of God's immutability. To be immutable is not merely to be unchanging, but rather to be *unable* to change. That is:

I1: x is immutable iff x is essentially unchanging.⁷

We must recognize, however, that there are extrinsic and relational properties that a thing may acquire or lose without any *real* change in the thing; that is, there are so-called Cambridge changes that something may undergo without thereby being mutable. For example if x is five feet tall at t and x is five foot five at some later time t' , then x has really changed; but if x is not an uncle at t and x is an uncle at some later time t' , then x has not really changed in virtue of acquiring this property. The idea is that there are some properties which are, to use Edward Wierenga's and Nicholas Wolterstorff's term, "change-relevant," and others which are not.

Despite the difficulty in providing a precise definition of a change-relevant property, there is, I believe, a good-enough intuitive sense of what it is. For example, intrinsic properties such as *being square* and *being six feet tall* are change-relevant; and relational properties such as *being an uncle* and *being worshipped by Saint Paul* are change-irrelevant. With an intuitive sense of the distinction between change-relevant and change-irrelevant properties, Wierenga proposes the following analysis of *being unchanging*:

I2: x is unchanging iff there are no times t_1 and t_2 , and change-relevant property P such that x has P at t_1 and x lacks P at t_2 .⁸

And immutability, according to I1, is the property of being *essentially* unchanging.

Although Descartes does not give an explicit account of immutability, there is no reason to think that he held a different account of immutability from that given by I1. In fact, Descartes's God would trivially satisfy I2 in virtue of being either simple or eternal (in Boethius's and Aquinas's sense of "eternal," i.e., timeless). Descartes's God is eternal in the relevant sense, and he is simple.⁹ Hence he

⁶ Perhaps someone will object that the Immutability Interpretation is a correct interpretation of Descartes, but Descartes did not realize the unwanted consequences of such an explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths. Leaving aside issues concerning charity in interpretation, we will see that such an objection is unfounded because Descartes, in fact, does provide an explanation of the eternal truths in which the unwanted consequences of the Immutability Interpretation are absent.

⁷ Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 170.

⁸ Wierenga, *Nature of God*, 172.

⁹ In the Sixth Replies, Descartes states that God created the world in time. Moreover, Descartes believes that God is independent of his creation. Therefore, God is independent of time (AT VII 432; CSM II 291).

would satisfy I2.¹⁰ Moreover, Descartes's God has only attributes, in Descartes's technical sense of "attributes," i.e., essential properties.¹¹ So, if God is unchanging, then he is essentially unchanging. Thus, he satisfies I1.

It is interesting to note that Descartes holds that although God is immutable and simple, God is simple *because* he is immutable. One reason this is interesting is that it marks a break with a classic statement on the same subject. In *Summa Theologiae* Ia 9.1, Aquinas argues that God is immutable *because* he is simple: "Things that change are always composite. Now it has been shown that in God there is no composition, but he is altogether simple. It is manifest that God that God cannot change." So, for Aquinas, God's simplicity is conceptually and explanatorily prior to his immutability.

In *Principles* I.56, a text which is not *explicitly* about either God's immutability or simplicity, Descartes states the following: "Hence we do not, properly speaking, say that there are modes or qualities in God, but simply attributes, because in the case of God, any variation is unintelligible" (AT VIII A 26; CSM I 211). I take it that when Descartes states that any variation in God is unintelligible, he is simply stating that God is immutable. What is not immediately obvious is that Descartes is stating anything concerning God's simplicity when he states that there are only attributes and no modes or qualities in God. It is commonly, though mistakenly, thought that Descartes held a radical new version of the doctrine of divine simplicity, in which there are not even conceptual distinctions between the attributes of God. While it is true that Descartes believes that there is no conceptual *priority* between God's intellect and his will, he does believe that his intellect and will are conceptually *distinct*. According to Descartes' theory of distinctions, as presented in *Principles* I.60–62 and the Sixth Meditation, distinctions are a function of the degree of *separability* of things.¹² That is, roughly, there is a real distinction between x and y iff x and y are mutually separable (i.e., both x and y can exist without the other); there is a modal distinction between x and y iff x and y are separable, but not mutually (i.e., either x can exist without y or y can exist without x, but both cannot exist without the other); and there is a conceptual distinction (*distinctio rationis*) between x and y iff x and y are mutually inseparable but there are concepts C₁ and C₂, such that x is understood under C₁ (or C₂) and y is understood under C₂ (or C₁), and C₁ ≠ C₂.¹³ So, the only things that can be conceptually distinct are substances and their attributes, where "attribute" is understood in Descartes's technical sense of an essential property or, in the case of so-called principal attributes, the essence of a substance.¹⁴ Because God has only attributes,

¹⁰ Aquinas thinks this is case as well. For instance, in ST Ia 9.1, Aquinas argues that God is immutable in virtue of his simplicity. In ST Ia 10.3, he argues that God is eternal because he is immutable. So, in the latter case, God's immutability is conceptually prior to his eternity. This, however, does not affect the point that if God is eternal, then he is immutable.

¹¹ AT VIII A 26; CSM I 211.

¹² Where x is separable from y iff x can exist as a complete entity without y.

¹³ See, for instance, AT IV 348–50; CSMK 279–81.

¹⁴ To be precise, there is another use of the conceptual distinction in Descartes, but which does not have anything to do with substances and their attributes. Descartes holds that there is only a conceptual distinction between God's creation and his conservation of the world. See AT VII 49; CSM II 48. This use of the conceptual distinction, however, is irrelevant to the present discussion.

according to the quoted passage above, and attributes are inseparable from their substance, God is simple (in the sense of not having anything really or modally distinct in him), although there is a conceptual distinction between his attributes.¹⁵ So, Descartes is implicitly discussing God's simplicity in the quoted passage; and he is asserting that God's immutability is conceptually and explanatorily prior to God's simplicity.

One may wonder why Descartes holds this view. After all, would we not think that something could be immutable without being simple? That is, can we not conceive of something that cannot change but is nonetheless composed of parts? Descartes would say that we cannot clearly and distinctly conceive of an immutable composite because anything that has parts is at least possibly separated, even if it is never in fact separated into parts. But to say that *x* is immutable means that it is not possible for *x* to change. So, anything with parts cannot be immutable due to the fact that the parts of a composite are possibly, though perhaps never actually, separated. Therefore, Descartes must hold that anything that is immutable is simple.

2. THE IMMUTABILITY INTERPRETATION

Those who hold the Immutability Interpretation do so primarily on the basis of one passage from Descartes's correspondence, passages from the *Conversation with Burman*, and from a general consideration of Descartes's discussion of the laws of nature in *The World* and the *Principles*. In the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne, Descartes offers the most compelling evidence for the Immutability Interpretation:

It will be said that if God had established these truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes, he can, if his will can change. "But I understand them to be eternal and immutable." - I make the same judgment about God. "But his will is free." Yes, but his power is incomprehensible. (AT I 145-46; CSMK 23)

Eighteen years later, in the *Conversation with Burman*, he reiterates this type of thinking:

Concerning the decrees of God which have already been enacted, it is clear that God is immutable with respect to these, and from the metaphysical point of view it is impossible to conceive the matter otherwise. (AT V 166; CSMK 348)

On the basis of these passages, Edwin Curley states that "[God's] creation of them [the eternal truths] is a genuine act of will (not necessitated), and yet it does provide a foundation of their necessity, because his will is immutable."¹⁶ That is,

¹⁵ Elsewhere, I argue that Descartes, in fact, held that there are two types of conceptual distinction: those that hold between a substance and one of its essential properties (attributes) or between two or more attributes of a substance, and those that hold between identical things (e.g., a substance and its *principal* attribute). Descartes holds that all of the divine attributes are identical; therefore, he holds that only conceptual distinctions of the latter type are proper to God. See Dan Kaufman, "Divine Simplicity and the Eternal Truths in Descartes," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 11 (2003), 553-79.

¹⁶ Curley, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," 588. Cf. Curley, "A God Who Can Do All Things," (Unpublished manuscript, 1988): 41-42: "[Descartes] professes to deduce them from God's immutability, which would confirm their necessity."

God is free with respect to the creation of the eternal truths, but, on the supposition that he creates them, the immutability of his will explains why they are necessary.

Additional *prima facie* evidence for the Immutability Interpretation may be found in Descartes's discussion of the laws of nature, in the *Principles* and *The World*. After all, Descartes's foundation for these laws is God's immutability.¹⁷ As he states: "it is that these two rules [i.e., laws of nature] follow manifestly from the mere fact that God is immutable and that, acting always in the same way, he always produces the same effect" (AT XI 43; CSM I 96). So, if the laws of nature are eternal truths (as some have held), and the laws of nature are explained by God's immutability, then it is *prima facie* reasonable to think that God's immutability is sufficient to explain the necessity of the eternal truths.

Although some scholars have defended the Immutability Interpretation, very few (at the very most) have attempted to offer anything resembling a real argument for the Immutability Interpretation based on the passages from the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne and the *Conversation with Burman*. In fact, Margaret Osler (one of the only scholars to mention the issue) simply states the Immutability Interpretation in passing, as if it were completely uncontroversial and did not require any argument or defense.¹⁸ Given that defenders of the Immutability Interpretation do not provide arguments, we can attempt to provide an argument for the Immutability Interpretation here. I offer the following as a first attempt at an argument based on the Mersenne letter and *Burman* passage:

1. God wills the eternal truths.
2. God's will is immutable.
3. Therefore, the eternal truths are immutable.

As it stands, it is not clear that the conclusion of the argument follows from the premises. What is needed is a principle, not *explicitly* stated by Descartes, establishing that there is a transfer of immutability from God's will to its effect.

Transfer of Immutability Principle: For any x, if x is willed by an omnipotent and immutable will, then x is immutable.¹⁹

Descartes seems to advocate something like the Transfer of Immutability Principle in *The World*: "God is immutable and always acting in the same way, he always

¹⁷ See Curley, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," Gijsbert Van den Brink, "Descartes, Modalities, and God," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 33 (1993): 1–15; and Nadler, "Scientific Certainty and the Creation of the Eternal Truths." Even some who hold that the laws of nature are not eternal truths hold that they are necessary truths. For instance, see Blake Dutton, "Indifference, Necessity, and Descartes's Derivation of the Laws of Motion," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34 (1996): 193–212.

¹⁸ In two separate works, Osler states, without *any* argument that "divine immutability provides Descartes's justification of the necessity of the eternal truths that God freely created." See Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy*, 131, and "Divine Will and Mathematical Truth," 152. Preceding this assertion, Osler does provide an argument. However, the argument that precedes this assertion does not justify the assertion. Rather it justifies the claim that God's will is immutable.

¹⁹ Cf. Dutton, "Indifference, Necessity, and Descartes's Derivation," 206. It has been pointed out to me by Robert Sleigh that there must be some mention of omnipotence (or of "sufficient power") in the Transfer of Immutability Principle because it is possible that there be a being with an immutable but insufficiently powerful will. In that case, although the will is immutable, it is not sufficiently powerful to secure the obtaining of its object, let alone the immutability of its object.

produces the same effect" (AT XI 43; CSM I 96).²⁰ And in the *Principles* 2.36, he states: "For we understand that God's perfection involves not only his being immutable in himself, but also his operating in a manner that is always utterly constant and immutable" (AT VIII 61; CSM I 240). I grant that this textual evidence is not particularly compelling. In fact, these passages seem only to support the idea that God is immutable, not that what he creates by his immutable will is itself immutable. I realize this. However, because the Immutability Interpretation *requires* the Transfer of Immutability Principle just to get started, we should grant that Descartes held it simply to see how far it can take the interpretation.

By inserting the Transfer of Immutability Principle, the argument will get the defender of the Immutability Interpretation closer to their desired conclusion, namely that the eternal truths are immutable. Moreover, Descartes, as the passages quoted above make clear, held premise 2 (AT I 145–46; AT V 166). Likewise, Premise 1 is something that Descartes held; in fact it is merely a concise statement of the Creation Doctrine.²¹ So far, the argument I am considering is grounded firmly in Descartes's texts, with the possible exception of the Transfer of Immutability Principle. However, it should be noticed that the argument still does not establish the *necessity* of the eternal truths; it merely establishes their *immutability*.²² So, if supporters of the Immutability Interpretation wish to establish their conclusion (i.e., that God's immutability explains the necessity of the eternal truths), the argument still needs to be supplemented by another principle:

Immutability-Necessity Principle: For any x, if x is immutable, then x is necessary.

By adding the Immutability-Necessity Principle to the argument, the defender of the Immutability Interpretation may arrive at the desired conclusion that the eternal truths are necessary.

Call the argument supplemented by *both* the Transfer of Immutability Principle and the Immutability-Necessity Principle "the Supplemented Immutability Interpretation;" and call the argument supplemented *only* by the Transfer of Immutability Principle "the Unsupplemented Immutability Interpretation." The Unsupplemented Immutability Interpretation is too weak to account for the necessity of the eternal truths. The Supplemented Immutability Interpretation, on the other hand, is strong enough to account for the necessity of the eternal truths, but it requires both the Transfer of Immutability Principle and the Immutability-Necessity Principle. I will show that the strength of the Supplemented Immutability Interpretation, as provided by the two principles, is had at too high a cost.

²⁰ Cf. AT XI 38; CSM I 93, and Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, 351.

²¹ See AT I 149–50; CSMK 24, AT I 151–53; CSMK 25–26, AT IV 118–19; CSMK 235, AT V 166–67; CSMK 348, AT V 223–24; CSMK 358–59, AT VII 435–36; CSM II 293–94, AT VII 380; CSM II 261.

²² Curley blurs the distinction between necessity and immutability: "More problematic is the reason he here assigns for the *immutability* of the eternal truths. In the letter to Mersenne, it was the *immutability* of God's will. Here it is the fact that God wills them to be *immutable*. If Descartes is not now inclined to explain the *necessity* of necessary truths by the *immutability* of God's will, if he's prepared to concede that God's will might change, then the fact that God has once willed the eternal truths to be *immutable* does not seem to provide much security for the future" ("God Who Can Do All Things," 10, my emphasis).

3. PROVIDENCE AND CONTINGENCY:
A BIG PROBLEM FOR THE IMMUTABILITY INTERPRETATION

If Descartes did hold the Immutability-Necessity Principle and the Transfer of Immutability Principle, as required by the Supplemented Immutability Interpretation, he would commit himself to unwanted consequences. At the very least, one of the things that a theory of modality should provide is an account of the difference between necessary truths and contingent truths. In our own time, possible worlds analyses of modality provide such an account (i.e., P is necessarily true iff P is true in all possible worlds; P is possibly true iff P is true in at least one possible world; P is contingently true iff P is true in the actual world but false in at least one possible world, etc.).²³ Despite the fact that Descartes rarely uses the term “contingent” (*contingens*),²⁴ it is clear that he believed that there are some propositions that, while true, are not necessarily so, i.e., they are contingent. For example, the propositions that ‘Descartes had a body,’ ‘the wax smells like flowers,’ ‘anything other than God exists,’ etc., are contingently true according to Descartes. But Descartes holds that not only eternal truths, but *all things*, including contingent truths, are the effect of God’s immutable will. As Descartes states: “if God exists, it is a contradiction that anything else should exist which was not created by him” (AT VII 188; CSM II 132).²⁵ In *Principles* 1.23, Descartes states that “there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills, and accomplishes everything. When I say ‘everything’ I mean all things” (AT VIII 14; CSM I 201). And given that Descartes thinks that the eternal truths are “things” (AT I 152; CSMK 25), it is reasonable to think that contingent truths are things as well.

To make things even more interesting, Descartes states that even the free actions of creatures come from God. For instance, in the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth, he states:

[A]ll the reasons that prove that God exists and is the first and immutable cause of all effects that do not depend on human free will prove similarly, I think, that he is also the cause of all the effects that do so depend . . . and he would not be supremely perfect if anything could happen in the world without coming entirely from him . . . [P]hilosophy by itself is able to discover that the slightest thought could not enter into a person’s mind without God’s willing and having willed from all eternity that it should so enter. (AT IV 314; CSMK 272)²⁶

Despite the fact that they “come entirely” from God as an “immutable cause,” Descartes certainly wants to hold that the free actions of creatures are contingent.

But from a premise stating that God wills contingent truths, it follows, via the Transfer of Immutability Principle, that contingent truths are immutable. And via

²³ Alternatively, P is necessarily true iff P is true in all *accessible* possible worlds, etc.

²⁴ Some noticeable uses are found in the *Regulae* (AT X 422; CSM I 46) and in the *Principles* (AT VIII 10; CSM I 197).

²⁵ It is important to notice that Descartes thinks that God wills all things that *exist* or are *real*; God does not will the *privations* involved in sinful actions and erroneous judgments. Privations, strictly speaking, are nothing. They do not require God’s causal input. See the Fourth Meditation (AT VII 54–61; CSM II 37–42).

²⁶ Cf. AT VII 191, 436; CSM II 134, 294, AT VIII 14–15; CSM I 201–2, AT V 166–67; CSMK 348, AT IV 332, 354; CSMK 277, 282, AT XI 438; CSM I 380.

the Immutability-Necessity Principle, it follows that contingent truths are necessary. Hence, Descartes would be committed to some particularly strong version of necessitarianism. The necessitarianism would be strong because the eternal truths are necessary in a strong sense (if helpful, think of Plantinga's broadly logical necessity). If eternal truths have *that* kind of necessity in virtue of God's immutable will, then so-called contingent truths will as well in virtue of being willed by God's immutable will. *This* should strike us as unacceptable because Descartes clearly holds that some truths are genuinely contingent.

Descartes's discussion of providence and petitionary prayer may be relevant here. Again, in the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth, Descartes states:

When your highness speaks of the particular providence of God as being the foundation of theology, I do not think that you have in mind some change in God's decrees occasioned by actions that depend on our free will. No such change is theologically tenable; and when we are told to pray to God, that is not so that we should inform him of our needs, or that we should try to get him to change anything in *the order established from all eternity by his providence . . .* but simply to obtain *whatever he has, from all eternity, willed to be obtained by our prayers.* (AT IV 315–16, CSMK 273, my emphasis)

In the *Conversation with Burman*, he reiterates this line of thought:

[W]e have to say that God is indeed quite immutable, and that he has decreed from eternity either to grant me a particular request or not to grant it. Coupled with this decree, however, he has made a simultaneous decree that the granting of my request shall be in virtue of my prayers [*per meas preces*], and *at a time* when, in addition, I am leading an upright life. (AT V 166, my emphasis)²⁷

As these passages show, Descartes held that even contingent propositions made true by virtue of a "prayer-response" are willed from eternity by God's immutable will. So, suppose that a person, Deaton, is starving to death, leading an upright life, and prays for a sandwich, which he then receives from God. Thus, (a) is true.

(a) Deaton receives a sandwich.

But it is absurd to think that Descartes held that (a) is immutably true, despite the fact that it is willed from all eternity by an immutable will. After all, before Deaton's prayer, (a) was false and after the prayer, (a) was true. Descartes does think that there are genuine changes in the world; as he states, "there are some changes whose occurrence is guaranteed either by our own plain experience or by divine revelation, and either our perception or our faith shows us that these take place without any change in the creator" (AT VIII A 61; CSM I 240). How can he hold this, if he holds the Transfer of Immutability Principle?

Notice in the *Burman* passage quoted above, there is reference made to a time at which my prayer is answered; and in the letter to Elizabeth, there is an implicit assumption that we receive an answer to our prayers at a certain time.²⁸ We can reasonably assume that what Descartes meant was that God immutably wills from

²⁷ Cf. AT VIII A 20: "we regard it as impious to suppose that we could ever do anything which was not already preordained by him."

²⁸ While we receive answer at a certain time, God does not answer our prayers at a certain time but from all eternity.

eternity that, *at a certain time*, (a) is true.²⁹ Thus, what is immutably true is the temporally-indexed proposition, (a*):

(a*) Deaton receives a sandwich at t.

Given that Descartes thinks that there *are* changes in the world, the Transfer of Immutability Principle has a chance of being true only if we restrict the scope of the quantifier to eternal truths and temporally-indexed propositions. The Transfer of Immutability Principle is required for the Immutability Interpretation. But clearly propositions like (a) can change with respect to their truth value. It seems that propositions like (a*) are the most plausible candidates for the objects of God's will, *if* the Immutability Interpretation is true. Moreover, if the Immutability Interpretation is a correct interpretation of Descartes, and we take seriously the above passages from the correspondence with Elizabeth and the *Conversation with Burman*, then we should attribute the following view of providence to Descartes:

P: God's providence consists in his eternally and immutably willing a series of temporally-indexed propositions.

The account so far may be helpful insofar as it allows that there can be genuine changes in the world without any alteration in God's will. This allowance is quite important precisely because Descartes's foundation for the laws governing natural *change* is God's immutability.³⁰

But does restricting the scope of the Transfer of Immutability Principle to temporally-indexed propositions help Descartes explain the difference between eternal truths and contingent truths? Although the truth of (a) is not immutable, it seems that Descartes is committed to the immutability of truths like (a*); and if he held the Immutability-Necessity Principle, (a*) and other so-called contingent truths, when indexed to a time, turn out to be necessarily true. So, if this is Descartes's view, he has not improved his situation concerning the difference between necessary and contingent truths.³¹

To sum up the problem thus far: The Unsupplemented Immutability Interpretation is not sufficient to explain the *necessity* of the eternal truths. On the other

²⁹ Because Descartes believes that God is eternal (i.e., atemporal) he could believe that:

God wills that (a) at t.

But Descartes could not believe that:

At t, God wills that (a).

³⁰ See Daniel Garber, *Descartes's Metaphysical Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 282.

³¹ This problem is not peculiar to Descartes. For instance, any philosopher who held, what Knuuttila and Hintikka (following Lovejoy) call, the principle of plenitude, will face the problem of contingent temporally-indexed truths. According to this principle, which Knuuttila argues was held by Aristotle, Boethius, and Maimonides among others, no genuine possibility will remain forever unactualized. See Simo Knuuttila, *Modalities in Medieval Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1982); Jaakko Hintikka, *Time and Necessity: Studies in Aristotle's Theory of Modality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). So, on this view, to say that P is possibly true is to say that, at some time, P is/was/will be actually true; to say that P is necessarily true is to say that P is actually true at all times; and to say that P is impossible is to say that there is/was/will be no time at which P is actually true. Thus, if a truth is immutably true, it is necessarily true. Leibniz *seems* to have attributed something like the principle of plenitude to Descartes. See G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, Leroy Loemker, ed. (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1956), 263.

hand, the Supplemented version is too strong, insofar as it commits Descartes to a version of necessitarianism. Furthermore, if God's providence consists of his immutably willing *non*-temporally-indexed propositions like (a), then the Transfer of Immutability Principle is false; because the Transfer of Immutability Principle is required for the Immutability Interpretation, the interpretation would be false if the Transfer of Immutability Principle were false. On the other hand, if P accurately captures Descartes's position on divine providence, then, if the Immutability-Necessity Principle is true, then Descartes is committed to the necessity of all temporally-indexed propositions. That is:

- (1) The Transfer of Immutability Principle is required for the Supplemented Immutability Interpretation.
- (2) The Immutability-Necessity Principle is required for the Supplemented Immutability Interpretation.
- (3) P is required for the Transfer of Immutability Principle to be true; so, P is required for the Supplemented Immutability Interpretation.

And if Descartes holds (1) – (3), then he is committed to (4):

- (4) If the Supplemented Immutability Interpretation is correct, then all temporally-indexed truths are necessary truths.

But, and here is the problem, Descartes does *not* hold the consequent of (4). Clearly then Descartes cannot accept *both* principles and P. However, as we have seen, there is textual evidence, albeit not particularly compelling, supporting an attribution of the Transfer of Immutability Principle to Descartes. The textual evidence for the Transfer of Immutability Principle is stronger than the evidence for P. However, because the Transfer of Immutability Principle seems to require P, the latter, we might say, “inherits” the evidence for the former. So, the troublemaker seems to be the Immutability-Necessity Principle. As the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth and the *Burman* passages show, Descartes may be willing to live with the *immutability* of things. What he cannot systematically live with is the *necessity* of all things. Moreover, unlike the Transfer of Immutability Principle and P, there is a *total* lack of textual evidence to support the Immutability-Necessity Principle.³² So, the way to go about interpreting Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths is to start by rejecting the Immutability-Necessity Principle. Unfortunately, for the supporter of the Immutability Interpretation, to reject the Immutability-Necessity Principle is to reject the Immutability Interpretation.

³² There is a *prima facie* strange passage in the *Passions of the Soul* in which Descartes states: “we should reflect upon the fact that nothing can possibly happen other than as Providence has determined from all eternity. Providence is, so to speak, a fate or *immutable necessity* [*une Necessité immuable*] . . .” (AT XI 438; CSM I 380, emphasis mine). On one reading of this, Descartes seems to be advocating the Immutability-Necessity Principle. However, because much of the material in the *Passions* was first developed in letters to Elizabeth, starting in 1643, we should read this text as being consistent with the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth; that is, as saying simply that providence is immutable (adding ‘necessity’ for emphasis). Cf. Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 384–417.

4. SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR SALVAGING THE IMMUTABILITY INTERPRETATION CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

Before completely rejecting the Immutability Interpretation in its supplemented form, I wish to look at some suggestions on how to salvage it.

Suggestion 1: It has been suggested by Edwin Curley, that although immutability is neither identical with nor sufficient for necessity in general, immutability *plus* eternity is sufficient for necessity.³³ To bring out this point, let us consider Thomas Morris's suggestion that immutability does not entail necessity.³⁴ The reason why this is true is that it is possible that some thing *x* may never be able to change (and hence is immutable), but it is possible that *x* failed to exist altogether. The view we have here is that *x* comes into existence at *t* and at no time *t** (*t* < *t**) can *x* change. Curley agrees that, in cases like this, immutability does not entail necessity. But the case of the eternal truths is different. Descartes not only thinks that God is immutable and eternal, but also that he has willed the eternal truths from eternity. Now, Descartes uses the term 'eternal' in two different ways: on some occasions, Descartes uses the term 'eternal' to mean 'outside of time or timeless' (AT VII 432; CSM II 291, AT V 193; CSMK 355), and on other occasions he uses the term to mean 'existing at all times' (AT VII 381; CSM II 262). The eternal truths are, at the very least, eternal in the latter sense. Given that the eternal truths are true at all times *and* they are willed by God's immutable will, then by the Transfer of Immutability Principle, there is no time at which they *can* fail to be true. So, unlike the case in which something comes to exist immutably but not necessarily, in the case of the eternal truths, they *cannot* change and there was no time at which they were not true. So, according to Curley, Premise 1 of Immutability Interpretation should be understood to contain an implicit mention of the eternity of divine willing. Hence, according to Curley, the eternal truths are true at all times and cannot be false at any time; that is, they are necessarily true.

There is also some apparent textual evidence for Curley's reading, although he does not sufficiently exploit it. In the Fifth Replies, Descartes characterizes the eternal truths and the essences they concern as "immutable and eternal" (AT VII 380; CSM II 261). I will consider this apparent textual evidence in the next section.

I am not wholly unsympathetic to Curley's suggestion. However, his suggestion leads directly back to the problem of necessitarianism already discussed. For certainly, temporally-indexed contingent propositions are willed *from all eternity* by God's immutable will. In fact, Descartes states the "there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he [i.e., God] simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes *everything*" (AT VIIIA 14; CSM I 201, my emphasis). Do we then want to say that *they* are necessary because they are true at all times and cannot be false at any time? We might be forced to this if there were not another way in which Descartes explains the necessity of the eternal truths. Fortunately, he does provide another explanation. I will look at this shortly.

³³ This suggestion was made by Curley when he served as commentator on an earlier version of this paper, presented at a Central Division APA.

³⁴ Thomas Morris, "Properties, Modalities, and God," *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984): 35–55.

Suggestion 2: Because Descartes's account of prayer to an immutable God is quite similar to the account given by Thomas Aquinas, perhaps Aquinas' solution to the problem of the contingency of "prayer-responses" is available to Descartes. And if it is open to Descartes, perhaps it can be generalized to account for the contingency of all contingent truths. That is, if Aquinas can make room for eternally- and immutably-willed contingent truths, then perhaps Descartes can as well; and perhaps the Immutability Interpretation is consistent with the existence of some contingent truths. This suggestion will not take a giant step toward salvaging the Supplemented Immutability Interpretation. Rather, it will take the small step of trying to make room for contingency in a world created by an immutable God. And if we cannot make *that* step, the Immutability Interpretation must be rejected.

In ST IIa IIae 83.2, Aquinas addresses the same kind of problem concerning contingency and the immutability of providence that has been bothering us. In particular, Aquinas is concerned with whether prayer is useful (*conueniens*), i.e., whether prayer makes any difference given that God's providential plan is immutably willed from eternity. Aquinas reviews three common mistakes concerning this issue and rejects them, one of which is a commitment to necessitarianism.³⁵ He recognizes that the real problem for an account of providence and prayer is to reconcile the immutability of divine providence with prayer and the contingency of some things governed by providence. He then gives an account nearly identical to Descartes's account:

[W]e do not pray in order to change the decree of divine providence, rather we pray in order to impetrate [*impetremus*] those things which God has determined would be obtained only through our prayers. (ST IIa IIae 83.2)

Thomas's solution for reconciling this view of prayer with the contingency of "prayer-responses" is as follows:

When considering the usefulness of prayer, one must remember that divine providence not only disposes which effects will take place, but also the manner in which they will take place, and which actions will cause them. Human acts are true causes, and therefore men must perform certain actions, not in order to change the divine providence, but in order to obtain certain effects in the manner determined by God. (ST IIa IIae 83.2)

Thus, Aquinas believes that the immutability of providence takes nothing away from the contingency of "prayer-responses" in virtue of the fact that God wills that certain things come about contingently and some necessarily; and the way God does this is by arranging certain types of causes (necessary or contingent) which will either bring about an event necessarily or bring it about contingently. Thus, something is contingent depending on the nature of a more proximate, secondary cause.

It would be nice if this kind of explanation were found somewhere in Descartes's writings. However, Descartes does not offer this kind of explanation, nor is this explanation available to him. Descartes, at least in many texts, is much less willing

³⁵ See ST Ia 22.2 & 4; 23.8; II 5.6; II 6.3.

than Aquinas to allow causes other than God. As he states: “God alone is the true cause of everything which is or can be [*Deus solus omnium quae sunt aut esse possunt vera est causa*]” (AT VIII A 14; CSM I 201); and in the 27 May 1630, Descartes states that, with respect to all of creation, including eternal truths, God is their “efficient and total cause [*efficiens et totalis causa*]” (AT I 152; CSMK 25). And in the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth, he states: “God is the universal cause of everything in such a way as to be also the total cause of everything [*la cause totale*]” (AT IV 314; CSMK 272). Because the truth and modal status of a proposition is something that depends *completely* on God, as does everything, Descartes cannot make contingency the result of a secondary cause.

There is no substantial agreement among Descartes scholars concerning the existence and nature of causes other than God. Even if one disputes this characterization of the status of secondary causes in Descartes, the fact that Descartes and Aquinas are discussing two different types of necessity and contingency cannot be disputed. What is at issue for Descartes in his discussion of the necessity of the eternal truths is the explanation of the *metaphysical necessity* of the eternal truths and the *metaphysical contingency* of other truths. Aquinas’s discussion of secondary causes should indicate right away that he is discussing *causal necessity and contingency*, not metaphysical. So, even if Descartes could help himself to Aquinas’s explanation, it would not help address Descartes’s problem concerning the metaphysical necessity of the eternal truths. So, this suggestion for making a small step toward an acceptable Immutability Interpretation by making room for immutably-willed yet contingent truths falls short.

Suggestion 3: Bite the bullet. Of course, this is not really a suggestion for how to make the Immutability Interpretation work, but simply another reason for accepting the Immutability Interpretation as Descartes’s explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths. Despite the detrimental consequences of the Supplemented Immutability Interpretation, the “suggestion” goes, Descartes is committed to it because of his account of the laws of nature. As I have already mentioned, Descartes presents God’s immutability as an explanation of the laws of nature.

First, consider this passage from the *Discourse on Method*:

I showed what the laws of nature were, I tried to demonstrate all those laws about which we could have any doubt, 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. (AT VI 43; CSM I 132)

Compare the passage from the *Discourse* to the following passage from *The World*:

The knowledge of these [eternal] truths is so natural to our souls that we cannot but judge them infallible when we conceive them distinctly, nor doubt that if God had created many worlds, they would be as true in each of them as in this one. (AT XI 47; CSM I 97)

The strong similarity of these two passages seems to force these conclusions:

- (i) The laws of nature are eternal truths.
- (ii) Being true in all of the many worlds God could create is equivalent to being necessarily true.
- (iii) Descartes’s explanation of the necessity of the laws of nature is God’s immutability.

And (i) – (iii) seem to entail (or at the very least, to provide strong evidence in favor of) the Immutability Interpretation. In fact, I agree with the hypothetical “suggestion-maker” that *if* Descartes held (i) – (iii), then the Immutability Interpretation would be the correct interpretation of Descartes. However, I will now argue that Descartes in fact, rejects each of (i) – (iii). So, he is not, after all, committed to the Immutability Interpretation and its detrimental consequences.

Descartes's rejection of (i): In a recent article, Blake Dutton (1996) has cast doubt on the idea that Descartes's laws of nature are eternal truths. His reasoning is as follows: Descartes holds that God had perfect freedom of indifference to create or not create the eternal truths; moreover, given that God chooses to create, he can create eternal truths in any manner he wishes. However, with respect to laws of nature, God has perfect freedom of indifference to create or not create them; but, given that God chooses to create laws of nature, he can only create laws that are consistent with his immutability. So, there is at least *this difference* between eternal truths and laws of nature.

There is also some indirect textual evidence supporting a rejection of (i). In the *Principles*, Descartes provides a list of examples of eternal truths. Among the propositions listed are: “*It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time; What is done cannot be undone; He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks*” (AT VIIIA 24; CSM I 209). In another place, Descartes states that the truths of mathematics are eternal truths. What should be noticed is that Descartes *never* gives a law of nature as an example of an eternal truth. This absence would be incredibly strange if he held that the laws of nature are eternal truths. I believe that it is more likely that he simply did not hold that laws of nature are eternal truths.

Descartes's rejection of (ii): To attribute (ii) to Descartes would be grossly anachronistic. Sure, *we* think that (ii) (or some secularized version of (ii)) is true, but it does not follow that Descartes did. Moreover, Descartes is not using the term ‘world’ in the same way as contemporary modal metaphysicians do. According to the contemporary notion, a world is a maximal compossible state of affairs (or something along those lines). Because it is maximal, there cannot be more than one actual world, although there could have been a different actual world instead of ours. However, Descartes does not speak of any world God could have created *instead of ours*; rather, he speaks of God creating *many worlds* (*plusieurs mondes*). Clearly, then Descartes must mean something different by “world” than what *we* mean.

Descartes's rejection of (iii): A close look at the relevant texts shows that Descartes never explains the *modal status* of the laws of motion by appeal to God's immutability. Rather, Descartes appeals to God's immutability to explain the *content* of the laws. The reason why the same quantity of motion is preserved, the reason why everything remains in the same state unless changed by something external, the reason why all motion (in itself) is rectilinear, the reason why a moving object which collides with another loses as much motion as it “imparts” to the latter, is God's immutability. No mention is made of God's immutability explaining why the laws of motion are necessary truths (if, in fact, they are).³⁶

³⁶ See AT VIIIA 61–66; CSM I 240–43 and AT XI 36–47; CSM I 92–97.

So, Descartes does not (or at least does not obviously) hold (i), (ii), or (iii). Thus, the suggestion that the Supplemented Immutability Interpretation is correct because of Descartes's view on the laws of nature is inconclusive at best, false at worst.

So far, I have attempted to show that the Immutability Interpretation cannot be a correct interpretation of Descartes's explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths. This would be disheartening if it were not for the fact that Descartes actually presents a better explanation, one which does not employ the notion of immutability and which avoids the problem of contingency. I turn to this explanation in the next section.

One last point about the Immutability Interpretation before moving on. There is an important but commonly overlooked point: It is wrongheaded from the start to view Descartes as employing immutability to explain the necessity of the eternal truths. A careful look at the texts used to support the Immutability Interpretation³⁷ reveals that Descartes appeals to immutability not to explain the *necessity* of the eternal truths, but to address the different, though related, issue of whether God can *change* the eternal truths he has in fact willed. The answer that consideration of God's immutability provides is that God can change them only if his will can change. And because his will is immutable, he cannot change the eternal truths. Thus, although immutability explains this issue, it does not (and should not, for reasons already mentioned) explain the issue at hand, namely why the eternal truths are necessarily true.

5. AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION

In several texts, Descartes gives a different explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths, one that does not make reference to immutability.³⁸ For instance, in the Fifth Replies, Descartes states:

I do not think that the essences of things, and the mathematical truths which we can know concerning them, are independent of God. Nevertheless I do think that *they are immutable and eternal, because the will and decree of God willed and decreed that they should be so.* (AT VII 380; CSM II 261, my emphasis)³⁹

And in the Sixth Replies, he states:

³⁷ AT I 145–46; CSMK 23, AT V 166; CSMK 348.

³⁸ Curley also notices this in "A God Who Can Do All Things."

An anonymous referee has pointed out to me that the "alternative explanation" I offer is (should be?) obvious to anyone familiar with the texts I cite. While I do think that the alternative is correct, it is not *obviously* correct. For example, none of the following Descartes scholars, who are certainly familiar with the relevant texts, offers the "alternative explanation": Jonathan Bennett, "Descartes's Theory of Modality," *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994), 639–67; Curley, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," and "A God Who Can Do All Things;" Frankfurt, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths;" Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy* and "Divine Will and Mathematical Truth;" and Petrik, "Descartes on Divine Indifference and Transworld Validity." Of course, I do not wish to imply that all of these authors share any positive interpretive positions.

³⁹ In the previous section, I stated that this passage could be used by Curley to support his suggestion that immutability plus eternity entails necessity. However, I do not think that this passage constitutes very strong evidence in favor of Curley's suggestion to help the Immutability Interpretation, because, if the Immutability Interpretation is correct, Descartes *cannot* mean that the eternal truths are immutable and eternal *because* God willed them to be so. After all, on the Immutability Interpretation, God does not need to will that the eternal truths are immutable and eternal in order for them to

God did not will the creation of the world in time because he saw that it would be better this way than if he had created it from eternity; nor did he will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise, and so on. On the contrary, it is because he willed to create the world in time that it is better this way than if he had created it from eternity; and it is *because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise* [fieri aliter non potest]. (AT VII 432; CSM II 291, my emphasis)

This passage states that God wills a certain proposition to be necessary, and *that* is why it is not only true but “*fieri aliter non potest*,” i.e., is necessarily true. And in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, Descartes states that “even though [*encore que*] God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily” (AT IV 118; CSMK 235). In these passages, Descartes is presenting his real explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths: the eternal truths are necessary precisely because God wills that they are necessary.⁴⁰

Although on first glance, this explanation is not particularly satisfying and may seem *ad hoc*, it has the following advantages:

(I) Most obviously, this explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths allows Descartes to distinguish sufficiently between necessary truths and contingent truths. After all, if the modal status of a proposition is *something at all*, then it is willed by God. So, on the present interpretation, Descartes's God wills some truths to be necessary, and presumably wills some to be contingent. Thus, Descartes need not be committed to any version of necessitarianism.

(II) Unlike the Immutability Interpretation, the present interpretation has a firm basis in the text. In fact, in *every* text in which Descartes purports to explain the necessity of the eternal truths, he appeals to the fact that God wills them to be necessary. As I have already explained, Descartes never intends God's immutability to explain the necessity of the eternal truths, but rather to explain why God cannot change the eternal truths he has willed.

(III) The present interpretation is *exactly* what we should expect Descartes to say. Because everything depends on God's will, if there are eternal truths at all, then their necessity will be the result of God's will. And Descartes does think that

be immutable and eternal. On the Immutability Interpretation, God merely needs to will them (from eternity), and by the Transfer of Immutability Principle, they will be immutable (and eternal) and hence necessary. I think that, in this passage, Descartes is using ‘immutable and eternal’ to mean ‘necessary,’ although he does not believe that immutability plus eternity entail necessity. This reading is supported by the passage from the Sixth Replies (AT VII 432; CSM II 291), in which Descartes states that the eternal truths are necessary because God wills them to be so.

⁴⁰ I was pleased to discover, on the suggestion of an anonymous referee, that Jean-Marie Beyssade recently proposed a similar line of interpretation concerning Descartes's explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths. See ch. 2 (“*Toute-puissance de Dieu et nécessité des principes physiques*”) of Beyssade, *Etudes sur Descartes: L'histoire d'un esprit* (Paris: Seuil, 2001). Although Beyssade and I agree that the eternal truths are necessary because God wills them to be necessary, we differ in many other respects concerning Descartes's Creation Doctrine. For instance, while Beyssade believes that God's will provides the eternal truths with *une vraie nécessité*, he believes that the eternal truths are not *necessarily* necessary precisely because they depend on God's will. As Beyssade states: “*Nécessaire cependant par Dieu et non pour Dieu, par son acte et en dépendant de sa libre volonté.*” I, however, do not think that the view that Descartes's eternal truths are necessary but not necessarily necessary, a view associated with Curley, is tenable. See Curley, “Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths,” and Kaufman, “Descartes's Creation Doctrine and Modality.”

the eternal truths are necessary; so, their necessity depends on God's will. After all, *that is* exactly the point of Descartes's Creation Doctrine: "God is the author of everything that is and *can be*." So, when Descartes states that the eternal truths are necessary because God wills them to be necessary, we shouldn't meet him with, to borrow a phrase from David Lewis, "incredulous stares." It is exactly what Descartes *should* say.

(IV) The present interpretation provides a firm basis for modal truths. To see this, think all the way back to St. Augustine. In Book Three of his *De Libero Arbitrio*, St. Augustine addresses the problem of whether God's foreknowledge is compatible with human free actions. Part of his solution consists in holding that God does not merely know that an agent will perform an action; God knows that, in many cases, an agent will perform an action *freely*. And if God knows that an agent performs an action freely, then that agent performed that action freely, no question. The same type of divine guarantee is found in Descartes. But in this case it is truths and modalities that are guaranteed by God's will. After all, nothing could guarantee the necessity of a truth more effectively than the fact that God wills it to be necessary.

(V) Peculiarly enough, I believe that Descartes has theological tradition on his side, despite some claims to the contrary.⁴¹ Descartes believes that God *understands* some truths as necessary, some as possible, etc. For instance, in the 6 May 1630 letter to Mersenne, Descartes states that the eternal truths "are true or possible only because God knows them *as true or possible*" (AT I 149; CSMK 24). But Descartes also accepts the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity:

In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true. (AT I 149; CSMK 24)

[F]rom all eternity he willed and understood them [the eternal truths] to be and by that very fact he created them . . . In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually [*ne quidem ratione*]. (AT I 153; CSMK 25–26)

So, by Descartes's acceptance of two traditional doctrines (i.e., that God understands truths as having some modal status or other and the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity), we arrive trivially at his explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths: God wills (and understands) some truths as necessary truths.

Thus, despite its initially unsatisfying impression, Descartes's explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths has many virtues.

Someone may object that Descartes's explanation still seems unsatisfying because it does not seem to *explain* anything. In reply to this I offer the following: Frankly, to expect more of an explanation from Descartes is to expect something to which we are not entitled. The explanation we receive from Descartes is *all the explanation we can get* from him. To see this, let us contrast two different views of

⁴¹ In particular, Leibniz famously held that Descartes's Creation Doctrine was wholly repugnant to theological tradition. For instance, in section 186 of *Theodicy*, Leibniz states: "[T]he eternal truths, which until the time of Descartes had been named an object of the divine understanding, suddenly became an object of God's will."

God's creation of something: Descartes's view of God's creation of the eternal truths and Leibniz's view of God's creation of the world. In Leibniz's case, we can ask certain types of questions, and we will receive informative answers. For instance, we can ask Leibniz: Why does this world exist? And we will get an answer: God, by his consequent will, decreed that this world exist. But we can continue asking Leibniz for deeper and deeper explanations. For instance, we can ask: Why did God decree that this world exist? And we will get yet another answer: Because this is the best possible world. And we can ask a further question: Why would God create the best possible world? Answer: Because God's nature requires that He create the best. And we may continue in this manner, though not indefinitely.

Turning now to Descartes, we see that Descartes *does* have an answer to the question: Why is a particular proposition necessarily true? Answer: Because God willed that that proposition be necessarily true. But unlike Leibniz, Descartes thinks that the next question (Why did God will that a particular proposition be necessarily true?) and, in fact, *any* question of the form "Why did God do a?", is in principle, unanswerable.⁴² As Descartes makes clear in the Sixth Replies (AT VII 431–37; CSM II 291–94), one of the fundamental features of his Creation Doctrine is that God's creation would not be (divinely) free if there were anything true or good in God's intellect prior to God's will. Divine freedom requires absolute indifference (in the sense that there is nothing in God's intellect prior to God's will). So, there is literally *no reason* for what God does, and hence there is *no further explanation* for what God does. So, to demand that Descartes give more explanation would require ignoring much of what Descartes says about the nature of God's free creation of the eternal truths.⁴³

⁴² Strictly speaking, this is true of questions concerning God's initial creation. "After" the initial creation of the eternal truths, God binds himself, by virtue of his immutability, to the observance of these truths. So, there may be some questions of the form "Why did God do x?" which may be informatively answered by appeal to that which God has bound himself.

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