

# Two kinds of necessity in Descartes: Conditional and absolute

Dois tipos de necessidade em Descartes:  
condicionais e absolutos

Saniye Vatansever<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to resolve the apparent conflict between Descartes' commitments to the creation doctrine and the necessity of eternal truths by elaborating different conceptions of necessity in Descartes' framework. More specifically, I argue that the fact that Descartes concedes the necessity of eternal truths does not compel him to assert the impossibility of their negation. Necessity, for Descartes, rather means immutability. Descartes distinguishes two kinds of immutable truths. While truths about God's essence are absolutely immutable, truths about the essences of God's creation are conditionally immutable, i.e., they can change if God's will changes. Since there are different kinds of eternal truths, they express different kinds of necessity as well, namely conditional and absolute necessity. After I clarify these two kinds of necessity, I explain how Descartes coherently maintains both that eternal truths are necessary and that God could have created eternal truths otherwise without undermining their necessity.

**Keywords:** Descartes, eternal truths, the creation doctrine, necessity, immutability.

## RESUMO

Este artigo busca resolver o aparente conflito entre os compromissos de Descartes com a doutrina da criação e a necessidade das verdades eternas, elaborando diferentes concepções de necessidade no quadro conceitual de Descartes. Mais especificamente, argumento que o fato de Descartes admitir a necessidade das verdades eternas não o obriga a afirmar a impossibilidade de sua negação. Necessidade, para Descartes, ao contrário, significa imutabilidade. Descartes distingue dois tipos de verdades imutáveis. Enquanto as verdades sobre a essência de Deus são absolutamente imutáveis, as verdades sobre as essências da criação de Deus são condicionalmente imutáveis, ou seja, elas podem mudar se a vontade de Deus muda. Uma vez que existem diferentes tipos de verdades eternas, eles também expressam diferentes tipos de necessidade, isto é, necessidade condicional e absoluta. Depois de esclarecer estes dois tipos de necessidade, eu explico como Descartes mantém coerentemente tanto que as verdades eternas são necessárias e que Deus poderia ter criado verdades eternas de outra forma, sem prejudicar sua necessidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Descartes, verdades eternas, doutrina da criação, necessidade, imutabilidade.

<sup>1</sup> Yeditepe University. Inonu Mahallesi: Kayisdagi Caddesi, 34755, Istanbul, Turkey. E-mail: saniye.vatansever@gmail.com

In the *Meditations*, Descartes seems to maintain the following theses<sup>2</sup>:

- (1) God created eternal truths freely just like He created all other creatures. (The Creation Doctrine.)
- (2) God could have made it possible that eternal truths are false. (For instance, God could have made that  $2+2=4$  is false.)
- (3) Eternal truths are necessary.

There is an *apparent* incoherency between (1), (2), and (3). It seems that the necessity of eternal truths, which implies a condition that could not have been otherwise, conflicts with Descartes' conception of an omnipotent God who creates everything voluntarily. For instance, when we say that  $2+2=4$  is necessarily true, we usually imply that it *could not have been otherwise*. Assuming that Descartes holds all of the theses above would be equivalent to saying that eternal truths, for Descartes, are both necessary and not necessary. One way to solve this apparent tension in Descartes' account of eternal truths involves denying one of the theses that lead to the conflict. While some scholars deny that Descartes holds the creation doctrine, others deny the necessity of eternal truths. The objective of this paper is to show that we can find two different kinds of necessity in Descartes' writings allowing him to maintain all of the theses without a conflict. The structure of the paper will be as follows. First, I will show why the solutions offered by some scholars, which involve getting rid of the incoherency by denying either the thesis that God could have created eternal truths otherwise or the creation doctrine, do not work. Then, I will argue that when Descartes asserts the necessity of eternal truths, he attributes them *conditional necessity*, which should be understood in terms of the immutability that is conditional on the immutability of God's will.

## The creation doctrine and the eternal truths

In his letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630, Descartes explicitly argues for (1) that God freely created the eternal truths:

*You ask also what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was 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. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things.*

*You ask what God did in order to produce them [eternal truths]. I reply that from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them. Or, if you reserve the word created for the existence of things, then he established them [eternal truths] and made them [eternal truths] (AT I 153, CSM III 25).*

According to Descartes, eternal truths – just as any other created things – depend on God's will. They are no more necessarily attached to God's essence. This is a consequence of God's simple nature. Since God's understanding is identical with His will – God's understanding and will are only conceptually distinct and one is not prior to the other –, there cannot be any standard that He understands prior to His willing and creation (AT I 153, CSM III 26). In other words, due to His simple nature God is not necessitated by any principles.<sup>3</sup> In other words, God understands, wills, and creates at the same time. Since God is free not to create the world at all or to create the world completely differently, He is also free not to make the eternal truths about the essence of His creation true. In other words, (1) that 'God freely created eternal truths' entails (2) that 'God could have created eternal truths otherwise.'

However, given that the necessity of things requires that they could not have been otherwise, (2) that 'eternal truths could have been created otherwise' is in conflict with the thesis (3) that 'eternal truths are necessary'. As a way of solving this incoherency some argue that Descartes does not argue for (2). According to Jonathan Bennett (1994), Descartes does not claim that eternal truths could have been otherwise. Bennett argues that Descartes merely refuses to assert that God *could* have created the eternal truths otherwise. He writes,

*Indeed, did Descartes believe that God can do anything? He warns us against "arrogantly supposing our minds to be so powerful and wise that we can attempt to grasp and set limits to what God can or should perform" [...]. Furthermore, if Descartes thought that God is omnipotent, he was absurdly understating his position every time he said that "God can bring about whatever we are clearly perceiving in a way exactly corresponding to our perception of it" (Bennett, 1994, p. 644).*

To put it differently, for Bennett, Descartes cannot be arguing for the thesis (2) that 'God could have created eternal truths otherwise' because it contradicts his view that God

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I use the following abbreviations: AT: DESCARTES, R. 1996. *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.). Paris, J. Vrin. Cited by volume and page number. CSM: DESCARTES, R. 1985. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1 & 2. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (eds.). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Cited by volume and page number. CSMK: DESCARTES, R. 1991. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Anthony Kenny (eds.). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Cited by page number. ST: AQUINAS, T. 1964-1981. *Summa Theologiae*. Cambridge, Blackfriars.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed elaboration of this point see Walski (2003).

brings about things we clearly perceive and we cannot grasp how eternal truths could have been false. Bennett claims that rather than making a positive assertion about God's doings, Descartes merely advises us to suspend our judgments on God's capacities. Moreover, for Bennett, we should consider Descartes' claims about the modal status of eternal truths as assertions regarding the limits of our understanding in terms of their conceivability or inconceivability (Bennett, 1994, p. 656). Asserting that God could have made eternal truths false, for Bennett, means that we can make sense of something of which we cannot make sense (Bennett, 1994, p. 658). The most powerful textual support for Bennett's interpretation comes from Descartes' letter to Arnould on 29 July 1648, where Descartes writes,

*I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, 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 (AT V 435; CSM III 358).*

Here, Descartes argues both that *we should not dare to say that God could not have made contradictories possible* and that the negations of eternal truths are contradictions in our conception. This passage clearly supports Bennett's interpretation according to which Descartes does not explicitly argue for (2) because Cartesian modality should be understood through conceptual analysis as opposed to by appealing to God's relation to eternal truths. However, there are a couple of other places where Descartes makes positive assertions regarding our knowledge that God could have made eternal truths false. For instance, in his letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644 Descartes argues that God's omnipotence entails (2). He writes,

*I turn to the difficulty of conceiving how God would have been acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could not be true. It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that 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 (AT IV 118; CSM III 235).*

Here, Descartes explicitly asserts that God could have made eternal truths otherwise.<sup>4</sup> Similarly in his letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes that, "You ask also what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal – just as free as he was not to create the world" (AT I 152; CSM III 25). It seems that textual evidence is too compelling to disregard them as merely confused or unfortunate assertions on Descartes' part.

Although Bennett's interpretation correctly points out Descartes' frequent references to the finitude of our understanding and our lack of grasp of the divine omnipotence, his interpretation presupposes that in order to know that God could have made eternal truths otherwise, we should *understand* or *grasp* those contradictions. However, as Descartes puts it, there is no reason why we should understand the negations of each individual eternal truth in order to know that creating such negations is in God's power:

*Again, there is no need to ask how God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight, and so on; for I admit this is unintelligible for us. Yet on the other hand I do understand, quite correctly, that there cannot be any class of entity that does not depend on God; I also understand that it would have been easy for God to ordain certain things such that we men cannot understand the possibility of their being otherwise than they are. And therefore it would be irrational for us to doubt what we do understand correctly just because there is something which we do not understand and which, so far as we can see, there is no reason why we should understand (AT VII 436; CSM II 294, emphasis mine).*

In other words, Descartes argues that the question, "How God could have made contradictories possible?" is the wrong question because it presupposes that we should *understand/ grasp* how it is possible. It seems that Descartes does not think that we need to *grasp* or *understand* how eternal truths could have been false in order to know that God could have created eternal truths otherwise.

Descartes is careful to distinguish the epistemic state of *grasping how* from *knowing that*. He argues that we may know that certain things are the case even though we may not *understand* or *grasp* how they are actually possible. For example, in his letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630, he argues as follows:

*For it is certain that he [God] is the author of the essence of created things no less*

<sup>4</sup> Bennett admits that this fragment of Descartes' letter to Mesland contradicts his interpretation. However, he considers the passage to be controversial and does not take it to be a serious problem for his interpretation. In fact, Bennett calls this letter "hot potato letter" and suggests that this is an unfortunate writing on Descartes part (Bennett, 1994, p. 657).

*than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than eternal truths. I do not conceive them as emanating from God like rays from the sun; but I know that God is the author of everything and that these truths are something and consequently that he is their author, I say that I know this, not that I conceive it or grasp it; because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful although our soul, being finite, cannot grasp or conceive him. [...] To grasp something is to embrace it in one's thought; to know something, it is sufficient to touch it with one's thought (AT I 152, CSM III 25, emphasis mine).*

In other words, even though we cannot *grasp* or *conceive* how powerful God really is and how He is the author of the eternal truths, we can nonetheless *know* that He is omnipotent and that He created the eternal truths just as He created other things. Accordingly, although we cannot *grasp* how contradictories, i.e., logical, physical, geometrical and metaphysical impossibilities, could have been possible, we can nonetheless *know* that God could have made them possible. It seems, therefore, that Bennett's interpretation overlooks this significant distinction that Descartes makes between *grasping* how something is the case and *knowing* that something is the case. Hence, the answer to the question whether we can assert that God could have created eternal truths otherwise lies in noticing this distinction as it allows Descartes to demarcate the issues on which we can make positive judgments from the ones on which we should suspend judgment. Since Bennett ignores the significance of this distinction, he attributes a rather conservative position to Descartes, according to which we should and cannot make any positive assertions about the free creation of eternal truths.

So far, I have argued that Descartes maintains (1) that 'God freely created the eternal truths' and that (1) entails (2) 'eternal truths could have been otherwise'. Hence, we cannot resolve the initial incoherence in Descartes' commitments about eternal truths by rejecting either (1) or (2) as the textual evidence is strong enough to hold that Descartes holds (1) and consequently (2). Some argue that if Descartes wants to have a coherent view he has to abandon (3) i.e., 'eternal truths are necessary' because necessity implies that eternal truths *could not* have been otherwise. Next, I will examine whether Descartes maintains that eternal truths are in fact necessary and what Descartes means by necessity.

## Necessity of eternal truths

Harry Frankfurt agrees that, for Descartes, God could have created eternal truths otherwise. Yet, he denies that

eternal truths, for Descartes, are inherently necessary.<sup>5</sup> According to Frankfurt, Cartesian eternal truths are 'inherently contingent' because God could have created them otherwise and could have made them false (Frankfurt, 1977, p. 42). He argues further that the necessity that is attached to eternal truths derives from the constitution of our minds.

*The propositions we find to be necessary – like the Pythagorean theorem – need not be truths at all. The inconceivability of their falsity, which we demonstrate by the use of innate principles of reason, is not inherent in them. It is properly to be understood only as relative to the character of our minds (Frankfurt, 1977, p. 45).*

In other words, as a way of solving the apparent incoherency in Descartes' views on the creation doctrine and eternal truths, Frankfurt simply denies that eternal truths are necessary. On his account, the necessity of eternal truths is nothing but the necessity of human mind, to which we cannot help but assent (Frankfurt, 1977, p. 57). Hence, according to Frankfurt, eternal truths *appear* to be necessary, but there is in fact nothing 'intrinsically necessary' about them.

The problem with this interpretation, as Frankfurt himself admits, is that if there are no truly necessary propositions, it means that necessary propositions even about God's nature are merely apparently necessary or necessary from our point of view. Thus, it might be the case that God is a deceiver, despite the fact that we cannot conceive of such a possibility. As Frankfurt puts it,

*But the proposition that God is a deceiver, however offensive to human reason it may be, cannot be regarded by Descartes as any more an absolute impossibility than the propositions – which on his account are equally unintelligible – that God can create a wholly void space or that He can create an atom He cannot divide (Frankfurt, 1977, p. 52).*

Since all necessities are just necessities of our own contingent nature, it follows that from a logical point of view everything is possible. Hence, even the contradictory claims regarding the nature of God, which Descartes relies on in his argument for the existence of the external world, are possibly false for there is no guarantee that the proposition that God is not a deceiver corresponds to reality. And if it is possible that God is a deceiver, then we have no guarantee that any of our truth claims, even the ones that seem necessary to us, are in fact true.

Similarly, according to Frankfurt, in the Cartesian system science is impossible as well. For science is construed as

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Wilson argues in a similar line. She argues that "Descartes did regard the 'necessity' we perceive in mathematical propositions as in some sense and degree a function of the constitution of our minds--themselves finite 'creatures'" (Wilson, 1978, p. 125).

an attempt to discover the objective truth about the world beyond the limitations of our cognitive powers (Frankfurt, 1977, p. 54). If Frankfurt's interpretation is true, it also means that Descartes' whole project in the *Meditations* is in danger because Descartes relies on the 'truth rule,' according to which whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is true.<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately, Frankfurt's interpretation is not the only way to get us out of the initial problem. That is, we do not have to deny the necessity of eternal truths in order to read Descartes' account of eternal truths consistently with the Creation Doctrine. Besides, his reading has little textual support. In fact, Descartes explicitly asserts in several passages that eternal truths are independent of the nature of our minds. For instance, in the fifth meditation, while he talks about the necessity of geometrical truths and the necessary existence of God, he argues that their necessity is independent of our minds:

*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 determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind (AT VII 64; CSM II 45).*

*It is not that my thought makes it so [that existence and God is inseparable], or imposes any necessity on anything; on the contrary, it is the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, which determines my thinking in this respect (AT VII 67; CSM II 46).*

As is clear in these passages, contra what Frankfurt suggests the necessity of our thoughts, according to Descartes, does not derive from the nature of our minds. On the contrary, since these necessities are real and independent, God guarantees that our thinking corresponds to those necessary truths. As Descartes asserts, "First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it" (AT VII 78; CSM II 54, emphasis mine). Therefore, if I clearly and distinctly perceive something is the case, then I can infer that it is the case because an all-good

God would ensure that our understanding corresponds to the reality (AT VII 70; CSM II 48).

I hope it is now clear that if Descartes had Frankfurt's conception of necessity in mind, he could never establish the "truth rule," which plays a central role in Descartes' philosophy in general for it enables him to achieve certain knowledge of countless matters whose nature is intellectual and also corporeal (AT VII 71; CSM II 49). The identification of necessity with our subjective convictions can at most ensure us that we will never be aware of our particular errors (AT VIIIA 21; CSM I 207). In brief, Frankfurt's mind-dependent necessity cannot be what Descartes had in mind.<sup>7</sup>

It seems that the common problem with the attempts to eliminate the apparent incoherency in Descartes' views on the creation doctrine and eternal truths lies in the unjustified assumption that Descartes has to abandon one of the theses. While for Bennett Descartes denies the theses (1) that 'God created eternal truths freely just like He created all other creatures' and consequently (2) that 'God could have made it possible that eternal truths are false,' for Frankfurt he denies the thesis (3) that 'eternal truths are necessary.' As I have argued, neither Bennett nor Frankfurt's accounts are satisfactory. In the next and final section of this paper, I will argue that in order to eliminate the inconsistency we need to explore Descartes' conception of necessity. As will be clear, by necessity Descartes simply means immutability of eternal truths, which are dependent on the immutability of God's will.

## Descartes' conception of necessity: Absolute and conditional necessities

Although simple and appealing, the contemporary notion of necessity understood as 'a condition that could not have been otherwise' does not fit well into Descartes philosophy. He argues that eternal truths are necessary, and yet he also maintains that they could have been created otherwise. I will argue that the source of incoherency lies in our misconception of the Cartesian necessity rather than his commitments to the creation doctrine or the necessity of eternal truths.<sup>8</sup> In order to understand Descartes' conception of

<sup>6</sup> As E.M. Curley points out, Frankfurt's interpretation both undermines Descartes' ontological argument, which presupposes the existence of true and immutable essence of things and it conflicts with Descartes' *a priori* method in physics. For a detailed defense of these points see Curley (1984, p. 570-576).

<sup>7</sup> As an alternative to Frankfurt's mind-dependent-necessity, Peter Geach proposes a world-dependent conception of necessity, according to which "the eternal truths are necessary *in our world*, and in giving us our mental endowments God gave us the right sort of clear and distinct ideas to see the necessity." Geach argues that even though eternal truths are necessary, they are not necessarily necessary; God could have freely chosen to make a different sort of world, in which other things would have been necessary truths (Geach, 1973, p. 10). However, this view is also in conflict with Descartes' views in the *Principles* where he argues 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; AT XI 47; CSM I).

<sup>8</sup> Dan Kaufman (2005) also argues the necessity of eternal truths is compatible with God's omnipotence to create eternal truths otherwise. However, his account is based on the assumption that God simply did not will to create all other possibilities of contradictions. However, his view does not help us much because he assumes that possibilities are prior to God's creation of them, which contradicts the singularity and the unity of God's will, understanding, and creation.

necessity we should first examine its scholastic roots, more specifically we should analyze Thomas Aquinas' account of *necessity by supposition*, which I call *conditional necessity*. In this section, I will argue that, following Aquinas, Descartes assumes that there are two kinds of necessity, namely *conditional* and *absolute necessity*.

According to Aquinas, "there are two ways in which a thing can be necessary, namely, *absolutely necessary*, and *necessary by supposition* (ST I, 110). He argues that while God's willing things in Himself, such as His goodness and omnipotence etc., is *absolute necessity*, His willing things apart from Himself is *necessity by supposition* (ST I, 111). Hence, in order to determine whether eternal truths, i.e., truths about the essences of things, are *absolutely necessary* or *necessary by supposition* for Aquinas, we need to determine which truths are in God and which ones are apart from Him. For Aquinas, not only truths about God's essence, but also all eternal truths about God's creation reside in God's mind. As he states, "the nature of a circle, and the fact that two and three makes five, have eternity in the mind of God" (ST I, 99). Hence, eternal truths are absolutely necessary just as truths about God's own essence.

On the other hand, Aquinas argues that certain truths such as "Socrates is sitting" are *necessary by supposition*. In other words, such truths according to Aquinas are simply *conditionally necessary* because God wills them to be the case, that e.g. "Socrates is sitting" and that it should not be *absolute necessity*. Moreover, God's will does not change, therefore, even though "Socrates is sitting" is not an absolute necessity, it is conditional on the fact that God has willed it to be the case.

Having made the distinction between *absolute* and *conditional necessities*, it seems that Descartes also has a similar distinction in mind. According to the creation doctrine, God freely created everything including the eternal truths and everything depends on Him.<sup>9</sup> By *eternal truths* Descartes means the essences of *created things* (AT I 151-2; CSM III 25). According to Descartes, truths of mathematics, geometry, and truths of metaphysics and ethics are eternal truths.<sup>10</sup> He argues further that "the existence of God is

the first and most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone others proceed" (AT I 150; CSM III 24). In other words, Descartes distinguishes eternal truths from the truths about God's existence (and essence), which are the first and most eternal truths of all.<sup>11</sup> He argues that we cannot even conceive of the impossibility of truths about God's essence and existence. He writes, "I agree that there are contradictions which are so evident that we cannot put them before our minds without judging them entirely impossible, like the one you suggest: 'that God might have brought it about that his creatures were independent of him'" (AT IV 119, CSM III 235). It is clear from this passage that Descartes wants to prevent us from making contradictory inferences about God's essence. Thus, he distinguishes truths about God's essence and existence from other eternal truths. That is why in presenting his position on eternal truths he mostly speaks of mathematical and physical truths as dependent on God's will and not of truths about God's essence. In this respect, when Descartes talks about eternal truths we should generally understand truths about the essences of created things only.<sup>12</sup>

This might seem as an arbitrary limitation of eternal truths.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the exclusion of truths regarding the essence and existence of God from the scope of eternal truths enables Descartes to hold (2) without a contradiction to (1) and (3). Descartes' commitment to the thesis (2) that 'God could have made eternal truths false' compels him to consider the first and most eternal of all truths as distinct and separate from the rest of eternal truths. If truths about God's essence and existence were eternal, then Descartes has to argue that God could have made His essence and existence otherwise as well.<sup>14</sup> Yet, for Descartes, God exists necessarily and His essence is necessarily as it is. In other words, God's essence could not have been otherwise. So, by demarcating the truths about the essence or existence of God from the eternal truths about the essence of created things, Descartes consistently argues that the latter could have been created otherwise. I will call the truths regarding the existence and essence of God *ab-*

<sup>9</sup> Here I adopt Margaret Wilson's term 'creation doctrine' (see Wilson, 1978). While Wilson thinks that the creation doctrine is simply the view that everything that exists depends on God's will, I use this doctrine in a more narrow sense to signify that all eternal truths depend on God's will. The reason for this qualification is that, as I will argue, the essential attributes of God do not depend on God's will in the way that the essential features of other things, i.e., eternal truths depend on it. While God freely determines the essence of everything else, His own nature is not freely determined by His will. He exists absolutely necessarily while everything else exists simply because God willed them to exist, hence their existence is merely conditionally necessary.

<sup>10</sup> Some instances of the metaphysical eternal truths are: 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, etc. (AT VIII 24; CSM I 209).

<sup>11</sup> Note that God's essence and existence are identical and they are only conceptually distinct.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Sperring distinguishes what he calls "god facts" and "other facts", and argues that the necessary truths pertaining to God's nature are of a higher order of necessity than the rest of the eternal truths. Yet, he does not present an account of the scholastic source of this distinction. Nor does he explain why the former has a higher modal status. For his account of the distinction in question, see Sperring (2005).

<sup>13</sup> According to Margaret Wilson, exclusion of truths about God's essence and existence from eternal truths is an arbitrary limitation. As she writes, "even if Descartes did want to limit his doctrine to the eternal truths of mathematics and physics, it is not clear how the limitation could be other than arbitrary and *ad hoc*" (Wilson, 1978, p. 124).

<sup>14</sup> Walski (2003) falsely assumes that Descartes takes truths about God's essence and existence to be instances of eternal truths and unjustifiably concludes that Descartes' views on the creation doctrine and eternal truths are incoherent.

*solute necessities* for they are not only eternal but, unlike other eternal truths, could not have been otherwise.<sup>15</sup>

Descartes distinguishes truths about God's essence from other eternal truths, i.e., truths about the essences of created things. The negation of truths about God's essence is *entirely impossible*. In this regard, Descartes demarcates *absolute necessities* that could not have been created otherwise from *conditional necessities*, whose negation could have been true, but that God chose them to be true. Truths regarding God's nature such as "God is omnipotent" and "God is simple" are absolute necessities or, as some may want to put it, they are necessarily necessary (see Curley, 1984).

However, unlike Aquinas, for Descartes eternal truths do not reside in God's mind. According to Descartes, eternal truths, just as other created things, are apart from God. In his letter to Mersenne, 7 May 1630, Descartes argues that it is certain that eternal truths are no more necessarily attached to God's essence than are other created things (AT I 152; CSM III 25). This is again a consequence of God's simple nature. Hence, contrary to Aquinas, for Descartes eternal truths, such as "2+2=4" and "Men are mortal", are *not* absolutely necessary, they are merely *conditional necessities*.

By *conditional necessity*, what is meant is that the necessity of eternal truths is conditional on God's will and its immutability. Supposing that God willed them to be necessary, they are necessary. As Aquinas puts it, "from the very fact that nothing resists the divine will, it follows that not only those things happen that God wills to happen, but that *they happen necessarily or contingently according to God's will*" (ST I, 116, emphasis mine). Descartes argues in quite a similar manner and writes that "[truths] are immutable and eternal, since the will and decree of God willed and decreed that they should be so. Whether you think this is hard or easy to accept, it is enough for me that it is true" (AT I 380; CSM II. 261). He also gives the following examples:

*For example, 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 be equal to two right angles*

*that this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so on in other cases (AT VII 432; CSM II 291, emphasis mine).*

In other words, both Aquinas and Descartes hold that God made certain things necessary and certain things contingent. In this respect, they both assume that necessity of truths is *compatible* with God's will and the creation doctrine. Moreover, Aquinas writes that, "although God's willing a thing is not by absolute necessity, yet it is necessary by supposition, on account of the unchangeableness of the divine will" (ST I, 115). That is, conditional necessities are dependent on the immutability of God's will. Hence, unless God's will changes, they do not change either. In his letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630, Descartes makes this point most clearly:

*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 [these eternal truths] to be eternal and unchangeable". I make the same judgment about God (AT I 146; CSM III 23).*

Notice that Descartes' attitude towards the *changeability* of eternal truths is quite conservative in comparison to his views regarding the free creation of eternal truths. He argues that eternal truths *cannot change* because their change implies change in God's will, which is inconceivable.<sup>16</sup> This in turn indicates that the immutability of eternal truths is essential for their being eternal and necessary.<sup>17</sup>

Another indication of Descartes' resistance to making any assertion regarding the immutability of eternal truths is the language he uses when referring to the eternal truths. While he argues that God *could have* created them otherwise, he never asserts that God *can* change them. This might be falsely interpreted as if he could chose another set of eternal truths to be true, which presupposes the existence of many sets of truths waiting for God to choose them. Yet, such reading would conflict with Descartes' commitment to the unity of God's understanding and will. That is, God could not have first understood different sets of truths and then willed to create one set among many. Thus, when Descartes argues that God could have made eternal truths otherwise we should read him simply as arguing that God could have created different things with different essential properties that would be expressed with a different set of eternal truths. The fact that God freely

<sup>15</sup> For structural purposes, I will leave the discussion about *absolute necessities* for the final part of the paper, where I will compare and contrast them to the eternal truths about created things, which, as I will argue, are *conditional necessities*.

<sup>16</sup> In the *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes repeats the point about the immutability of God's attributes. As he writes, "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).

<sup>17</sup> I agree with Curley's immutability interpretation of necessity, according to which the necessity of eternal truths derives from the immutability of God's will (1984, p. 588).

chose what to create does not undermine the necessity of eternal truths because once they are created, their necessity is guaranteed by their immutability.

When Descartes argues that eternal truths are necessary, therefore, he simply means that they are true at all times and their truth-value cannot change unless God's will changes. The argument for the necessity of eternal truths can be stated more formally as follows:

- (1) God freely creates and determines the eternal truths, i.e., the essence of things.
- (2) Once created, the essence of His creation does not change, unless God's will changes.
- (3) God's will is immutable.
- (4) Eternal truths are immutable. (E.g.,  $2+2=4$  is always true.)
- (5) Immutability entails necessity.
- (6) Eternal truths are necessary.

Having defined the necessity of eternal truths as the immutability of truths that depend on God's immutable will, one might worry that such an account does not leave any room for contingent truths. In "God's Immutability and the Necessity of Descartes's Eternal Truths," Dan Kaufman criticizes the immutability interpretation. According to Kaufman, the immutability interpretation is incorrect because 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 strong necessitarianism, a view that does not have any room for contingent truths.<sup>18</sup>

While Kaufman is right to demand an explicit explanation of how immutability accounts for the necessity of eternal truths, I think that his worry can be addressed just by defining necessity in terms of immutability and contingency in terms of mutability. While the essence of his creation cannot change unless God's nature changes, the accidental properties of objects can change under various different conditions. One possible explanation for this is that while God wills the essential properties of things to be in a particular way, he merely sets limits for the accidental properties but does not decide upon how the accidental properties should be. That is, the accidental properties of objects are not sufficiently determined by the essential properties of things. In that respect, while accidental features of God's creation are still dependent on God's will, they are not willed in the same way that eternal truths are willed, i.e., they are not willed to be in a particular way. Hence, even if all truths including the contingent truths are effects of God's immutable will, this does not mean that they cannot change. Contingent facts, like I have a body or short hair, can change in time.

Contra what Kaufman argues, in order to account for the immutability of eternal truths, one does not need to adopt the Transfer of Immutability Principle, according

to which eternal truths are immutable because they are the creation of God's immutable will. While Kaufman is right to point out that this principle leads to strong necessitarianism according to which all truths are necessary, he is wrong to think that in order for the immutability interpretation to work it needs to appeal to this principle. Immutability of the eternal truths does not directly derive from the fact that they are the products of God's immutable will. Their immutability rather derives from the fact that God freely wills them to be immutable. The fact that contingent facts also depend on God's immutable will, therefore, does not mean that they should be immutable and necessary. God does not will contingent facts to be immutable. While both contingent and necessary truths are created by God's immutable will, God wills them differently, i.e., He wills them to be mutable or immutable respectively.

By defining necessity in terms of immutability and contingency in terms of changeability of the truth-value of statements, one can therefore explain how Descartes can consistently hold that eternal truths are necessary even though God could have created them otherwise. Understanding necessity as immutability would also help us distinguish different kinds of eternal truths. It seems that Descartes allows for a hierarchy between different kinds of eternal truths when he asserts that the existence of God is the most eternal of all truths. Following Paul Sperring, we should distinguish eternal truths pertaining to God's nature from the eternal truths pertaining to the essential features of God's creation. While the former are "absolutely necessary" simply because God's nature would not change and therefore those truths about God cannot change, the latter kinds of eternal truths are only "conditionally necessary" because their truth-value is conditional upon the mutability of God's will. Even if both kinds of truths are necessary and thereby immutable, while the eternal truths about God could not have been otherwise, we can entertain the thought that the latter kind of immutable truths could be otherwise due to the fact that they are the product of God's free will. Similarly, while the negation of absolute necessities, such as "God is omnipotent," is an absolute impossibility, the negation of conditional necessities, such as " $2+2=4$ ," is a conditional impossibility because it is conditional on the immutability of God's will.

Hence, while Aquinas and Descartes disagree on the modal status of eternal truths they both argue that the necessity of things that are apart from God is determined by God's free will and that their necessity depends on God's immutable will. Given these pieces of evidence, it seems that by the necessity of eternal truths they merely mean the immutability of those truths. In his reply to Gassendi, Descartes explains how it is possible that truths of geometry and metaphysics are both immutable and eternal and yet dependent on God and

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed account of his critique of the immutability interpretation and his own solution to the original problem, see Kaufman (2005).

argues that since eternal truths are always the same we can call them eternal.<sup>19</sup> Hence, according to Descartes we are justified to call the eternal truths ‘necessary’ and ‘eternal’ not because they are independent of God, but simply because they do not change. He argues that eternal truths “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).

## Concluding remarks

In this paper, I argued against two influential interpretations of Descartes’ view regarding the modality of eternal truths and the creation doctrine by undermining the common underlying assumption in both views, namely that the necessity of eternal truths entails that they could not have been created otherwise. If by claiming that eternal truths are necessary Descartes meant that they could not have been created otherwise, he would contradict himself, as there are many passages suggesting otherwise. Similarly, there is also textual evidence showing that he also assumes the necessity of eternal truths. Hence, the solutions offered to resolve the problem consist of denying either one of the theses (1) that ‘God created eternal truths freely just like he created all other creatures,’ (2) that ‘God could have made it possible that eternal truths are false’ or (3) ‘Eternal truths are necessary.’

As I have argued, the necessity of eternal truths should be understood as the immutability of those truths. Thus, when Descartes claims that eternal truths are necessary he rather emphasizes their immutability instead of claiming that they could not have been otherwise. I also argued that the necessity of eternal truths is similar to the Thomistic *conditional necessity*, according to which necessity is conditional, i.e., they are immutable as long as God’s will is immutable. In this respect, the immutability, i.e. necessity, of eternal truths is guaranteed by the immutability of God’s nature. Accordingly, contingency can be understood as mutability. This interpretation does not only solve the apparent inconsistency but also explains the following, (i) how God could freely determine which propositions should be necessary, i.e. unchangeable, and which ones should be contingent, i.e. changing in time;

(ii) how God’s unified nature could have created different sets of necessary, i.e. unchangeable, truths; (iii) how Cartesian necessity as immutability is compatible with divine omnipotence; and finally (iv) how Descartes avoids making assertions regarding the changeability of eternal truths while he confidently argues that God could have created them otherwise.

## References

- AQUINAS, T. 1964-1981. *Summa Theologiae*. Cambridge, Blackfriars.
- BENNETT, J. 1994. Descartes’ Theory of Modality. *Philosophical Review*, **103**:639-667. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2186100>
- CURLEY, E.M. 1984. Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths. *The Philosophical Review*, **93**(4):569-597. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2184828>
- DESCARTES, R. 1996. *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.). Paris, J. Vrin.
- DESCARTES, R. 1985. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1 & 2. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (eds.). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- DESCARTES, R. 1991. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Anthony Kenny (eds.). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- FRANKFURT, H.G. 1977. Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths. *Philosophical Review*, **86**(1):36-57. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2184161>
- GEACH, P.T. 1973. Omnipotence. *Philosophy*, **48**:7-20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100060381>
- KAUFMAN, D. 2005. God’s Immutability and the Necessity of Descartes’s Eternal Truths. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, **43**(1):1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2005.0009>
- SPERRING, P. 2005. Descartes, God and the Eternal Truths. *Richmond Journal of Philosophy*, **10**:1-7.
- WALSKI, G. 2003. The Cartesian God and the Eternal Truths. *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, **1**:23-44.
- WILSON, M. 1978. *Descartes*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. xviii + 255. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203167670>

Submitted on June 19, 2017

Accepted on August 14, 2017

<sup>19</sup> Descartes, following the scholastics who describe the nature of eternity through lack of change or movement, writes as follows: “As therefore the nature of time consists in the numbering of before and after in movement, so likewise in the apprehension of the uniformity of what is altogether outside of movement consists the nature of eternity” (AT VII 381; CSM II 262).