

Existential Import and the Contingent Necessity of Descartes's Eternal Truths

[Penultimate Copy. Please Cite Published Version.]

Jeremy W. Skrzypek
University of Mary

INTRODUCTION

Throughout his philosophical works, though more often in his correspondence than in his published manuscripts, Rene Descartes sets aside certain mathematical and logical truths as comprising a distinct and important category known as the “eternal truths”.¹ Some of the mathematical truths that Descartes places in this category include: the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles (CSM 2: 45/ AT 7: 64; CSM 2: 46/ AT 7: 66; CSM 2: 291/ AT 7: 432, CSMK: 235/ AT 4: 118), the greatest side of a triangle subtends its greatest angle (CSM 2: 45/ AT 7: 64), twice four makes eight (CSM 2: 294/ AT 7: 436), all of the radii of a circle are equal (CSMK: 25/ AT 1: 152), and one and two make three (CSMK: 359/ AT 5: 224). Some of the logical truths that he places in this category include: “Nothing comes from nothing” (CSM 1:

¹ References to passages in Rene Descartes's own works are indicated in parenthetical citations using the following abbreviations (along with their corresponding page numbers): ‘CSM 1’ is an abbreviation for John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); ‘CSM 2’ is an abbreviation for John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and ‘CSMK’ is an abbreviation for John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). ‘AT’ is an abbreviation for Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds., *Oeuvres De Descartes* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1983) (the numbers that follow indicate volume and page numbers). All references to other works are indicated in footnotes.

209/ AT 8A: 23; CSM 1: 221/ AT 8A: 38), “It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time” (CSM 1: 209/ AT 8A: 24), “what is done cannot be undone” (CSM 1: 209/ AT 8A: 24), “he who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks” (CSM 1: 209/ AT 8A: 24), “the whole is greater than its part” (CSMK: 103/ AT 2: 138), “in general contradictories cannot be true together” (CSMK: 235/ AT 4: 118), and “countless others” (CSM 1: 209/ AT 8A: 24).

Descartes’s doctrine of the eternal truths is interesting and significant not because of which truths he includes in this category, but because of what Descartes says about the category as a whole. First, Descartes says that these eternal truths are not only eternal and immutable (CSM 2: 45/ AT 7: 64; CSM 2: 261/ AT 7: 380), but also, in some sense, *necessary* (CSM 2: 291/ AT 7: 432; CSMK: 235/ AT 4: 118; CSMK: 348/ AT 5: 166). Descartes agrees that two plus two *necessarily* equals four, and the three angles of a triangle *necessarily* add up to a right angle. This much is not surprising. But Descartes also seems to hold that the eternal truths are, in some sense, merely contingently true. The sense in which they are merely contingently true is as follows. According to Descartes, the eternal truths are *created* by God and are eternally dependent on His decree that they be as they are (see, for example: CSM 2: 261/ AT 7: 380; CSM 2: 294/ AT 7: 436; CSMK: 23/ AT 1: 145). God creates these eternal truths by creating certain eternal essences. By creating a particular essence for triangularity, for example, God thereby makes certain propositions concerning triangles necessarily true. As Descartes explains in a May 1630 letter to Mersenne,

You ask me by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply:
by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say, as their
efficient and total cause. For it is certain that he is the author of the essence of

created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths. (CSMK 25/ AT 1:152)

And, concerning triangularity in particular, in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes writes,

But I think the most important consideration at this point is that I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside me still cannot be called nothing; for although in a sense they can be thought of at will, they are not my invention but have their own true and immutable natures.

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. This is clear from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated of the triangle, for example that its three angles equal two right angles, that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle, and the like; and since these properties are ones which I now clearly recognize whether I want to or not, even if I never thought of them at all when I previously imagined the triangle, it follows that they cannot have been invented by me. (CSM 2: 45/ AT 7: 64)

According to Descartes, then, God creates the eternal truths by creating certain eternal essences.

Importantly, however, Descartes insists that God does not create these eternal truths or the essences that serve as their truthmakers out of any kind of necessity. As the same letter to Mersenne cited earlier continues, “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” (CSMK 25/ AT 1: 152). And in an illuminating passage from the Sixth Set of Replies, Descartes explains,

It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. I am not speaking here of temporal priority: I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of ‘rationally determined reason’ as they call it, such that God’s idea of the good impelled him to choose one thing rather than another. 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 equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise*; and so on in other cases... Thus the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence. (CSM 2: 291-292/ AT 7: 432)²

² The notion of ‘indifference’ being used in this passage is a complex (and potentially problematic) notion in Descartes’s writings, and it seems to mean a few different things depending on the context. For instance, shortly after the passage above, it is explained that “the indifference which belongs to human freedom is very different from that which belongs to divine

For Descartes, then, the eternal truths are freely created by God. And, because God was “supremely indifferent” with respect to these truths in his initial act of creation, they are merely contingently true. As Descartes insists time and time again, God could have made many, if not all, of the eternal truths that are now in place false: “God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight” (CSM 2: 294/ AT 7: 436); “[God] 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” (CSMK: 25/ AT 1: 152); “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 together” (CSMK: 235/ AT 4:118); “I would not

freedom” (CSM 2: 292: AT 7: 433). But in a letter to Mesland, 9 February 1645, Descartes describes two sorts of indifference that apply to human freedom, one of which sounds extremely close to the sort of indifference he wants to preserve in God. Here he defines the first type of indifference as “that state of the will when it is not impelled one way rather than another by any *perception of truth or goodness*” (CSMK: 245/ AT 4: 173). This seems to be same sort of indifference emphasized in the passage above, where he says that “there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of ‘rationally determined reason’ as they call it, such that God’s *idea of the good* impelled him to choose one thing rather than another”. We might minimally understand God’s indifference, then, to require the absence of any external standards that would limit God’s freedom. So in emphasizing that God is indifferent with respect to his creation of the world, Descartes aims to preserve both God’s independence and the priority of His will. For more on Descartes’ account of indifference and its role in his doctrine of the eternal truths, see Dan Kaufman, “Infimus Gradus Libertatis? Descartes on Indifference and Divine Freedom”, *Religious Studies* 39 (2003): pp. 391-406.

dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3” (CSMK: 358-359/ AT 5: 224).

The fact that Descartes repeatedly claims that God could have made many, if not all, of the eternal truths false has led several scholars to attribute to Descartes’s God a radical sort of power: the power to do the logically impossible, that is, the power to make twice four equal to nine, or two radii of the same circle unequal in length, or contradictories true together.³ In his 1977 article, “Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths”, for example, Harry Frankfurt writes,

Descartes...evidently thinks that God, while creating the essence “circularity”, could have made it different from what we conceive it to be. In that case there would be eternal truths about circles, but they would differ from – and perhaps be negations of – the propositions that are necessarily true of circularity as we now understand it.⁴

As Frankfurt continues, understanding Descartes doctrine of the eternal truths in this way leads to the conclusion that Descartes’s God is “a being for whom the logically impossible is possible”.⁵ The purpose of this paper is to offer an interpretation of Descartes’s doctrine of the eternal truths that avoids attributing to his God this sort of power. Descartes does repeatedly claim that God could have made many, if not all, of the eternal truths that are now in place false.

³ See for example, Harry Frankfurt, “Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths”, *The Philosophical Review* 86 (1997): pp. 36-57; Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980): pp. 95-126.

⁴ Frankfurt, “Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths”, pp. 41-42.

⁵ Frankfurt, “Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths”, p. 44.

But I do not think that this commits him to view that God could have made twice four equal to nine, or anything of that sort. In what follows, I will show how, by placing Descartes's doctrine of the eternal truths in its proper historical context, a new, more charitable interpretation of that doctrine becomes available, according to which Descartes's God could have made the eternal truths false by choosing not to create the eternal essences to which these truths refer. I argue, furthermore, that there are a number of passages in Descartes's corpus that support this alternative interpretation. I conclude by considering some potentially troublesome passages for my interpretation and show how they can be accommodated when read correctly.

TWO KINDS OF FALSITY

The main thesis of this paper is that, even though, for Descartes, the eternal truths are willed indifferently by God, and, in that sense, are merely contingent, this does not entail that, for Descartes, God could have established an alternative, contrary set of eternal truths in their place. What I am suggesting is that even though Descartes does say that God could have made certain eternal truths, such as " $1 + 2 = 3$ ", false, this does not commit him to the claim that God could have made certain other, contrary propositions, such as " $1 + 2 = 4$ ", true in their stead. Consider once again the passages in which Descartes explains the contingency of God's decision to create certain eternal truths. He states that "God could have brought it about from eternity that it was *not true* that twice four make eight", and that God could have "made it *false* that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles". What Descartes explicitly says in these passages, and, to my knowledge, what he says in every other description of the eternal truths, is that God had the ability to make each of the eternal truths false or untrue or not true, not that He had the ability to make alternative propositions eternally true in their stead.

Now, one might wonder what other way there would have been for God to have made “ $1 + 2 = 3$ ” false other than making the summation of one and two equal to some other number. My contention is that, unlike most modern logics, Descartes’s logic recognizes not one but *two* ways in which an affirmative proposition can turn out to be false. In the logical system that I am ascribing to Descartes, all affirmative propositions have existential import, that is to say, the truth of any affirmative proposition entails not only a certain relation between the subject and predicate, but also the existence of the subject in question. In order for an affirmative proposition to be true, then, two things must be the case. First, the terms in the proposition must successfully refer. The subject or subjects mentioned in the proposition must actually exist. Second, the subject or subjects mentioned in the proposition must also possess the quality being attributed to it or them in the proposition. As an illustration, consider the proposition “The sky is blue”. For the proposition “The sky is blue” to turn out to be true, two things must be the case. First, the term “sky” must successfully refer to something in the world. Second, this sky must actually possess the relevant quality, it must be blue. Now, because two things need to be the case for this proposition to turn out to be true in this logical system, there are actually two ways in which this proposition could have turned out to be false. First, the sky could have possessed some alternative, contrary property (for instance, a different color). But there is another way in which the proposition “The sky is blue” could have turned out to be false. The sky is blue would have been false were the term “sky” to fail to refer, that is, were there to have been no sky. In such case, if one were to annihilate the sky, or if the sky were never to have been created, then there would be no “truth-maker” for the affirmative proposition, and it would turn out false.

Why think that Descartes’s logic might have had this underlying feature? For one, this existential import of affirmative propositions is found in Aristotelian logic, a logical system in

which Descartes would have been well-trained. In a telling passage from his *Categories*, Aristotle explains,

‘Socrates is ill’ is the contrary of ‘Socrates is well’, but not even of such composite expressions is it true to say that one of the pair must always be true and the other false. For if Socrates exists, one will be true and the other false, but *if he does not exist, both will be false; for neither ‘Socrates is ill’ nor ‘Socrates is well’ is true, if Socrates does not exist at all.*⁶

So, whereas one might think that if Socrates does not exist, then “Socrates is ill” and “Socrates is well” are neither true nor false (or trivially true if understood as material conditionals), for Aristotle, the fact that Socrates does not exist is sufficient to make both of these propositions false.

The idea that a proposition can turn out to be false by lacking existing referents is one that was also carried through medieval Aristotelianism, espoused by at least Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham.⁷ Even though Descartes regularly criticizes Aristotle’s syllogistic logic

⁶ Aristotle, *Categories*, in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941): 13b14-19 (p. 33)

⁷ See Thomas Aquinas, *De principiis naturae*, trans. Gyula Klima, in Gyula Klima with Fritz Allhoff and Anand Jayprakash Vaidya, eds., *Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007): p. 160. Ockham actually has the clearest exposition of this Aristotelian idea: “In affirmative propositions a term is always asserted to supposit for something. Thus, if it supposits for nothing the proposition is false. However, in negative propositions the assertion is either that the term does not supposit for something or that it supposits for something of which the predicate is truly denied. Thus a negative proposition has

as being unable to produce new knowledge (CSM 1: 36/ AT 10: 405-406; CSM 1: 119-120/ AT 11: 17-18), he may very well have inherited this underlying logical presupposition that affirmative propositions require for their truth the existence of their referents. And there is at least one passage in Descartes's published works that can be seen to support this reading. In the Third Meditation, Descartes speaks of certain ideas in the mind as being false by lacking referents:

light and colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold and the other tactile qualities, I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way, to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things or of non-things. For although, as I have noted before, falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can occur only in judgements, there is another kind of falsity, material falsity, which occurs in ideas, when they represent non-things as things. For example, the ideas which I have of

two causes of truth" (William of Ockham, *Summa Logicae*, in Michael Loux, ed., *Ockham's Theory of Terms: Part I of the Summa Logicae* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974): p. 206). See also Terence Parsons, "The Traditional Square of Opposition", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2012 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/square/>. That affirmative propositions have necessary existential import was, however, denied by several other scholastic philosophers, including William of Sherwood, John Buridan, and Francisco Suarez. For an excellent overview of the history of this controversy and its relevance for understanding Descartes and his followers, see John N. Martin, "Existential Import in Cartesian Semantics", *History and Philosophy of Logic* 32 (2011): pp. 211-239.

heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the absence of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is. And since there can be no ideas which are not as it were of things, if it is true that cold is nothing but the absence of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false; and the same goes for other ideas of this kind. (CSM 2: 30/ AT 7: 43-44)

I think Descartes's statements concerning the possible falsity of the eternal truths should be interpreted in light of this Aristotelian context. My suggestion is that the ability Descartes is granting to God is the ability to have freely *refrained* from making the eternal truths true. God could have done this by choosing not to create particular mathematical or logical essences, such as the number "1", the addition function, or the equals sign, or by choosing to refrain from creating anything at all. For according to Aristotelian logic, if there are no numbers, no mathematical essences, then the statement " $1 + 2 = 3$ " is not true. In fact, the absence of numbers is one way that the propositions detailing their relations to other mathematical entities could turn out to be false. If all of the eternal truths turn out to be contingent for Descartes, then the only further assertion that I think this commits him to is that God was free not to create any of the eternal essences to which the eternal truths refer.

Importantly, that God was free not to create any of the eternal essences to which the eternal truths refer is a claim that Descartes clearly held. In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes makes the explicit assertion that "[t]he mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures" (CSMK: 23/ AT 1: 145). Descartes also states that "[God] 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*" (CSMK: 25/ AT 1: 152).

According to my interpretation, then, God is just as free to make it not true that all the radii of a circle are equal as He was not to create the world because they are the same sort of act – a decision not to create some particular thing or set of things.⁸

⁸ One commentator (and perhaps the only commentator) who seems to agree with me on this point is Hide Ishiguro. In her own article on the subject, Ishiguro writes, “when Descartes gives an example of a possibility we must be willing to think is available to God though incomprehensible to us, it is not the possibility of two times four being seven that he gives, but the possibility of *two times four not being eight*... Not only is there no passage in the *Meditations* or in the Replies to Objections where Descartes gives a positive contradiction (as distinct from a negation of a necessary truth) as something God could make true, I am as yet unaware of any example in his other works either” (Hide Ishiguro, “The Status of Necessity and Possibility in Descartes”, in Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Essays on Descartes Meditations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986): p. 466). The major difference between Ishiguro’s approach and my own is that she sees the eternal truths as strictly mental entities, whereas I see the eternal truths (or at least the eternal truths as grounded in the eternal essences) as extra-mental (but still created and entirely dependent on God). For Ishiguro, logical and mathematical axioms are *a priori* features of our reason, and so, if God had refrained from creating any human minds, then all of those logical and mathematical axioms that comprise the eternal truths would have been made false through an absence of any relevant truth-makers (the truth-makers is in this case being our reasoning faculties) (Ishiguro, “The Status of Necessity and Possibility in Descartes”, pp. 461, 465). We might, then, see Ishiguro as giving a sort of Kantian reading of Descartes’ doctrine of the eternal truths (she herself refers to Kant at least twice in the explication of her view). I tend to think we should read Descartes along broadly Platonist lines

TWO KINDS OF OPPOSITE

I would like now to attend to some passages in which Descartes explains the contingency of the eternal truths that are a bit more difficult to parse along the lines of my interpretation. In addition to the passages in which, as I have argued, Descartes grants God the ability to have made some of the eternal truths false by refraining from creating one or more of the eternal essences, there are at least two points at which Descartes seems to be giving God some positive ability to have made some other facts or propositions eternally true in their stead. The first passage that I have in mind reads as follows: “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 together*” (CSMK: 235/ AT 4: 118). And the second, even more difficult passage is this: “God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that *he could have done the opposite*” (CSMK: 235/ AT 4: 118).

In the first of these passages, Descartes seems to suggest that God could have made it false that contradictories could not be true together. Is this the same as saying that God could have made it true that contradictories can be true together? That is certainly one way to read this passage – perhaps the most natural way of reading it. And if it is the only way, then my claim

(mostly for the reasons given in Marleen Rozemond, “Descartes’ Ontology of the Eternal Truths” in Paul Hoffman, David Owen, and Gideon Yaffe, eds., *Contemporary Perspectives on Early Modern Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Vere Chappell* (Broadview Press, 2008: pp. 41-63), and so I tend to gear my locutions in that direction, but I do not think very much of my argument depends on this, and I suspect that many of the features of my account could be made compatible with Ishiguro’s.

that Descartes's God cannot do the impossible turns out to be an unsustainable reading. But let us apply my method of reading these sorts of passages to the one in question. The proposition that Descartes is here claiming to be possibly false is this: "contradictories cannot be true together". The way I have been interpreting the possibility of the eternal truths being false is to say that God could have refrained from creating the entities to which they refer – the eternal essences (CSM 2: 45/ AT 7: 64). I would suggest that the proposition "contradictories cannot be true together" refers, in general, to all of the eternal essences of things. The fact that contradictories cannot be true together is grounded in each eternal essence. In order to make that proposition false, then, God would have to have been able to refrain from creating any of the eternal essences of things – and this is precisely one of the things Descartes takes God to be able to have done.

What about Descartes's later claim that God could have "done the opposite" with regard to the truth of the proposition, "contradictories cannot be true together"? One might want to insist, "Surely this is an outright affirmation that God could have made contradictories true together!" However, I am still not convinced that this is what Descartes has in mind here. I want to argue that "doing the opposite" ambiguously refers to two sorts of "opposites", which correspond roughly to the distinction in Aristotelian logic between contraries and contradictories. The first sort of "opposite", the contrary sense of opposite, is the one that would undermine my reading of Descartes. Here "doing the opposite" with regard to "contradictories cannot be true together" would be to assert "contradictories can be true together". The second sort of "opposite", the contradictory sense of opposite, is the way that I have been reading Descartes's assertions of the possible falsity of certain eternal truths. Here "doing the opposite" means making the true proposition "contradictories cannot be true together" false by refraining from

creating the entities to which it would refer. The opposite that is done is the shift from truth to falsity, but it is not a shift that calls for a replacement truth.

I think that this sort of ambiguity is present elsewhere in Descartes's writings as well. Consider the following passage from one of his letters to Mesland:

I do not know that I laid it down that God always does what he knows to be the most perfect, and it does not seem to me that a finite mind can judge of that. But I tried to solve the difficulty in question, about the cause of error, on the assumption that God had made the world most perfect, since if one makes the opposite assumption, the difficulty disappears altogether (CSMK: 232/ AT 5: 113).

The problem that Descartes is referring to here is the seeming incompatibility of three claims: (1) we humans have the capacity to err, (2) God would create the most perfect world, and (3) God exists. In the last sentence of this passage, Descartes suggests that (2) is an assumption that he has made in order to prove a point. He also says that if one “makes the *opposite* assumption”, then these three claims are not incompatible. But what is the “opposite assumption” that Descartes is referring to here? One opposite assumption would be the claim, (2’): “God would create the most *imperfect* world – one that is as bad as it can get”. But that cannot be what Descartes means to say here, for in that situation a new problem of incompatibility would arise between the fact that human beings seem to have the capacity to sometimes make correct judgments and (2’). The difficulty would not “disappear altogether”. Descartes must then mean by “the opposite assumption” a different claim, (2’): “God would create a *somewhat* imperfect world”. Something like this claim is clearly what Descartes has in mind here, but it is not obvious that this is the assumption that we would take to be the original’s opposite. It is just one of its opposites. Similarly, I would argue that this sort of ambiguity is present in Descartes’s

statement that God could have “done the opposite” with regard to the eternal truth of certain propositions. The “opposite” ambiguously refers to two sorts of opposites, only one of which is what Descartes had in mind. I would like to suggest, then, that even the apparently troubling passages for my interpretation do not count against it.

CONCLUSION

On my reading of Descartes’s doctrine of the eternal truths, the eternal truths are merely contingently true in the sense that God could have freely chosen to make many, if not all, of the eternal truths that now hold false. As I have argued above, however, this does not entail that Descartes’s God has the power to do the impossible, to have made twice four equal to nine or two radii of the same circle unequal. On my reading, the ability that Descartes is attributing to God is the ability to have freely chosen to refrain from creating any or all of the eternal essences to which the eternal truths refer, not the ability to have created alternative, contrary eternal truths that would have been true in their stead.

When looking over the list of the logical truths that Descartes includes in the category of eternal truths, there is one lingering concern that remains, however. When we consider an eternal truth such as “It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time” or “in general contradictories cannot be true together”, for example, we might wonder why Descartes would think that God would have to create anything at all in order for that proposition to be true. Could not God Himself, or His immutable essence, serve as the truthmaker for such truths? This is, I think, where the real boldness of Descartes’s doctrine of the eternal truths lies. For many medieval scholastics, the answer to the aforementioned question is yes: God’s essence does serve

as the truthmaker for logical truths such as the principle of non-contradiction.⁹ Descartes, on the other hand, is clear that he means to reject this view. In the May 1630 letter to Mersenne from which I drew earlier, Descartes states,

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. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things. (CSMK: 25/ AT 1: 152)

Here we see clearly that, according to Descartes, none of the eternal truths discussed earlier are grounded in God Himself or His immutable essence. God has to *decide* to create any one of them. And as we saw earlier, God does that by choosing to create certain eternal essences. What I think this shows is that the most interesting, most startling claim made by Descartes concerning the eternal truths is not that God has the power to do the impossible. I hope to have shown above that Descartes makes no such claim, and that nothing else that Descartes says commits him to that claim. On the contrary, the most interesting, startling claim made by Descartes concerning the eternal truths is that they are all a result of God's decision to create certain things, that not even the most fundamental truths of logic or mathematics are grounded in God's nature. If what I have argued in this paper is correct, then this is the claim to which we should aim our objections if we wish to reject Descartes's doctrine of the eternal truths. Whether my interpretation makes

⁹ See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981): I, Q. 15. For a brief discussion of this point and its relevance for understanding Descartes' doctrine of the eternal truths, see Frankfurt "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths", pp. 39-40.

this doctrine more plausible or less is a bit unclear, but it does helpfully direct us to the real issue to be discussed. And it saves Descartes from at least one charge typically levelled against him.¹⁰

¹⁰ I would like to thank Scott Ragland, Sam Murray, and audiences at the 2013 Virginia Tech Graduate Student Conference and the 2017 Early Modern – Saint Louis Conference for helpful comments on early versions of this paper.