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The Creation of Necessity: Making Sense of Cartesian Modality*

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Abstract

In Descartes theological writing, he promotes two jointly puzzling theses: T1) God freely creates the eternal truths (i.e. the Creation Doctrine) and T2) The eternal truths are necessarily true. According to T1 God freely chooses which propositions to make necessary, contingent and possible. However the Creation Doctrine makes the acceptance of T2 tenuous for the Creation Doctrine implies that God could have acted otherwise--instantiating an entirely different set of necessary truths. Jonathan Bennett seeks to reconcile T1 and T2 by relativizing modality to human understanding. I argue that Bennett's approach to Cartesian modality is misplaced: One does not have to resort to conceptualism about modality in order to explain the subjective language found in Descartes or to reconcile Descartes' Creation Doctrine with the necessity of the eternal truths. After showing that Bennett's argument implies that Descartes held the non-eternality of the eternal truths and the independence of the eternal truths from God, I show that if one understands Descartes' use modal terms as indexed to God's willing, then apparent contradictions vanish. In addition, I show that if one evaluates the truth value of modal propositions 'non-bivalently', then one can also unravel the apparent contradiction. One can reconcile Descartes' Creation Doctrine (T1) and the necessity of the eternal truths (T2) without Bennett's conceptualism.

Keywords: *Descartes, creation doctrine, eternal truths.*

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Introduction

In Descartes theological writing, he promotes two jointly puzzling theses that scholars have called, ‘peculiar’¹ ‘strange’² ‘incoherent’(Curley, 1984: 569-597), and ‘counter-intuitive.’³ They are as follows:

T1) God freely creates the eternal truths (i.e. Descartes’ Creation Doctrine).

T2) The eternal truths are necessarily true.

According to Descartes’ Creation Doctrine, God freely chooses which propositions (including those of logic and mathematics) to make necessary, contingent and possible. However, the Creation Doctrine (CD) makes the acceptance of *T2* tenuous for CD implies that God could have acted otherwise—instantiating an entirely different set of necessary truths. Intuitively, though, this seems to make the eternal truths not really necessary after all! Commentators have sought various ways to harmonize these two theses without undoing Descartes’ other important claims.⁴ Some have argued that Descartes did not hold to *T1* throughout his career.⁵ Others have rejected *T2*, arguing that for Descartes, there are no necessary truths (Frankfurt, 1977: 36-57). In the paper, “Descartes’s Theory of Modality,” Jonathan Bennett seeks to reconcile *T1* and *T2* by relativizing modality to human understanding. Bennett writes, “I submit that our modal concepts should be understood or analyzed in terms of what does or does not lie within the compass of our ways of thinking.” (Bennett, 1994: 647). So for Bennett, ‘impossible’ merely means that humans are unable to conceive otherwise: “‘impossible that P’ means that no human can conceive of P’s obtaining while having P distinctly in mind; and similarly for P’s possibility and its necessity”(Ibid). By making the truth value of modal propositions dependent on human perception, Bennett is able to make room for Descartes’ Creation Doctrine. He writes:

Given that all modal truths are at bottom truths about what we can conceive, and given that God made us how we are (this being a truism for Descartes), it follows that God gives modal truths their status as truths. He made it

necessarily true that $2+2=4$ by making us unable to conceive otherwise (Ibid, 649). (Emphasis added)

Although, Bennett's attempt to reconcile *T1* and *T2* has many advantages, namely its ability to handle what he calls the "Bootstraps Problem," it suffers from two fatal flaws: First, on Bennett's view, the eternal truths are not truly eternal; and second, the eternal truths depend on human perception for their necessity; and these are views which Descartes explicitly denies. An additional concern for Bennett's position is that it entails that Descartes overlooks the relationship between conceivability and actuality. Bennett argues that Descartes overlooks the consequences of his alleged modal conceptualism for his arguments in the *Meditations*:

By keeping voluntarism [or CD] out of [the Meditations], Descartes helped hide from himself the split in his thought. Had he let it in, it would have...compelled him to become explicitly clear about how indubitability relates to truth. Perhaps Descartes was subliminally aware of this, that being why voluntarism does not show up in the Meditations or either of its cousins—the Discourse on the Method and the Principles of Philosophy (Ibid, 652-653).

All other things being equal we would hope that Descartes did not embrace a view that undermined his arguments in the *Meditations*. In order to avoid this less-than-ideal consequence of Bennett's view, I would like to offer an alternate reading of Descartes which reconciles *T1* and *T2* and avoids the problems that plague Bennett's account. But before proceeding, let us examine the textual evidence for *T1* and *T2*.

The Creation Doctrine

I have asserted in *T1* above that Descartes held that 'God freely creates the eternal truths.' As stated above, this is part of Descartes' Creation Doctrine; but what exactly does CD entail and how does it generate the difficulties mentioned above? First, there are three main components of Descartes' Creation Doctrine. 1) God is the efficient cause of all things. Descartes clearly states this in a letter to Mersenne. He writes, "You ask by what kind of causality God has established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as He created all

things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause” (CSMK 3:25). 2) Since all things are created by God, all things depend on God. Descartes writes in the *Sixth Replies*, “...there is nothing whatsoever that does not depend on [God]. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything’s being true or good” (CSM 2:293)⁶. 3) God freely creates the eternal truths. Descartes concept of divine freedom was quite different from the received view (or St. Thomas’ view).⁷ For Thomas, God cannot help willing what is good, true and beautiful because these eternal truths are part of God’s very nature—they ‘reside’ in His intellect. Therefore, when God chooses to create, the choice to create is free, but the choice of eternal truths is fixed by God’s nature. In short, God is not able to make the eternal truths other than what they are. This thereby ensures their necessity—the eternal truths could never have been other than what they are. For Descartes, Thomas’ account of God’s freedom in creation limits God’s freedom and power and in addition, threatens His simplicity.⁸ Because of this, Descartes believed that ‘indifference’ was required for divine freedom. He writes in the *Sixth Replies*, “As for the freedom of the will...It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen...”(CSM 2:291). Descartes goes on to explain that if God had beliefs about what was “good or true” before God willed them to be, He would be impelled by his beliefs to create accordingly and therefore, He would not be truly free:

...it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. I am not speaking here of temporal priority: I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of rationally determined reason’ as they call it, such that God’s idea of the good impelled him to choose one thing rather than another. (CSM 2:291-2)

Descartes is careful to emphasize the ‘simultaneity’ of God’s believing and willing so that one will not necessitate the other. Therefore, for Descartes, God selects the eternal truths arbitrarily (or

more fairly ‘indifferently’): In short, God is free to “make it not true that all radii of the circle are equal—just as free as He was not to create the world” (CSMK 3:25). The result of the doctrine of divine indifference is that God’s power and freedom is unlimited. God is free to instantiate whatever mathematical, logical and moral truths he wishes. As we see in this selection from a 1644 letter Mesland, God even was free not to create the law of non-contradiction or to make $2+2\neq 4$ (CSM 2:294):

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

And for Descartes, the result of God’s actual decision to will the law of non-contradiction into being, is that it ‘becomes’ necessary.

In order to help us understand the nature of the contradiction between T1 and T2, let us rewrite T1 as T1’ according to what we have learned about what Descartes means when he says that God freely creates the eternal truths.

T1’: If God freely creates the eternal truths, then God could have made $2+2\neq 4$.

As we have seen above, Descartes believed that God’s freedom in creation entails that God could have made the laws of mathematics different than what they are so the consequent follows from the antecedent. Now let us turn to the textual evidence for T2:

The Necessity of Eternal Truths

In addition to being freely and indifferently created, Descartes also believed that the eternal truths are necessarily true (as stated in T2 above). In a 1640 letter to Mesland, Descartes writes that God willed “that some truths should be necessary” (CSMK 235). What does Descartes mean here by necessity? Descartes describes the eternal truths, such as the truths of geometry, as having “a determined nature, or essence, or form...which is immutable and eternal” (CSM 2:45). There are also texts where Descartes speaks of the eternal truths holding in all possible worlds (although, it is important to note that

Descartes probably didn't think of 'possible worlds' in the same way as contemporary metaphysicians). For example, Descartes writes in the *Discourse on Method*, "I showed what the laws of nature were, and... to show that they are such that, even if God created many worlds, there could not be any in which they failed to be observed" (CSM 1:132). In addition to the passages listed above, there is also systematic, inter-textual evidence for Descartes' belief in the necessity of eternal truths (Kaufman, 2002: 24-41). Descartes' commitment to true and immutable natures in the ontological argument, his belief that we clearly and distinctly perceive necessary truths, and his commitment to the *a priori* in his physics would all be undermined if the eternal truths were not necessary in the strongest sense (Curley, 1984: 547). Therefore, in order to avoid destabilizing many of Descartes' views, we must have a robust understanding of the necessity of the eternal truths. So we can rewrite T2 as T2':

T2': If the eternal truths are necessarily true and $2+2=4$ is an eternal truth, then $2+2=4$ is a necessary truth.

As I showed above, Descartes believed that the eternal truths are necessarily true. I also showed that a simple mathematical truth, like $2+2=4$, is an example of an eternal truth. Therefore, for Descartes $2+2=4$ is necessarily true.

If the contradiction between T1 and T2 was not immediately apparent above let me use the amended T1' and T2' to show that a direct contradiction follows from their joint acceptance:

T1': If God freely creates the eternal truths, then God could have made $2+2\neq 4$.

a₁) God freely creates the eternal truths.

b₁) God could have made $2+2\neq 4$

c₁) If God could have made $2+2\neq 4$, then it was possible for $2+2\neq 4$.

d₁) It is possible for $2+2\neq 4$.

e₁) Therefore, it is not necessary that $2+2=4$.

T2': If the eternal truths are necessarily true, then it is necessarily true that $2+2=4$.

a₂) The eternal truths are necessarily true.

b₂) Therefore, it is necessarily true that $2+2=4$.

As one can see e_1 and b_2 follow from $T1'$ and $T2'$, respectively, and that e_1 and b_2 are directly contradictory: It is impossible that $2+2=4$ is both necessarily and not necessarily true. In the following section I will discuss Bennett's proposed solution to this difficulty.

Bennett's Conceptual Analysis of Modality

As mentioned above, Bennett seeks to reconcile $T1$ and $T2$ through relativizing modality to human perception. He argues that since what is necessary is just what humans (and perhaps other persons) believe is necessary, then God's indifference in creation does not undermine the strong modal status that necessary truths require in Descartes' work. To support this claim, Bennett points out that throughout Descartes writings is an "intensely subjectivist strand, in which issues about what is really the case are displaced by or even equated with issues about what to believe or about what can be believed." (Bennett, 1994: 651). Indeed, Descartes stated quest in the *Meditations* is to find indubitable propositions to form a solid base for knowledge—Descartes often emphasizes our perception of truth over truth *simpliciter*: This is evidenced in the following passages:

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

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

In these passages it seems that Descartes is saying that the truth of modal propositions is relative to our perceptions of them. In addition, in texts such as the following letter to Arnauld, Bennett argues that what Descartes is saying is that when God wills certain modal 'propositions,' what God is really doing is willing a determinate set of human mental faculties. Descartes writes:

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

According to Bennett, the pairing the statements, “It is not impossible for God to make an uphill without a downhill” and “we cannot conceive of an uphill without a downhill” (Ibid, 645) should lead the reader to believe that the truth value of modal propositions is dependent on human perception. The modal proposition “it is impossible for there to be a mountain without a valley” is true only because we think that it is true.

One key benefit of Bennett’s interpretation is that it addresses the ‘Bootstraps Problem’—a problem that plagues all non-conceptualist interpretations of Descartes’ Creation Doctrine, according to Bennett. The problem is that if God were free to choose any set of eternal truths, God is then able to select those truths that guarantee *Himself* necessary existence. The flip-side of this, though, is that God was also free to choose his own *non*-existence (or his own contingent existence). So did Descartes really think that God was indifferent with respect to the nature of his own existence? It seems that Descartes would have rejected the possibility of God bringing about his own non-existence; but the difficulty is finding a principled and textually plausible way to insulate God’s person from Descartes’ own Creation Doctrine. For Bennett, God’s necessity just consists in our inability to conceive of God’s non-existence. The Bootstraps problem is not a problem on Bennett’s interpretation because it is meaningless for the conceptualist to ask if it ‘was’ possible for God to bring about his own non-existence. Why? Namely, on a conceptualist framework, humans are not able to ask these questions. Some may object that this is not really a solution at all; because what is in question is God’s modal ontology. But, to ask such a question, according to Bennett, is to presuppose non-conceptualism or commit a category mistake. Although it might be a misnomer to call Bennett’s interpretation a ‘solution’ to the Bootstraps problem, it does at least untie that particular knot for

Descartes. However, as we shall see next, by untying this knot, Bennett creates some additional tangles for himself.

Objections to Bennett's View

Although Bennett's interpretation has much in its favor, textual support, an interpretation that takes both *T1* and *T2* into account, and a 'solution' to the Bootstraps Problem, it also suffers from some serious difficulties. As mentioned above, if Bennett's view is correct, Descartes would be guilty of ignoring the question of how our perceptions of what is necessary is connected to what is actually necessary.⁹ We will not rehearse this objection again, but will move on to two, more serious objections: First, on Bennett's view, the eternal truths would not be eternal and second, the eternal truths would not be dependent on God, but on his creatures.

First, if the modal status of propositions depends on human perception alone, then the eternal truths cannot be eternal for the obvious reason that humans are finite. This is a serious departure from Descartes' intentions. He is clear that the eternal truths have been true for all time (and/or have been timelessly true). And second, Descartes is clear that the eternal truths depend on God alone and not on his creatures. However, on Bennett's interpretation, the necessity of eternal truths depends on the persons who perceive them; their necessity is not dependent on God, but on created beings. Descartes, however, is clear that there is no one thing that is not dependent on God. The following texts provide evidence both for the eternity of the eternal truths, and their sole dependence on God: Descartes writes that "...we should not suppose that eternal truths 'depend on the human intellect or on other existing things'; *they depend on God alone*, who as the supreme legislator has ordained them from *eternity*" (Emphasis mine—CSM 2:293). Again Descartes is unequivocal about the dependence of all things on God when he writes, "...there is nothing whatsoever that does not depend on [God]. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good" (CSM 2:293). Additional evidence for the eternity and divine dependence of the eternal truths can be found in the *Fifth Meditation*:

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

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

The mathematical truths that you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely, no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed, to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and subject him to the Styx and the Fates (Emphasis added—CSMK 3:23).

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

Bennett, however, is not without a response. He argues that the first objection (i.e. that on his view the eternal truths are not actually eternal) misunderstands the nature of his conceptualist account of modality. When the critic wonders if the eternal truths are actually eternal, this question presupposes a non-conceptualist understanding of modality. The conceptualist cannot countenance such a question: "Anything we say now about the modal status that a proposition had or does or will have, or would have if..., must be determined by our actual present intellectual limits." (Ibid: 664). Given these limits, the eternal truths are eternal—humans cannot conceive of a time when the eternal truths did not or will not hold. According to Bennett, this is all the content we are entitled to give the concept of eternity. Although, conceptualism about modality may be a coherent position deserving of defense, it is a different question whether or not Descartes himself was a conceptualist. It seems that the most natural reading of the text (CSM 2:44-45, CSMK 3:23-24), would lead any non-philosophically motivated reader to conclude that Descartes literally believed that the eternal truths have been true and will be true eternally.

Bennett does not directly respond to the second objection (i.e. that on his interpretation the eternal truths depend on created beings and not on God) but focuses on a text that seems to explicitly contradict his position:

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

Bennett argues that Descartes only appears to contradict his conceptualist position, because he is replying to a critic who has asked if the “truths depend solely upon the intellect while it is thinking of them, or on existing things, or else they are independent...”¹⁰ (CSM 2:281).

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

Bennett’s reading of the above text is questionable: if Descartes wanted to say that the necessity and the eternity of the eternal truths depend on human perception in any way, then Descartes was philosophically sophisticated enough to unequivocally state this. Even if one grants that Bennett’s reading of this single text is plausible, Bennett does not address all the other texts that clearly state that the eternal truths depend on God alone (CSM 2:44-45, CSMK 3:23-24). It is strange that Bennett thinks that this single text is the only truly problematic text as the overall impression one receives from reading Descartes’ theology is that everything, including the eternal truths depend on God.

I believe that there is a better way to account for the subjective language that Bennett observes in Descartes. Descartes often speaks in subjectivist language because his project of methodological doubt required it. Bennett notes that passages, such as the above following, prioritize human subjective impressions: “Everything which

I...understand is ...created by God so as to correspond...with *my understanding of it*" (CSM 2:54). It sounds at first as if God creates the world to match our perceptions. But this is taking the above quote too literally. Given the supremacy of God in Descartes' theology, it is unlikely that Descartes intended this interpretation. There is another explanation for the "intensely subjectivist strand" (Bennett, 1994: 651) that we find in Descartes. Descartes stated objective in the *Meditations* is to find solid, indubitable truths on which to base human knowledge. If Descartes was a conceptualist, then there would be no need to question the reliability of his perceptual faculties as he does in the *Meditations*. Descartes wants to find some propositions that are actually true so that we might have a solid foundation for all knowledge. In short, Descartes project of methodological doubt explains the subjective language that Bennett observes. Descartes believed that having clear and distinct perceptions of some idea meant that this idea was actually true independent of our thinking that it was true. It is the fact that certain things are necessary that we cannot conceive of them otherwise, not the other way around. Bennett has the causal direction backwards: Our concepts are not what 'create' necessity, but it is because God willed certain propositions to be necessary that we conceive certain things as necessary. Our understanding is constrained precisely because God has made certain things impossible (possible, contingent, necessary etc.). Since God is not a deceiver, God is able to fashion our perceptual faculties in such a way so that they will correspond to what is real: "Everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it" (CSM 2:54). The reason our subjective modal impressions are the way they are is because God made modal truths the way they are.

An Alternate Account of Cartesian Modality

A more accurate interpretation of Cartesian modality would ideally embrace both T1 and T2, while giving a plausible answer to the 'Bootstraps' problem. It was the original difficulty of reconciling T1 and T2 that motivated Bennett's conceptualism. But, as we have seen, Bennett's route is not textually open to us. Therefore, there must be a

way to coherently embrace both T1 and T2 while avoiding Bennett's conceptualism about modality.

As I argued above, there is a strong textual case that Descartes would have embraced T1' and T2'. (I don't think this claim would be very controversial among Descartes scholars). I also argued above, that what follows from T1' is e_1 and what follows from T2' is b_2 . And e_1 and b_2 are directly contradictory:

e_1) It is not necessarily true that $2+2=4$.

b_2) It is necessarily true that $2+2=4$.

If Descartes means the same thing by each of his terms in e_1 and b_2 then Descartes has directly contradicted himself. However, I will argue that for Descartes, these propositions are not contradictory. This is because of the way Descartes uses the modal terms that are involved in the supposed contradiction above. In short, the modal terms Descartes uses are indexed to God's willing. So the sense in which Descartes uses, 'possible' or 'could' depends on what relation the term bears to God's willing. For example, in passages where Descartes is specifically addressing God's freedom in creation, modal terms used should be understood as indexed sans God's willing of the eternal truths. In other words, by formulating the Creation Doctrine, Descartes is imagining God 'before' He has willed what is to be necessary. Speaking in this way e_1 is true: God could have made it so that $2+2 \neq 4$ and so it is not necessarily₁ that $2+2=4$. However, God has timelessly willed that $2+2=4$ so cum God's willing the eternal truths, it is necessary₂ that $2+2=4$. This makes b_2 also true. So given the adjusted meanings of necessarily₁ and necessarily₂, e_1 and b_2 do not involve a contradiction:

e_1) It is not necessarily₁ true that $2+2=4$.

b_2) It is necessarily₂ true the $2+2=4$.

I am not accusing Descartes sloppy equivocation because Descartes only uses necessity₁ when he is speculating about divine freedom (or when he speaks about what is possible for God). Because of this, the Descartes scholar can make a principled distinction between the two senses of 'necessity' that Descartes uses.

Some might argue that ‘necessity₂’ is not what we mean when we call something ‘necessary’. If a proposition could have been otherwise, then it is not really necessary. Although we might wonder if Descartes’ notion of ‘necessity’ is robust enough for us, Descartes would have been satisfied with his account of modality. This is because for Descartes, God’s willing something to be a certain way is sufficient for it to be that way. When God willed $\Box P$, His will guaranteed that $\Box P$. So, necessity₂ is real necessity for Descartes. Some might object that Descartes is cheating—that his explanation seems cheap and unsatisfying. Descartes, however, is not being disingenuous. In fact it is what we should expect of Descartes given his Creation Doctrine—that all things originate from the will of God (Kaufman, 2005: 1-19). Descartes scholar, Dan Kauffman makes the excellent point that to expect to know why ‘ $\Box P$ ’, beyond that God willed that ‘ $\Box P$ ’, is to “expect something to which we are not entitled” because the question “‘Why did God do a?’ is in principle, unanswerable” (Ibid, 18-19). The question is unanswerable because if God had a reason for willing ‘ $\Box P$,’ then God would not be indifferent with respect to ‘P’. Therefore, for Descartes, God’s will is what distinguishes necessarily₁ ‘P’ and necessarily₂ ‘P’. To require more of Descartes is to commit a Cartesian category mistake.

If the above account of necessity is not convincing, there is another, related way to reconcile e_1 and b_2 : this involves the way that we understand the phrase ‘not true’ in e_1 ’above. When Descartes speaks of what God could have timelessly willed, Descartes is speaking of a ‘time’ when nothing (short of God’s existence) had a truth value. On CD one can infer that ‘before’ God’s decision to will, all truth values were undefined. So for example, one might ask if $2+2$ ‘did’ equal 4 sans God willing it to be so; but since this proposition did not exist, it had no truth value. So e_1 ’is not false: $\sim \Box(2+2=4)$, but not because it is false that $\Box(2+2=4)$, but because it is undefined that $\Box(2+2=4)$. E_1 and b_2 seem contradictory because we are thinking in terms of 2-valued logic, but in situations like the one that Descartes is considering, 3-valued logic is called for.

In Saul Kripke’s work on modality, he developed a 3-valued logic that is applicable to descriptions of modality in Descartes’ Creation Doctrine. For Kripke, “‘necessarily Fa’ means ‘a is F in every world

where a exists.”¹¹ So worlds where a does not exist, do not count against the necessity of Fa . So the world where God has not yet willed any proposition is a world where $2+2 \neq 4$ because this proposition does not ‘yet’ exist. Necessarily $2+2=4$, is true because on Kripke’s system of logic we are allowed to ignore worlds with empty domains—namely the world that existed sans God’s willing mathematical propositions. Therefore, e_1 and b_2 are not contradictory in 3-valued logical systems such as Kripke’s.

The ‘Bootstraps’ Problem

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

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

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

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

According to the third option, Descartes did not address the bootstraps problem because he thought the answer was obvious. There are hints in Descartes' writings that he did not believe that the Creation Doctrine applied to God's own person. For instance, Descartes writes to Mersenne that "the existence of God is the first and most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all the others proceed" (CSMK 3:24). This passage implies that God's existence is immune from the effects of CD—that God was not indifferent with respect to his own existence. Descartes also seemed to think (as can be seen in the above texts) that God could not have brought it about that there was a class of things that existed and did not depend on God's conservation. Descartes writes, "there cannot be any class of entity that does not depend on God" (CSM 2:294). This leads us to believe that Descartes thought that God was not indifferent about the dependence of all things on Him. Another reason why we might believe that the above two propositions represent a higher-order necessity for Descartes, is that his argument for the existence of God depends on God being a necessary being. If it were possible for God to instantiate the eternal truths and then bring about His own non-

existence, then Descartes' argument for God's existence¹² in the *Third Meditation* would fail. It might seem *ad hoc* for Descartes to make an exception to CD for God's existence. However, this exception is consistent with Descartes' theological views. God's existence and the dependence of all things on God was a foundational belief for Descartes. There are some beliefs that one takes as basic that cannot be analyzed further. For Descartes, God is the most basic and absolute ground of being.

Conclusion

Bennett's approach to Cartesian modality is misplaced: One does not have to resort to conceptualism about modality in order to explain the subjective language found in Descartes or to reconcile Descartes' Creation Doctrine with the necessity of the eternal truths. After showing that Bennett's argument implies that Descartes held the non-eternality of the eternal truths and the independence of the eternal truths from God, I offered two arguments reconciling the Creation Doctrine with the necessity of the eternal truths. First, I showed that if one understands Descartes' use modal terms as indexed to God's willing, then apparent contradictions vanish. Second, if one evaluates the truth value of modal propositions 'non-bivalently', then one can also unravel the apparent contradiction. After arguing that one can reconcile Descartes' Creation Doctrine and the necessity of the eternal truths without Bennett's conceptualism, I addressed the Bootstraps problem. I argue that there is textual evidence for two, different interpretations that both adequately address the problem. Although, there is not enough space in this paper for a full-scale analysis of the Bootstraps problem, the point is that one does not need to resort to conceptualism in order to offer a consistent interpretation of Descartes.

Notes:

1. Louis Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).
2. Nicholas Jolley, *The Light of the Soul: Theories of Ideas in Leibniz, Malebranche, and Descartes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

3. Alvin Plantinga, *Does God have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980) in Dan Kauffman, "Descartes's Creation Doctrine and Modality," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 80 (2002): 25.

4. Namely, Descartes' *a priori* physics, his clear statements that God is not a deceiver, his view that clear and distinct ideas are a guide to truth, and Descartes' arguments for the existence of God.

5. A. Koyre, *Essai sur l'idée de Dieu et les preuves de son existence chez Descartes* (1922): 19-21. in Harry Frankfurt, "Descartes on the Creation of Eternal Truths," *The Philosophical Review* 86, No. 1 (1977): 36-57.

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

7. I label Thomas' position as the traditional view although other scholastics (Scotus and Suarez) differed in their creation doctrines.

8. Henry Frankfurt argues that Descartes might have been motivated by concerns about God's simplicity when he formulated his Creation Doctrine: Descartes was concerned that by giving logical or temporal priority to God's intellect in creation, would create more than the accepted distinction of reason in God rendering God a complex entity. Therefore, Frankfurt argues that Descartes might have formulated CD as a response to scholastic views that he believed threatened God's simplicity.

9. And if they are not, God is a deceiver.

10. This is Bennett's translation of the Sixth Objections (CSM 2:281)

11. Gramme Forbes, *An Introduction to Modal Logic*, unpublished manuscript.

12. The argument for God's existence in the *Third Meditation* grounds God's existence is the dependence of all things on God.

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