

**THE ONTOLOGY AND MODALITY
OF ETERNAL TRUTHS AND ESSENCES IN DESCARTES**

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Abstract

The thesis discusses questions about the ontology and modality of eternal truths and essence in Descartes. There are different understandings of the ontological status of eternal truths and essences, and the thesis shows that this discrepancy is because of tensions among texts and letters where Descartes discusses essences and eternal truths. An interpretation that properly accounts for the ontological status of eternal truths thus need not ignore what has been claimed, both explicitly and implicitly, in these texts. The thesis first analyzes four contemporary interpretations of the ontological status of eternal truths and essences in Descartes. Each interpretation is presented with texts quoted by defenders of that interpretation and an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of such understandings. While doing so, it also questions whether those texts have been analyzed properly or can be understood in some non-original senses that do not necessarily imply a determinate nature of eternal truths and essences. After the first chapter, it should be clear of claims or ‘requirements’ that have been claimed about eternal truths and essences. The second chapter, based on a distinction between formal and objective reality, proposes an understanding of eternal truths and essences, that they are either uncreated and timeless or created and everlasting.

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Introduction

The questions of ontology and modality of Cartesian essences and eternal truths have been discussed for nearly 50 years, but not much agreement has been found in literature about the nature of essences and eternal truths. And it has reasons. The most important reason is that Descartes seems to commit to contradicting claims about the ontological and modal status of essences and eternal truths. For the question of the ontology of essences and eternal truths, Descartes claims that they exist only in human minds in the *Principles of Philosophy* published in 1644 (from now on the *Principles*) while in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* published three years earlier, in 1641 (hereafter the *Meditations*), he implies that they exist independent of human minds. These contradicting claims lead to different interpretations of the ontological status of eternal truths and essences. Anthony Kenny and Margaret Wilson, for instance, believe that Descartes is a Platonist or at least quasi-Platonist regarding the ontological status of essences and eternal truths. They use passages in the *Meditations*, specifically the *Fifth Meditations*, about the true and immutable nature of things, and the creation doctrine that God creates all things in order to support their reading. Meanwhile, Jonathan Bennet, Vere Chappell, and Lawrence Nolan believe that Descartes is a conceptualist for he has explicitly claimed in the *Principles* that eternal truths exist only in human minds and have no existence outside it. Some commentators such as Tad M. Schmaltz, Marleen Rozemond, and Helen Hattab propose a more moderate reading that tries to reconcile these contradicting texts in the *Principles* and *Meditations*. On the other hand, even less agreement has been found in the debate about the modality of eternal truths and essences. The discussion around the modal status of essences and eternal truths often focuses on questions such as how to reconcile the creation doctrine and the necessity and eternity of eternal truths and essences. It also attempts to answer questions such as do eternal truths and essences depend upon God's will (voluntarism) or God's wisdom (intellectualism)? This thesis tries to understand the ontological status of eternal truths and essences, and how the understanding of the ontological status of eternal truths and essences may relate to the discussion of modality.

The thesis is composed of two chapters. The first chapter analyzes four different interpretations of the ontological status of eternal truths and essences. These four interpretations are the Platonist defended by Anthony Kenny and Margaret Wilson; the conceptualist by Jonathan Bennet, Vere Chappell, and Lawrence Nolan; the Scholastic by Tad M. Schmaltz and Marleen Rozemond; and the Neoplatonist by Helen Hattab. By analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of these readings, I conclude that there are different

'requirements' for a proper understanding of eternal truths and essences in Descartes. These requirements contradict each other if we understand them in the strict sense, but I will explain that they may not be necessarily irreconcilable if we understand them in a non-strict sense. The second chapter suggests two possible understandings of eternal truths and essences that takes advantage of these non-strict sense requirements. It suggests that there may be a difference in the way that God creates essences and eternal truths and employs a distinction between formal and objective reality to realize how essences and eternal truths being uncreated and timeless would be different from them being created and everlasting.

1. Contemporary Readings of the Ontology of Eternal Truths and Essences.

In this chapter, I consider four main interpretations of the ontological status of eternal truths and essences. They are the Platonist, defended by Kenny (1968, 1970) and Wilson (1978); the conceptualist by Bennett (1997), Chappell (1997), and Nolan (1997); the Scholastic by Schmaltz (1991) and Rozemond (2008); and a relatively recent Neoplatonist reading defended by Hattab (2016).¹ For each reading, I will analyze its advantages and disadvantages while also considering whether there may be another way to understand them in non-strict senses. From there, I list the main ‘requirements’ that are claimed about the ontological status of essences and eternal truths. They are the doctrine of creation, that God creates everything including eternal truths and essences; voluntarism, that God creates them freely at his will; the independence of eternal truths and essence of human minds; the objective being of essences and eternal truths in human minds; and the eternity and necessity of essences and eternal truths.

It is best to first settle some terminological matters before examining the four interpretations. In a letter sent to Mersenne in 1630, Descartes identifies eternal truths with essences of created things: “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 III, 25).² This is a very important identification, and it causes a lot of puzzlement. Nolan and Schmaltz both agree that this identification implies that anything Descartes claims for the ontology and modality of eternal truths also applies to essences (Nolan, 1997, p.189; Schmaltz; 1991, p.159). Adding to this, in the *Fifth Meditation* and first set of replies, when discussing the ontological argument, Descartes seems to use ‘true and immutable nature’ or ‘determinate nature’ interchangeably with essence:

That which we clearly and distinctly understand to belong to *the true and immutable nature, or essence*, or form of something, can truly be asserted of that thing. But once we have made a sufficiently careful investigation of what God is, we clearly and

¹ Schmaltz and Rozemond call their view Neoplatonist. However, as it has Scholastic origins, and to distinguish their view from Hattab’s interpretation, I follow Hattab terms, that is to call the view defended by Schmaltz and Rosemond the Scholastic reading. It should be noted also that Schmaltz no longer holds Scholastic view regarding the ontological status of eternal truths, and seems to accept that Descartes is a conceptualist. However, his interpretation is rich and still worthy of more analysis.

² I use the English translation of Descartes’s works by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugall Murdoch (the third volume with Anthony Kenny). The translation has three volumes, abbreviated hereafter as CSM I, II, and CSMK III.

distinctly understand that existence belongs to his true and immutable nature. Hence, we can now truly assert of God that he does exist (CSM II, 83).

It seems, however, that this identification of eternal truths, essences, and true and immutable natures is a little obscure. Descartes never actually claims that true and immutable natures of things are essences and eternal truths; he just uses them interchangeably in the *Meditations*. In the *Principles*, he usually uses essences and eternal truths rather than true and immutable natures.

To make sense of this identification, commentators often bridge true and immutable natures of things and eternal truths to something else. For instance, Nolan argues that eternal truths are innate ideas considered objectively. He later demonstrates that Cartesian natures are also innate intellectual ideas regarded objectively. Schmaltz has the same strategy. He bridges eternal truths pertaining to something to be divine decrees and then demonstrates that true and immutable natures of things are also divine decrees. This may be a way, but it seems that we will first need to know with certainty that Descartes identifies eternal truths with innate ideas considered objectively or divine decrees. These views are still under debate. Thus, it would not be appropriate to assume that Descartes does identify so.

But it is not without a clue. It seems that in the *Principles* I, 53 Descartes identifies ‘principal attribute’ or ‘principal properties’ with ‘nature’ and ‘essence’: “To each substance there belongs one principal attribute” and “each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred” (CSM I, 210).³ This implies a distinction between two kinds of attributes, that are principal attribute or property and other properties that can be inferred or demonstrated from the principal attribute. Dougherty (2002) calls them respectively first-order and second-order attributes (p.42-5). Griffin (2015) regards them as nature of a thing *narrowly* conceived and the nature of a thing broadly *conceived* (p.21-2). Principle 53 also implies that, while each substance has only one first-order attribute, there can be several second-order attributes. For instance, the principal attribute of a triangle is a figure having three straight sides and three interior angles; second-order attributes of a triangle may be that sum of its three angles equals two right angles, and its largest side subtends its largest angle, and so on. Following this distinction, Griffin and

³ Though there are still debates about the uses of ‘attribute,’ ‘property,’ and ‘quality’ in Descartes (see Melamed (2017) for detailed discussion), in Principle 53, Descartes seems to use ‘attribute’ and ‘property’ interchangeably. Thus, for simplicity, I also use ‘attribute’ and ‘property’ interchangeably.

Dougherty both agree that necessary existence is a second-order attribute of God, and omnipotence is his principal attribute (Dougherty, 2002, p.47; Griffin, 2015, p.22). In the *Fifth Meditation*, necessary existence is demonstrated to belong to the true and immutable nature of God. This implies that the true and immutable nature of a thing is the principal attribute of that thing. Thus, when Descartes uses “true and immutable nature, or essence of a thing” I understand that he intends to use ‘nature’ and ‘essence’ interchangeably, and ‘true and immutable nature’ as the first-order attribute of a thing. For Descartes explicitly claims that essences are eternal truths, I will accordingly distinguish eternal truths into first-order truth (i.e., a triangle is a figure that has three straight lines and three interior angles) and second-order truths of a thing (i.e., the sum of three angles of a triangle equals two right angles). When I use essences of a thing and eternal truths about that thing in general, I mean both the first-order and second-order essences or truths.

1.1. The Platonist Reading

Kenny (1968) argues that in the *Fifth Meditation*, Descartes makes it clear that essences are independent of human minds and other physically existing things. He uses the passage below to support his reading:

- A. When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists 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 II, 64-65).

According to Kenny, by “exist outside my thought” Descartes means there exists in the real actual world some triangular objects (p.148). But Descartes does not think that there is such an object exists in our actual world, for there can be no mathematical objects that satisfy the Euclidian definition of a triangle, e.g., there are no lines that are strictly straight, and a Euclidian line should not be observable (p.148-9). Thus, the triangle exists only inside my thought when I imagine and attribute to it a determinate nature. One may think that the triangle existing inside my thought is just an idea, but Kenny argues that “it appears to be things, not ideas, that have true and immutable natures” (p.150). This is supported by:

- B. 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 nature (CSM II, 64).

If it is not an idea of a triangle but the triangle itself that has a nature, then the triangle in my thought is not merely an idea. Then what is the triangle in my thought? Kenny thinks that it is a real thing that has a true and immutable nature. Kenny interprets “a determinate nature [...] which is not invented by me” as that I do not impose or ascribe any properties to the triangle. It is the triangle that has those properties, and it is the triangle that makes me have the thought that the triangle has those properties when I come to think of it. That is the reason why he writes “thought imposes no necessity on things, but the necessity of things determines thought” (p.150). Curley (1984) seems to have a similar view: “These eternal natures do not depend on my mind; my thought does not impose any necessity on things, rather the necessity of the things themselves determines me to think of them in the way that I do” (p.572). This is supported by:

- C. It is not necessary for me ever to imagine any triangle; but whenever I choose to consider a rectilinear figure that has just three angles, I must ascribe to it properties from which it is rightly inferred that its three angles are not greater than two right angles (CSM II, 47).

Thus, a triangle that exists in my thought is not just an idea, but a thing; that thing has a true and immutable nature regardless of whether an actual triangle exists in our real world or not, and we ascribe no properties to the thing, but it is the thing’s properties that cause us to have different thoughts about that thing.

One way to think of how the triangle in my thought is not just an idea is to consider the ontological argument. The ontological argument in the first replies can be reconstructed as follows:

- Premise 1: Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to true and immutable or essences of something can be truly asserted of that thing.
- Premise 2: I clearly and distinctly perceive that (necessary) existence belongs to the true and immutable nature of a supremely perfect being namely God.

- Conclusion: (Necessary) existence can be truly asserted of God, that he exists.⁴

As argued above, in premise 1 ‘something’ that has a true and immutable nature is not an idea but a thing, but if we insist that except ideas, there are only actually existing things and that only actually existing things can have true and immutable natures, ‘a supremely perfect being’ is already assumed to be an actually existing thing. This is “a gross begging of the question” (Kenny, 1968, p.151) and Descartes could easily know it. Hence, the triangle Descartes is talking here is neither an idea (*triangulus cogitatur*) nor an actually existing triangle (*triangulus existit*). Kenny calls it *triangulus datur*, the given triangle whose nature is eternal, immutable, and not dependent on finite minds.

In an article in 1970, Kenny re-affirms this view: “for Descartes the geometers' triangle is an eternal creature of God, with its own immutable nature and properties, a real thing lacking only the perfection of actual existence” (Kenny, 1970, p. 697). He elaborates this reading with an analysis that connects the ontological status of mathematical entities and truths with Descartes’s doctrine of creation. The doctrine of creation is that God creates everything, including eternal truths. They depend on him *entirely* just as other creatures.

D. The 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) (doctrine of creation).

I understand this dependence of eternal truths and all other creatures on God as an ontological dependence, that they depend on God for their existence, whatever this ‘existence’ might be. This implies that only God has ontological independence, as in Principle 51: “By substance we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God's concurrence” (CSM I, 210). It may also be said that ontological independence is self-sufficiency. According to the quote and passage D., eternal truths are ontologically dependent on God in the sense that they can exist only if God exists.

⁴ The original text is “My argument however was as follows: 'That which we clearly and distinctly understand to belong to the true and immutable nature, or essence, or form of something, can truly be asserted of that thing. But once we have made a sufficiently careful investigation of what God is, we clearly and distinctly understand that existence belongs to his true and immutable nature. Hence we can now truly assert of God that he does exist.'” (CSM II, 83).

Descartes also adds that God creates eternal truths by efficient causality:

- E. There is no need to ask what category of causality is applicable to the dependence of this goodness upon God, or to the dependence on him of other truths, both mathematical and metaphysical [...] But in fact they did give it a name, for it can be called efficient causality [...] (CSM II, 84).
- F. You ask by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as he created all things, this is to say, as their efficient and total cause [...] 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. You ask what God did in order to produce them. 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 and made them. In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually (CSMK, 25).

Efficient causality in a strict sense requires that the cause and its effect are distinct: ‘[. . .] a cause which is not distinct from its effects is not an efficient cause in the strict sense [. . .]’ (CSM II, 167).⁵ Thus, Kenny argues that by claiming that mathematical entities and truths are creatures of God, Descartes means to set up something *distinct* from God (p.698-7). Along with the claim that these entities have a nature that is independent of human minds, it seems that mathematical entities and truths can be seen as a kind of Platonic universals. For this reason, Kenny claims that Descartes can be called “the father of modern Platonism” (p.697). Wilson (1978) supports the view. Like Kenny, she believes that in the *Fifth Meditation* Descartes claims that a thing in thought does have a nature or *reality*. This *reality* does not depend on human abilities to imagine or conceive them but only on God. For this reason, she claims that Descartes is “at least quasi-Platonic” (p.149).⁶ In conclusion, defenders of Platonist reading believe that eternal truths and essences are independent of human minds. They are also distinct

⁵ In the first set of replies Descartes implies that God is God's own efficient cause, violating this principle. Section 1.3 will discuss more about efficient causality.

⁶ Wilson, however, does not think that Descartes is a Platonist about mathematical science, for Descartes does not think that mathematical knowledge is derived directly from pure understanding. Mathematical knowledge or truths about immaterial objects such as a triangle do depend on our ability to imagine physical objects that are exemplars of the triangle in our mind or mental vision, and though this imagination “is only an aid [...] it is far from being an incidental aid” (p.149).

from God because they are created by God by efficient causality, though are not ontologically independent of him for their existence.

It is noteworthy that it is unclear what exact distinction between a cause and its effects is required for efficient causality. Recall that Descartes only mentions three kinds of distinction in his theory of distinction in the *Principles*. The three distinctions are the *conceptual* or *rational* distinction between a substance and its principal attribute, the *modal* distinction between a substance and its modes or between two modes of a substance, and the *real* distinction between two created substances (CSM I, 213-5). Kenny himself does not specify the distinction required by efficient causality, but it is with certainty that he does not think of a conceptual distinction. Also, it is difficult to see how eternal truths and essences are principal attributes of God. Hence, the distinction between God and eternal truths is not a conceptual distinction. A modal distinction seems not good either, for it would imply that eternal truths and essences are modes of God. It is hard to see how eternal truths and essences are modally distinct from God in this sense. Take Descartes's example of the modal distinction between a thinking substance such as a finite mind and its modes such as recollection or affirmation. We can clearly perceive a finite mind apart from the two modes, but we cannot understand recollection and affirmation apart from substance. We can clearly understand eternal truths and essences apart from God. Thus, eternal truths and essences are not modes of God. Only real distinction is left. This real distinction seems most reasonable for the efficient causality, for if a cause is distinct from its effects, one may think that they are distinct entities or substances. But if the distinction required by efficient causality is a real distinction, it means that eternal truths and essences are created substances. Descartes claims that there are only two created substances, which are the thinking substance (the finite mind) and the corporeal substance (the body). I do not see how eternal truths and essences can be finite minds or corporeal bodies. It seems that the theory of distinction can only account for the creation of created substances and their modes, but not the creation of essences and eternal truths. On the other hand, if we are to take efficient causality into account, we need to make clear how or in what sense mathematical truths and essences created by God are distinct from him. Kenny simply leaves it that they are distinct without further explanation. This problem is not unique to the Platonist reading. As will be clear later, the conceptualists neither give a proper explanation on what kind or sense that essences and eternal truth are distinct from God. They seem to simply assume that eternal truths and essences are distinct from God in the sense that they exist in human minds while God is an actual existing substance.

There are advantages and disadvantages of the Platonist reading. Those who defend this interpretation may explain the creation of eternal truths and essences as that God creates eternal truths and essences as some entities that are independent of human minds and other existing things, as implied in the *Fifth Meditation*. They depend only on God's will, and because God's will is immutable and unchangeable, they are both eternal and necessary in a sense. However, as they insist that these eternal entities are distinct from both God and human minds, they will need further clarification on what the distinction between God and eternal truths and essences is. A more significant disadvantage of the Platonist reading is that it goes against an explicit denial of Platonism in the *Principles*, as De Rosa (2011) points out (p.616). Specifically, in the *Principles*, Descartes claims that mathematical entities such as numbers and all universals are just modes of thinking (CSM I, 211; Principle 58, CSM I, 212). The existence of mathematical truths such as sum of three angles of a triangle equals two right angles depends on the existence of the triangle, number two and three. If numbers are just modes of thinking dependent on our minds, it seems that the existence of the eternal truths would not be entirely independent of human minds. Thus, we need not ignore this denial of Platonism in the *Principles*.

1.2. The Conceptualist Reading

Nolan and Chappell, unlike the Platonists, see Cartesian essences as innate ideas in human minds, and thus also dependent on human minds.⁷ The view is mainly derived from passages in the *Principles* such as:

- G. All the objects of our perception we regard either as things, or affections of things, or else as eternal truths which have no existence outside our thought. (CSM I, 208)
- H. Everything in the preceding list we regard either as a thing or as a quality or mode of a thing. But when we recognize that it is impossible for anything to come from nothing, the proposition *Nothing comes from nothing* is regarded not as a really existing thing, or even as a mode of a thing, but as an eternal truth which resides within our mind. Such truths are termed common notions or axioms. (CSM I, 209)
- I. The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God [...] are all in born in our minds just as a king would imprint his laws on the hearts of all his subjects if he had enough power to do so (CSMK, 23).
- J. [. . .] when I think of the essence of a triangle, and of the existence of the same triangle, these two thoughts, as thoughts, even taken objectively (i.e. even in respect

⁷ Gueroult (1984) suggests this way of interpretation but does not develop it further.

of their representational content) differ modally in the strict sense of the term ‘mode’; but the case is not the same with the triangle existing outside thought, in which it seems to me manifest that essence and existence are in no way distinct. The same is the case with all universals. Thus, when I say Peter is a man, the thought by which I think of Peter differs modally from the thought by which I think of man, but in Peter himself being a man is nothing other than being Peter (CSMK, 280-1).

Passages G. and H. clearly state that eternal truths have no existence outside my mind but ‘resides’ within it. Passage I. implies that mathematical eternal truths are implanted by God in our minds. Together, it implies that God implants eternal truths as innate ideas in human minds. Nolan (1997) argues that this conceptualist reading is not only explicitly indicated through these three passages, but also through the way Descartes distinguishes between a substance and its principal attribute. To be specific, the distinction between a substance and its principal attribute is only *conceptual* or *rational*, that is it “occurs only within our thought by a process of intellectual abstraction, making essences purely conceptual entities” (p.189-90). This also applies to mathematical entities such as numbers, as written in Principle 55: “we should not regard order or number as anything separate from the things which are ordered and numbered, but should think of them simply as modes under which we consider the things in question” (CSM I, 211). Thus, principal attributes or essences of substances are only conceptual entities, and if from this principal attribute we infer other second-order attributes or truths, it is hard to argue that essences and eternal truths are something else other than conceptual entities.

Passages J. is cited by De Rosa (2011), without further discussion, as one of the passages that support the conceptualist reading that essence has “objective existence in human minds” and is “modes under which we conceive of thing” (p.607-608). Specifically, the passage discusses the distinction between the thought of the essence of a triangle and the thought of the existence of that triangle. These thoughts are different *modally*. That means the distinction between the thought of the essence of a triangle and the thought of the existence of that triangle is only *modal*, just like the thought of Peter and the thought of the man is modally distinct but being Peter and being the man in formal reality have no difference. Recall that modal distinction is between two modes or a mode and its substance, then either that the thought of the essence of a triangle and the thought of its existence are two modes of the thinking substance, or that one of them is the substance and the other is its mode. It is hard to think how any of these two thoughts is a created substance, for the mind itself is a created substance by God, and thought is the principal attribute of the thinking substance (Principle 53, CSM I, 210).

Hence, the distinction between these two thoughts is the distinction between two modes, and as already quoted, for De Rosa it is two modes under which we conceive of the triangle. As it is the way we conceive of things, it cannot be independent of our minds but seems to entirely depend on it. Thus, eternal truths are merely innate ideas in human minds.

The conceptualists avoid the Platonist reading in the *Fifth Meditation* by claiming that what Descartes means is that essences are *causally* independent of human minds. Chappell (1997) argues that neither passage A. nor B. necessarily implies a Platonic reading of essence (p.125). He suggests that what Descartes means in A. is that essence is “not my own creation, or indeed the creation of any human being” but is God’s creation (p.126-7). It seems reasonable, for we can read “not invented by me or dependent on my mind” as simply “not invented by me”. This means essences are only *causally* independent of human minds, not ontologically, as in the sense that they exist only if human minds exist. Nolan (1997) has a similar interpretation. He argues that Descartes “must be invoking another notion of dependence” rather than ontological dependence when claiming that essences of a triangle are not dependent on my mind (p.182). He proceeds to argue that true and immutable natures or essences are not invented by human minds in the sense that “they have been created, or composed by me,” but that “they are implanted in me by God” (p. 182). Thus, for the conceptualists, essences and eternal truths are *causally* dependent God for their existence as innate ideas in human minds.

To say that eternal truths and essences causally depend on God for their existence implies that the conceptualists do not necessarily commit themselves to the view that essences and eternal truths depend *only* and *entirely* on finite minds for their existence. The core claim of their view is that essences and eternal truths are *innate ideas* in human minds and that these ideas are created and imprinted in our minds by God. Hence, they seem to only commit to the claim that eternal truths and essences have only existence in the mind or mind-dependent existence, for, after all, they are ideas. Chappell, Nolan, and Bennett all arrive at this conclusion, but their approaches are different. While Chappell and Nolan use the theory of ideas to directly explain the ontological status of eternal truths and essences, Bennett starts with the theory of modality. There are also differences between Chappell and Nolan’s understanding. Specifically, Chappell claims that eternal truths and essences exist only in finite minds. He writes “it is in our minds and only there that they [eternal truths] ‘reside’” (Chappell, 1997, p.113). It is because he distinguishes between beings and reality: “Being belongs to a thing or it doesn’t; either something is or it isn’t. But reality admits of degrees; everything that

is has some of it, and some things have more than others” (Chappell, 1986, p.190). If only actual things have being, as Chappell seems to believe, then non-existent things such as mathematical objects, eternal truths, and essence cannot have beings but only objective reality in the mind.

Nolan does not distinguish between being and reality, and believes that for Descartes objective being or objective reality is unique to ideas only, that is, only ideas possess objective reality (p.174). He believes that every Cartesian idea has two distinct kinds of being or reality, formal and objective. Ideas considered in terms of formal reality are modes of thought, and thus have the same degree or level of formal being or reality. In other words, all ideas are equal with respect to their formal reality. To distinguish ideas, we need to consider them in terms of their objective reality, that is to consider them as “images which represent or exhibit different things to the mind” (Nolan, 1997, p.174). There are two ways to distinguish ideas considered objectively. One is by their levels of ontological (in)dependence. For instance, infinite substance, that is God who is independent of everything has the highest level of objective reality; finite substances, i.e., my mind which is dependent on God, have a lower level; and accidents or modes, i.e., I am thinking of something, which is dependent on the thinking substance, have the lowest level of objective reality. Another way to distinguish ideas considered objectively is by their objects or contents of ideas, regardless of whether these objects or contents actually exist or not (p.175). For instance, I have an idea that represents a winged horse and a man to my mind even if there are no winged horses and men in the world. The winged horse is the content of an idea or internal object of thought that does not have formal or actual existence outside the mind while the man is an internal object of thought that does have formal existence outside it. That means that even if an internal object of thought does not actually exist in the world, or lacks formal existence, it still has an objective being in the mind. Nolan suggests that Descartes identifies ideas considered objectively with internal objects of thought (p.175-6). This identification is significant, for it merges Kenny’s distinction between ideas and non-existent mathematical objects such as a triangle in thought. But it does not mean that the objective reality of an idea is nothing. Nolan explains that because Descartes needs to establish that the idea of God requires God’s actual existence as a sufficient cause if he admits Caterus’s objection that the objective reality of an idea is nothing, it means the idea

of God requires no cause and the causal argument for the existence of God would fail (p.176).⁸ This cause cannot be a random cause, but must have as much formal reality as the ideas contain objectively. That means the degree of ontological (in)dependence of the formal being must be greater than or at least equal to the degree of ontological (in)dependence of the objective being in the mind. This causal principle is significant for the argument for God's existence in the *Third Meditation*, for only God has the degree of ontological (in)dependence that are greater than or equal to the degree of ontological (in)dependence of the infinite substance in the mind. Moreover, this causal principle implies that humans can be the cause of their own ideas of other finite substances, even though these finite substances do not possess formal reality. Certainly, eternal truths and essences do not possess formal existence as men or animals outside our minds do. They thus only have objective being inside human minds.

Bennett's approach is not similar to that of Chappell and Nolan. His main focus is not the ontological status like that of Nolan and Chappell but the modality of eternal truths and essences, that is how to account for the fact that for Descartes eternal truths are created by God at will while being necessary and eternal. According to Bennett's reading, eternal truths are necessary because human minds are unable to conceive them as being otherwise (p.645-9). That means eternal truths can be otherwise, but our intellectual or mental capacities limit us in conceiving so. Interestingly enough, Bennett takes this line of argument from Margaret Wilson (1978, p.127). Nevertheless, Bennett's reading is based not on the theory of ideas which directly explains the ontological status of eternal truths. It only finds the conceptualist reading as an inevitable consequence of the modality of eternal truths. Thus, one may find conceptualism to be a plausible thesis of modality in the way that Bennett suggests.

⁸ Caterus's objection in the first set of objections: "But what is 'objective being in the intellect'? According to what I was taught, this is simply the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object. And this is merely an extraneous label which adds nothing to the thing itself. Just as 'being seen' is nothing other than an act of vision attributable to myself, so 'being thought of', or having objective being in the intellect, is simply a thought of the mind which stops and terminates in the mind. And this can occur without any movement or change in the thing itself, and indeed without the thing in question existing at all. So why should I look for a cause of something which is not actual, and which is simply an empty label, a non-entity?" (CSM II, 66-7). Descartes rejects this denial that objective reality of an idea is nothing and thus requires no cause: "'Objective being in the intellect' will not here mean 'the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object', but will signify the object's being in the intellect in the way in which its objects are normally there. By this I mean that the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect — not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect. Now this mode of being is of course much less perfect than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect; but, as I did explain, it is not therefore simply nothing." This is significantly related to the ontological argument in the *Fifth Meditation*.

Being back to the difference between eternal truths and essences having mind-dependent existence and having only objective existence in human minds. One may argue that eternal truths and essences have only mind-dependent existence without necessarily implying that they have only objective existence in human minds. Passage J. may be interpreted in a way that supports this. To be specific, passage J. does not necessarily support the claim that essences are ideas in the human mind alone or that objective reality is existence in human minds alone. It only implies a dependence of the thought or the idea of essences and the thought or the idea of existence (in this case, the thoughts of essences/existence of a triangle and Peter) on human minds. These thoughts are ideas, and the triangle and the truth that sum of three angles of this triangle equal two right angles are internal contents or objects of these ideas in human minds. But it does not necessarily follow that they are ideas that exist only in human minds too. Thus, one might hold a view that something exists in human minds without its whole existence being dependent on the mind. This view requires further clarification on what it means to exist in the mind. I will investigate this view more in the next chapter.

Let us now discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the conceptualist reading. First, it is compatible with what has been explicitly claimed in the *Principles* that essences and eternal truths reside inside within the mind and have no existence outside our thought. Second, Chappell and Nolan seem to succeed in arguing that passage A. in the *Fifth Meditation* implies nothing about Platonism, and that the independence of eternal truths and essences of human minds should not be understood in the ontological sense but only causal. Third, Nolan is right when claiming that for Descartes ideas taken objectively are internal objects of thought or contents of ideas. Finally, it may satisfy the claim that God creates eternal truths and essences by efficient causality. As seen above, the exact nature of the distinction required by efficient causality is still questionable, but if efficient causality in a strict sense requires a *real* distinction between the cause and its effect, then the conceptualist reading might satisfy the requirement.

There are two disadvantages of the conceptualist reading. One is that it cannot account for the necessity of eternal truths and essences, for how can something be necessary if it is created freely by God's will? Descartes emphasizes this voluntarism many times. If we are to take into account voluntarism seriously, we must deny the absolute necessity of eternal truths. I suggest taking the necessity of eternal truths in a non-strict sense. Specifically, there are two ways of interpreting passage J. 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”: (a) God could bring it about that those truths do not exist (maybe because he could have made the circle not exist, thus there can be no truths derives from it); and (b) God could bring it about that those truths are false (such as two and three make no longer five but six or four). If we are to accept (a) it contradicts the omnipotence thesis, for there seem limits on God’s power: he cannot make those truths false. If we are to maintain this absolute omnipotence, as Descartes seems to strongly commit to it, we need to accept (b). However, it is contentious about the coherent scope of the omnipotence thesis. Many philosophers such as Curley (2005) have criticized Descartes’s Christian conception of God, that his power is absolute and he can do everything. For now, I would prefer (a). It is because (a) can account, in a non-strict sense, for the necessity of eternal truths. Descartes is very clear in claiming that eternal truths are necessary. If we accept (b) it would be highly contradictory that eternal truth is necessary and at the same time can be made false if God wills so. However, if we accept (a), we can argue that eternal truths are necessary in a non-strict sense. For instance, an eternal truth such as two plus three is five might not exist because two and three do not exist, but if two and three are to exist, it is necessary that their sum equals five, thus rendering the mathematical truth some sense of necessity.

It is worth noting that Bennett’s reading may not face the contradiction between the creation doctrine and the necessity of essences and eternal truths in the way it threatens Nolan and Chappell’s reading. In his reading, the necessity of eternal truths is reduced to the inability of human minds to conceive these truths to be otherwise. These truths are necessary because we are only capable of conceiving them to be so. God can freely establish other impossible truths and worlds at will and the necessity of twice two equals four stills remains the same to our minds. This implies that the necessity of these truths to our minds is in an absolute sense. It thus seems that Bennett’s reading can both account for the radical voluntarism of God’s will and the necessity of eternal truths and essence. However, Bennett seems to miss a point. If the necessity of eternal truths and essences is in its absolute sense, the incapacity of our minds to conceive impossible eternal truths is also necessary in a sense. God may change everything else, but in order to maintain the absolute necessity of eternal truths to our minds, he must not change this limitation of our mental and intellectual capacity to conceive impossible truths. Otherwise, what we are able to conceive would be altered and we may be able to conceive impossible truths such as those that are contradictory to necessary truths we are now able to conceive. Radical voluntarism would not accept that God cannot easily create us otherwise, including our mental and intellectual capacity and incapacity of conceiving created truths.

Thus, even if Bennett's reading can account for the strict necessity of eternal truths and essences, it may not account for a radical stand of voluntarism.

Another disadvantage to the conceptualist reading is that it cannot account for the eternity of eternal truths. Chappell, Nolan, and Bennett take pain to handle this problem. Human beings and the world are created in time, while eternity in the strict sense means timelessness. Then how are eternal truths be timeless if they exist *only* in finite human minds that exist in time? Even if we take eternity to mean everlastingness (beginningless and endless) as Descartes seems to sometimes use, the objection still stands, for while eternal truths are everlasting, according to Descartes human souls are only immortal, that is once created a soul does not cease to exist. Unless Descartes holds that God creates all human souls at once and never creates new souls afterward, and that at that very same moment he creates time, we must admit that there is a time that eternal truths and essences do not exist in human minds.⁹ This is particularly bad for Chappell, for he holds explicitly that eternal truths exist only in human minds. Chappell does recognize this weakness. He simply rejects that "Descartes has [...] no way of meeting this objection without admitting that by calling them eternal he did not mean that either the truths or the objects of mathematics themselves exist from all eternity" (p.126). Nolan has a similar rejection. He thinks that when Descartes calls mathematical truths eternal truths, he "was simply adopting the Augustinian expression familiar to his correspondents", as seems to imply in passage I. (p.194). Nolan further appeals to divine incomprehensibility to handle this problem. He claims that the eternity of essences and eternal truths belong to divine incomprehensibility and is beyond human understanding (p.185). Bennett has another way to avoid this problem. He claims that 'eternal' means 'unchanging' or 'immutable' (p.663-5). It derives from the immutability of God's will. However, it is not really what Descartes means. Chappell emphasizes that what Descartes means to be "from all eternity" is not created truths but "will or decree that the truths in question obtain [...]" (p.126).¹⁰ Moreover, it will be clear later that accounting for the eternity and necessity of eternal truths by appealing to the immutability of God's will might not be the right way. Thus, the conceptualists still face the questions of the eternity of essences and eternal truths.

⁹ Some Augustinian and biblical scholars seem to suggest that God does not create new souls but creates them all at once at the moment he creates Adam's soul. It is however unclear whether Descartes might agree with the view. He might be familiar with and influenced by Augustinian theology and philosophy, but claiming that Descartes would hold the same view is very speculative.

¹⁰ This appears to be compatible to Schmaltz's reading that eternal truths and essences are divine decrees.

1.3. The Scholastic Reading

The Scholastic reading was suggested by Schmaltz (1991) and Rozemond (2008) and they both place essences and eternal truths in God. Schmaltz (1991) proposes that essences and eternal truths are identical to acts of divine will, or divine decrees. Rozemond's (2008) interpretation differs from Schmaltz's. She argues that essences and eternal truths are "contents of such [divine] decrees" and "have objective beings in God's mind" (p.42). Let us first consider Schmaltz's interpretation. He takes eternal truths as divine decrees caused by God. This identification goes through many steps. Schmaltz first identifies eternal truths with created laws established by God (p.136-7). Laws are moral entities, as Descartes claims in the *Sixth Replies* that "the law itself is not an entity existing physically but is merely what they call a moral entity" (CSM II, 294). A moral entity is produced by a moral cause, just as the king commands his subjects (p.137-8). This implies, Schmaltz argues, that moral entities are commands or decrees (p.138). Thus, he concludes, for Descartes eternal truths are divine decrees.

This identification seems a little forceful and at best implicit. Descartes never explicitly claims that eternal truths are divine decrees, though he neither never denies it. Nevertheless, this view may face an objection from Platonists and conceptualists that if eternal truths are divine decrees they are not distinct from God and this contradicts the efficient causality that God and its effects are distinct. Though the nature of the distinction required by efficient causality is still questionable, it seems clear that it is not a conceptual distinction. I cannot see how the distinction between God and divine decrees to be any other distinction except the conceptual distinction. Schmaltz argues that eternal truths can be created by efficient causality and not being distinct from God himself. To be specific, Descartes's essentialism allows God's essence to be the efficient cause of his existence, that is God is the cause and effect at once. Schmaltz suggests that eternal truths and essences can be created by God by efficient causality in a similar manner, that is God's essences are the efficient cause of God's decrees: "God is the cause of decrees that are not distinct from himself in the sense that God determines from eternity that he will so decree" (p.155). If we have no way but to accept that eternal truths and essences are divine decrees, this violation of the efficient causality seems reasonable and acceptable.

The first advantage of Schmalz's reading is that it well explains the eternity and necessity of eternal truths. If God has determined 'from eternity' that he will so decree, it seems that eternal truths and essences are necessarily so obtained. Another advantage is that it explains the independence and immutability of eternal truths of human minds, for they are determined by God's immutable will only (p.155). However, there are three disadvantages to Schmalz's reading. First, as De Rosa points out, it may contradict Descartes's voluntarism. It is because if divine decrees are necessarily followed from God's essences in the same manner that necessary existence is necessarily inferred from God's omnipotence, it contradicts the claim that God can create eternal truths and essence otherwise. It seems that he is compelled or necessitated to create those truths. Second, since Schmalz does not place eternal truths and essences in human minds, this reading cannot account for passage H. and G. which claim explicitly that essences and eternal truths reside in human minds and have no existence outside it. Schmalz argues that passage G. and H. are "to reject the view that this universal [triangularity and eternal truths concerning it] represents a universal created substance with physical existence" (p.165). I find this explanation not convincing. Passage G. may make a negative claim about the physical existence of essences and eternal truths, but passage H. is in no way a negative claim. It explicitly states that they reside within human minds. On the other hand, Chappell objects that eternal truths obtained from pertinent divine decrees must be distinct from God, which again contradicts the efficient causality. To avoid this objection while still insist that eternal truths and essences are in God, there is only one way, that is to claim that eternal truths and essences are contents of divine decrees rather than the decrees themselves, which moves us to the examination of Rozemond's suggestion.

Rozemond proposes that eternal truths and essences are contents of divine decrees and have objective being in God's mind for a more apparent reason. She argues that an eternal truth such as sum of three angles of a triangle equals two right angles is hardly a decree or command. It is content of divine eternal decrees rather than acts. But how are eternal truths contents of divine decrees? Rozemond employs the theory of ideas to explain this, and that is the reason she brings in the notion of objective being in God's mind in her interpretation. To be specific, Rozemond identifies the contents of divine decrees with divine ideas considered objectively in God's mind. Like Nolan, Rozemond insists that for Descartes, the objective reality of an idea is a genuine mode of being that though is "much less perfect than that by which things exist outside the mind" does require a cause (CSM II, 75; Rozemond, 2008, p. 52-3). But unlike Nolan who claims that the efficient cause of these ideas is God who implanted them in human minds only,

Rozemond emphasizes that God can be the total and efficient cause of these ideas in his mind just as human minds “can be the cause of its ideas of corporeal entities because these ideas contain no more reality than his mind *qua* substance” (p.52). This cleverly avoids Schmalz’s disadvantage that God’s essence being the cause of God’s decrees contradicts voluntarism. Like Schmalz, Rozemond explains the claim in the passage G. and H. by that “Descartes is not at all concerned with the relationship between essences or eternal truths and God” and that he is “laying out his ontology of the created world” only (p.58). Again, I find this explanation unconvincing. Descartes was very explicit in asserting that eternal truths exist only in human minds.

De Rosa (2011) and Hattab (2016) pose different criticism of Schmalz and Rozemond’s interpretation, mostly focusing on the efficient causality and divine simplicity thesis. The simplicity thesis is that “In God, willing, understanding, and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually” (CSM III, 25-6) and “In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it” (CSMK, 24). They claim that Schmalz and Rozemond can in no way reconcile the efficient causality without violating the divine simplicity thesis. To be specific, if God wills from all eternity that eternal truths are to be obtained, it seems that he wills first, and then creates them later in human minds as innate ideas, which implies a priority between willing/knowing and creating in God.

I believe that De Rosa and Hattab were too quick to conclude that Schmalz and Rozemond cannot account for efficient causality without violating the divine simplicity thesis. Schmalz and Rozemond never claim that eternal truths and essences exist in God *prior* to them being imprinted in human minds, as De Rosa and Hattab seem to think (De Rosa, 2011, p. 614; Hattab, 2016, p.16). Rozemond was well aware of the possible threat the divine simplicity thesis poses against her view, and so never actually places them in human minds, for doing so means that God understands eternal truths in his mind *prior* to him creating or imprinting them in human minds. For Schmalz, he thinks that eternal truths are divine decrees, thus there should be no problem because God’s commands can hardly be in human minds. They may be in God’s mind before being decreed or created so. But it implies that eternal truths are contents of these decrees rather than the act of commanding themselves, which is Rozemond’s view. The divine simplicity then only arises when eternal truths and essences are first willed or understood or known in God’s mind and then created or imprinted in human minds in order to account for

passage G. and H that eternal truths have existence within the minds. But Schmaltz and Rozemond deny a positive claim in passage G. and H. (which I believe is the most unconvincing part of their interpretation), thus they do not really face the divine simplicity thesis.

1.4 The Neoplatonist Reading

Hattab (2016) claims that her approach can resolve most of the contradictions between requirements around eternal truths and essences. Specifically, Hattab argues that Descartes might have been influenced by Proclus's Neoplatonic theory of universals and that this theory can account for crucial doctrines about essences and eternal truths that Descartes holds. According to Proclus's Neoplatonic theory, there are three types of universal. One is Platonic universals (type A). This kind of universals "exists in the divine mind even when not grasped and employed by our discursive mind" (p.39). This kind of universals, such as the eternal truth "nothing comes from nothing" and immutable essences of a triangle that its three angles equal two right angles, exist prior to, and regardless of whether they are instantiated (p.40). Another kind of universals is Aristotelian universals (type C) which exist in the things that instantiate them. This kind of universal is dependent on human minds alone, for it depends on the abstraction of what we grasp of material objects and thus cannot be eternal. These are the universals that the conceptualists claimed to be meant in the *Principles*. However, Hattab argues Descartes does not mean so. There is the third type of universals, mediate universals type B existing in both God's mind and human minds. When Descartes was talking about the essence in passage A. in the *Fifth Meditations*, Hattab claims, he is talking of universal type A. When he was talking about essences of mathematical objects in the *Principles*, it is universal type B. The mathematical essences are universal type B because "they are inseparable from their instances and cannot be imagined apart from body" (p.39). Thus, they do not exist in human minds unless their instances also exist in minds.

To my opinion, this approach is no better than a combination of the Platonist and Scholastic interpretations. Hattab may get her conclusion stronger by appealing to historical evidence, but as she herself acknowledges, there is little evidence to support the claim that Descartes got more familiar with Proclus's theory through Kepler (Hattab, 2016, p.27-8). Meanwhile, even though she may be right that Descartes was not familiar with Scholasticism and his essentialism was not a response to the contemporary mainstream Scholastic existentialism, it is not necessarily that Descartes is more influenced by Proclus's Neoplatonic philosophy than the

Scholastic Aristotelianism. After all, historical evidence may be important, but whether this theory can solve the problems concerning essences and eternal truths is more important. Proclus's theory can solve most of the contradictions by its flexibility in choosing which kind of universals fits better for each passage in the *Meditations* and the *Principles*, but the divine simplicity thesis remains a conundrum. Hattab's analysis of universal type B in both human minds and God's mind to account for the eternity of essences and its existence in human minds faces what the Scholastics would face if they place essences and eternal truths in human minds: the divine simplicity thesis that entails the ontological dependence of essences and eternal truths on divine will. I do not see how Hattab can account for the eternity of essences and its existence in human minds except by accepting that essences have to be placed in God's mind *prior* to them being implanted in human minds by God's efficient causality. Hattab simply ignores the divine simplicity thesis: she claims that the divine simplicity thesis is "problematic, no matter which interpretation we follow" (p.45).

In conclusion, it seems that there is almost no way out, for Descartes's 'requirements' for essences and eternal truths themselves are contradictory. The main struggle lies in how Descartes uses the terms eternity and necessity: something cannot be eternal in the strict sense if it is created, and neither be necessary in the strict sense if it can be freely created otherwise at God's will, as either as not existing or false. Thus, any interpretation will have to deal with this contradiction between the doctrine of creation and necessity and the eternity of essences and eternal truths. While we may accept a non-strict sense of necessity, the Platonists still face an explicit denial of Platonism in the *Principles*, and the conceptualists still cannot account for the eternity in the strict sense if they insist that essences and eternal truths exist as ideas in human minds. One may argue that essences and eternal truths are in God's immutable will and mind thus rendering them the eternity, necessity, and independence of human minds. However, she will face the explicit claim in passage G. and H. that essences and eternal truths exist within human minds. But if she tries to solve the problems by placing them in God's mind *prior* to them being implanted in human minds, so that essences and eternal truths are eternal at the same time being created by God and exist in human minds, she will find herself facing another contradiction between divine simplicity thesis and efficient causality. The efficient causality requires God and essences to be distinct while the divine simplicity thesis requires that God's willing, knowing, understanding, and creating essences are the same act, thus denying any interpretation that accounts for the distinctness between God and essences by

placing essences in God's mind before them being implanted, by God through efficient causality, in human minds.

Let us recall all relevant requirements around the ontological status of eternal truths. They are created by God (creation doctrine) freely at his will (voluntarism); are eternal and necessary; are independent of human minds; have no existence outside my thought but reside within it; are distinct from God (efficient causality). It is worth noting that the efficient causality requirement that God and his creatures must be distinct can be violated at some points if the eternal truths and essences have objective being in God's mind. The simplicity thesis does not directly affect the discussion except when we are claiming that there is a priority between creating, willing, and understanding of eternal truths and essences in God, such as God wills eternal truths and essences first and then creates them in human minds. It does not mean that we cannot separate creating/willing/understanding in our thinking. God's will, creation, and understanding of eternal truths can be understood separately, as Rozemond suggests (p.53-4). On the other hand, these requirements can be understood in a non-strict sense. For instance, eternal truths and essence are not ontologically but only causally independent of human minds, and that they are mind-dependent though may not have objective existence dependent only on human minds, or we can understand eternity in the sense of everlastingness rather than the strict sense timelessness, or that necessity can be understood in the non-strict sense that they can be not existing but cannot be false. The next chapter will suggest two possible understandings of eternal truths and analyze how the two understandings fit these requirements.

2. Reconcile the Contradictions

Having listed all relevant requirements in their strict and non-strict sense, in this chapter I first explain the distinction between *in re* and *in intellectu* reality, or in Descartes's term formal and objective reality. A more contemporary distinction of these two distinctions is the distinction between possible and actual beings. Later, I suggest that Descartes may think that there is a difference between the creation of the world and the creation of essences and eternal truths. Later, I suggest that we can understand Cartesian essences and eternal truths in only two ways. One is that they are uncreated and timeless. Another is that they are created and everlasting. These two understandings, however, can in no way satisfy the requirements listed above about essences and eternal truths.

2.1 Distinction between Objective and Formal Reality

This section explains the *in intellectu* and *in re* distinction presupposed in Anselm's ontological argument according to Mann (1972) and argues that the same distinction might be held by Descartes in the name of objective and formal reality with some deviations. It then suggests a more contemporary distinction that is similar to Mann's distinction, that is possible and actual distinction.

The contradictions among the doctrine of creation, that essences and eternal truths are created by God by efficient causality, and the eternity and necessity of essences and eternal truths require a more appropriate and suitable notion of eternity and necessity. I have suggested that a non-strict sense of necessity might be compatible with the doctrine of creation. It is because if an eternal truth, such as two plus three equals five, cannot be false but only be not existing, it is in some sense necessary. Eternality remains a difficulty. I mentioned earlier that Descartes might hold two different senses of eternity: timeless, that is outside of time, and everlasting (beginningless and endless). One thing to be sure, neither of them is compatible with the view held by Chappell that essences and eternal truths exist in the mind *alone* as innate ideas. It is because if essences and eternal truths exist *only* in our minds, they cannot be eternal in any sense. It will be bound by the limited duration of the existence of the finite mind.

However, as indicated in section 1.2, the objective existence of eternal truths and essence in human minds may not depend entirely on the existence of human minds. There is a difference between existing only in human minds and depending on minds. Eternal truths and essences are ideas, so they are at least mind-dependent entities; without a mind, they cannot be conceived

and no eternal truths can be known. However, being mind-dependent does not necessarily imply that they are dependent on human minds, or depend on human minds for their objective existence. One holding this view may find Mann's (1972) notion of existing *in intellectu* appears to be very appealing. To be specific, according to Mann's interpretation of Anselm's ontological argument, for something to exist *in intellectu*, it is when that thing is understood or exists in the understanding. Mann also argues that the things in understanding are conceivable things, "irrespective of whether anyone is in fact conceiving it" (Mann, 1972, p.263-4). *In intellectu* beings, in this way of interpretation, are then conceivable things. This implies the independence of existence of *in intellectu* beings on human minds: even if there are no human beings to conceive them, *in intellectu* beings are still conceivable. Eternal truths and essences are then mind-dependent beings that are *in intellectu*, but are independent of human minds in the sense that they are conceivable even if no human minds exist. Mann also distinguishes *in intellectu* beings and *in re* beings are things that actually exist. This class of beings is a subclass of *in intellectu* beings (p.264). As a result, something can both exist *in intellectu* and *in re*.

If any distinction that is similar to the distinction between *in re* and *in intellectu* beings exists in Descartes's corpus, it would be the distinction between formal and objective reality. In the Third Meditations, Descartes discusses this distinction, claiming that things that have formal existence are things that actually exist, while things that have objective reality are those same things that exist in the minds or in the intellect (CSM II, 74-75). Pessin (2010) argues that "essence of a thing may sometimes be equated with that thing insofar as it exists objectively in the intellect" and "a possible essence may generally be equated with the very possibility of the thing, or a thing of that type, existing" (p.71). Griffin (2015) is clearer. He argues that this is an *ontological* distinction between actual and possible beings and "possible existence [...] is a mode of existence" (p.18-9). This is very similar to *in intellectu* beings, except that *in intellectu* beings in Mann's interpretation concerns conceivability rather than possibility. After all, if Pessin and Griffin's distinction between actual and possible existence is in line with Nolan's distinction of formal and objective being, possible existence then is not nothing, or a thing that has possible existence is not merely an imaginary thing in mind that requires no cause.

2.2 An Alternative Reading of Ontological Status of Eternal Truths and Essences

Now that we are clear on the distinction between formal and objective reality, it seems to me that with these contradictory requirements, we cannot have them all in their absolute or strict sense. For instance, if we are to insist on the creation doctrine and voluntarism, eternal truths and essences cannot be necessary and eternal in the strict sense, and if we are to maintain that eternal truths are necessary and eternal in the strict sense, the creation doctrine and voluntarism might need to be changed in some sense. On the other hand, if we insist that eternal truths and essences are necessary in a sense that the world is not, it seems that we will have to allow for a difference between the way God creates the world and the way he creates eternal truths. In the Sixth Replies, after replying to the authors of the sixth objections that God is just as indifferent in creating eternal truths and essences as he is in creating the world, Descartes wrote:

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 (CSM II, 291).

This passage implies a direct denial of intellectualism, that God's intellectualism does not necessitate him to choose to create one thing rather than another. God is just as indifferent in creating eternal truths and essences as he is in creating the physical world. The difference then can only be with time. Descartes was saying that the world is created in time, and eternal truths 'from eternity'. But what is 'from eternity'? If 'from eternity' is in contrast to 'created in time' it can only mean timelessness. But it can mean everlasting, as the world may be created in time but is not everlasting. Thus, I suggest that there are two possible understandings: one is that eternal truths and essences are timeless; another is that they are everlasting. If eternal truths and essences are timeless, they are uncreated. I do not see how we can think of eternal truths being created at the same time timeless, for the moment we speak of the creation of eternal truths *prior* to the creation of time, it already involves time. If eternal truths and essences are everlasting, they are created. Can they be everlasting and uncreated? It seems to me that that

cannot be the case, for everlasting already presuppose the creation *in* time. It then means that time and eternal truths and essences are created at the same moment.

Let us first consider the view that eternal truths and essence are uncreated and timeless. This view may seem incoherent and highly contradict what Descartes emphasizes about the eternal truths and essences, that they are created at God's will, but it is worth seeing if it can account for our requirements in some sense. If we read eternal truths and essences as uncreated and timeless, and God only brings about these truths into existence in human minds as innate ideas by making human minds be able to conceive them, it satisfies the earlier suggested non-strict sense of the necessity of eternal truths. God may not bring about the existence of mathematical entities such as numbers two and a triangle, thus there are no truths that can be derived or demonstrated from them, but if he is to create numbers and a triangle, it must be that twice two equals four and sum of three angles of a triangle equals two right angles. However, saying so seems to imply that eternal truths are created through the creation of mathematical objects, i.e., number two and the triangle. A way to avoid this is to claim that mathematical objects are uncreated and timeless too. If a triangle is uncreated and timeless, both its principal attribute and second-order attributes are timeless and created too. We may take time to understand or infer the second-order attributes from the principal attribute for human beings exist in time, but these truths and essences are *with* the uncreated and timeless mathematical objects, thus no time involves. Note that I only claim that eternal truths and essences are uncreated and timeless. I do not claim that they are completely independent of everything. These truths seem to still depend on the existence of mathematical objects, but it does not necessarily contradict the claim that they are timeless and uncreated if we accept that mathematical objects are uncreated and timeless too.

On the other hand, this view can account for the eternity of eternal truths and essence even in the strict sense, that is timelessness. Eternal truths have always existed timelessly, and God only brings them into existence in human minds by changing the capacity of human minds to conceive them. It is the opposite of Bennett's reading. In Bennett's reading, God's power is not limited, and he can change all truths, even the contradictories of all current truths, at will, but human mental capacities cannot conceive those truths. In this way of understanding, eternal truths and essences are not under God's power; God can only change the capacity of human minds so that they can conceive these uncreated truths. If so, uncreated truths and essences are independent of not only human minds but also God. But it contradicts the claim that they are

innate ideas in human minds. This is the first disadvantage of this reading. Another significant disadvantage is that it goes completely against the doctrine of creation that eternal truths and essence are created. However, ‘bringing into existence’ in human minds can in a loose sense mean ‘creating’ in human minds. A final disadvantage of this view is that it contradicts the omnipotence thesis. God can only change human capacity to conceive uncreated truths but cannot change them at his free will. Though Descartes seems to hesitate to discuss some theological questions regarding this problem, I doubt that Descartes would mean to limit God’s absolute power in any way, as written in a letter sent to Mesland in 1644 answering the question of how can we conceive that God has complete freedom and omnipotence while still maintain that contradictories could not exist together?

K. It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things that God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible. The first consideration 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. The second consideration assures us that even if this be true, we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so (CSMK III, 235).

The passage is rich, and I will come back to it later. Here I emphasize only that Descartes does not think there are any limits on God’s power. Many think this Christian conception of God’s power is incoherent (Curley, 2005) and needs to be at least adjusted in some way. I do think so, but this view that eternal truths and essences are uncreated and timeless would radically limit God’s power and is highly heretic to the Christian conception of God that Descartes might have.

The second possible reading is eternal truths and essences are created and everlasting. This satisfies the creation doctrine and non-strict sense of eternity of eternal truths and essences. It can also account for both the Platonist reading and the conceptualist reading, for essences and eternal truths are conceivable truths regardless of whether anyone clearly and distinctly perceives them. But they still depend on human minds to be conceived, for we need at least one human to conceive those truths. Whether or not the view can make the voluntarists happy depends. Certainly, the view is voluntarist in the sense that God could have created a different set of created truths, that is twice two would not make four and the sum of three angles of a

triangle does not equal two right angles, making them contingent. However, it is not completely contingent in the sense that God can freely change them at any time he wants, for they are everlasting once created so. In this sense, everlasting means immutability, and we can explain this immutability by claiming that God's will is immutable, as Kenny (1970) seems to suggest (p.698-9). This view still does not escape the omnipotence thesis, though the scope of God's power is different. He could have created a different set of eternal truths and essences rather than the one that has existed already, but he cannot at will change them all and make another set of truths to govern our universe, or analogously so.

However, there are worries about whether we can claim that the eternity and necessity of eternal truths and essences is because of the immutability of God's will.

- L. From the simple fact that I consider the two halves of a part of matter, however small it may be, as two complete substances ... I conclude with certainty that they are really divisible. Someone may tell me that though I can conceive them apart, I have no reason to deny their inseparability because I do not know that God has not united or joined them together so tightly that they are entirely inseparable. I would reply that however he may have joined them, I am sure that he can also disjoin them (To Gibieuf, 19 January 1641: CSMK III, 202-203).

Passage L. implies that whatever God does, he can undo that. This contradicts the above claims that his will is immutable or unchangeable. He can will that twice two equal four from all eternity, but he can always undo it. If so, it seems that we can claim nothing to be immutable under God's absolute omnipotence and nothing is inherently necessary. Everything, including eternal truths and essences, is inherently contingent.

However, Descartes does seem to think that God's omnipotence is not absolute:

- M. But we can clearly understand a thinking substance that is not extended, and an extended substance that does not think, as you agree. So even if God conjoins and unites them as much as he can, he cannot thereby divest himself of his omnipotence and lay down his power of separating them; and hence they remain distinct (To Regius, June 1642: CSMK III, 214).

Passage M. suggests that God cannot create extended indivisibles, or cannot make the mind and body inseparable. This allows a non-absolute sense of omnipotence and thus renders a non-strict sense of voluntarism. If so, I propose the following understanding of how, for Descartes, God would create laws, eternal truths and essences, and other existing things. Non-

contradiction laws are created *prior* to any other laws, truths, and things. They are still in time, for again, it is hard to coherently understand how something can be created *prior* to other things without them being in order and time. Thus, God makes it impossible for laws, truths, or things to be contradictory. Passage K. above can be interpreted to support this view. Descartes seems to distinguish between ‘things which God wished to be in fact possible’ and things ‘which he has wished to make impossible.’ Human beings are created by God such that we are able to conceive the former as possible but unable to conceive as possible the latter. Descartes also emphasizes that that “God has willed that some truths are necessary” does not mean that he necessarily creates to create them to be so (CSMK III, 235). The latter clearly violates the absolute omnipotence and free will of God, for it means he is necessitated to do so regardless of his will. The former simply implies that he wills to create things in a specific way, that is it is necessary that contradictories cannot exist together. There is no violation of the divine omnipotence thesis. Combined with human’s inability to conceive as possible things that God wished to make impossible, it means that God wished that contradictories exist together is impossible, but human beings, because of their nature so created by God that they are unable to conceive as possible things God has made impossible, mistakenly conceive it as things that God could have been made possible but unable to do so. Thus, we can imagine analogously God to first create a non-contradictory universe and then bring about these truths into human minds as ideas considered objectively. These truths are already created non-contradictorily, thus there can be no truths such as the sum of three angles of a triangle not equaling two right angles existing simultaneously with the truth that the sum of three angles of a triangle equals two right angles. As a result, there is one set of non-contradictory eternal truths that God has created. He can create other sets of truths, but he decided that it is so, and that this set of eternal truths is necessary. Given the Christian conception of God that he has, I think Descartes is more likely to hold this view rather than the one discussed above.

Further questions can be raised regarding these possible two readings would involve how each of them implies a certain view on the objectivity and certainty of the truths of mathematics and physics. Curley (1984), Osler (1985), and Easton (2009) all point out that Descartes’s view on the immutability and necessity of eternal truths and essences is closely related to his foundation of truths in mathematics and physics. The view that eternal truths and essences are uncreated and timeless may be in line with intellectualism which claims that eternal truths are immutable and unchangeable. It is because a true science requires that “the eternal truths be independent of God’s will and grounded in the eternal and immutable nature of God’s reason”

(Easton, 2009, p.358). It is unclear how my reading that eternal truths are uncreated and timeless would depend on God's intellect, for my view certainly imply the independence of eternal truths on God's intellect, but it is worth further thought. Meanwhile, supporters of radical voluntarism and the creation doctrine object that eternal truths can be independent of God and allows truths in physics and mathematics to be in some non-strict sense of necessity (Easton, 2009, p.358). My latter view that eternal truths are created and everlasting seems to be in line with them, and it is good to think how it can more specifically account for the objectivity and certainty of truths of mathematics and physics.

Conclusion

The thesis was motivated to understand the ontology and modality of eternal truths and essences. It starts with the contradicting texts regarding essences and eternal truths in Descartes's *Meditations for First Philosophy* published in 1641 and *Principles of Philosophy* published in 1644. I have analyzed four different readings suggested by Cartesian scholars. They are the Platonist, defended by Anthony Kenny (1968, 1970) and Margaret Wilson (1978); the conceptualist, by Jonathan Bennet (1994), Vere Chappell (1997), and Lawrence Nolan (1997); the Scholastic, by Tad M. Schmaltz (1991) and the Neoplatonist by Hellen Hattab (2016). After analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of these four readings, I have concluded that Descartes's view on the ontological status of eternal truths and essence comprises the following requirements. They are created by God (creation doctrine) freely at his will (voluntarism); are eternal and necessary; are independent of human minds; have no existence outside my thought but reside within it; are distinct from God (efficient causality, though maybe with violations in case of essences and eternal truths being placed in God). With all these contradicting requirements, I then suggest two possible understandings of eternal truths and essences that are based on the possible and actual distinction. It is either that essences and eternal truths are uncreated and timeless, or they are created and everlasting. I have demonstrated that the former understanding has many significant disadvantages and that it clearly contradicts Descartes's Christian conception of God, thus this may not be the view that he has in mind. I have also shown that the later view may face different objections if we understand those requirements in a strict sense. But Descartes does seem to allow for some non-strict sense of God's omnipotence and voluntarism. This may shed a light on how for Descartes, God would create laws, eternal truths and essences, and other existing things.

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