1.

One of the conceptual problems which has traditionally been inherent in the theistic doctrine of divine omnipotence has to do with the relation between God's power and the so-called eternal truths. The question here is, whether it is possible to conceive of universals, properties, numbers, kinds etc. as in any way dependent upon God's power. Or, to cast it in its nominalist form, whether the rules of logic and analyticity can be considered as subject to God. Since a negative answer to this question seems to imply a limitation of God's abilities and therefore a denial of his omnipotence, believers have always tried to respond to it in some other way. On the other hand, a positive answer to the question has some wildly counterintuitive implications. If the eternal truths are subject to God's power, God can make it the case that for example 5 is less than 3, or that things may be red without being coloured.

The most famous attempt to address this dilemma, taking the form of an intriguingly subtle and pious solution to it, is no doubt René Descartes' doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths. Unfortunately, however, in spite of much recent research which has been done on the issue, there is no unanimity as to how this doctrine should be interpreted. Therefore, in this article I will try to assess what exactly Descartes' view regarding the eternal truths amounts to.

2.

The doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths does not form a substantial part of the argument in any of Descartes' philosophical works. Rather, his treatment of it is scattered over some eight letters Descartes wrote to various persons, and his Replies to two sets of Objections against his
Meditations. All of these passages were written over a period of nineteen years, from 1630 to 1649, and there is no reason to suppose that Descartes changed his mind afterwards. Although an unequivocal interpretation of them is impeded by the absence of an overall systematic exposition in Descartes, it is generally accepted that together the passages do form a coherent whole. Its first account occurs in a letter to Mersenne, dated 15 April 1630. Descartes’ formulation seems rather straightforward here:

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. Indeed to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and Fates. Please do not hesitate to assert and proclaim everywhere that it is God who has laid down these laws in nature just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom. There is no single one that we cannot understand if our mind turns to consider it. They are all inborn 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.

Descartes’ final remark on the eternal truths is in a letter to Henry More, written on 5 February 1549, where he answers the question whether God can create a vacuum as follows:

For my part, I know that my intellect is finite and God’s power is infinite, and so I set no bounds to it; I consider only what I can conceive and what I cannot conceive... And so I boldly assert that God can do everything which I conceive to be possible, but I am not so bold as to deny that he can do whatever conflicts with my understanding – I merely say that it involves a contradiction.

Apart from the continuity in Descartes’ thought, two things are clear from these quotations. First, as appears from the letter to More, eternal truths do not only include mathematical ones, but also fundamental physical intuitions. Other passages show that Descartes further considers logical, metaphysical and even moral principles as instances of eternal truths. In general, the notion of ‘eternal truths’, although never explicitly defined, corresponds to every truth the denial of which is supposed to form a logical contradiction. Secondly, the most natural conclusion from both statements is that God, being the creator or rather legislator of the eternal truths, is able to do anything whatsoever, no matter whether it is self-contradictory and therefore inconceivable to our human minds. According to Descartes, we should not say that God is unable to bring it about that the lines drawn from the center of a circle to its circumference are unequal, that the three angles of a triangle are unequal to two right angles, that there exists a mountain without a valley, that atoms
(conceived as indivisible particles) exist, or that twice four is something other than eight.\textsuperscript{6}

Indeed, one interpretation of Descartes’ doctrine carries its extremely harsh and perplexing character to the maximum. According to this reading, Descartes’ God is “a being for whom the logically impossible is possible.”\textsuperscript{7} This entails of course a very special view of modality, the most noteworthy feature of which is that there are neither necessary truths nor logical impossibilities. Although there are things and propositions which seem to be necessarily true to our minds, God is always able to make the opposites of these things and propositions true. Thus, these truths are not necessary in an absolute sense. Similarly, take any logical impossibility or contradiction you like – in virtue of the fact that “the power of God cannot have any limits,”\textsuperscript{8} God can make it not only possible but even true (and, for all we know, might do so at any time). We may summarize this view of modality briefly as follows: for any proposition $p$, $p$ is logically possible. It follows from this definition, that the truth-value of $p$ may change at any time.

Since there is some quarrel about the question whether this interpretation should be labelled the “standard reading,”\textsuperscript{9} let us call it the “extreme reading.” Alvin Plantinga has argued that this reading, which he characterizes as “universal possibilism,” represents “the fundamental thrust of Descartes’ thought.”\textsuperscript{10} But there are a number of considerations, emerging from a broader examination of Descartes’ thinking, which make the extreme reading highly implausible. Therefore, many interpreters have put forward an attenuated version of it, ascribing some weaker position to Descartes. In what follows I will first indicate some general reasons why the extreme reading is problematic, and then discuss three of the attenuated positions. I will argue that the first of these is possibly true but irrelevant, the second one simply false, and the third one both true and relevantly different from the extreme reading. It is this latest interpretation which renders the most credible conceptualization of Descartes’ conviction that God’s power ranges over the eternal truths.

Clearly, the idea that God may make any proposition $p$ true is at odds with major strands of Descartes’ philosophy. First, Descartes’ version of the ontological argument does not only presuppose that there are truths which are, though not necessary, eternal and immutable (e.g., that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles),\textsuperscript{11} but also that the existence of God is a necessary truth independent of the contingent nature of the human mind.\textsuperscript{12} Second, a universal possibilism would force Descartes to give up central tenets of his very philosophical enterprise. Thus, universal possibilism would allow for the truth of the following proposition: “I think, but nevertheless I am not.” In similar ways, the validity of
every link in the application of Descartes’ deductive method from the cogito towards the science of physics might be questioned. But the initial reason Descartes gave for his doctrine of the creation of eternal truths was precisely that it formed the foundation of his physics. The denial of necessary truths, however, would be detrimental to his methodology and philosophy of science, since it would lead him to a doubt far more radical than he could make use of. Descartes himself was conscious of the necessity of necessary truths for his physics, as appears from his repeated remark that even if God had created other worlds, the most basic laws of nature would be true in all of them.

Apart from such general systematic reasons, there are textual considerations in the passages on the eternal truths themselves which count heavily against the extreme interpretation. We shall mention them hereafter, in the course of dealing with the weaker readings of Descartes’ doctrine.

3.

The first qualification of the extreme reading of Descartes’ theory simply excludes a limited number of truths, which are claimed to be necessarily true in the sense that they cannot be changed even by God, from a majority of truths which are only epistemically necessary, i.e., necessary given the conditions of our human mind but not from the divine perspective. In contrast to the latter class, the first set of necessary truths is conceived by Descartes as uncreated. The reverse side of this reading is of course, that there is an equal number of absolute impossibilities. The most likely candidates for the privilege of being absolutely necessary are truths about God himself, particularly the truth that God exists. Indeed, there are some indications in Descartes’ wording of the theory which suggest that he assigns a special modality to truths concerning the nature and existence of God. Most notably, in his second letter to Mersenne on the topic of the eternal truths he has it that “the existence of God is the first and most eternal of all the truths which can be, and the one from which alone all the others derive.”

On the other hand, Descartes emphatically declares that nothing is excluded from the realm of things which can be brought about by God. Of course there are many things of which we cannot conceive that God brings them about. But the very point of Descartes’ theory is, that our conceptual abilities do not form a valid criterion for measuring the scope of God’s power. For this reason, Margaret Wilson is right in arguing that it would be rather arbitrary to exempt theological truths from the body of
created eternal truths. "If what we cannot conceive in the realm of mathematics is no guide to strict or absolute impossibility and necessity in that realm, why should our mental constraints be any surer guide in the realm of theology?"  

This reservation might also be formulated in the form of an irrelevance. If the extreme interpretation holds for logical truths, so that God could make it the case that e.g. "2+2=5", or "2+2=5 and at the same time 2+2=4", then what precisely is achieved by subsequently denying that God could make it the case that "God is omnipotent and at the same time God is not omnipotent"? At any rate, the suggestion which is implicit in, for example, Gueroult that the acknowledgement of uncreated truths makes Descartes' theory more intelligible, is simply false. On the contrary, it makes Descartes' theory to some degree internally inconsistent, since it postulates truths which set bounds to the power of God. Thus, even if we grant, as many commentators do, and as we ourselves implicitly did above, that Descartes holds at least some truths (e.g., the existence of God, and possibly his omnipotence) to be absolutely unquestionable, this fact does not moderate the extreme interpretation in a relevant sense. We conclude that this first qualification, though probably providing a more correct reading of Descartes, is irrelevant in this sense that it leaves his theory equally bizarre.

A second alternative to the extreme interpretation was first proposed somewhat loosely by Peter Geach, then spelled out in more detail but rejected by Alvin Plantinga, and more recently formalized and advocated as the "most charitable" way of reading Descartes by Edwin Curley. According to this interpretation Descartes does not deny that there are necessary truths, but only that those which are necessary are necessarily necessary. The textual evidence for this suggestion is found above all in Descartes' letter to Mesland, where he argues that "even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will them necessarily, or to be necessitated to will them."  

Following this indication, Curley formulates Descartes' thoughts on the eternal truths in terms of "iterated modalities." According to him, Descartes did not hold that for any proposition p, p is possible, but that for any proposition p, p is possibly possible. Take any proposition you can think of – God could have made it possible. If p is a necessary proposition, then God could have made it the case that p is possible, i.e. that p is only contingently true. And if p is logically impossible, God could have made it the case that p is possible.

That this reading has some odd consequences is shown by Plantinga,
who discusses it under the name “limited possibilism.” In contrast to universal possibilism, this weaker version only allows that the modal status of all propositions are within God’s control, while denying that their truth values depend upon God as well. Thus, God could only have made it the case that the proposition “2x4=8” is possibly false. That is: God could have made it the case that “2x4=8” could be false. But he could not have brought it about that “2x4=8” is in fact false.23 Similarly, God could have made it the case that “2x4=9” is possibly true, but not that it is in fact true. The most puzzling feature of this interpretation is, that it implies the possibility of logically possible actions which the super-omnipotent Cartesian God cannot perform. For as soon as God has made it the case that “2+2=5” is possibly true, instantiating this possibility is no longer logically impossible. But precisely the latter ability is denied to God. This would really seem to be a limitation of God’s power!24

Of course one might hold that Descartes’ theory of the creation of eternal truths is incoherent on any serious interpretation. At least, the fact that a proposed interpretation of it has some strange consequences does not necessarily count against its credibility as a sound description of Descartes’ views. But apart from its perplexity, the iterated modality reading is in conflict with several explicit claims of Descartes to the extent that God could indeed have made necessary truths false. Descartes insists, for instance, that God could have made it untrue that all the lines from the center of a circle to its circumference are equal, or that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles.25 Moreover, these claims are quite compatible with the forementioned passage from the letter to Mesland, appealed to by the proponents of the iterated modality reading. Therefore, we conclude that this interpretation hardly does more justice to the whole of Descartes’ claims on eternal truths than the extreme interpretation.

Nevertheless, the iterated modality reading, at least in the version presented by Curley, has one important advantage in comparison to the extreme interpretation. For it does not only take seriously the fact that the eternal truths are created by God, but also the fact that they are created as eternal, i.e. necessary truths. All of Descartes’ statements concur in the assumption that it is not in any way possible for God to abrogate the truth and necessity of the eternal truths now. This fact provides an important clue to the only reading of Descartes’ theory which is both at first sight less bizarre than its alternatives, and does maximal justice to the totality of Descartes’ statements on the theme. Leaving aside a discussion of some other mitigating readings,26 let us now turn to this interpretation.
A crucial passage, throwing light upon the question whether according to Descartes it is possible for God to change the eternal truths, occurs in his very first letter on the question to Mersenne. Imagining an objection which Mersenne would be confronted with when explaining Descartes’ theory, Descartes constructs the following fictitious dialogue:

They will tell you that, if God had established these truths, he could change them, as a king does his laws; to which one must reply yes, if his will can change. – But I understand them as eternal and immutable. – And I judge the same concerning God. – But his will is free. – Yes, but his power is incomprehensible. In general we can assert that God can do everything that we can comprehend but not that he cannot do what we cannot comprehend. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power.27

Several things are important to note here. First of all, the eternal truths are really eternal to Descartes in the sense that it is not possible that God will change them. Although God may be able to change them, there is not the slightest chance that he will change them, because his will does not change. Here, we meet with the same argument as the older medievals used in defending the view that God, though able to act de potentia absoluta, will never actually do so.28 As in another famous juncture of Descartes’ philosophy, it is the veracity of God which guarantees the reliability of our knowledge of the created order.

Second, the real problem concerns the nature of the divine will. How can God’s will be both immutable and free? It would be too easy to respond that God’s freedom entails the freedom to will things immutably. For if God did freely decide to will the eternal truths immutably, then he had the possibility to choose otherwise. But if God could have decided not to will the eternal truths immutably, then the eternal truths are not really immutable, since up to the moment of God’s decision it was possible that they were changed by God. Moreover, since God continues to be able to change them, the eternal truths continue to be able to be changed, i.e. to be mutable. The problem is, in other words, how can the eternal truths on the one hand be necessary, and on the other hand contingent upon God’s will? We will return to this problem in due course.

Third, it is characteristic that at this point Descartes invokes the incomprehensibility of God’s power. Although we cannot conceive what it means that God might make truths necessary, we should not deny that God can do so, because God’s power transcends our conceptual capacities. Significantly, Descartes hesitates to spell out precisely what this means.
On the one hand, he often uses double negations when indicating the absolute power of God, as he does at the end of the passage just quoted. He seldom flatly says that God can make contradictions true, but rather that we cannot say that God cannot make contradictions true. Thus, Descartes suggests an agnostic answer to the question whether or not God can do such things; since God’s power transcends our conception, we simply don’t know. On the other hand, however, it is inherent in Descartes’ doctrine of the creation of eternal truths that God could have made contradictions true, and this is precisely what Descartes implies in many statements. For example, in the letter to Mesland he formulates as follows:

I turn to the difficulty of conceiving how it was free and indifferent for God to make it not be true that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could not be true together. It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not to be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has in fact wished to make impossible.

So although we cannot conceive how God was free to make contradictions true together or things which are now impossible possible, we do know that God was free to do such things.

As it seems to me, we should take very seriously Descartes’ warning that we cannot conceive of the way in which God acts. Many of the attenuating readings of Descartes’ theory try to make the nature of God’s power conceivable to our human understanding. It is part of what Descartes intends his theory to express, however, that God’s power cannot be elucidated in such a way that we may grasp it. According to Descartes, the incomprehensibility of God’s power functions as a kind of great-making property. Therefore, as Frankfurt has seen, it is a mistake to seek a logically coherent explication of Descartes’ assertions on God’s ability to make contradictions true or to change the eternal truths. For this would mean to try to comprehend the incomprehensible, which is not only impossible and unnecessary, but even impious.

At one point, however, and here we part company with Frankfurt and Alanen, we should not make the Cartesian God more incomprehensible than he is. For clearly, Descartes is not committed to the view that God can make contradictories true or necessary truths false at any moment in time. On the contrary, Descartes explicitly rejects this view, for example, when he argues that the mathematical truths are unchangeable and eternal because God so willed it. Instead, Descartes believes that God has
created the eternal truths from all eternity, and La Croix is right in concluding that they are for that reason co-eternal with God. He creates them by means of one single eternal act of continuously willing and conserving them. Rather than being determined by external substances, God determines himself to what he creates.

Let us now return to the question how this conception of an eternal act of creation can be reconciled with Descartes' view of the absolute freedom of the divine will. Doesn't our reading of Descartes' enigmatic claims on the eternal truths simply "trade one paradox for another," as Curley has it? Although on this interpretation we are not required to ascribe to Descartes the paradoxical view that there are no necessary truths, we are now faced with the dilemma that there are necessary truths which are at the same time not necessary, while dependent upon the free creative choice of God. For however eternal God's choice to create the eternal truths may be, Descartes will stick to his conviction that it is a free choice.

Perhaps some modal distinctions recently developed by Thomas Morris might help us to solve this dilemma. According to Morris, there are more modalities which might be utilized in the doctrine of God than only the usual ones of necessity and contingency, essentiality and accident. Concentrating upon entities of any sort, there may be entities which cannot cease to exist, as well as entities which cannot have begun to exist. Entities belonging to the first category are characterized as "enduring" by Morris, entities belonging to the second category are "immemorial," and entities which belong to both categories "immutable." Given this matrix, an immutable entity is not the same as a necessary entity. This can be seen as follows. Consider a being which (1) in fact exists, (2) could not have begun to exist, (3) cannot cease to exist, but (4) could have failed to exist at all. Clearly, such a being exists immutably (in virtue of 1 to 3) but not necessarily (since it fulfils condition 4 as well).

As it seems to me, what Descartes wants to claim with regard to necessary truths is that they are immutably existing beings in the technical sense developed by Morris. First, Descartes considers the eternal truths as identical with things, more particularly with essences, as is clear from the following quotation: "...it is certain that God is no less the author of creatures' essence than he is of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths. I do not conceive them as emanating from God like rays from the sun; but I know that God is the author of every-thing and that these truths are something and consequently that he is their author."

Second, let us consider the standard example of an eternal truth, "2+2=4," and assume like Descartes that it is a thing. On most existing interpretations of Descartes' theory, it is a thing which in fact exists.
Moreover, on our reading of Descartes’ theory, when this truth is a thing, it is certainly an enduring thing. For whether Descartes might have conceived of it as a temporal or a timeless thing, since he claims that God created it as an eternal truth, which cannot be changed even by God himself, it is clear that this truth cannot cease to exist. Further, since Descartes claims that God created the eternal truths from all eternity, there cannot have been a time when it began to exist, and therefore it is also an immemorial entity. Thus, “2+2=4” fulfils all three of Morris’s conditions for a being that exists immutably. But note that nevertheless it is not a necessary being, since it also fulfils the fourth condition. It could have failed to exist, viz. if God had not wished to create “2+2=4,” but perhaps some other truth instead of it (e.g., “2+2=5”), or no comparable truth at all. In this sense, Descartes’ eternal truths are eternal and immutable, but not necessary.

It might be objected against this interpretation, however, that according to Descartes some physical and mathematical eternal truths are true in every possible world. And it is widely agreed upon that for a proposition to be true in every possible world is to be necessarily true. So it seems that Descartes’ eternal truths (or at least some of them) are necessary truths after all.

This objection does not hold, however. First, to claim that some laws of nature and of mathematics are true in every possible world is not to claim that God could not have made them false. What is claimed by this assertion, is that if God was to create a world at all, irrespective of its actual structure or constellation, He could not by-pass these laws. In other words, the necessity of these truths is conditional upon God’s decision to create a world. But second and more importantly, Descartes does not suggest that God’s power is limited even by such conditional necessities as if these were in some sense ontologically prior to him. For Descartes himself remarks that in demonstrating the necessity of the laws in question, he does not base his arguments “on any other principle than the infinite perfections of God.” Now whether this is true or not does not matter, what does matter is that Descartes thought it to be true. No doubt, in Descartes’ view the infinite perfections of God include the divine will. Thus, the laws of nature and mathematics which would have been true in any possible world are nevertheless considered by him as dependent upon the immutable will of God. We may even go one step further, and claim that it is precisely because of the immutability of God’s will that the eternal truths are true in every possible world. It belongs to the essence of Descartes’ view that the concept of possibility is defined and confined by the divine will, rather than the other way round.

Therefore, we may safely conclude that the status of the eternal truths
according to Descartes could “most charitably” be interpreted as immutable but not necessary truths.

Notes

5. Of course, many of Descartes’ eternal truths can hardly be considered as analytical in the modern sense; but Descartes, being a heir of Scholasticism in this respect, was not an exception in lacking a clear view on the distinction between “truths of reason” and “truths of fact.” Cf. on this point Amos Funkenstein, “Descartes, Eternal Truths, and the Divine Omnipotence,” *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 6 (1975): 185–199, especially 196–197 (re-edited in id., *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986], pp. 179–192, pp. 190–191); and Lilii Alalen, “Descartes, Scotus and Ockham on Omnipotence and Possibility,” *Franciscan Studies* 45 (1985): 186–188. Both authors argue convincingly that Descartes’ eternal truths are best interpreted not as analytical but as intuitive, i.e., as “clearly and distinctly” perceived ideas.
6. Descartes adduces these examples in respectively another letter to Mersenne (27 May 1630; K, p. 15); a letter to Mesland (2 May 1644; K, p. 151), to Arnauld (29 July 1648; K, p. 236), and to More (5 February 1649; K, p. 241); and the *Reply to Objections VI* against the *Meditations*. The latter text is now available in the new English translation of John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 285–301. For reasons of easier comparability with most of the existing secondary literature on our theme, however, where possible I quote from the older translation by E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 2 vols. (1911; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973–76); see Vol. 2, p. 251. I will subsequently refer to this work as HR, and abbreviate the first mentioned translation as CSM.
7. As Harry G. Frankfurt put it in his seminal article “Descartes and the Creation of the Eternal Truths,” *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977): 44. This essay, along with some of the other ones we will discuss subsequently, has recently been included in a useful anthology: W. Doney (ed.), *Eternal Truths and the Cartesian Circle* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), pp. 222–243.
9. See Lilli Alanen, “Descartes, Omnipotence, and Kinds of Modality,” in Doing Philosophy Historically, ed. P.H. Hare (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), p. 185. It is not clear to Alanen who the proponents of this interpretation are (p. 194, n. 16). But her argument in exonerating Harry Frankfurt from adopting this position (p. 195, n. 32), is too subtle to be convincing. What else could the claim that necessary truths do not limit God’s omnipotence mean than that they are not necessary in an absolute sense, so that their denials are possible? Some other commentators who at least have not explicitly or implicitly distanced themselves from the extreme reading are summed up by Alanen herself (p. 192, n. 1). Alanen is right, however, if she means that this interpretation is seldom explicitly defended over against alternative readings. See also the shorter version of her article in L. Alanen and S. Knuuttila, “The Foundations of Modality and Conceivability in Descartes and his Predecessors,” in Modern Modalities. Studies of the History of Modal Theories from Medieval Nominalism to Logical Positivism, ed. S. Knuuttila (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), pp. 11–17. See for Frankfurt’s position also his earlier paper “The Logic of Omnipotence,” Philosophical Review 73 (1964): 262–263, where he suggests that the Cartesian God is able to perform self-contradictory tasks, to the extent that he e.g. “can handle situations which he cannot handle” (p. 263).


12. Ibid.; HR 1, p. 181. “While from the fact that I cannot conceive God without existence, it follows that existence is inseparable from him, and hence that he really exists; not that my thought can bring this to pass, or impose any necessity on things, but, on the contrary, because the necessity which lies in the thing itself, i.e. the necessity of the existence of God determines me to think in this way.”


14. In his unpublished Le Monde, see Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.), Oeuvres de Descartes XI (Paris: Leopold Cerf, 1911), p. 47 (now translated in CSM I, p. 97); and in his Discourse on Method, HR 1, p. 108; Both texts are quoted by Curley, “Descartes on the Creation,” p. 573, who points to the fact that Descartes is anticipating here Leibniz’ definition of “necessary” as “true in all possible worlds.”

15. Curley, “Descartes on the Creation,” p. 572 mentions still another one: if there are no necessary truths, Descartes’ has to give up his principle that everything which we perceive clearly and distinctly is necessarily true. Since there are some complicated questions of interpretation here (Descartes himself suggests that this principle is at least not self-evidently true, but requires external warrant in the veracity of God), however, we leave this consideration aside.


17. Letter to Mersenne, 6 May 1630; K, p. 13. Perhaps apart from the letter to More, in which Descartes distinguishes between two kinds of impossibility (K, p. 241), as far as I can see all other textual evidence is weaker than this statement. A somewhat ambiguous remark in the letter to Mesland (K, p. 151) is, contrary to Curley’s proposal (“Descartes,” pp. 594–95), most naturally interpreted as not supporting the hypothesis that Descartes distinguishes between two kinds of necessary truths, since the context is one in which Descartes defends that there are no necessarily necessary truths. Cf. on this point Frankfurt, “Descartes,” p. 48.

18. See the letter to Arnauld, K, pp. 236–237; and remember our previous quotation from the letter to More, K, p. 240: “For my part, I know that my intellect is finite and God’s power is infinite, and so I set no bounds to it.” Given this statement, it would seem that any attempt to single out some uncreated truths would be experienced by Descartes as doing just that: setting bounds to the omnipotence of God. Cf. also Reply to Objections VI, HR 2, p. 250: “…it is clear that nothing at all can exist which does not depend on him. This is true not only of everything that subsists, but of all order, of every law, and of every reason of truth and goodness.”


22. K, p. 151. See also a comparable passage in the Reply to Objections VI: “Thus, to illustrate, God did not will ... the three angles of a triangle to be equal to two right angles because he knew that they could not be otherwise. On the contrary, ... it is because he willed the three angles of a triangle to be necessarily equal to two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so on in other cases;” HR 2, p. 248.

23. For a slightly different version of this example, see Plantinga, Does God Have a Nature?, p. 112. Instead of his “he could only have made it the case that he could have made it false” I prefer to read: “he could only have made it the case that it is possibly false.”

24. Remarkably enough, as far as I know this consequence has not previously been noted in the literature.

25. See respectively his letter to Mersenne of 27 May 1630 (K, p. 15; cf. Reply to Objections VI; HR 2, p. 151), and to Mesland (2 May 1644; K, p. 151). Significantly, at all these places Descartes uses perfect tenses in describing God’s power. Thus, it is somewhat misleading when Alanen, “Descartes, Omnipotence,” p. 186 refers to these texts as containing instances of what
God “could make” true rather than of what he could have made true.

26. Such as the one proposed by Hide Ishiguro, “The Status of Necessity and Impossibility in Descartes,” in Essays on Descartes’ Meditations, ed. A.O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 459–471, hinging on an alleged asymmetry between necessary truths (which God could make untrue) and necessary falsehoods, i.e. contradictions (which God could not make true) in Descartes. For a useful evaluation of the pros and cons of this reading, see Alanen, “Descartes, Omnipotence,” pp. 186–189.


29. This point is not sufficiently taken into account by Alanen, who claims that Descartes “says, repeatedly, that God can make contradictories true together” (“Descartes, Omnipotence,” p. 184). In all of the three texts she quotes for support Descartes uses double negations. Cf. R.R. La Croix, “Descartes on God’s Ability to do the Logically Impossible,” Canadian Journal of Philosophy 14 (1984): 471: “In fact, the claim that God can violate the law of contradiction or do what human reason judges to be logically impossible or contradictory is conspicuous by its very absence.”

30. In this vein, Marion, Sur la théologie, p. 302 concludes from the letter to More that whether or not everything is possible to God is undecidable to us.


32. For the significance of this distinction between conceiving or comprehending (concevoir, comprendre, comprehendere) and knowing (savoir, connaître, intelligere) in Descartes’ doctrine of God, see J.-M. Beyssade, “Création,” pp. 89ff. Although a statement like “God could have made contradictions true” is inconceivable, it is not unintelligible.

33. “The greatness of God … is something which we cannot comprehend even though we know it. But the very fact that we judge it incomprehensible makes us esteem it the more greatly; just as a king has more majesty when he is less familiarly known by his subjects, provided of course that they do not get the idea that they have no king.” Letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630; K, p. 11.


35. Cf. a fine passage in the letter to Mersenne from 6 May 1630: “It is easy to be mistaken about this [i.e., about the fact that the eternal truths depend upon God, GvdB] because most men do not regard God as an infinite and incomprehensible being, the sole author on whom all things depend; they stick to the syllables of his name and think it is sufficient knowledge of him to know that ‘God’ means what is meant by ‘Deus’ in Latin and what is adored by men. Those who have no higher thoughts than these can easily become atheists”; K, p. 14.

36. Reply to Objections V; HR 2, p. 226. “...yet I think because God so wished it and brought it to pass, they are immutable and eternal” (Descartes seems to emphasize the word esse indeed). Cf. id., p. 250 (“It is because he willed the
three angles of a triangle to be necessarily equal to two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise,” italics added), and the interesting dialogue in the Conversation with Burman on the Ockhamist issue of the odium Dei, where Burman asks: “But does it follow from this that God could have commanded a creature to hate him, and thereby made this a good thing to do?” Reply of Descartes: “God could not now do this: but we simply do not know what he could have done. In any case, why should he not have been able to give this command to one of his creatures?” AT 5, p. 160; the translation is of John Cottingham, Descartes’ Conversation with Burman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 22.

37. See the Letter to Mersenne from 27 May 1630, the Conversation with Burman (Cottingham, Descartes’ Conversation, pp. 15–16), and La Croix, “Descartes,” p. 462. In general, the papers of La Croix and Schrader (“Frankfurt”), though hardly noticed up to now, are convincing in emphasizing this point. Apart from them, the interpretation we propound is also shared by Bouveresse, “La théorie,” esp. pp. 305–306.

38. See on this special Cartesian concept of creation the Meditations 3 (HR 1, p. 168); Alanen, “Descartes, Duns Scotus and Ockham,” p. 167; and Curley, “Descartes on the Creation,” pp. 577–579, who claims that we should not take Descartes’ temporal expressions at face value, since Descartes conceives God’s creative act as timelessly eternal. But since he does not provide any textual evidence on this point, this remains to be seen.

39. Reply to Objections VI; HR 2, p. 250.

40. Ibid., p. 577.

41. T.V. Morris, “Properties, Modalities, and God,” Philosophical Review 93 (1984): 35–36. Morris expounds his modal distinctions in terms of properties which can be exemplified by individuals or objects, but this feature can easily be left out.

42. Ibid., p. 40.

43. Letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630; K, p. 14. Apparently, the fact that Descartes presents his theory in terms of eternal truths rather than in terms of (abstract) things does not imply that he holds a nominalist view on the nature of those truths. But as we indicated in the introducing paragraph, this point does not make a relevant difference to the present discussion.

44. See note 14 for the relevant texts.

45. For this argument I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer of the International Journal for Philosophy of Religion.

46. Discourse on Method, HR 1, p. 108.