R. G. COLLINGWOOD'S CRITIQUE OF THE REALIST CLAIM THAT KNOWING MAKES NO DIFFERENCE TO WHAT IS KNOWN

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I

In a chapter of *An Autobiography* titled "The Decay of Realism," R. G. Collingwood provides one of his most concise and explicit criticisms of early twentieth-century epistemological realism. Attacking the longtime Oxford University Professor of Logic John Cook Wilson's claim that "knowing makes no difference to what is known," Collingwood argues

> Any one who claimed, as Cook Wilson did, to be sure of this, was in effect claiming to know what he was simultaneously defining as unknown. For if you know that no difference is made to a thing Θ by the presence or absence of a certain condition c, you know what Θ is like with *c*, and also what Θ is like without *c*, and on comparing the two find no difference. This involves knowing what Θ is like without *c*; in the present case, knowing what you defined as the unknown." (44)

Collingwood's argument against realism is criticized by Alan Donagan in the first major monograph about Collingwood's thought, *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, and Donagan's critique is in turn attacked by John F. Post in "Does Knowing Make a Difference to What is Known?" Post rejects Donagan's critique, but insightfully notes that if Collingwood's *reductio ad absurdum* argument is effective against realism, it is, *mutatis mutandis*, just as effective against idealism and the claim that knowing *does* make a difference to what is known. Post wonders how the author of such a pithy and succinct argument could be ignorant of this fact, and in "A Rejoinder to Mr. Post," Donagan questions why Collingwood might have neglected to address it if he *had* been aware of it.

In this paper I argue that Collingwood's critique of realism is not so easily turned on idealism as both Post and Donagan believe; thus, Collingwood felt no compulsion to address this concern. The key is to recognize that Collingwood's notion of knowledge is substantially different from that of early twentieth-century realists such as Cook Wilson as well as more recent realists such as Donagan and Post. I contextualize Collingwood's critique of the claim that knowing makes no difference to what is known within (1) his discussion in the later pages of *An Autobiography* of the consequences of realism for moral philosophy and history, and (2) his scale of forms methodology in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. First, while Cook Wilson purports to provide a general realist theory of knowledge, Collingwood's critique in *An Autobiography* maintains that in some areas of study such as moral philosophy and history Cook Wilson's claim is false, for in those areas knowing clearly makes a

difference to what is known. Second, Collingwood's scale of forms philosophical methodology as described in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, contra realism, does not bifurcate knowledge and ignorance into two exclusionary classes, therefore, not trapping the idealist in the contradictory position in which the realist is trapped.

II

Neither Donagan nor Post has a clear idea of what Collingwood means by knowing, yet both seem to assume that by the object of knowledge he means a perceptual object or a mathematical concept. Donagan contends that Collingwood wrongly "assimilated knowing to seeing" (*Later* 287). This contention implies that Collingwood was guilty of treating Oxford theory of knowledge as if it were a theory of perception. This is hard to justify, however, when within three pages of its introduction Collingwood applies the realist claim that knowing makes no difference to what is known to moral philosophy. Post, on the other hand, also limits the objects of knowledge to objects with properties, e.g., an apple.

Donagan and Post, then, both adopt the theory of knowledge of the realists such as Cook Wilson that is criticized by Collingwood. "When [realists] discussed the theory of knowledge it was plain that, as a rule, they regarded the word 'knowledge' in that phrase as more or less equivalent to knowledge of the world of nature or physical world" (*Autobiography* 84). Yet any respectable theory of knowledge, Collingwood thinks, must account for other types of knowledge such as historical, moral, and philosophical knowledge as well. He states, "I could see that . . . the thing they called theory of knowledge had been devised with special reference to the methodology of natural science; and that any one who attempted the 'application' of it to history found, if he knew what historical thinking was like, that no such application was possible" (*Autobiography* 85). Historical knowledge, according to Collingwood, is not knowledge of a perceived object; rather, it is the re-thinking of past thought, and insofar as the historian re-thinks past thought, he achieves knowledge not only of "the world of human affairs," but also a kind of "self-knowledge" (*Autobiography* 115). And it is clearly the case that in fields of thought such as history that generate self-knowledge for human beings knowing (e.g., historical inquiry) does make a difference to what is known (e.g., historical knowledge). Realism, Collingwood argues, has shortsightedly neglected historical knowledge.

Collingwood at times interprets the realist claim that knowing makes no difference to what is known to mean "that the known is independent of, and unaffected by, the knowing it" (*Autobiography* 45). This is particularly damaging, he argues, in regard to moral philosophy: three pages after his critique of Cook Wilson's realist claim, Collingwood summarizes the negative practical consequences for ethics of the claim that knowing makes no difference to what is known. Cook Wilson's realist colleagues at Oxford such as H. A.

Prichard, he maintains, had separated the teaching of moral thinking from moral conduct: theory was divorced from practice, knowledge from action. To their students, they said, "Remember the great principle of realism, that nothing is affected by being known. That is as true of human action as of anything else. Moral philosophy is only the theory of moral action; it can't therefore make any difference to the practice of moral action. People can act just as morally without it as with it" (*Autobiography* 48). In opposition to realism Collingwood emphasizes that knowing in ethics does affect what is known: moral knowing (theoretical moral inquiry) does affect moral practice and action. He states,

> In his capacity as a moral, political, or economic agent [every human being] lives not in a world of "hard facts" to which "thoughts" make no difference, but in a world of "thoughts"; that if you change the moral, political, and economic "theories" generally accepted by the society in which he lives, you change the character of his world; and that if you change his own "theories" you change his relation to that world; so that in either case you change the ways in which he acts. (*Autobiography* 147)

Thus, the moral theories of any society or era construct the "world" of that society or era, and to change or improve them in a fashion that constitutes knowing is, in fact, to make a difference to the world that is known. Once again, Collingwood is arguing that realism's generalized theory of knowledge created for application to the empirical sciences is inadequate for dealing with disciplines that construct self-knowledge: i.e., knowledge of humanity in its idiosyncratic humanness. Furthermore, it becomes clearer that for Collingwood the "thing" which is known by knowing may not be a perceptual object: rather, it may be the past thought of a historical agent or a moral theory.

III

We have seen that one reason Collingwood believes Cook Wilson's realist claim that knowing makes no difference to what is known is false is as follows: Cook Wilson's purportedly general claim about knowledge is really a claim about the objects of the physical world, but it cannot account for disciplines of inquiry such as history or moral philosophy in which the known object is a particular kind of self-knowledge on the part of the knower. In *Metaphysics, Method and Politics: The Political Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, James Connelly provides an illuminating "footnote" to Collingwood's critique of Oxford realism. Connelly points out that one year after Collingwood's *An Autobiography* was published, he added the following comment to the text of his "Lectures on Moral Philosophy," first presented in 1933 in Oxford:

> Oxford realism's "main article of faith was that 'knowing makes no difference to its object.' In support of this dogma it used to be asserted that astronomers, by coming to know how stars move, do not make them move differently. This may (for all I know) be true, though I should be sorry if I were asked to

> prove it; but where knowledge takes the form of self-knowledge it is flagrantly and indubitably false." (33, quoted in Connelly 167)

Collingwood admits here that the realist claim *may* be true, but the passage implies exactly what his critique on page one of this paper is designed to demonstrate: that if it is true, we cannot know that it is true. More importantly, however, he clarifies that what he takes to be knowledge is not limited to empirical knowledge; it also includes human self-knowledge. And as Connelly rightly notes, for Collingwood one of the most basic forms of human self-knowledge is philosophical knowledge. Thus, the philosophical knower, in constructing philosophical theories, is like the historian, making a difference to what is known. While it is easy to presume that stars move as they do independent of and unaffected by anyone's knowing about such things, it is much more difficult to presume that a philosophical theory of moral goodness or a philosophical theory of the ideal state *could even exist* without anyone knowing about them, let alone independent of and unaffected by anyone's knowing about them.

In *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, first published in 1933 and six years before his autobiography, Collingwood makes an important distinction between non-philosophical knowledge such as that of the exact and empirical sciences and philosophical knowledge, and this distinction is crucial to his critique of the realist claim that knowing makes no difference to what is known. In exact sciences such as geometry there is "an absolute difference between knowing the essence of a concept and not knowing it" (viii). When one comes to know the essence of the concept of a dodecahedron, for example, one has achieved knowledge of a concept that is completely devoid of ignorance. This absolute bifurcation of knowledge and ignorance is characteristic not only of the exact sciences, Collingwood maintains, but it is also characteristic of the empirical sciences; it is not characteristic, however, of philosophy.

Collingwood argues in *An Essay on Philosophical Method* that in philosophical knowledge the appropriate distinction is not between absolute knowledge and total ignorance; the appropriate distinction is between knowing in better ways and in worse ways. We begin our inquiry not in utter ignorance, but in confusion and lack of clarity, and the act of knowing is a process that brings us not to sheer knowledge but to a truth we know more fully and precisely (96-97). What philosopher can forget his or her first muddled attempts to solve a philosophical problem? Is anyone capable of moving instantaneously from complete ignorance to complete knowledge? In coming to know in philosophy, then, we do not discover something we had never known at all before (the view Donagan adopts in *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, 288); rather, we clarify our thought on an issue. Coming to know in philosophy is thus consistent with the Socratic principle that

> . . .what we are trying to do is not to discover something of which until now we have been ignorant, but to know better something which in some sense we knew already; not to know it better in the sense of coming to know more about it, but to know it better in the sense of coming to know it in a different and better way—actually instead of potentially, or explicitly instead of implicitly, or in whatever terms the theory of knowledge chooses to express the difference. (11)

While coming to know in empirical science involves learning something new based on the data of experience, coming to know in philosophy involves coming to know something relatively familiar in more developed, adequately understood, and, in the end, more rational ways (170).

The kind of dialectical method that Collingwood is advocating in *An Essay on Philosophical Method* is bolstered by his claim that in a non-philosophical, empirical inquiry such as biology the species of a genus are divided into mutually exclusive classes without any overlap of classes. Philosophical inquiry, however, involves an overlap of classes, such that the concepts of a genus need not exclude one another. A good action may be pleasant, expedient, or right, but not exclusively so. Moreover, philosophical concepts make up a hierarchical scale of forms such that a generic concept is composed of forms which differ in both degree and in kind. Thus, a concept such as goodness is defined only gradually as one moves up the scale of forms, which depict various kinds and degrees of goodness (perhaps the most well-known example is Plato's divided line). While it is unnecessary here to flesh out in more detail this grounding for Collingwood's conception of philosophical knowledge, the overlap of classes and scale of forms (see *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, Chapters 2 and 3) perhaps help to clarify Collingwood's denial of the bifurcation of absolute knowledge and total ignorance in philosophical knowing. As he states, "Establishing a proposition in philosophy, then, means not transferring it from the class of things unknown to the class of things known, but making it known in a different and better way" (161).

It should be clear why Collingwood believes his refutation of Cook Wilson's realist claim cannot be utilized, *mutatis mutandis*, to also refute idealism. A realist theory of knowledge such as Cook Wilson's, devised in such a way as to privilege empirical knowledge of objects, entails a complete bifurcation of knowledge and ignorance. To know that knowing makes no difference to what is known, one must know absolutely what reality is like when it is known and what it is like when one is ignorant of it, and know there is no difference between the two. Obviously, the realist can never know this. Collingwood's argument can be used to refute idealism, however, only if philosophical knowing is assimilated to non-philosophical knowing, i.e., if philosophical knowledge and empirical knowledge are conflated, if philosophical knowledge's status as a kind of human self-knowledge is ignored, and if there is a complete bifurcation between absolute knowledge and absolute ignorance. Yet Collingwood rejects all of these

claims. In regard to the last point, if coming to know is coming to know better or with more clarity, as is the case with philosophical knowledge or with any kind of self-knowledge, then knowing does make a difference to what is known. In such cases, there is a continuum between ignorance and knowledge such that as we come to knowledge the known changes. The upshot is that Collingwood would perhaps deny the idealist is caught in the predicament of comparing objects as known and object as unknown: the objects of knowledge are never completely unknown. And coming to know better makes a difference to what is known.

IV

In conclusion, Collingwood's refutation of Cook Wilson's realist claim is quite revealing of his epistemological position in 1939. While he seems quite ready to shrug off any overt inclinations toward idealism in *An Autobiography* (see e.g., 57), his critique of Cook Wilson's realism is roughly the same as that in his 1935 lectures titled "Central Problems in Metaphysics: Realism and Idealism." In these lectures he had wholeheartedly embraced a rather hybrid version of Hegelian-Bradleyan metaphysics he called "objective idealism." Yet Collingwood's philosophical positions are often best characterized by what he opposed, and his opposition to realism was constant throughout his philosophical work. It continues in his next book, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940), in which his assumption that knowing makes a difference to what is known manifests itself in his contention that there can be no science of pure being. That is, we can have no knowledge of reality as it is in itself. Rather, metaphysics is possible only as the uncovering of the absolute presuppositions that govern scientific belief. While he here uses different language, he is still maintaining that realism is wrong to think that knowing makes no difference to what is known.

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DESCARTES AND THE CREATION OF ETERNAL TRUTHS

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Descartes proposed in several writings that necessary truths are created by God.[1] In his letter to Mersenne, Descartes clearly makes this point: "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" (Kenny 11). Some philosophers have argued that Descartes' doctrine that eternal truths are created by God has the worrisome implication that it renders all necessary truths contingent.[2] Others have tried to offer interpretations of Descartes' doctrine on eternal truths that avoid rendering all necessary truths contingent; however, these interpretations also seem to be problematic. In this paper I intend to argue for an interpretation of Descartes' doctrine of the creation of eternal truths that allows for God to create the necessary truths and for the necessary truths to be true for all times and unchangeable. The remainder of this paper will be divided into three sections. In the first section, I will briefly discuss what Descartes says about the eternal truths and their creation. In the second section, I will discuss two prominent interpretations of Descartes' doctrine and explain why they are problematic. In the third section, I will present an interpretation of Descartes' doctrine that avoids the problems plaguing these other interpretations.

Eternal Truths

To begin, it is important to understand that Descartes considers the eternal truths to be truths about essences. As Harry Frankfurt notes, "The Pythagorean theorem, for example, is (or purports to be) an eternal truth about what is essential to right triangularity" (38). Descartes describes to Mersenne that eternal truths are essences when he explains, "For it is certain he [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" (Kenny 14). So, Descartes believes that eternal truths are essences and he believes that all essences are created by God. So, it is easy to see why Descartes believes that the eternal truths are created by God. Descartes expresses this simple reasoning in the following way: "I know that God is the author of everything and that these truths are something and consequently he is their author" (Kenny 14-15). Descartes is also very clear that since God created the eternal truths they could not have existed if He did not create them. "So we must not say that if God did not exist nonetheless these [eternal] truths would be true; for the existence of God is the first and the most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all others derive" (Kenny 14).

Another important point to bear in mind about Descartes' doctrine of the creation of eternal truths is that God *freely* created the eternal truths, i.e., God did not have to create the eternal truths at all or in the way that He did. Descartes explains to Mersenne that:

> . . . just as He was free not to create the world, so He was no less free to make it untrue that all the lines drawn from the centre of a circle to its circumference are equal. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than other creatures are. 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. (Kenny 15)

So, according to Descartes, God freely created the eternal truths, and He could have made it the case that the eternal truths were false. Interestingly, by pointing out that the eternal truths are not "attached to" God's essence, Descartes is denying the Scholastic conception that the eternal truths are part of God's essence.[3] This is important for Descartes because the only way that God could have freely created the eternal truths is if they are creatures of His and not part of His own essence. If the eternal truths were part of God's essence, they would be uncreated just as God is uncreated, so they must not be part of God's essence on Descartes' view.

One more important point about Descartes' doctrine is that although the eternal truths were created by God, they are necessary and unchangeable. In his Fifth Replies, Descartes explains, "I think that, because God so willed it, because he disposed them so, they [the eternal truths] are immutable and eternal"(AT VII, 380). Descartes also expresses that the eternal truths are unchangeable when he gives the following answer to Burman's question about whether God could do something that is a contradiction: "God could not now do this, but we simply do not know what he could have done" (Cottingham 22). Even though the eternal truths are necessary and unchangeable throughout all time it is crucial to remember that on Descartes' account this does not mean that God necessarily had to create them. Descartes expresses the following in a letter to Mesland: "And 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" (Kenny 151). So, Descartes thinks that the eternal truths are essences that are created by God, God freely chose to create the eternal truths, and the eternal truths are necessary and unchangeable. Now that I have briefly described Descartes' doctrine of the creation of eternal truths, I will examine two noteworthy interpretations of Descartes' doctrine and explain why they are problematic.

Problematic Interpretations of Descartes

One important interpretation of Descartes' doctrine of the creation of eternal truths is that it means all truths are contingent. Frankfurt expresses this interpretation by discussing the property of circularity when he claims:

> Descartes evidently thinks that God could have omitted creating the essence "circularity" entirely. In that case there would be *no* eternal truths about circles: every proposition about a circle would have the status now enjoyed by the proposition that the diameter of the circle on a certain blackboard is one foot. Descartes also evidently thinks that God, while creating the essence 'circularity', could have made it different from what we conceive it to be. In that case there would be eternal truths about circles, but they would differ from—and perhaps be

> the negations of—the propositions that are necessarily true of circularity as we now understand it. (43)

Since the eternal truths were created by God's free willing, it is not implausible to think that they must be contingently true because God could have willed them otherwise. As Harry Frankfurt says, ". . . the eternal truths are inherently as contingent as any other proposition" (42).

On first approximation the interpretation that claims Descartes' doctrine leads to all truths being contingent seems to be quite reasonable.[4] However, there are reasons for thinking that this interpretation is not correct. One reason is that Descartes seems to think that certain characteristics of God's nature are necessary. Descartes would not want to claim that "God exists" is a contingent truth because he claims "the existence of God is the first and the most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all others derive" (Kenny 14). Also, it seems that Descartes thinks that it is necessarily true that God is omnipotent. God's necessary omnipotence is why Descartes thinks that other necessary truths are within God's power to create according to His will. A further reason to think that Descartes does not think all truths are contingent is that in *Le Monde* when he is discussing mathematical truths and the laws of physics he asserts, "if God had created several worlds, they would be as true in all of them as they are in this one" (AT XI, 47). He also claims that "even if God had created several worlds, there could not be any in which they would fail to be observed" (AT VI, 43). Thus, the interpretation that Descartes' doctrine of the creation of eternal truths commits him to the idea that all truths are contingent is problematic.

Another interpretation of Descartes' doctrine tries to avoid the problems of interpreting Descartes as thinking there are only contingent truths by positing that Descartes espoused a conceptualist analysis of necessity, i.e., that "necessity is a function of how the human mind is" (Bennett 646). Jonathan Bennett expounds this interpretation of Descartes' doctrine in the following manner:

> Descartes held, I submit, that our modal concepts should be understood or analyzed in terms of what does or does not lie within the compass of our ways of thinking. Roughly speaking: "It is absolutely impossible that P" means that no human can conceive of P's obtaining while having P distinctly in mind; and similarly for P's possibility and its necessity. In each of these analyses, "no human can" must be understood in causal, psychological terms, and not as involving the absolute or logical modalities that are being analyzed (647).

By positing a conceptualist analysis of necessity, Bennett is able to maintain that there are necessary truths and that God freely created them. Bennett maintains that "given that God made us how we are (this being a truism for Descartes), it follows that God gives modal truths their status as truths. He made it necessarily true that $2 + 2 = 4$ by making us unable to conceive otherwise" (649).

Initially, it seems this interpretation can make sense of God's creating truths and those truths being necessary truths. Unfortunately, there are reasons for thinking that this

interpretation is not correct. Descartes makes it clear in the *Fifth Meditation* that, contrary to the proposed conceptualist analysis of necessity, necessary truths do not depend on the nature of our minds:

> When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind (AT VII, 64).

This interpretation is also at odds with Descartes' views on the necessity of mathematical truths and the laws of physics. As mentioned above, Descartes claims in *Le Monde* that "if God had created several worlds, they [mathematical truths and the laws of physics] would be as true in all of them as they are in this one" (AT XI, 47), and he claims "even if God had created several worlds, there could not be any in which they would fail to be observed" (AT VI, 43). Descartes does not think that we are a necessary feature of any world that God creates, i.e., God is free to create us or not create us when He creates the world. So, it seems Descartes would be willing to admit that God could create worlds without people, but it also seems that Descartes thinks the mathematical truths and the laws of physics will be necessary in those worlds. This does not fit with the conceptualist analysis of necessity that Bennett ascribes to Descartes because we would not exist in some of the worlds that God could create, so there would be no way for the truths of mathematics and the laws of physics to be necessary because there would be no human mind to conceive of them as necessary. Yet, Descartes thinks that these truths are necessary even in worlds with no human minds to conceive them as necessary. So, this interpretation is difficult to reconcile with Descartes' views.

Now that I have discussed two of the more prominent interpretations of Descartes' doctrine of the creation of eternal truths and explicated why they are problematic, I will offer a more plausible interpretation of Descartes' doctrine.

A Reasonable Interpretation of Descartes

For reasons mentioned above, Descartes should be understood as thinking that the necessary truths of God's nature are not created, they just exist as God exists without being created. However, there is a way to explain how Descartes understands God to have created the other necessary truths and how those truths are immutable and unchanging. Prior to God's willing there is no limit to the possible worlds He can create because possible worlds are limited by necessary truths and God has not created the necessary truths yet.[5] So, God, who has the freewill to create however He chooses, could have created worlds at this point with different necessary truths. This fact allows for God's freewill and His omnipotence. At the point of God's willing and ever after, the necessary truths are set, i.e., from that point on they are immutable. The necessary truths are eternal because the moment that God wills them is the moment that time begins. Also, they are eternal and immutable because the only way they could change after God has willed them is for His will to change, but as Descartes tells us, "I understand them [necessary truths] to be eternal and unchangeable.—I make the same judgment about

God, i.e., God's will is unchanging" (Kenny 11). Since God wills the necessary truths at the moment time begins and He will not change them, they are true for all time. Thus, God freely creates truths that are necessary and immutable.

There are several reasons for accepting this interpretation of Descartes' doctrine of the creation of eternal truths. One reason is that this interpretation allows the necessary truths to be not merely contingent. There are no times at which the necessary truths are not true because time begins with God's willing, which is when they are created, They are true at all times because God's will once set is immutable, so He will not change the necessary truths. The necessary truths are true in all possible worlds because once God creates the necessary truths He has limited the possible worlds by setting His will, and the possible worlds are limited to the ones in which the necessary truths are true. Another reason for accepting this interpretation is that it does not restrict God's omnipotence or His freewill. He could have made the necessary truths however He wanted, but He freely willed them the way they are and nothing can undermine His free choice by changing the necessary truths. A final reason for accepting this interpretation is that it does not make necessary truths dependent upon our minds like the conceptualist analysis of necessary truths. So, they are true in any world God chooses to create regardless of whether there are human minds in that world to conceive of them as necessary. According to this interpretation, the necessary truths are true because God freely willed them so, not because we conceive of them as being necessary.

At this point one may object to this interpretation by claiming that it limits God to only one chance at creation. Since on this interpretation once God sets the eternal truths, they are unchanging, it seems that God only has one chance to create the eternal truths and after creating the eternal truths, God cannot change them. The fact that God does not have the ability to change the eternal truths seems to limit his power, but Descartes is very clear that God is omnipotent. So, the objector would conclude that this interpretation cannot be correct because it limits God to only one chance at creation, which limits His power, and Descartes is unwilling to think of God's power as limited.

Although this is a reasonable objection for one to make, there are good reasons for thinking that Descartes did believe that God only created once but that fact in no way limited His power. In the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes makes it clear that he believes all of God's creating occurs in a single act because he says "there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he [God] simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything" (AT VIIIA 14). Also, as mentioned above, Descartes considers God's will to be immutable. If the above objection is considered in light of the fact that Descartes considers God's will to be immutable, and he believes God creates with a single, simple act, it seems to be a mistake to assume that God's having one chance at creation limits His power. First, it is reasonable to think that Descartes believes that since God's will is immutable, He has only one chance at creation because once His will is set it does not change. The fact that God's will is immutable takes nothing away from His omnipotence because He is the one who sets His immutable will. Second, it is likely that Descartes thinks that God only had one chance at creation *because* of His omnipotence. If God has to create more than once it seems that either He

made mistakes the first time He created, or, at the very least, He has to try more than once to get things just the way He wants them. So, God has one chance at creating because He is omnipotent, and one chance is all that He will ever need. Thus, the objection that God's only having one chance at creation limits His power is mistaken, and the interpretation of Descartes' doctrine of the creation of eternal truths that I offer is unaffected by the objection.

Concluding Remarks

I have explained Descartes' doctrine of the creation of eternal truths and two prominent interpretations of his doctrine. I have shown that both of these interpretations are problematic. Finally, I have presented an interpretation of Descartes' doctrine that avoids the errors of these interpretations while comporting with what Descartes claims about necessary truths. Thus, I conclude that the interpretation that I have presented is a reasonable way to understand Descartes' doctrine of the creation of eternal truths.

NOTES

1. Descartes often referred to necessary truths as "eternal truths." I will consider the terms "eternal truths," and "necessary truths," to be synonymous in this paper.

2. See Frankfurt and Van Cleve for interpretations of Descartes along these lines.

3. For an interesting discussion of why Descartes was motivated to deny this conception see Frankfurt.

4. See Frankfurt and Van Cleve.

5. By "prior" here, I am referring to conceptual priority not temporal priority. Descartes would likely consider time to begin with God's willing, so it would make no sense to speak of a time prior to God's willing.

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