

Descartes on Freedom, Truth, and Goodness

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Freedom is the least discussed thesis of Descartes' works. Two major issues are: (i) the *Fourth Meditation* is seen as an unfounded theodicy, an interlude, an interruption to the analytic order; (ii) some passages in Descartes' other works are seen as inconsistent with the *Fourth Meditation*. First, I argue that Descartes' treatment is philosophical, that freedom underlies his entire philosophical project, defending the indispensability of the *Fourth* to his metaphysics. I demonstrate that Descartes' conception of freedom differs from the mainstream conceptions, in particular it admits of degrees of higher or lower quality or worth. The latter is connected with indifference, error and sin. The former with spontaneity, truth and goodness. I argue that autonomy and spontaneity are a *sine qua non* of freedom of highest grade. Secondly, I offer a solution to two problematic passages: *Principles* I 37, and the notorious letter to Mesland, drawing on Descartes' conception of freedom as the greatest good, on the internal relation between reason and freedom, and demonstrating that there is no inconsistency. Descartes' treatment and indispensability of freedom gives his conception a certain sublimity, and his conception of man a certain serenity: an autonomous rational human being irreducibly and substantially real.

*Quod vitae sectabor iter?*¹

1. Meditation IV: An Interlude and Unfounded Theodicy?

In the parenthetical remarks in the *Synopsis* to the *Fourth Meditation*,² Descartes states that he would deal only with error in matters pertaining to speculative truths, and as it 'occurs in distinguishing truth from falsehood' (AT VII 15), and not with error that occurs in pursuing good and avoiding evil. Yet, in his discussion of the problem of error he connects truth and goodness, and draws an analogy between error and sin, thus apparently

contradicting himself. As Donald Cress says: ‘No passage from the *Synopsis* is more problematic than the account of the content and role of the Fourth Meditation.’³ Cress argues that ‘the bulk of the Fourth Meditation constitutes a quasi-theological interlude in the analytic order of the *Meditations*.’⁴ ‘To claim’, he continues, ‘that these theodical components, supplied without proof, are the spontaneous outpourings of the natural light of reason exhibits a certain lack of historical awareness [. . . and] betrays a curious ignorance of both the intellectual struggles of his predecessors as well as the essentially communal and theological nature of their enterprise.’⁵ The discussion of truth and falsity and, in particular, of freedom, has also been seen by Georges Dicker as no more than an interlude or pause for breath in the general project, rather than an intrinsic part of the overall argument. Apart from a few short quotations and a brief summary of the gist of the theory of error, Dicker omits the *Fourth Meditation* from his book.⁶

I shall argue that Descartes’ treatment of these matters is primarily philosophical, that the connections are made scrupulously and for good reasons, and that, far from being an interlude, the *Fourth Meditation* is an indispensable step in his metaphysical system. Without a discussion of freedom we can neither understand what has gone before (in particular the aim, scope, and limit of the methodic doubt) nor make intelligible what comes later (the vindication of the possibility of new metaphysical knowledge and especially the nature of the human mind and self-consciousness). These fundamental metaphysical issues would form a string of separable sections and arguments with very little contribution to the philosophical force and unity of his work if it were not for the step that is pivotal to the whole project: the *Fourth Meditation*. A rebuttal of both Cress’s objections and Dicker’s dismissal will have to wait until later, largely because it requires an understanding of Descartes’ conception of freedom which does not fall in any straightforward way within the mainstream approaches: determinism, libertarianism, and compatibilism. In his search after truth he develops a theory of judgement which he also uses to explain not only how but also why error occurs. Seen in the light of his scientific concerns, his explanation of error is also an attempt to express and explain his conception of man not only as a rational but also as a free and autonomous being.

My discussion involves three main tasks. The first task is to clarify and explore the relation between freedom, truth, and goodness as it arises out of Descartes’ conception of freedom. The second is to demonstrate that Descartes’ commitment to freedom is central to and underlies not only his methodic doubt, but also his entire philosophical project. This is not so much an historical exploration as a critical examination of a conception that differs from mainstream approaches to the metaphysics of freedom. Such an undertaking will require a reconsideration of what are seen as seriously problematic passages in Descartes’ writings, especially the notorious letter thought to be addressed to Mesland (9 February 1645), and *Principles* I 37,

and an examination of whether there was a tension or a real change in his thinking from the position he defended in the *Fourth Meditation*. The third task, therefore, is to offer a resolution to these problematic passages and demonstrate (§5 and §6 below) that Descartes' conception is consistent.

2. Truth, Error, and Goodness

2.1 Searching after Truth, Responsibility, and the Avoidance of Error

In the *Fourth Meditation* Descartes labels as error the assent to false beliefs, and as a fault the assent to true beliefs at which he arrives by pure chance (AT VII 60). In *Principles* I 44, he repeats that it is still 'a misuse of our judgement, even if by chance we stumble on the truth' (AT VIII A 21).

Having gone through and rejected various hypotheses concerning the nature of error, he concludes that it is 'privation or lack of some knowledge which somehow should be in [him]' (AT VII 55).⁷ I shall argue that Descartes' use of 'should' brings out the substantive presuppositions of the project of rational enquiry: it is one's responsibility to search after truth, to pursue the quest for the possibility of new metaphysical knowledge, and to avoid error.⁸ For Descartes, the requirements or demands of reason present themselves to us not only in moral obligation (or in reason's practical employment), but also in epistemic obligation (in reason's theoretical employment). But such demands would be unintelligible, and the whole project of pure enquiry would fail to get off the ground, if there were no such thing as freedom of the will.

To accept that I should embark on the search after truth and the possibility of new metaphysical knowledge presupposes that I have good reasons to do so, reasons which involve a clear recognition of the threat of scepticism. It is not the 'should' that motivates me to embark on such a project, nor does some external authority force me to do so. This is evident from the fact that the method of doubt is not passively adopted but is clearly thought out and carefully articulated as the proper method of enquiry.⁹ Suspending assent is constitutive of the methodic doubt, the employment of which presupposes reason's recognition of the fragility and instability of one's overwhelming opinions. But the method's purpose is also to enable reason to assert its authority, and the will to demonstrate its autonomy by shaking itself out of any dogmatic slumbers in order to clear the way for the discovery of new metaphysics, new science. Thus the method's acceptance marks out the 'should' as required by the joint effort of the authority of reason and the autonomy of the will. Its employment is meant to be a critique of *both* metaphysics and epistemology, 'and as such involves the criticism of the reasons that we ordinarily take as overwhelming.'¹⁰

In searching after truth I am not simply trying to establish the nature and possibility of new metaphysical knowledge, I am also striving towards the perfection that pertains to my kind. This is essential to the connection

Descartes makes between truth and goodness, and to the analogy he draws between error and sin. Any falling away from that searching and striving is precisely what needs explaining, not explaining away. If there can be error, and for that matter sin, there must be some reason why I should have what I seem to lack: ‘some knowledge which somehow should be in me.’ Before addressing these issues, an elucidation of the concepts of truth and goodness is necessary, given Descartes’ connection between them and their centrality to his conception of freedom.

2.2 *Truth*

What properties are possessed by a proposition that is true? Put differently, what are the marks of the concept of truth? Two such marks are clarity and distinctness.¹¹ Each proposition ‘should be scrutinised with the utmost care’ (AT VII 158); an idea (or a proposition) is *clear* if, having been thus scrutinised by the method of doubt, it withstands that scrutiny. A clear idea is not some image or pictorial representation in the mind; it is that by the possession of which I understand the *nature* of what is conceived. An idea is *distinct* if, as well as being clear, it can be understood as true without being mixed with or relying on anything extraneous. In his letter to Mersenne (16 October 1639, AT II 597; CSMK: 139) Descartes says: “‘truth”, in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object.”¹² Clear and distinct propositions correspond to the true and immutable nature of things, they are true and cannot be contradicted, and they compel assent (this thesis runs through the paper, but see especially §7 below). The assent-compellingness of such propositions is pivotal, not only to Descartes’ conception of freedom, but also to his conception of the relation between freedom, truth, and goodness, as we shall see later.

2.3 *Goodness*

When we turn to consider the notion of goodness we find that, apart from some moral injunctions, some commentary on Stoic ethics, and some remarks in his letters which suggest that goodness and right moral judgements presuppose knowledge of what is true, there is nothing on moral philosophy that can be compared with either his natural philosophy or his metaphysics. In a letter to Princess Elizabeth he distinguishes between goodness as a rule for our actions, and things which are good or advantageous. In terms of the latter, we compare what in a single thing we may find advantageous or disadvantageous to us and decide accordingly. But in terms of the former, ‘we take goodness to consist in all of the perfection that can exist in the thing we are calling “good”, and we compare the perfection with a straight line, which is unique among the infinite number of curves, with which we compare evils’ (January 1646, AT IV 354; CSMK: 283). It is this conception of goodness that presupposes knowledge of what is true, and which is connected with freedom in the *Fourth Meditation*. Despite the lack of any treatise

on moral philosophy there can be no doubt that Descartes' metaphysics is closely connected with and, indeed, underpins his conception of goodness. The unity of his grand project and especially the unity of theoretical and practical reasoning, is exemplified simply and clearly in his letter to Queen Christina: the goods of the mind 'can all be reduced to two heads, the one being to know, and the other to will, what is good.' (20 November 1647, AT V 83; CSMK: 325)¹³

3. Freedom and Determinism

3.1 *The Hoary Old Question*

Thomas Hobbes, in the *Third Set of Objections and Replies* (AT VII 190), challenges the justification for claiming that there is freedom of the will, or freedom of choice. Hobbes's challenge may be seen to be borne out by Descartes' own writings. For example, in the *Fourth Meditation* he says: 'I could not but judge that something which I understood so clearly was true' (AT VII 58), and in the *Fifth* he writes: 'my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true' (AT VII 69). These and similar passages¹⁴ suggest that there is no room for freedom of choice, for if 'I cannot but believe it', if such truths compel assent, then it appears that in no way am I free to choose; I am determined to accept it. What emerges here is the hoary old question of freedom and determinism. This difficulty can only be addressed after a clear understanding of Descartes' conception of freedom. I shall return to it in §7.

3.2 *Mainstream Conceptions*

Descartes rejects the determinists' denial of freedom. As to the counterfactual 'could have done otherwise' which is central to libertarianism, it is controversial as to whether Descartes adheres to it as is generally defended in the literature; this will become clearer as the discussion develops, and will be addressed more specifically in §5. His conception also differs from a Humean-type compatibilism because, while he appreciates that the emphasis is on the absence of external forces and constraints, he rejects its three main premises: that reason (despite being granted an instrumental rôle of defining or pointing to the object of emotion) is inert, indolent, with no efficacy to motivate the will; that reason and the will are external to each other; and that acts of the will are comparable to the blind operations of physical movements governed by mechanical forces and exemplified in the regularities, predictions, and explanations of the physical sciences.

Descartes' conception differs from the mainstream approaches in a number of important respects. It is connected with his defence of the idea that freedom, like reason, is central not only to moral but also to epistemic responsibility; that freedom is central to an explanation of error, that freedom

is connected not only with goodness but also with truth, and most crucially that freedom admits of degrees. Acts of the will of a self-conscious being that can properly be free are impelled in a distinctive way¹⁵ (see §4.3 below).

4. Descartes' Conception of Freedom

4.1 *Freedom and the Will*

In his reply to Hobbes's objection that he simply assumed the freedom of the will, Descartes retorted: 'I made no assumptions beyond what we all experience within ourselves. Our freedom is very evident by the natural light.' (*Third Set of Objections and Replies*, AT VII 191). He can at times be brusque in his replies, but in this case it is not clear how Hobbes could have thought that Descartes made such assumptions.

The question of whether there is an active power in us, a will, is raised right at the start of the *First Meditation*—to embark on a process of doubt requires not only a rational consideration but also a determination or act of the will—and reiterated at the beginning of the *Second*, where the efficacy of the will is subjected to the methodic doubt and the dialectical exposition begins once again: 'It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top' (AT VII 24; see also *Principles* I 39). The way out lies in transcending this predicament and rejecting the conclusion that this experience of helplessness and inefficacy is his ultimate state of being. Thus, the meditator declares: 'I will make the effort and once more attempt the same path which I started yesterday.' Making the effort and attempting once more are actualisations of the will. Consistently with the elenctic method of cross-examination, the counter-thesis follows: 'But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world', to which the counter-response is: 'But 'if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed.' (AT VII 25). The first affirmation that something must exist in order to have the experience just described is cast both in the theoretical and in the active mode of thinking¹⁶ (e.g., willing or practical reasoning): it is an affirmation by an active rational being capable of reason and reflection and ready to try once more to defy the external forces that tumble him around.

The parallel between the problem of the metaphysics of knowledge and the problem of the metaphysics of freedom is clearly exemplified here, and the two are brilliantly treated together: the problem of the metaphysics of knowledge is one of scepticism, the problem of the metaphysics of freedom is one of helplessness. We have been prepared for the parallel between them with the declarations in the *First Meditation*: 'My habitual beliefs keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom' (AT VII 22). Habitual beliefs threaten to impede the application of the method of doubt to what he has *good reason* to doubt, by preventing the

will from freeing itself from their bonds and thereby withholding assent to opinions that reason renders doubtful.

The evil deceiver is deliberately postulated in order to counteract the force of custom and habit and thus enable the will to keep at bay what reason has rendered doubtful.¹⁷ With the methodic doubt in place, the meditator moves from a state of uncritically thinking that he knows to a state of recognising that he is not certain of what can or cannot amount to knowledge. The realisation that he is not certain has awakened the intellect from dogmatic slumbers and, instead of adhering to Scholasticism's claim to the possession of truth, has supplied a motivation for the search after truth. It is therefore for the will to exert itself and realise its true nature by being at one with the intellect, and together to undertake a *critique* of metaphysics and epistemology, to make sure that a proposition has been scrutinised, as demanded by the method, before assenting to it. This is the only way to move away from custom and habit, from unreflectiveness and preconceived opinions.

Furthermore, Descartes has not assumed that having a will means having a free will; presumably conscious creatures, not simply self-conscious subjects, can be said to have a will, though we never think that they are responsible for what they do, which suggests that they cannot be said to be free, at least not in terms of the conception defended here: 'As for animals that lack reason it is obvious that they are not free [. . . though they have] the power of not being forced or constrained' (Letter to [Mesland], 2 May 1644, AT IV 117; CSMK: 234). Rather, having a will, exerting such power, creates an opening for the genuine *possibility* of freedom—freedom is thinkable or intelligible. The distinction between conscious creatures and self-conscious subjects makes it more plausible to suppose that it is this distinction that can inform our conception when we are considering the place of freedom in the world.

4.2 Freedom and Degrees of Freedom

'I call free in the general sense whatever is voluntary' Descartes explains in his letter to [Mesland] (2 May 1644, AT IV 116, CSMK: 234). There are two interrelated essential elements in his conception of freedom: one is the distinction between indifference and spontaneity, the other is the thesis that there are degrees of freedom. The latter is what sets Descartes' conception apart from other conceptions. The degrees of freedom are, of course, not quantitative (metaphysical freedom is an all-or-nothing notion, as is the will;¹⁸ one either has a will or has not) but qualitative. Freedom can be of a higher or a lower grade (in terms of quality or worth); the former is properly realised when reason's clear and distinct perceptions motivate a spontaneous inclination of the will to assent to truth and goodness, an inclination that expresses its essential nature. It is in this sense that '[t]he freedom of the will is self-evident' (*Principles* I 39) or 'evident by the natural light [of reason]'¹⁹ (*Third Set of Objections and Replies*, AT VII 191). Freedom of the

highest grade is, for Descartes, not only ‘the condition of the moral law’ (as Kant argues in the Preface to the *Second Critique*), but also the condition of epistemic responsibility. Knowledge involves making judgements and, for Descartes, judgements—both theoretical and practical—require the concurrence of the understanding and the will; this is because judging is more than entertaining or conceiving, it is an activity. In the case of clear and distinct propositions, the will (being freed from the bonds of custom and habit) spontaneously assents to them.

Kant argues that there are no theoretical grounds for assuming freedom of the will, and thus from the theoretical standpoint we are committed to universal determinism, though he also argues that spontaneity belongs both to theoretical and to practical reasoning.²⁰ For Descartes the highest grade of freedom is first evident in theoretical judgements of clear and distinct propositions concerning what is true. This marks out what is distinctive about his thesis since his conception shows that, even from the theoretical standpoint, there must be grounds for freedom, the highest grade of which finds expression in its connection with clear and distinct propositions concerning not only what is good but also what is true.

The lowest grade of freedom, on the other hand, finds expression in the indifference of the will towards a perception which is obscure or mixed, and hence insufficiently clear and distinct; in such a case it is possible for the will to affirm or deny, though no cogent or sufficient reason can be found in support of one or other direction (when reason pushes neither one way nor the other). In his letter thought to be addressed to Mesland (9 February 1645, AT IV 173; CSMK: 245), he explains: “‘indifference’ in this context seems to me strictly to mean that state of the will when it is not impelled one way rather than another by any perception of truth or goodness. This is the sense in which I took it when I said that the lowest degree of freedom is that by which we determine ourselves to things to which we are indifferent.’ In terms of the lower grade of freedom, the true nature of the will is least realised because it can turn away from the clear-sightedness of reason as a result of the long occupation with custom and habit, and it is thus determined by external forces; all this ‘is evidence not of any perfection of freedom, but rather of a defect in knowledge or a kind of negation’ (AT VII 58–59; see also *Sixth Set of Replies*, AT VII 432–433).

Being motivated by clear and distinct perceptions does not mean being ‘determined by any external force’ (AT VII 57), since in the attainment and manifestation of the highest grade of freedom the will and the intellect are not external to each other, something that is most evident in the will’s spontaneous assent to such perceptions. The highest grade of freedom evident in the spontaneity of the will implies that the will must be self-determining. This insight into the coexistence of freedom and self-determination at the level of reason in the active self-conscious being, which is often attributed to Kant as one of his monumental discoveries, is clearly worked out and

defended by Descartes—though, unlike Kant, he did not go on to propose a systematic metaphysics of morals.

It might be retorted that, if freedom of the highest grade is to be achieved at the level of reason, if it is connected with truth and goodness, then how can someone be free and at the same time do something wrong or vicious? I believe that Descartes astutely discerned the seriousness of this problem and was led by it to the idea that freedom admits of qualitative degrees. There is adequate space in which freedom can be exercised both in spontaneous response to the true and the good, but also in indifferent defiance of them. Being in a state of indifference does not imply that there is no inclination one way or the other, that there is no freedom (however low it is in terms of quality or worth), since no act can properly be called wrong or vicious except in relation to freedom; being in a state of indifference does not threaten freedom of the will, only its quality or perfection (see *Sixth Set of Replies*, AT VII 433). Habit and custom, passions and unexamined overwhelming opinions can determine the will to affirm or deny; binding oneself to habit and other external influences can incline one to fall into error, or to go wrong.

4.3 *Freedom and Self-mastery*

Freedom of spontaneity is bound up with self-mastery which is achievable by intellectual discipline and self-control, emanating from the twin employments of reason: theoretical and practical. Self-mastery is not achievable by the subjugation of unruly passions and instincts, nor by their isolation from reason or by their denial, for to deny our passions and instincts is to deny that we are human beings. Descartes distinguishes between two kinds of instinct: one is in us *qua* human beings; it is the natural light of reason manifested in reason's ability to grasp that things are thus and so, or that they ought to be thus and so. The other belongs to us *qua* animals; it is a certain impulse of nature towards our preservation, the satisfaction of bodily needs, and so on. The latter is not rejected, though he suggests that it 'should not always be followed' (Letter to Mersenne, 16 October 1639, AT II 599; CSMK: 140). Self-mastery is, therefore, achievable by the moderation and transformation of passions and instincts of the second kind into human sensitivities, by bringing those passions and instincts into harmony with truth and goodness as revealed by the reflective power of reason. Self-mastery is a transformation that consists in beginning to see matters afresh, not one that results from considering them afresh. It requires an examination of one's overwhelming opinions and customs, and the systematic application of the methodic doubt.

Through the transformation envisaged as essential to self-mastery a person can achieve autonomy. Autonomy implies that rational beings can act (affirm or deny, pursue or avoid) neither out of fear of punishment nor out of hope of reward, but as knowers and as agents: everything in the world acts in

accordance with laws or principles, but only a self-conscious subject can also act from the recognition, or a clear conception of principles and values, of truth and goodness, and in so doing he or she is impelled in a distinctive way: on grounds of reason.²¹ The pronouncement immediately follows: ‘In order to be free, there is no need for me to be inclined both ways’; on the contrary, ‘the more I incline in one direction [towards truth and goodness] the freer is my choice’ (*Fourth Meditation* AT VII 57–8). This is a manifestation of autonomy and the highest grade of freedom.

Autonomy is not only self-governance; it presupposes an ability to *know which* are the right principles, values, and reasons from which an agent can act, and *know why* they are the right ones. On Descartes’ conception, the fundamental principle of morality and rationality is to reason clearly and distinctly. Autonomy secures the unity of reason. Such a conception has affinities with those of Plato and Aristotle, and looks forward to Kant’s conception of the autonomy and goodness of the rational will. For these philosophers, this is the only way in which man can be free and autonomous despite living in the physical world of mechanical causal determinism.

It is by exploring the notion of freedom that we can begin to appreciate and understand the significance of Descartes’ Real Distinction between the essential natures of mind and corporeality.²² And it is through that exploration that he manages to bring out the unity of the theoretical and practical employments of reason, assigning no supremacy to either—a unity that informs his conception of personhood. A person, for Descartes (despite entrenched misconceptions), is neither a disembodied mind or ego, nor a physically or neurobiologically constituted particular: it is a substantial union of mind and the body, a union which, as he argues in a number of places, is basic and unanalysable²³—a person is an irreducible, rational, and autonomous free subject capable of determining itself to act from the recognition of truth and the right principles and values. Such a conception of personhood does not consider the ‘I’ or the self as an appendage of personhood, but as its source or explanatory ground.²⁴

4.4 Self-determination

It seems reasonable to say that there is sufficient reason for regarding it as at least possible that Descartes’ conception of the highest grade of freedom has shown that the autonomous will is subject neither to randomness nor to physical causal determinism, but to self-determination rationally motivated. The very idea that the will can be self-determining, that it can keep itself under tight rein, is put forward in the *Second Meditation* when Descartes turns to scrutinise the everyday belief that the things we touch and see are more clearly understood than ‘this puzzling “I”’. His mind wanders off and does not ‘yet submit to being restrained within the bounds of truth.’ So he decides ‘just this once to give it completely free rein, so that after a while,

when it is time to tighten the reins, it may more readily submit to being curbed' (AT VII 30). This curbing is not a form of control in the sense of repression, but results from keeping at bay not only one's own passions and overwhelming opinions, but also external domination, custom and habit; one gradually and painstakingly moves towards a clear recognition of truth and goodness, culminating in self-mastery.

It is possible, of course, to suppose that, despite the thesis defended here, our decisions to act are ultimately the result of passions and desires, psychological dispositions, external influences, and social manipulations, as they are for those who claim that at base all reasons for action are calculatively self-interested, or who deny reason's efficacy. These positions are seen in contemporary debates as profoundly disturbing and at odds with much recent work on practical reason and the thesis that morality by itself can provide reasons for action. Descartes' conception is neither threatened nor disturbed by such positions, nor does it need to deny them; his conception of freedom can account for them by relegating them to indifference and the lowest grade of freedom, manifesting itself in varying degrees from selfishness, to error, to fault, and ultimately to sin. Whenever there is an occasion for wrong doing there is indifference and insufficient clarity. In an insightful statement he says that in order to do wrong it is not 'necessary to see clearly that what we are doing is evil. It is sufficient to see it confusedly [. . .] without paying attention to the reasons which prove it to be so' (Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, AT IV 117; CSMK: 234).

5. A *Sine Qua Non* of Freedom?

There is of course the notorious letter to Mesland (9 February 1645) in which it appears that Descartes has either changed his mind or contradicted his arguments in the *Fourth Meditation*. In the letter he suggests that 'absolutely speaking' the will has the power to hold back from assent to clear and distinct propositions, though 'morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction' (AT IV 173; CSMK: 245). Descartes' thesis connects the highest grade of freedom with our clearly and distinctly perceiving the true and the good so that we cannot but spontaneously assent to them; that is, in terms of the highest grade of freedom 'there is no need for [us] to be inclined both ways'; on the contrary, 'the more [we] incline in one direction [towards truth and goodness] the freer is [our] choice' (AT VII 57–8). This thesis I shall call Descartes' *Principle of Freedom of Spontaneity* (henceforth his Principle).

There seems to be no consensus on how the apparent conflict or tension might be resolved.²⁵ To pursue such difficulties by examining the various suggestions made would require another paper, though in a more recent article Cecilia Wee rehearses this apparent tension and argues that it can be resolved.²⁶ Central to her argument is the thesis that Descartes accepts the

counterfactual ‘could have done otherwise’ (henceforth ‘the counterfactual’), or at least he sees some kind of ability to do otherwise as ‘a *sine qua non* for freedom’.²⁷ I shall consider two key passages on which Wee draws in defence of her thesis: one from the *Principles*, the other from the letter to Mesland. The passage from *Principles* I 37 is quoted by Wee thus:

It is a supreme perfection in man that he acts voluntarily, that is, freely; this makes him in a special way the author of his actions and deserving of praise for what he does. . . . [W]hen we embrace the truth, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than would be the case *if we could not do otherwise*. (her italics: 394)

She immediately states: ‘In the opening sentence of the passage above, Descartes equates acting voluntarily with acting freely. He then indicates that acting voluntarily requires that we ‘could have done otherwise’. It follows that, for Descartes, it is a requirement of freedom that we could have done otherwise.’ (394)

5.1 Spontaneity and Autonomy

If there were no controversy surrounding the counterfactual, presenting the passage selectively might not have been too serious a problem. When presented in its entirety, however, it is unclear that it can lend the support required for Wee’s thesis. The section omitted from the *Principles* I 37 is crucial to understanding the conclusion Descartes draws and the reference he makes to ‘if we could not do otherwise’. The omitted section reads as follows:

We do not praise automatons for accurately producing all the movements they were designed to perform, because the production of these movements occurs necessarily. It is the designer who is praised for constructing such carefully-made devices; for in constructing them he acted not out of necessity but freely. By the same principle, when we embrace the truth, [. . .].

Wee observes that ‘Descartes equates acting voluntarily with acting freely.’²⁸ The crucial question is: how is ‘acting freely’ to be understood in this context? When the passage is read in its entirety, we see that Descartes’ ‘if we could not do otherwise’ means if we were automata we would be without any autonomy;²⁹ his point is that we are not automata. Given that the *Principles* passage is especially concerned with our embracing the true and the good, and hence with the highest grade of freedom and man’s perfection, it is clear that, when he writes (in the first sentence of the passage): ‘It is a supreme perfection in man that he acts voluntarily, that is, freely’, he is concerned to emphasise acting autonomously and to contrast it with ‘if we could not do otherwise’, if we were automata. It should be clear by now that, for

Descartes, autonomy and the highest grade of freedom (or his Principle) neither entail nor require that ‘we could have done otherwise’, contrary to Wee’s thesis. Pulling the argument together in the last sentence, Descartes says that it is the human agent who is praised, not the automaton: if we were pre-programmed and moved from such necessity, those movements would be undeserving of praise or blame. Wee claims: ‘This indicates that, even when we embrace the truth from our clear and distinct perceptions, we have to be able to do otherwise. (Otherwise, it would be less to our credit that we did so embrace it.)’ (396). But this reading fits neither Descartes’ unexpurgated argument, nor his Principle.

When we embrace the true and the good we act spontaneously and autonomously, and our doing so is much more – not *less* – to our credit; we are truly free: it is man’s autonomy that makes him ‘in a special way the author of his actions’ (*Principles* I 37). My analysis of the *Principles* passage is also consistent with his letter to Mesland: ‘the things which others command us to do, and which we would not otherwise do spontaneously, we do less freely than the things which we are not ordered to do’ (9 February 1645, AT IV 174; CSMK: 245). The *Principles* passage, read in its entirety, offers no evidence that the counterfactual is a *sine qua non* of the highest grade of freedom, and no support for the inference that Wee draws that ‘the agent should always be “able to do otherwise”’ (397).

Wee accepts what Descartes says in another letter to Mesland: so long as we continue focusing carefully and attentively on the same clear and distinct thought ‘it would be impossible [...] to stop the course of our desire’ (2 May 1644, AT IV 116–7; CSMK: 233–234). But she goes on to say that one ‘does not, however, *have* to continue in the same thought—it is possible to shift our focus to some other thought’ (397), or ‘a window of opportunity always exists’ for ‘the exercise of this act’ (398); therefore the counterfactual ‘is necessary for Cartesian freedom’ (396). It is evident, though, that Descartes would relegate that shift to the will’s not being well focused, to its not being fully at one with reason, and hence to its being still easily distracted or affected by external factors. All this would be consistent with the indifference of the will: when the will is indifferent ‘it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of [our] error and sin.’ (*Fourth Meditation*, AT VII 58). It is the shift of our focus, or indifference, that gives rise to the idea that freedom requires the counterfactual; but this is bound up with the lowest grade of freedom, with error and sin. The highest grade of freedom is bound up, not with indifference, but with the spontaneous assent to the true and the good. The counterfactual, therefore, has not been shown to be a requirement of the highest grade of Cartesian freedom. On the contrary, it is autonomy and spontaneity that together form a *sine qua non* of the highest grade of freedom; this grade of freedom is not something into the nature of which the counterfactual, however plausible in itself, can provide us with any insight.

5.2 *The Proviso, and Absolutely and Morally Speaking*

The second key passage cited by Wee in support of her thesis comes from the letter to Mesland, which *prima facie* seems to provide the support that her thesis needs—especially the part of the letter on which she relies heavily: ‘For it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth’ (AT IV 173; CSMK: 245), and from which she draws the conclusion that ‘Descartes thus intimates here that the agent is *always* able to do otherwise’ (394); ‘that the ability to do otherwise is necessary for human freedom.’ (395)

There are both philosophical and textual worries here. First, the fact that Descartes finds it necessary to add, immediately after the sentence on which Wee relies, the proviso: ‘provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing’ (AT IV 173; CSMK: 245), suggests that he has neither contradicted what he has argued in the *Fourth Meditation*, nor changed his mind in terms of his Principle. Wee does later quote the proviso, but does not consider what the philosophical reasons are which led Descartes to add it. Instead she infers: ‘Evidently then, we demonstrate the freedom of our will by holding back from pursuit of/assent to what is clearly known. But if our freedom of will is demonstrated by the ability *not* to pursue or assent to what is clearly known, the ability to do otherwise must be a *sine qua non* for freedom’ (396). (I shall return to this in §6 below.) Secondly, drawing on Descartes’ distinction between ‘absolutely speaking’ and ‘morally speaking’, Wee says: ‘[M]orally—or practically—speaking it is near-impossible for us not to pursue a clearly known good [...] (This is presumably because the temporal gap between clear and distinct perception and affirmation/pursuit would be miniscule, [*sic*] allowing little time for the agent to shift her attention and hence withhold affirmation/pursuit)’ (397). ‘Absolutely speaking’, she continues, ‘it is always possible for us to withhold affirmation/pursuit. So it is always possible in principle for us to do otherwise’ (397).

What is morally or practically possible is not simply having the ability to act or knowing how to act, but knowing *why* one is to act in a certain way, and knowing *what* (or *which*) is the right or wrong thing to pursue or avoid. It requires that the subject have ‘what might be called *discriminating knowledge*’:³⁰ the subject must have the capacity to distinguish between having good reasons and being indifferent, between goodness and wrongness, between truth and the possibility of error. It is not simply voluntarism, it is cognitivism. That morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction from a clearly known good is not because of any minuscule temporal gap, as Wee presumes, but because it would be contrary to good reasons to do so. Having good reasons for doubting, assenting, affirming, or withholding is a fundamental requirement of Descartes’ method of enquiry. As he puts it in the letter to Mesland ‘when a very *evident reason* moves us in one direction [...] morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction’ (AT IV 173; CSMK: 245; italics added). Descartes suggests in the letter

that some perhaps ‘mean by “indifference” a positive faculty of determining oneself to one or other of two contraries’, and he accepts, as Wee observes, that the will has this ability ‘not only with respect to those actions to which it is not pushed by any evident reasons on one side rather than on the other, but also with respect to all other actions’ (AT IV 173; CSMK: 245). But the suggestion is not left unqualified. The will’s ability with regard to the former sort of action is aligned with indifference and the lowest grade of freedom, determined by forces external to reason; whereas its ability with regard to the latter sort of action is aligned with spontaneity and the highest grade of freedom—the will is at one with reason and motivated by its clear-sightedness.

Wee interprets this to mean that ‘in determining ourselves’ to follow evident reasons and cases in which we see ‘more good than evil’ (AT IV 174; CSMK: 245), Descartes holds that we ‘may be said to have a kind of freedom’ and are “free” in the weaker sense’ (399); but this, she continues, ‘does not detract from the fact that the [...] ability to do otherwise is required for *genuine* voluntariness and freedom. Genuine freedom involves that one always has the [...] ability to do otherwise, even when reason points wholly in one direction’ (399).

It is difficult to see, first, how this can be genuine freedom when Descartes relegates it to its proper place, to ‘cases which are called *adiaphora* or indifferent’ (AT IV 174; CSMK: 245) and the lowest grade of freedom, and connects it with error and sin; and secondly, how he can accept that ‘when reason points wholly in one direction’ it is only ‘a kind of freedom’ and we are “free” in a weaker sense’ when he clearly argues that this is freedom of the highest grade and we are ‘indeed at our freest’ (*Sixth Set of Replies*, AT VII 433).

6. Towards a Resolution

Descartes’ Principle is a manifestation of autonomy. If, however, someone adamantly denies that there is freedom (of spontaneity), absolutely or theoretically speaking it is always open to us ‘to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing.’ (AT IV 174; CSMK: 245). It is clear that even absolutely speaking what is *required* for holding back from a clearly known good is having good reasons. But why would we consider it a good thing to do so?

We have good reasons for so doing, we consider it a good thing, because we see clearly that freedom of spontaneity is the *greatest good*.³¹ The will’s spontaneous assent to that clearly perceived fact has nothing to do with a possible dimming of the perception or lapse of concentration.³² Freedom of spontaneity is the greatest good because without it the will would remain indifferent, bound by custom and habit, easily distracted and turned away

from the true and the good. Under those conditions it is unlikely that either the project of pure enquiry, or our striving towards the perfection that pertains to our kind, would get off the ground (see §2.1 & §4 above). Thus, the choice to demonstrate our freedom of spontaneity (even if we have to hold back from another known good) is in fact an example or an application of Descartes' Principle, not an exception to it³³—otherwise the proviso would make no sense.

Where Wee's reading differs substantially from Descartes' conception is in taking things the other way round. She takes Descartes to be offering an exception to his Principle and by implication a confirmation of her defence of the counterfactual, stating that 'we do not *need* to follow the course with the most reasons in its favour' (399). But on Descartes' conception, the decision not to follow such course would be an error of judgement manifesting the lowest grade of freedom, not an exception to or a violation of his Principle. It is neither an exception to nor a violation of his Principle because one of the reasons for holding back from a known good under those exceptional circumstances is precisely to demonstrate our freedom of spontaneity. In so doing we cannot but assent to that clearly perceived fact—'it would be impossible for us to sin [against the greatest good] as long as we saw it in that fashion' (Letter to Mesland 2 May 1644; AT IV 117; CSMK: 234). Therefore, we *do* follow 'the course which appears to have the most reasons in its favour [and] we determine ourselves more easily' (AT IV 174; CSMK: 245); in self-determining we assent to that with the most reasons in its favour: the greatest good.

The will assents most freely in virtue of being at one with reason, and its assent marks out its choice as required by autonomy. That the will has made the right choice *follows* from the fact that reasons of truth and goodness weigh as they do.³⁴ All this is perfectly consistent with Descartes' Principle. What motivates the autonomous will even under those exceptional circumstances is precisely reason's clear sight of the greatest good—that which has the most reasons in its favour: 'freedom of spontaneity and voluntariness are the same thing. It was in this sense that I wrote that I moved towards something all the more freely when there were more reasons driving me towards it.' (Letter to Mesland, 9 February 1645, AT IV 175; CSMK: 246; see also *Fourth Meditation* AT VII 57) Descartes' commitment in both places is perfectly consistent: what we uphold by demonstrating our freedom of spontaneity even under such circumstances is not the counterfactual but the Principle; what we manifest in so doing is our autonomy and the highest grade of freedom.

7. Reason and Spontaneity

We should now turn to address the difficulty raised in §3 above concerning the assent-compelling nature of clear and distinct propositions, which seems

to imply that freedom of spontaneity is not freedom at all because we do not have the option of denying them. Indeed, Jean-Paul Sartre – while acknowledging that clear and distinct propositions correspond to the essences of things, are true, and cannot be contradicted—asks: ‘if we start with mathematical intellection, how shall we reconcile the fixity and necessity of essences with freedom of judgement?’³⁵

Judging that something is or is not the case involves not only the deliberative faculty of understanding in conceiving of *p* and in engaging in an *aitias logismos*—the scrutinising and working out the reason why *p* is true—but also the faculty of the will in assenting to or asserting that *p*. Unless the will acts, either spontaneously or indifferently, there can be no judgement *that p*, or *that not p*. There is a further and deeper reason, as I argued in §4.1, for the requirement of the concurrence of the twin faculties in judgement, which results from Descartes’ use of ‘should’ and its relation to freedom: the relation between freedom and epistemic and moral responsibility. Misunderstanding that relation might lead us to think that in judgements concerning clear and distinct propositions there is no freedom, that freedom of spontaneity is not freedom at all.

We are compelled to assent to clearly and distinctly perceived propositions but this comes from within us, from the concurrence of the authoritative reason and the autonomous will freed from the fetters of indifference to spontaneously assent to the true and the good. Reason’s clear-sightedness holds the fabric of intelligibility together. Even absolutely speaking, as we have seen, we do not say ‘No’ to a clearly perceived truth as this would be unintelligible; we simply hold back, subject to the proviso. In spontaneously assenting to truth and goodness the will is at the same time wholly in control, and thus, far from implying no freedom, its assent is the most perfectly free actualisation of its true nature, and involves no struggle between the will and reason. And this is, for Descartes, the paradigm of genuine freedom. If freedom were freedom to do otherwise than assent to truth and goodness, or to the greatest good, it would be of no worth—it would be of the lowest grade. It is only when the will is at one with reason’s clear and distinct perceptions that it is truly at one with itself, when it can properly be referred to as the rational self-determining will.

The spontaneous inclination or the lack of struggle seems to be implicit in what Williams calls ‘the Cartesian presupposition’: ‘that what one would expect the human mind to be is a rational instrument *effortlessly* embodying the truth, and that it is failure to live up to this specification that demands explanation.’³⁶ The will’s spontaneous inclination towards truth and goodness, or the greatest good, is ‘not weighed with other reasons at all, not even on a scale which always tips on their side.’³⁷ Any considerations which might have appeared to constitute ‘reasons for acting otherwise are silenced altogether—not overridden—’³⁸ by the clear recognition of reason’s requirements. Reason’s perception of truth and goodness suffices to motivate a

spontaneous or *effortless* assent of the autonomous will, and the attainability of truth is higher and more valuable because of its relation to the highest grade of freedom (recall Descartes's claim that in arriving at truth accidentally I am still at fault). The will's involvement in judgement is connected with *should* precisely because its acts and its choices (spontaneous or indifferent) confer both epistemic and moral responsibility on oneself.

The above considerations illustrate the complexity and structure of what Descartes sees as the indispensable connection between the possibility of freedom, of truth, and of goodness, and help to explain the term 'inclination' of the spontaneous will. Construing its spontaneous inclination as effortless we come to see the will's assent as a case of being motivated to act in a distinctive way—to affirm or assent to what is clearly and distinctly understood, for 'there is nothing else to think [...] no further questions for us to ask' but that *p* (*Second Set of Replies AT VII 144–5*).³⁹ The will's assent is not an extra component of, or external to, the considerations of reason, but effortlessly follows from the fact that the reasons of truth and goodness weigh as they do. It is no surprise therefore to find Descartes arguing that it is in the internal relation between reason and freedom of spontaneity, and in the *exercise* of such faculties, that our 'greatest and most important perfection is to be found' (*Fourth Meditation AT VII 62*).

The distinction that Descartes draws between spontaneity and indifference, and the relation that he defends between the will's effortless assent and the intellect's clear and distinct perceptions of truth and goodness, give his conception of freedom a certain sublimity, and his conception of man a certain serenity.

8. Truth and Goodness

We are finally in a position to understand Descartes' philosophical reasons for connecting truth and goodness, and for drawing an analogy between error and sin in the *Fourth Meditation*. In fact, if such an analogy had not been drawn, it would have posed a threat to the unity of his grand project in search for truth, the possibility of knowledge, and in particular to his conception of the internal relation between reason and the will, of the unity and integrity of the self, demanded by the attainability of the highest grade of freedom. The incorrect use of the will can lead to error, and ultimately to sin, because of a failure to prevent freedom from undermining itself (in terms of its degrees of quality or worth) due to the will's indifference as a result of either unreflective habits, external domination, the law of custom, or malicious motives. '[V]irtue unenlightened by intellect can be false [but] the right use of reason [...], by giving knowledge of the good, prevents virtue from being false' (Letter to Princess Elizabeth, 4 August 1645, AT IV 267; CSMK: 258).⁴⁰ Descartes sees philosophical enquiry, not theological revelation, as the only way to set man truly free from unwarranted assumptions and preconceived opinions, and to

view the command of reason and the responsibility it confers upon oneself in a distinctive and irreducible way.⁴¹

8.1 *Philosophy or Theology?*

Seen in this light, it would be a serious mistake to try to assimilate the philosophical aspirations of Descartes' conception of goodness to blind obedience, to 'an inculcated code' of theology, and when the assimilation or the forging cannot be maintained, to accuse him, as Donald Cress does, of lacking 'historical awareness [. . . that] betrays a curious ignorance [. . .] of the struggles of his predecessors [. . . and] the essentially [. . .] theological nature of their enterprise.'⁴² It is to Descartes' credit that he insists on the autonomy of the will, the rejection of abiding by the commands of anything other than reason, and the defence of the thesis that the highest attainment of freedom is one in which the self-determination of the rational will follows from and is motivated by the clear-sightedness of reason (see AT VII 60). Such rational motivation is not just compatible with the highest grade of freedom but constitutive of it.

The thesis expounded and defended in this paper lends support to Descartes' remarks that goodness and right moral judgements presuppose knowledge of what is true. A rational autonomous being accepts the maxim on which to act, not heteronomously, but from the recognition of the true and the good. The perfection and well-being of persons is conceived in a secular way as the tranquillity of the mind when it is rationally directed towards truth and goodness—it is on this that the 'greatest felicity of man depends' (Letter to Princes Elizabeth, 4 August 1645, AT IV 269, CSMK: 258). Once we see with Descartes the internal relation between reason and the autonomous will, and come to grips with its rôle—pivotal to the entire project of his enquiry—then, contrary to Georges Dicker and others who brush aside the *Fourth Meditation* as an interruption to that project, we see that there is a substantive and reasonable notion of practical reason or the rational will which is akin to the (enlarged) conception of reason that prompts the search for truth and the possibility of knowledge, not only in metaphysics and scientific reasoning, but also in moral reasoning.

9. The Antinomy of Freedom

All this brings me back to what I referred to in §3 as the hoary old question of freedom and determinism. Kant, among others, seriously entertained the possibility of providing a solution to this problem in the 'Antinomy of Freedom'; despite his complex arguments, however, he made it clear that it was not his intention to establish the *reality* of human freedom, and concluded that what he managed to show was only that 'freedom is at least *not incompatible* with nature' (A558/B585–6).⁴³ He argued that the thesis: 'Causality in accordance with laws of nature is not the only causality [but] there is

also another causality, that of freedom' (A444/B472), and the antithesis: 'There is no freedom; everything in the world takes place in accordance with laws of nature' (A445/B473), may 'both alike be true' (A532/B560).⁴⁴ It is these difficulties that can be said to have led Kant to offer his account of freedom as transcendental, as a presupposition or a necessary condition of the question 'what *ought* I to do?' Without that presupposition the 'ought' would have a merely functional or instrumental use and would lack any commanding or binding force. Functional, psychological, empirical, social, and physical conditions can be supposed to *cause* the will to act, but they cannot be supposed to bring about anything *on the grounds* that it ought to be done (A547/B575–A548/B576). This is what is captured by the 'should' in Descartes' analysis of error, which grounds the very idea of both epistemic and moral responsibility whose presupposition is the highest grade of freedom. So long as rational beings face the question 'what *ought* I to do?'⁴⁵ then, as Kant says, we *must* think of ourselves as free autonomous beings—Kant is here alluding to a regulative principle.

What must we do in order to overcome scepticism about freedom? What is required, Kant argues, can be supplied by moral necessity: knowledge of freedom of will may be grounded in consciousness of obligation or of the moral law—though he immediately detected a circularity. We have perhaps 'assumed the Idea of freedom only because of the moral law, in order subsequently to infer the moral law in its turn from freedom'.⁴⁶ Whether Kant manages to get out of the circle, and whether the circle is vicious or not, is not an issue that can be dealt with here.

For now, in answer to the sceptical question concerning freedom, we may appeal to what Descartes says: 'we have such close awareness of the freedom [of spontaneity] and indifference which is in us, that there is nothing we can grasp more evidently or more perfectly' (*Principles* I 41). Implicit in this is the idea that the true nature of reason and the autonomy of freedom can reveal themselves only from within thought—not subjectively, but as aspiring to objective validity and universality, and as irreducible to any psychological, social, physical, or functional phenomena and explanations.⁴⁷ Indeed, in the context of the physical and scientific reductionism which was becoming prevalent at the time Descartes was writing, and to which he gave tremendous impetus, an autonomous rational being, as he saw clearly and distinctly, is the only kind of being that can rise above physicalism, functionalism, and scientific prediction and explanation, and be irreducibly and substantially real.⁴⁸

Notes

¹ Translated as: 'what road in life shall I follow?' Gaukroger, Stephen. 1995, *Descartes: an intellectual biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 107–8.

² All references to Descartes' work are to the CSM and CSMK translations 1984 and 1991 respectively. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (trans., by John Cottingham, Robert

Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch. 1984, vols I & II. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); and vol. III trans., by Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny. 1991. Throughout the paper I use the terms 'reason' and 'intellect' interchangeably in line with Descartes' use. 'Intellect' or '*intellectus*' as Kenny suggests can also mean understanding, and the verb '*intelligere*' is sometimes restricted to mean understanding what something is. Kenny, Anthony, 1972. 'Descartes on the Will', in *Cartesian Studies*, Butler, R.J. [ed.] (Oxford: Basil Blackwell) 1–31, 13.

³ Cress, Donald A. 1994, 'Truth, Error, and the Order of Reasons: Descartes's Puzzling Synopsis of the Fourth Meditation' in *Reason, Will, and Sensation: Studies in Descartes' Metaphysics*. Cottingham, John [ed.] 1994. (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 141–155, 155.

⁴ Cress, 1994, 149.

⁵ Cress, 1994, 150.

⁶ Dicker, Georges. 1993, *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press) 109.

⁷ I discuss the various hypotheses and Descartes' reasons for rejecting them in my *Self, Reason, and Freedom: A New Light on Descartes' Metaphysics, in progress*.

⁸ Williams has argued persuasively that 'the search for truth is the search for knowledge' and such a search turns 'into the search for certainty.' Williams, Bernard. 1978, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Sussex: Harvester Press) 45 and 49 respectively.

⁹ As Russell put it: Descartes' methodical doubt is 'the kind of criticism which we are asserting to be the essence of philosophy.' Russell, Bertrand. 1912/1967, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 87.

¹⁰ Williams, 1978, 178–9.

¹¹ I can see no reason to think that Descartes' conception would not accommodate Wiggins's enumeration of the five marks of the concept of truth. See Wiggins, David. 1991, 'Truth, and Truth as Predicated of Moral Judgements' in his *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; second edition) 147–152.

¹² Referring to Mersenne's criterion of truth as one of universal consent, Descartes declares that he does not have a criterion of truth except the natural light of reason. All men, he says, by their very nature as rational beings, have the same natural light; the great differences between them can be explained by the fact that 'hardly anyone makes good use of that light [and thus many] may share the same mistaken opinion.' (16 October 1639, AT II 598; CSMK: 139).

¹³ Descartes is not offering a reductive thesis but implicitly rejecting the Scholastic view of universals formed through a process of abstraction from particulars; for him the perception of simple notions "I attribute [...] to the intellect alone, which relates to many things an idea which is in itself singular." (Letter to Regius, 24 May 1640, AT III 66; CSMK:148).

¹⁴ See Letter to Regius, 24 May 1640, AT III 64; CSMK: 146; Letter to [Mesland], 2 May 1644, AT IV 116; CSMK: 233; *Principles* I 43.

¹⁵ Chappell, Vere. 1994, 'Descartes' Compatibilism' (in Cottingham [ed.], 1994) 177–190, 185, n3. Chappell points out that Descartes does not explicitly refer to the *cause* of a free act or action, though he regularly uses what might be seen as causal vocabulary to capture this relationship—terms such as 'impel' (*Sixth Set of Replies*, AT VII 433), 'compel' (AT VII 59), 'incite', 'dispose' (Letter to Princess Elizabeth, 15 September 1645, AT IV 295, CSMK: 267; *Passions*, art.40 AT XI 359).

¹⁶ See also Schouls, Peter. 1994, 'Human Nature, Reason, and Will in the Argument of Descartes's Meditations' (in Cottingham [ed.], 1994) 159–176, 169.

¹⁷ The evil-deceiver hypothesis does not call into doubt anything that has not already been called into doubt with the argument from God, or His absence, once the belief in his existence was rendered doubtful at AT VII 21 of the *First Meditation*.

¹⁸ In fact the reference to the unrestrictedness of the human will is a reference to the nature and ability of the will, namely, that it can perform any operation, affirm or deny, assent to, withhold or suspend judgement on any proposition.

¹⁹ 'Natural' cannot be equated with 'physical'. It may be true that everything that is physical is natural, but it does not follow that everything that is natural is or must be physical, or subject to scientific investigation or explanation. For further discussion of these issues, see my 2007, 'God, Physicalism, and the Totality of Facts', *Philosophy*, 82: 4, 515–542.

²⁰ Kant distinguishes between the practical, theoretical, and speculative employments of reason; its theoretical employment does not go beyond the limits of experience, whereas one of its concerns in its speculative employment is freedom of the will. Descartes, on the other hand, defends the inner unity of theoretical and practical reasoning (freedom in its highest grade); it is such a unity that informs his conception of a unified self as both a thinking and an acting rational free being. Kant, having drawn a dichotomy at the heart of that unity, abrogating the very unity of the self, finally acknowledges that all the interests of reason ultimately combine (A804-5/B832-3). This is with the view of putting that unity back together again in his moral philosophy, but resulting in some puzzling difficulties. Kant, Immanuel. 1929, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (trans., Norman Kemp Smith; London: The Macmillan Press Ltd).

²¹ The question concerning the problem of freedom and divine preordination is something that I pursue in another paper, *in progress*.

²² See my 2001, 'Descartes' Dualism: Correcting Some Misconceptions', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 34: 2, 215–238.

²³ See, for example, Descartes' letter to Regius (December 1641, AT III 460; CSMK: 200), in which he explicitly objected to Regius claim 'that the human being is an *ens per accidens* [and not] an *ens per se*' (and not essentially a unity). See also Letters to Princess Elizabeth (28 June 1643, AT III 691; CSMK: 226, and 21 May 1643, AT III 665; CSMK: 218).

²⁴ See my 2009, 'Self and Self-Consciousness: Aristotelian Ontology and Cartesian Duality', *Philosophical Investigations*, 32: 2, 134–162.

²⁵ See for example, Chappell, 1994, 182–183; Williams, 1978, 181; Kenny, 1972, 24–31.

²⁶ Wee, Cecilia. 2006, 'Descartes and Leibniz on Human Free-Will and the Ability to do Otherwise', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 36: 3, 387–414. All subsequent references to Wee will be to this article and will be given in the text. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Noûs* for pointing out to me Wee's article.

²⁷ Wee distinguishes between what she calls Descartes' and Scholastic libertarianism.

²⁸ As Kenny points out, Descartes 'was following the precedent of Gibieuf [who] was consciously going against the prevailing scholastic tradition which made a distinction between the two.' Kenny, 1972, 24. See also Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, where Descartes explicitly says that he is following precedent. (AT IV 116; CSMK: 234).

²⁹ Kant uses 'thinking automata' comparable to marionettes. Kant, Immanuel. 1956, *Critique of Practical Reason* (trans., by Lewis White Beck. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company) [101].

³⁰ Evans, Gareth. 1982, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 89.

³¹ See especially Letter to Queen Christina (20 November 1647, AT V 81–86; CSMK: 324–326).

³² My argument here is consistent with what Descartes say in his letter to Mesland (2 May 1644) where he is (a) making a general point about the ability of the will to suspend judgement (in fact that is central to the arguments in the *First Meditation*), and (b) pointing out that the nature of the (untrained) soul 'is such that it hardly attends for more than a moment on a single thing.' The latter is connected with freedom of indifference, 'fewer reasons', and 'imperfection' (AT IV 116–117; CSMK: 233–234). And again: as a result of its long occupation with custom and habit the will 'enjoys wandering off and does not yet submit to being restrained within the bounds of truth' (AT VII 30).

³³ I owe much of the discussion here to numerous discussions with Peter J. King, to whom I am most grateful for enabling me to clarify these difficulties.

³⁴ See also Nagel, Thomas. 1970, *The Possibility of Altruism*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 29–30.

³⁵ Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1955, 'Cartesian Freedom', in his *Literary and Philosophical Papers* (London: Collier Books) 171. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Noûs* for suggesting this paper to me.

³⁶ Williams, 1978, 165; italics added.

³⁷ McDowell, John. 1978, 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. vol.52: 13–29, 26.

³⁸ McDowell, 1978, 28.

³⁹ Descartes has clearly anticipated Wiggins's formula: there is nothing else to think. See Wiggins, David. 1990/1, 'Moral Cognitivism, Moral Realism, and Motivating Moral Beliefs', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 91: 61–85, 66. As Wiggins explains, the formula is to be read non-indexically or absolutely. If there were any apparent alternatives, one 'needs to be ready to show how the apparent alternatives are generated and then excluded.' Wiggins. 1996, 'Reply to Adrian Moore', in *Essays for David Wiggins: Identity, Truth and Value*, Lovibond, Sabina and Williams, S.G. [edd.] (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd) 272.

⁴⁰ In his 'Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth' to the *Principles*, Descartes explains that many of the true virtues may arise not 'solely from the knowledge of what is right but from some error. Thus goodness is often the result of simplicity, piety the result of fear, and courage the result of desperation. Because such virtues differ from each other, they go by different names. But the pure and genuine virtues which proceed solely from knowledge of what is right, all have one and the same nature and are included under the single term "wisdom".' (AT VIII A 2).

⁴¹ But there must surely be room in such a conception for showing that there would be no failing of goodness for those people in stultifying economic, political, or educational conditions who might not really be expected to devote their time or even a small part of their spare time to the cultivation of such ends. They can be expected not to reject these ends even if they are or might be forced to neglect them at times. Descartes is fully aware of all this. See Letter to Princess Elizabeth (4 August 1645, AT IV 263–268; CSMK: 256–259).

⁴² Cress, 1994, 150.

⁴³ The issues of course are more complicated and are bound up with Kant's transcendental idealism which, as Allison says, cannot guarantee that the conceptual space that it creates for the thought of transcendental freedom can be filled. This might explain the reason for Kant's denial to having established the reality of freedom and, instead, offering a much weaker conclusion. Allison, Henry E. 2004, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press; revised and enlarged edition) 388.

⁴⁴ Kant's deeper reason for regarding the Antinomy of Freedom as involving an opposition rather than a contradiction is because freedom, given its important consequences for morality, had to be saved from being declared illegitimate by transcendental realism. For Descartes the deeper reason would be to save freedom from being declared illegitimate by materialism and scientific reductionism because it is an indispensable condition not only for morality, but also for the new metaphysics, for epistemic responsibility, for an explanation of error, and for what it is to be a self-conscious being.

⁴⁵ "'Ought" expresses a kind of necessity and of connection with grounds which is found nowhere else in the whole of nature.' Kant, 1929, A547/B575.

⁴⁶ Kant, Immanuel. 1948, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (trans. H.J. Paton. London: Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd) [453].

⁴⁷ This is basically the central thesis that Nagel expounds and defends, arguing the side of rationalism against any form of reductionism, and emphasising reason's aspiration to universality. Nagel, Thomas. 1997, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press).

⁴⁸ I am grateful to Peter J. King, Martha Klein, Hemdat Lerman, and Adrian Moore for valuable comments on an earlier draft and for their encouragement. A version of this paper was presented to the Cerberus Society, Balliol College, University of Oxford, in March 2005; I should like to thank the audience for their comments. I should also like to thank an anonymous referee for *Noûs* for very helpful comments and suggestions.

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