Self-Knowledge, Moral Freedom, and the Passions in Descartes

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This dissertation has as its focus a tension at the heart of Descartes' theory of the passions, one which defines and therefore problematizes his final ethic. As he sees it, the passions can both contribute to our good and prevent us from seeing it perspicuously. It is not so much the presence of this tension itself in Descartes' thinking which is noteworthy - the tension is an old one in the history of philosophy - but his epistemological treatment of it, the fact that it emerges within and can only be resolved through the new philosophy of ideas. I explore this fundamental tension as it relates to two closely related themes, both of which are of major importance to Descartes throughout his career. The first is the problem of knowledge or truth, the second that of freedom. As I argue, the account of freedom in Meditation Four is canonical for Descartes. This means that the ideal formal relation between intellect and will which that account lays down applies in all spheres of prospective knowledge acquisition - from metaphysics to morals.

The intersection of truth and freedom in Meditation Four is well-known: only when the will's operations are spontaneously directed by the "light" of the intellect can our beliefs or actions be fully free. However, Descartes' mature ethic, contained almost exclusively in The Passions of the Soul, presents that doctrine of freedom with a good deal of conceptual trouble. For although it is quite clear what the object of moral knowledge is - the good of the composite self - it remains difficult to specify exactly how the passions can reveal this object for what it univocally is. This is, I claim, due to the inherent "opacity" of passion-ideas, their irreducibly problematic status as
representational entities. They are, it would seem, both the only means to self-knowledge and moral freedom and a persistent hindrance to this dual ideal.

Nevertheless, with the concept of generosity, Descartes claims to offer us a clear picture of what it means to achieve the ideal. The criterion of self-knowledge employed by the generous agent is that of "control": she is aware of the degree of control she is capable of exercising over people and things external to herself, and she structures her desires accordingly. But this result is, allegedly, not obtained at the cost of suppressing the passions. The generous agent thus combines, in optimal measures, the pleasures afforded by the passions with full rational control of the will.

I close with some sceptical reflections on the ideal of generosity thus construed.
No mortal man is free from these perturbations; or if he be so, sure he is either a god or a block.

Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

For the rest, the soul can have pleasures of its own. But the pleasures common to it and the body depend entirely on the passions, so that persons whom the passions can move most deeply are capable of enjoying the sweetest pleasure of this life. It is true that they may also experience the most bitterness when they do not know how to put these passions to good use and when fortune works against them. But the chief use of wisdom lies in its teaching us to be masters of our passions and to control them with such skill that the evils which they cause are quite bearable, and even become a source of joy.

Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*
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1: INTRODUCTION

Descartes' early biographer, Adrien Baillet, described Descartes' last published work, The Passions of the Soul, as "l'un des plus beaux et plus utiles d'entre ses ouvrages".\(^1\) However, Baillet's scant treatment of the Passions -whose "history and contents" receive barely two pages of analysis- is a mark of the neglect this work would suffer in the ensuing three and a half centuries. Descartes himself seems to have foreseen this, writing in the Letter-Preface to the Passions that "this treatise will fare less well than my other writings".\(^2\) Naturally there have been exceptions to the tendency to overlook the treatise. Spinoza for example, although he disagreed vehemently with many of Descartes' particular moral and metaphysical doctrines, recognized that in the Passions Descartes had explained the emotions "through their first causes"\(^3\), an achievement which had presumably eluded all previous philosophers. But on the whole, Descartes' theory of the

\(^1\) Baillet (1972), Vol. II, Livre VII, Ch. XIX, 395.

\(^2\) (AT XI 326), I, 327. All Descartes references in this thesis are from J. Cottingham et. al. (CSM) (1985-95). The reference, as above, will contain the Adam and Tannery volume and page number, followed by the CSM volume and page number. Citations from the Passions will also contain the article number.

\(^3\) Spinoza (1992), Pt. III, Preface, 102.
passions, and indeed his moral philosophy generally, have effectively been accorded the status of philosophical bagatelles. The same cannot of course be said for his metaphysics, epistemology, and physics, which have collectively received the lion's share of scholarly attention over the years. This thesis is an attempt, however small, to redress that imbalance of attention.

I investigate the problem of the passions through the lens of another philosophical problem that was of deep and abiding concern to Descartes, that of human freedom. Much scholarship has been lavished on Descartes' conception of the relation between human freedom on the one hand and the search for truth in metaphysics and the sciences -especially physics- on the other. This is no accident, since Descartes' most thorough discussion of human freedom unfolds in the Meditations, whose principal aim is to establish metaphysico-scientific truths which are "stable and likely to last".⁴ As I argue, Descartes thinks we are only free when we are in apprehension of these truths and our will is lead to affirm them. The cogito argument of Meditation Two is paradigmatic in this respect because it reveals the relation

⁴ (AT VII 17), II, 12.
between knowledge and freedom at their maximal levels: the argument is indubitably true and we are fully free in affirming it in spite of the fact that the choice not to do so sincerely is simply not an option for us.

Descartes' search for secure truths was not however confined to metaphysics and physics. Indeed, as the famous "tree of philosophy" metaphor from the Preface to the French edition of the Principles of Philosophy would have it these two fields are, respectively, just the roots and trunk of the tree, while its branches can be reduced to medicine, mechanics, and morals. Descartes describes the last item in this list as "the highest and most perfect moral system". Moreover,

...just as it is not the roots of a tree or the trunk from which one gathers the fruit, but only the ends of the branches, so the principal benefit of philosophy depends on those parts of it which can only be learnt last of all.\(^5\)

Given this claim -made relatively late in his career (1644)- about the potential extension of our knowledge we might expect that the account of freedom which I have just sketched -where we are only free in the presence of truth- extends equally far for Descartes. I think this is basically right, though as regards

\(^5\) (AT IXB 14015), I, 186.
moral truth and freedom it comes in for rather severe qualification in the course of the present study.

My final position is a somewhat sceptical one. Because "moral truth" is on Descartes' own terms such an elusive and precarious good, so too is moral freedom. The reason for this is that, as Descartes argues in the Passions, "it is on the passions alone that all the good and evil of this life depends". What I think is the central problem of the passions is encapsulated in that statement. Descartes is telling us that all the good and evil of this life depends on the passions. What makes the passions potentially productive of evil is that they can be distorted and excessive, can misrepresent their causes or referents, and can be mutually conflicting. Obviously it cannot be the case that it is a feature of the good life to be in a state of more or less constant conflict and emotional stress. However, simply to suppress the passions in the interest of psychic harmony would run afoul of Descartes' claim that only via the passions can we aspire to the good life. Descartes, then, sees the problem of the passions as defined by two truths about human nature. First, the passions are the means to the good life. Second, the passions

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6 (AT XI 488), I, 404, art. 212.
tend to pose persistent hindrances to the good life. Thus, Descartes' moral theory must take the form of reconciling these contrasting theses about the passions and human nature. My own attempt to sort out the problem on his behalf can best be elucidated by means of a synopsis of the argument of each chapter of this thesis.

Chapter one is an exploration of the Cartesian theory of freedom. Although my sketch of this theory above makes it sound relatively straightforward, it is anything but. As I argue, we ought to read the account of freedom in Meditation Four as the definitive Cartesian doctrine. According to this theory, we are most free when we give our assent spontaneously to evident truths. True freedom therefore involves the "passivity" of the will in the face of the contents of the understanding when the latter are clearly and distinctly perceived. It would not be a problem interpreting this as the Cartesian doctrine if Descartes himself had not appeared, in at least two sources written after the first edition of the Meditations, to retract it. I show that the appearance is just that, and the definitive doctrine remains that of Meditation Four. This is the doctrine against which the possibility of moral freedom will ultimately be measured.

Next, I look at the development of Descartes' moral philosophy
in three important sources. The first is the provisional morality of the Discourse on Method, the second the correspondence with Princess Elizabeth, and the third the first two parts of the Passions itself. My argument is that in the first two of these sources, Descartes cannot construct a comprehensive moral philosophy because he explicitly detaches moral concerns from the project of philosophical analysis which he himself develops in the Discourse. This is not meant as a criticism of Descartes. Indeed, if we take the tree-of-philosophy metaphor to heart, the development of a definitive moral philosophy must await the achievements of metaphysics and physics. Part of my purpose then is to show the extent to which the last of the three sources I have identified draws sustenance from philosophy's roots and trunk, not to mention its other branches. Elizabeth had asked Descartes for a full definition and classification of the passions in order to know how best to live. He does not provide this analysis in the letters themselves but he does in the first two-thirds of the Passions. Another crucial feature of Descartes' moral theory emerges in the exchange with Elizabeth. This is Descartes' claim that his theory is meant to reconcile virtue and contentment (which he identifies with pleasure). Although I think Elizabeth shows that his account of this reconciliation is too
sketchy as it is presented in the letters, it remains a central element of his final moral theory, as this is developed in Part Three of the *Passions*.

I begin a full-scale analysis of the passions of the soul in chapter three. Descartes' most comprehensive attempt at a functionalist account of agency is offered in the *Passions*. That is, the passions are modes of the substantial union of mind and body which are individuated through their role in the maintenance of the total system. The first articulation of this kind of functionalism in Descartes' corpus was Meditation Six, so the *Passions* can in this sense be read as an extended postscript to the *Meditations*. I argue that the account of agency in both sources depends on the claim that there is an ideal and fully natural state of the human organism. This is that state wherein my passions (to take the mode most relevant to my purposes) inform me of my good by representing the state of my soul to me, and my will, in the mode of desire, is then carried along in accordance with this good. My argument here rests crucially on an epistemological interpretation of the role of the passions. That is, I insist that the passions are for Descartes the means to a kind of knowledge, that they have an object. This object is the self, and as an object of knowledge we can be either right or
wrong about it. The functional ideal as I have just sketched it thus conforms to the account of freedom offered in chapter one because that ideal expresses the manner in which the will operates in the presence of truth. That the true is in this case the good should not obscure the point.

But the process of achieving functional harmony can go wrong in various ways, most prominently because of moral weakness. I therefore offer what I think Descartes' theory of moral weakness -or akrasia- must be given the complexities of his ontology of mind. I suggest further that the problem of conflict -the key feature of the morally weak agent- may be a worry for Descartes precisely because it is difficult in principle to determine whether or not an occurrent passion really informs us of the state of the soul. If this is the case, however, conflict among the passions may itself be natural or at least very difficult to avoid. This is the central sceptical challenge to Descartes' theory of the passions. It is that feature of his theory around which the key problem identified above -that the passions are the source of both good and evil- is concentrated. I close the chapter with a consideration of what I take to be Descartes' response to the problem of conflict, the theory of "determinate judgements". I offer two ways of interpreting this theory, one of
which contravenes the Cartesian doctrine of freedom, while the
other does not.

In the final chapter I show that regardless of how one
interprets it, the theory of determinate judgements is not
Descartes' last word on the rational rehabilitation of the
passions. There are instead those who are "generous". The
generous agent is, I argue, uniquely adept at knowing herself,
which means that she is especially good at determining how best
to preserve and perfect herself as the particular individual she
is. That is the key difference between the generous agent and the
weak-willed agent. The latter is habitually conflicted because
she lacks self-knowledge. Although there may be rare exceptions,
few are "by nature" conflicted. The reason for this is relatively
simple from Descartes' point of view: the passions are meant to
inform us of our good, so that if they regularly failed us in
this regard in spite of our sincere and systematic attempts to
get clear on them, God would be a deceiver. This is of course
anathema to Descartes, which is why he isolates a weak will as
the most persistent threat to knowledge generally and to the good
life in particular. The generous agent is thus the only one who
lives up to the ideal of moral freedom. Her will is resolutely
drawn along in accordance with perfect self-knowledge. I argue
moreover that through her unique capacity for self-transcendence, the generous agent can incorporate potentially painful passions, such as pity, into her "affective repertoire" without sacrificing psychic harmony or the ability to act. She thus embodies the reconciliation of virtue and contentment to which I have already alluded.

As I have said, I think Meditation Four contains Descartes' definitive doctrine of freedom. However, if it is to be applied to ethics it will need to be stretched to some extent. But this is not a damaging requirement. It is an inherently flexible notion because it need not be taken to imply that we are only free when in the grip of clear and distinct ideas. Moral philosophy cannot aspire to that level of certainty, nor does Descartes think it should. To say that our will ought to follow the weight of evidence is not to deny that what counts as evidence from one domain of human knowledge to another changes. The ideals of knowledge and freedom in ethics do not admit of comparison, beyond the formal level, with these ideals in the

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7 Thus one commentator notes that Cartesian knowledge claims will not all be "homogeneous" with those of metaphysics because for Descartes there are "...many methodic tools not required [for] the metaphysical principles and hence [there is] a pluralization of certitudinal assents, not all of which can be in the same mode as those in metaphysics...". Cf. Collins (1971), 54.
spheres of science or metaphysics.

Nevertheless, in his moral philosophy Descartes has placed the
criterion of knowledge, and therefore the price of freedom, very
high. I hope my analysis in chapter four makes it clear that the
generous person is a psychologically and morally peculiar,
perhaps even faintly repugnant, character. Hume's description of
the stoic ideal of wisdom as a "refined system of selfishness"
may be entirely apposite as applied to Descartes' highest type,
who is based on the Epictetan sage. The question for Descartes'
late twentieth-century readers may not be whether we are strong
enough to achieve the sublime detachment represented by that type
and thus experience full moral freedom, but whether we think of
generosity thus construed as a moral ideal at all.

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2: FREEDOM AND TRUTH

A. Introduction

In this chapter, I examine Descartes' doctrine of freedom. The chapter has two sections. In the first, I sketch his theory of judgement and its connection to the problem of error. The point here is to lay the foundation for a direct discussion of freedom by showing that Descartes thinks of judgement as the genus of all operations of the will. In the second section, I defend as the definitive Cartesian doctrine the view of freedom articulated in Meditation Four, according to which we make the best possible use of our will when it is compelled to assent to the truth of clear and distinct ideas. This defines the ideal of freedom against which all other possibilities must be measured. I argue that, as Descartes sees it, our ability to judge contrary to the way in which we are being causally prompted, although it is a power of considerable scope, can and should only be employed instrumentally in the search for truth.¹

¹ A note on some of the terminology introduced in this chapter and employed throughout the thesis. I will refer to the power of the will to act contrary to the weight of reasons variously as "voluntarism", "indifference", or "molinism", depending on the context. As far as the history of debates on freedom in Descartes' period is concerned, this doctrine is associated with the teachings of the Jesuits. On the other side is freedom of "spontaneity", a doctrine which came to be associated with the predestinarian
B. Judgement and Error

Having revealed in Meditation Three God's necessarily veracious character, Descartes now (at the outset of Meditation Four) draws the conclusion that such a God could not have created anything inherently faulty. This insight leads however to the following impasse:

There would be no further doubt on this issue were it not that what I have just said appears to imply that I am incapable of ever going wrong. For if everything that is in me is from God and he did not endow me with a faculty for making mistakes, it appears that I can never go wrong.²

Descartes resolves this problem by noting that he possesses an idea not only of a supremely positive being, which is God, but also an idea of nothingness, that which is furthest removed from ultimate perfection and positivity. He himself is somewhere between these two extremes, being and non-being or nothingness (though he claims to have only a "negative idea" of nothingness). Insofar as he participates in perfection, there is nothing in him which can lead him astray, while to the extent that he participates in nothingness, "it is no wonder" that he makes theology of the Oratory. This describes the situation wherein the will is compelled, though not necessarily by forces "external" to the mind, to operate in accordance with the weight of reasons.

² (AT VII 54), II, 38.
mistakes. Error, then, is not something positive, but rather a negation or privation.

None of this appears however to absolve God fully from a role in my errors, since the question remains as to why it is that I have been constituted so as to be capable of falling into error and sin. In other words, is God not responsible for placing me, qua human, just where he did in fact place me in the great chain of being? Descartes does not doubt that everything created by God is as such the best it could be and he is therefore drawn to ask, "[i]s it then better that I should make mistakes than that I should not do so?"\(^{3}\) This question can only be understood in relation to the distinction Descartes draws between negation and privation. If one answers the question in the negative, then error would be seen as a privation, that is, as evidence that I lack a perfection which I "ought" to possess. And this answer is indeed a provisional stopping place in the Fourth Meditation.\(^{4}\)

But it is quickly shown to be an untenable position since it relies on the claim that God has not created me as perfect as He could or should have. So, since God could have given me this perfection, and He always does what is best, a positive answer to

\(^{3}\) (AT VII 55), II, 38.

\(^{4}\) Ibid.
the question is immediately suggested. It must somehow be "better" for things as a whole that I am liable to err than it would be if I were not. Error, on this understanding, is a mere negation, a "lack" to be sure, but one which evidently befits my station in the cosmic order. This answer, however, merely intensifies the metaphysical problem without resolving it. If we want to discover why it is that we are better off insofar as we are capable of error we need to move the investigation to a theological plane wherein God's ends are considered. But Descartes explicitly rejects this course as fruitless and asks instead after the source of error from a human perspective. As he sees it, the source of error would seem to be a function of either his understanding or his will.

The function of the understanding is simply to receive ideas from any number of sources and in this sense the understanding contains no error. But whereas the understanding is finite and does not therefore perceive everything of which it is possible to have an idea, this describes not a privation but merely a lack or negation. Descartes does not apparently think it necessary to argue this point, except to say negatively that there is no way of proving that a craftsman ought to have put into every one of his works all the perfection which he is capable of putting into
some of them. Having thus blocked any appeal to the understanding as the source of error, Descartes next explains that it would be equally misguided to locate the source of error purely in the will. The reason for this is that it is my will which makes me most like God:

For although God's will is incomparably greater than mine, both in virtue of the knowledge and power that accompany it and make it more firm and efficacious, and also in virtue of its object, in that it ranges over a greater number of items, nevertheless it does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the essential and strict sense.6

After examining the respective natures of intellect and will, therefore, Descartes concludes that error depends on neither of the faculties considered separately and in themselves. But if this is the case, why should Descartes pursue his inquiry at this point? If error is a mere negation, and we can be secure in the knowledge that God has willed what is best, why does the imperative to overcome error nevertheless persist? The answer is that from the epistemological point of view error is the privation of a perfection—knowledge—which to a limited extent I can and ought to possess. This is true in spite of the fact that from the metaphysical point of view error remains a negation. But

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5 (AT VII 56-7), II, 39.

6 (AT VII 57-8), II, 40.
the latter claim can now be seen to mean that we have been created perfect in our kind, so that we cannot pursue the problem of error by way of impugning our God-given faculties. To state it somewhat paradoxically, our capacity to err is a perfection (and it is only this capacity for which God is directly responsible) though our use of this capacity to err involves us in privation.⁷

Descartes concludes from this discussion that error depends not on either of the faculties taken in themselves, but on their concurrence in judgement, the paradigmatic operation of the will. False judgements occur when the will exceeds the determinations of the intellect by assenting, through a free act, to more than

⁷ "For in so far as these acts depend on God, they are wholly true and good; and my ability to perform them means that there is in a sense more perfection in me than would be the case if I lacked this ability. As for the privation involved...this does not in any way require the concurrence of God, since it is not a thing; indeed, when it is referred to God as its cause, it should be called not a privation but a negation." (AT VII 60-1), II, 42; cf. also (AT IXB 17), I, 203-4. There remains a tension in these ideas, in spite of Descartes' attempts to resolve the conflict between the metaphysical and epistemological explanations. For if it is the case that sub specie aeternitatis error is a mere negation, then why should I not as it were adopt this perspective, the result of which would surely be that the imperative to avoid error would be suppressed. If we do not want to suppress this imperative, however, it is difficult to see how error is not a privation from the metaphysical point of view. For surely God could have created a world in which humans did not err or sin. Why then is the present state of affairs, in which we do err and sin, not a privation relative to that possibility? Some interesting reflections on these and related themes can be found in Gombay (1994).
is contained in bare perception. The concept of judgement is thus
central to Descartes' account of error and, by extension, his
view of freedom. But his theory of judgment is by no means
unambiguous. In what remains of this section I will attempt to
sketch out this theory and resolve the textual tensions as much
as possible. I will proceed by way of criticizing two accounts of
this doctrine: those put forward respectively by Franz Brentano
and James Petrik.8

(i) Judgement and the Division of Mental Phenomena: Brentano

Brentano maintains that in the Meditations Descartes.upholds a
threefold division of mental faculties and that this division is
the true Cartesian doctrine, notwithstanding other apparent
textual contradictions. The key passage for Brentano's thesis is
from Meditation Three, where Descartes classifies his thoughts
into "definite kinds":

Other thoughts have various additional forms: thus when
I will or am afraid, or affirm or deny, there is always
a particular thing which I take as the object of my
thought, but my thought includes something more than
the likeness of that thing. Some thoughts in this
category are called volitions or emotions while others
are called judgements.9

8 Brentano (1966); Petrik (1992).
9 (AT VII 37), II, 25-6.
Brentano concludes from this passage that there are three types of mental phenomena: images, volitions/emotions, and judgements. Separating judgements from volitions in this way means that the two cannot simply be equated, such that to will is to judge. It is, says Brentano, one thing to produce the judgement (which can be an act of will) and another to be that judgement. The latter is judgement proper which, although it falls "within the domain of the will" is properly speaking a mental phenomenon unto itself rather than simply a stand-in term for any act of will. Brentano recalls the scholastic vocabulary which, he asserts, must underlie Descartes' treatment of these terms. Thus judgement is held to be an *actus imperatus voluntatis*, an act performed under the control of the will, rather than an *actus elicitus voluntatis*, an act of the will itself. Brentano argues further that Descartes contradicts his own true doctrine when in later texts he classifies judgement as an *actus elicitus* instead of an *actus imperatus*, because "the intentional relation is not the same in the two cases".

Brentano overcomplicates Descartes' classification of mental

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10 Brentano op. cit., 29.

11 Ibid., 31.

12 Ibid.
phenomena, in the process explaining away key passages which
clearly contradict his thesis. The first passage is Principles I,
32. There Descartes argues that all the modes of thinking can be
brought under two headings: perception and volition. He then
lists the various modes found under each of these headings. Under
volition he lists desire, aversion, assertion, denial and
doubt. There is no mention here of a third mental category
distinct from perception and volition, whereas the latter are
held to be the "only two modes of thinking". Again, in Descartes'
last published work, the Passions, all our thoughts are said to
be "of two principal kinds" -actions or volitions and passions or
perceptions. Although these two sources do not tell us where
judgement fits in this twofold scheme, another work does. In the
Comments on a Certain Broadsheet Descartes writes,

...I saw that over and above perception, which is a
prerequisite of judgement, we need affirmation and
negation to determine the form of the judgement...Hence
I assigned the act of judging itself which consists
simply in assenting (i.e. in affirmation or denial) to
the determination of the will rather than to the
perception of the intellect.

All three of these texts were published after the first edition

13 (AT VIIIA 17), I, 204.
14 (AT XI 342), I, 335, art. 17.
of the *Meditations* (1641): the *Principles* in 1644, the *Comments* in 1648, and the *Passions* in 1649. The two latter texts thus also postdate the final version (published in French) of the *Meditations* (1647). Brentano's argument rests on two claims. First, he argues that there is no indication that Descartes abandoned the view of the *Meditations*, while in the French version of that work the passage in question is not altered. But even if we grant Brentano the point that the *Meditations* passage implies a threefold classification he begs the question at issue since in two works written after the revised version of the *Meditations* Descartes clearly holds to a twofold division of mental phenomena.

Brentano's second claim is that although in the *Principles* (I, 42), Descartes does say that error depends on the will, he also maintains that nobody errs "voluntarily". Brentano notes that Descartes does not say here that errors are themselves acts of will: the will does not itself affirm or deny, but rather "wills assent". It is therefore clear, so goes the argument, that for Descartes judgements are effects of acts of the will. But in the *Principles* passage on which Brentano bases his argument Descartes is not even talking about the division of mental phenomena. He is

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16 Brentano *op. cit.*, 30.
rather making the entirely separate point that we cannot will the false as such. Descartes claims here that when we err we affirm what is in fact false, and this just means that we take the latter to be true. But from this point it simply does not follow that our affirmation is not an actus elicitus voluntatis.

Descartes is clear in the Comments passage that the two most prevalent kinds of volitions - affirmation and denial - are "simply" judgements. Judgements then are volitional operations brought to bear on the contents of the understanding, and a judgement may as such take the form of any of the modes listed in Principles, I, 32. There is therefore little textual warrant to claim, as Brentano does, that judgement is a distinct mental phenomenon rather than the genus of all volitional operations of which the modes are species (or "forms" as Descartes has it in the Comments). Further, the Comments passage, which is the clearest statement ever made by Descartes on this theme, was written by him as an explicit defence and clarification of his real doctrines in the face of Regius' distortions of those doctrines, and we may therefore safely take this text as axiomatic on this question.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{17}\) It will be observed that I have passed over a further problem with Descartes' theory of judgement which is not however germane to my discussion. This is Descartes' apparent shift -around
(ii) Judgements as 'Conatively Charged Perceptions': Petrik

A somewhat more persuasive interpretation of the Cartesian theory of judgement has been advanced by James Petrik. Petrik defends the conative theory of judgement—the claim that judgement is chiefly a determination of the will— but weds it to a necessitarian or anti-voluntarist conception of mental activity, which he takes to be Descartes' definitive position. Petrik notes that the conative theory of judgement will run into serious difficulties if it is not detached from a voluntarist conception of the will. For according to voluntarism, "...the will is the immediate cause of a belief and the explanatory

1640- from an intellectual to a conative theory of judgement. The early Descartes of the Regulae writes for example that we can "...distinguish between the faculty by which our understanding (intellectus) intuits and knows things and that by which it makes affirmative or negative judgements" ((AT X 420), I, 45); cf. also ((AT 1 350), III, 53). This kind of statement seems to conflict with the later view which attributes judgement to the will. However, Hiram Caton has argued persuasively that the differences are not so striking once we consider the use to which Descartes is putting the term intellectus in the passage just cited and in the early work generally. There are, he claims, at least three ways of understanding intellectus. In the passage being considered, the term refers to "the mind with all its powers". Taken this broadly, there is no contradiction between the earlier and later views, for Descartes' "...'voluntarization' of judgement goes hand in hand with an 'intellectualization' of volition". Cf. Caton (1975), 101.
terminus of why that belief was adopted". Petrik finds the latter sort of claim straightforwardly absurd and contrasts it with the theory that beliefs always result from some mixture of the weight of reasons, the passions, and childhood prejudices. Judgement remains the most distinctive act of the will, but it is, on Petrik's understanding, an operation which is nevertheless fully determined by the weight of evidence offered up by the intellect.

Presenting Petrik's argument in this light may lead to a misunderstanding of it, however, because it might seem as though he were interpreting Descartes as a faculty theorist. To speak of the will acting on the information of the understanding sounds as though in any mental operation the mind is being bifurcated into two temporally and logically distinct parts or events. Petrik wants to avoid this way of thinking, putting forward instead a holistic theory of the mind as the real Cartesian doctrine. On this theory, a judgement does not involve two separate events - a perception and a volition- but is rather "a perception that has conative force". To will something then is nothing more or less than having a perception which has specific conative force.

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18 Petrik op. cit., 39.

19 Ibid., 111.
Petrik has identified and attempted to resolve a real problem in Descartes' account of mental activity. It does look as though Descartes' notion of the intellect offering up bare information—information which has no propositional content—which the will then somehow infuses with propositional meaning, is incoherent. If the will is in itself simply the power to deny, assent, doubt, and so on, then how does it "know" when and why it should perform one of these acts rather than an alternative one unless it is guided in this choice by the contents of the understanding? The very ability which the will has to make the choice in one direction or the other seems to presuppose that an idea already has some propositional content, so that the will "sees" it as making a definite claim which is either true or false. Bernard Williams summarizes the problem:

I can assent only to something of the nature of a proposition: one believes or refuses to believe, that such and such is the case.  

Williams concludes that if Descartes is to say that what we assent to are ideas, he must include propositional ideas. It might be better to say, with Lilli Alanen, that clear and distinct ideas as such have true propositional "counterparts"  

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20 Williams (1978), 182.
rather than saying that they are propositional per se.\textsuperscript{21} I take this to mean simply that such ideas can always be resolved into propositional form: a that-clause which is necessarily true given the clarity and distinctness of the idea in question.

This may be a difficult position to defend on Descartes' terms. The problem is that if we accept it, it appears as though we will have to abandon Descartes' claim that ideas are in themselves neither true nor false. Obviously the perception that the angles of a triangle are equivalent to 180 degrees is truth-functional. Williams notes, however, that there need be no insurmountable difficulty here if we interpret Descartes' doctrine about the non-truth-functional nature of ideas as the claim that the mere consideration of a given idea-proposition does not in itself commit an agent to either assent or denial with respect to that idea. This is true but should not obscure another crucial point: that the will is pushed more or less strongly in a certain direction given the prior presentation of a specific sort of idea like the one about the Euclidean triangle. In other words, Descartes thinks that a specific propositional attitude is "commanded" by the propositional content of the understanding, in the case of clear and distinct ideas that of

\textsuperscript{21} Alanen (1994), 216.
assent or affirmation. I will return to this point later in this chapter.

For his part, Petrik is presumably going further than Williams, by saying not only that Descartes must "include" propositional ideas among the ideas to which the will assents, but that all ideas -regardless of their relative clarity or obscurity- necessarily possess a determinate propositional content. Both Petrik and Williams see this as a possible problem for Descartes, since if ideas have determinate propositional content, willing appears to become a superfluous mental operation. Why do I need to add my assent to a proposition which by itself is more or less irresistible? Petrik however welcomes this outcome because he thinks it proves Descartes is no voluntarist. An operation of the will is not logically separable from the idea which occasions it, and a fortiori the will cannot act in a way contrary to that in which the idea prompts it. In the next section I will attempt to extricate Descartes from some of these difficulties, but for the moment I will confine myself to pointing out two flaws in Petrik's analysis.

First, since his account of judgement rests on showing that Descartes is not a voluntarist, Petrik must show that the very substantial number of texts wherein Descartes appears to argue
for voluntarism do not represent Descartes' real position. This Petrik fails to do. The textual evidence suggesting that Descartes held to a voluntarist conception of the will is just too overwhelming. In the Principles, for example, Descartes writes,

The extremely broad scope of the will is part of its very nature. And 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. 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, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than if we could not do otherwise.\(^{22}\)

Here voluntary actions are expressly contrasted with those which come about by "necessity". A few articles later Descartes claims that "the free actions of men" are "undetermined",\(^{23}\) a fact which is, he argues, reconcilable with divine preordination. And finally, in his reply to Hobbes, Descartes claims that "...if we simply consider ourselves we will all realize in the light of our own experience that voluntariness and freedom are one and the

\(^{22}\) (AT VIIA 18-19), I, 205.

\(^{23}\) (AT VIIIA 20), I, 206.
same thing."

It is difficult to read these passages as anything less than a recognition by Descartes that the voluntaristic conception of free will is a basic metaphysical reality. Whether or not such a conception represents the height of freedom is an entirely separate matter (which I will address below), but Petrik would at the least seem to be on shaky ground in claiming that Descartes did not even recognize the possibility of voluntaristic action.

Second, and more importantly for my purposes in this chapter, Petrik's necessitarian interpretation of Descartes cannot make adequate sense of Descartes' theory of error. That theory depends, as we have seen, on the claim that will is by its nature free to exceed the determinations of the intellect. I err precisely insofar as my will goes beyond what is contained in the understanding. If, for example, I were to go beyond the idea of a particular pain I am experiencing and assert that that pain exists in the foot in which I seem to feel it, I would be committing just the sort of error Descartes describes. If I were to investigate the perception more carefully I would discover that the pain is in fact an idea, that its locus is therefore the mind, and that the foot is only undergoing some kind of purely

\[\text{(AT VII 191), II, 134.}\]
mechanical stress conformable to the laws of nature. Or again, Descartes argues against Gassendi that when I judge that an apple which is in fact poisoned is nutritious, my judgement goes beyond the contents of the understanding. The latter only tell me that the smell, colour, etc. of the apple are pleasant, but my judgement is clouded by the fact that I want to eat the apple. The bare contents of perception do not allow for the judgement that the apple is nutritious.²⁵

Petrik reads Descartes' statement about the will exceeding the intellect differently. Asking rhetorically how it is possible on a holistic model of the mind to account for this notion, he maintains that,

[the answer to this problem lies in the fact that intellectus in the solution to the problem of error refers only to the class of clear and distinct ideas, and not to the class of all perceptions, both clear and obscure. Thus, when [Descartes] says that the will extends beyond the intellect, he does not mean that we have a contentless volition; rather he means that the content of the volition is not clearly and distinctly

²⁵ (AT VII 377), II, 259. Gassendi had argued that "...the scope of the intellect is at the very least no narrower than that of the will, since the will never aims at anything which the intellect has not already perceived." Later he claimed that the scope of the intellect is even greater than that of the will, since the intellect always leads the will in its, the will's, choices ((AT VII 314), II, 218). Descartes' categorical response to these challenges is that "...the will can after all be directed toward an object which the intellect does not impel it towards" ((AT VII 378), II, 260).
To be in error is just to have a conatively charged obscure perception to which the will then automatically assents. Petrik's reading of Descartes here implies both that we are always in error save when under the sway of clear and distinct ideas, and that such error is inevitable in the sense that once we are in a state of error we cannot escape it through an act of will. Presumably we just have to wait until the erroneous perception passes of its own accord. Neither of these claims is acceptable. The first one would imply that Descartes does not have a notion of the probable. But the weight of reasons in a given situation could favour one course of action or belief over another without doing so clearly and distinctly or even very strongly. In this case, although our perceptions are technically speaking "obscure" it would nevertheless not be correct to say that in acting or believing in accordance with the weight of reasons we are erring. This is especially pertinent in ethics. As we will see in chapter

\[26\] Petrik op. cit., 126. Although Petrik relies here on Caton's analysis of intellectus (cf. note 17, above), he is, with no independent justification for doing so, distorting Caton's semantic distinctions. The only designation which fits Petrik's analysis here is that according to which intellectus refers, in Caton's words, to the "...pure understanding, as distinguished from sensation and imagination" (Caton op. cit., 101). But this obviously picks out a faculty rather than a class of ideas, as Petrik would have it.
two and beyond, while it makes little sense to speak in this
domain of clear and distinct ideas, it does not follow that our
ethical actions are always instances of error or sin. If they
were, there would be no helpful way of making normative
distinctions within the sphere of non-clear and distinct ideas,
and practical philosophy, to say nothing of normatively governed
action, would be entirely baseless and futile. This is an extreme
solution to the problem of error, one which Descartes' real views
do not however force us to accept.

Moreover, Petrik's claims here cannot account for Descartes'
insistence that error is an activity for which we are
responsible. We are, on Petrik's analysis, in error in spite of
ourselves, inasmuch as our ideas are not clear and distinct.
There are two sides to this problem. The first is that Descartes
is clear in the Meditations and elsewhere that error is a kind of
intellectual sin,27 and that when we commit it, we could have
done otherwise. The second, then, is that we can avoid error by
refusing to assent hastily to obscure ideas. Petrik can provide

27 In the Synopsis to the Meditations Descartes disclaims any
connection between error and sin ((AT VII 15), II, 11). But in
Meditation Four, he does connect the two. In explaining that the
will can extend beyond the intellect, he says that this activity
allows the will to "...easily turn aside from what is true and
good, and this is the source of...error and sin" ((AT VII 58), II,
40-1).
no robust understanding of what it means to withhold judgement, which for Descartes is the methodological cornerstone of his attempt to reconstitute the sciences. If error is just assenting to obscure ideas while ideas themselves fully determine the will, then Descartes' repeated invocations of the possibility of epistemological therapy are misguided and otiose.

My purpose in this section has been to lay the foundation for a discussion of Descartes' doctrine of freedom. The latter cannot be approached without first understanding his thoughts on judgement and error. In the course of criticizing the theories of Brentano and Petrik relative to these themes, I have established (a) that judgement is the genus term for all operations of the will, of which assent and denial (for example) are species; and (b) that judgements thus understood are not for Descartes simply "conatively charged perceptions", because if they were Descartes' entire theory of error would be undermined. Most of my efforts in this section have been critical, and the precise nature and scope of judgement remain as a result somewhat obscure. Only in the context of a discussion of freedom can a more comprehensive characterization of judgement emerge. I therefore turn now to the problem of freedom proper.
C. Freedom in Meditation Four and the Letter to Mesland.

Descartes seems to uphold two mutually conflicting notions of freedom. The first is liberty of spontaneity, according to which we are most free when determined by reasons but undetermined by external forces; the second is liberty of indifference according to which we are free just to the extent that we choose. The two doctrines appear together in the Meditations:

...the will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid); or rather (vel potius), it consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force.28

In the first part of the passage Descartes defines the will simply as the power to do or not do something - liberty of indifference. In the second part, he defines liberty as action determined by the weight of reasons, i.e. the truth, but undetermined by external compulsion - liberty of spontaneity. The two notions seem opposed because the second seems to rule out the first, since if my will is compelled by the weight of reasons it makes little sense to speak of choice. The concept of choice implies an ability to do otherwise. As plausible as this seems, it is a reading of Descartes which should be resisted to some

28 (AT VII 57), II, 40.
extent. The reason is that when we assent spontaneously to the truth we have, as Descartes sees it, no desire to do otherwise. This is precisely why he says that we feel no external compulsion in such cases. There is therefore no reason to deny that the spontaneous operations of the will are choices. I will return to this point shortly.

By setting it up in direct contrast to freedom of spontaneity, Descartes is clear that liberty of indifference involves choice against the weight of reasons. Of course such a contrast implies that there is always a weight of reasons, which may not however be the case. So, later in the same passage Descartes introduces a second kind of indifference, that state wherein my will is not moved in any direction because the information presented to it offers as much weight for a given belief or action as against it. He goes on to define this kind of indifference as the "lowest grade of freedom", and spontaneity, where my will is guided ineluctably either by divine grace or natural philosophy, as its highest grade. To do justice to Descartes' description of the balance of reasons as indifferent we need to revise the account of indifference just sketched, and see it as inadequately compelled choice. This more general definition is necessary given

29 (AT VII 58), II, 40.
Descartes' claim that we can choose in a state of balance, even though there is no compelling reason to choose one way rather than another. So activity against the weight of reasons on the one hand and in a state of balance on the other are two species of a more general conception of willful activity which is indifferent to, or inadequately guided by, the causal force of ideas.30 There are then three distinct kinds of freedom being compared with one another in this passage. What is the ideal form of freedom as Descartes sees it? The most plausible reading is that there is a subordination of ambivalence to indifference and a further subordination of both of these to spontaneity. In what follows I will defend this as the definitive Cartesian doctrine of freedom.

There is a strain in Descartes' thinking on the will emerging in a letter to Mesland, written in February of 1645, which appears to challenge the view of freedom expressed in Meditation Four. In clarifying to Mesland what he meant by "indifference" in the Meditations account of freedom, Descartes now asserts that he cannot find fault with those who see indifference, when properly defined, as a "positive faculty". Such indifference needs here to

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30 Nevertheless, in the interest of clarity I will henceforth refer to the situation of balance as "ambivalence", and the power to choose contrary to the weight of reasons as "indifference".
be understood not as ambivalence - where like Buridan's Ass we are frozen before two or more rationally equivalent possibilities - but as determinate willful activity directly contradicting the weight of reasons obtaining in the understanding. On this picture, not only is the will able to move in a direction contrary to that prescribed by reason, but in doing so it may even be expressing itself in an ideally free manner:

For it is always open to us to hold back from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by doing so.31

Descartes maintains further that freedom may consist precisely "in a greater use of the positive power which we have of following the worse although we see the better". His purpose in this letter is in fact to defend his original conception of indifference, understood as ambivalence, as the lowest grade of freedom, that state in which we are simply not moved by any of our possible courses of action. In contrast to this situation, acting in a manner contrary to reason is seen as a free use of a positive power. So, as in Meditation Four, there are in this letter three kinds of freedom elucidated by Descartes, but the mutual ranking they receive appears to challenge the earlier

31 (AT IV 173), III, 245.
view. As Descartes would now have it, we are most free when (1) our acts follow the weight of reasons in the understanding; or equally when (2) our acts are contrary to the weight of reasons in the understanding. We are least free when (3) we are in a state of ambivalence. The problem is that Descartes appears to put (1) and (2) on an equal footing, or even to place (2) above (1).

In the two subsections which follow I will both address this apparent inconsistency and work out a general account of the interaction of will and idea. In the first subsection, I will examine just how much power or scope the indifferent will has according to Descartes. My analysis here is guided by three questions. (a) Does the will have the capacity, as the Letter to Mesland seems to indicate it does, to refuse assent even to clear and distinct ideas? (b) What is the distinction between active and passive operations of the will? And finally (c) what is the status of inherently obscure or "materially false" ideas with respect to the indifferent will? In the second subsection I examine directly the apparent claim in the Letter to Mesland letter that it may be a good thing from the moral point of view for the will to exercise its countercausal power without overriding regard to the truth.
(i) The Scope of the Indifferent Will.

(a) Clear and Distinct Ideas. By arguing that the will can both refuse to assent to a clearly perceived truth and pursue a good which is contrary to reason, Descartes seems to have compromised significantly the stark view of the will as wholly subservient to reason when the latter presents clear and distinct ideas. Anthony Kenny however denies that Descartes' thinking really underwent any changes in this period, asserting that the letter to Mesland is of a single piece with the doctrine of the Meditations.\(^\text{32}\) Although Kenney is right that the Mesland letter does not introduce any ideas that are not, at least in embryo, in the Meditations, I think it is difficult not to see a change of stress between the two texts. Moreover, I show below that there are good historical reasons for thinking such a change did take place. However this may be, Kenny argues that when Descartes claims it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good he did not mean that we can do this while we are in fact in apprehension of the true and the good. At the moment of such apprehension our will is compelled to assent to the perception of truth or goodness.

\(^{32}\) Kenney (1972).
Katherine Sherman notes that what Kenny overlooks is the reason this is so. If the will refused assent to a clear and distinct perception of the truth it would involve itself in a contradiction since Descartes defines a clear and distinct idea as one which appears only to the attentive mind and the ability to direct attention is precisely an act of will. The will cannot simultaneously hold attention and withdraw it. Thus in saying that a person can refuse assent to a clearly perceived truth, Descartes is only saying that by doing so such a person would simply cease having a clear and distinct perception of that truth.\textsuperscript{33} I will define this interpretation as the "ignorance thesis". It states that it is possible to doubt a true idea-proposition only if one has become ignorant of the specific contents of that proposition, though one must of course still have some notion of it, however faint.

The problem for Descartes' account is how to explain the very possibility of our moving from the apprehension of an evident truth to our withdrawing attention from it without undermining the strong claim that we \textit{must} assent to such truths. The ignorance thesis is initially attractive because it denies that attention withdrawal needs to be -or indeed can be- motivated by

\textsuperscript{33} Sherman (1974), 563.
the desire to doubt an evident truth. One only needs to claim that since the understanding does not always hold a given perception clearly and distinctly for very long, no activity is required to withdraw attention from it. When the power of the perception wanes, the will is thereby given scope to withdraw its attention. Even if the perception does not wane of its own accord, it can simply be replaced by a different one insofar as the attention of the agent is, for whatever reason, required elsewhere. In neither case is it necessary to suppose that the will is withdrawing attention in order to deny the truth in question.

Although I think it is basically correct, the ignorance thesis seems to fly in the face of what Descartes actually says in this letter. He claims, quite unambiguously it seems, that we can always hold back from pursuing a "clearly known good", and that we can follow the worse even as we "see the better".34 It seems then that we must recognize that the will has the power to see and reject an evident truth and that this kind of act may not require a prior diminution in knowledge of that truth. In this case, however, it will be difficult to avoid the conclusion that this represents a contradiction in Descartes' thinking insofar as

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34 (AT IV 173-4), III, 245.
the necessitarian reading of the power of clear and distinct ideas has overriding appeal for him.

The force of this apparent contradiction can be blunted by making a distinction, on Descartes' behalf, between ideas which are clear and distinct and those which are merely clear.\textsuperscript{35} For example, although in the \textit{Meditations} Descartes claims to have proved the existence of God indubitably, in a letter of 1648 to Silhon he makes a distinction between the knowledge we have of God via natural reasoning and discursive inquiry on the one hand and the kind of knowledge we can have of Him via the beatific vision on the other. Whereas the former methods are "even at their clearest" only "gross and confused", the latter is presented by a "direct impress of divine clarity on our understanding". Later in the same letter, Descartes draws an analogy between this latter kind of certainty and that obtained in the \textit{cogito}.\textsuperscript{36}

It can be argued then that these two truths - the beatific vision and the \textit{cogito}- stand alone for Descartes as absolutely indubitable, so that when he claims that the will is impelled to assent to clear and distinct truths he has only these two in mind

\textsuperscript{35} I owe this point to Calvin Normore.

\textsuperscript{36} (AT V 136-8), III, 330-1.
(though of course there could be others). In contrast to these truths, in the passages from the Mesland letter where Descartes makes his claims about our will's powers, he only speaks of our ability to act contrary to "clearly perceived truths" or "very evident" reasons rather than clearly and distinctly perceived truths or strictly indubitable reasons. I would suggest that the ignorance thesis makes very little sense with respect to the beatific vision and the cogito, and that any attempt to doubt sincerely the truths they contain would fail. And this means not just that one cannot doubt them while one is attending to them, but equally that one cannot doubt them "after" this because it makes no sense to speak of our entertaining them in some sense while not being in a state of intuitive clarity with respect to them (this is not to deny that an act of will is, at least in the case of the cogito, required to bring the truth to attention in the first place). For, first, I presume that on attaining the beatific vision, one is permanently thereafter infused with the

37 (AT IV 173), III, 245. On the relation of clarity to distinctness Descartes claims that an idea can be clear without being distinct but not conversely, which fits the interpretation of the Mesland letter here put forward. Thus, for example, one could have a clear perception of a pain which however one indistinctly judges to exist in the "pained" area (e.g., the foot), although one could not have distinctly localized the pain as the mental phenomenon it is without at the same time having a clear awareness of it ((AT IXB 22), I, 209).
"divine clarity" of which Descartes speaks. As for the cogito, any attempt to doubt it, places one immediately back in that state of intuitive clarity in which its truth is seen clearly and distinctly.\footnote{There may be some warrant to claim that the cogito can in fact be doubted according to Descartes. In the Third Meditation, he asserts that before he knows if there is a God and whether or not He can be a deceiver he cannot be fully certain about "anything" ((AT VII 36), II, 25). Curley notes with respect to this passage that Descartes "...makes no exception in favour of his own existence, as he might easily have done", and concludes that Descartes in fact doubts his own existence at the beginning of the Third Meditation. Cf. Curley (1978), 94-5. Gueroult puts forward a similar point, arguing that the persistence of the evil genius at this point in the argument, "...rend précaire et chancelante la certitude du cogito, qui cesse d'apparaître comme absolue". Cf. Gueroult (1955), 155-6. I would argue, on the contrary, that any attempt to actually doubt the truth of the cogito must end in affirming it, and that these commentators therefore misinterpret Descartes on this point.} I conclude that what Descartes says in the letter about the scope of indifference does not represent an evolution in his thinking on this problem from the Meditations account of freedom. For there the will is seen simply as the ability to choose, but at no point is this ability said to extend to clear and distinct ideas. Clear and distinct ideas, interpreted narrowly, are beyond the reach of the indifferent will.

However, the ignorance thesis has some merit with respect to all ideas which are not clear and distinct, and with respect to these ideas we must concur with Kenny and Sherman that Descartes...
could not in the Letter to Mesland have meant that we can reject an evident truth while attending to it, though we can do so if we withdraw attention from it. But the reliance of this thesis on the phenomenon of attention withdrawal requires some scrutiny. I suggest that we can resolve some of the perplexities in Descartes' thinking here by construing attention withdrawal as "attention diversion". That is, Descartes' should be taken as arguing that our will can refuse assent to a clearly perceived truth only for a reason which is seen to override the truth in question and which therefore diverts the will's attention. So in the letter to Mesland Descartes does not speak of our simply refusing assent to clear and distinct ideas but of our doing so only "...provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will in so doing", where the latter reason provides the will with the form of its (in this case) negating or refusing activity.

This is how we need to supplement the thesis of attention withdrawal. Attention can only be withdrawn for a reason, where

39 Thus Descartes explains to Regius that although we are able to understand something without an attendant operation of the will, the converse is not possible: "...we cannot will anything without understanding what we will" ((AT III 372), III, 182). I take this to mean that the will always needs a reason for its operations.

40 (AT IV 173), III, 245.
this reason is "fitted" to the activity of the will. To pursue
the example just raised, demonstrating my freedom is seen by me
as a better thing to do than assenting to an evident truth. This
sort of act will be extremely difficult given the low degree of
obscurity which evident or clear truths as such possess. But it
must be possible for the will to find a reason which is taken to
override even an evident truth, though it may be the case that
the only effective one is precisely this desire to assert my
countercausal freedom. Nor should it be objected that this
account in fact strips the will of any countercausal capacity,
and that I am therefore agreeing with the necessitarian reading
of Descartes put forward by Petrik. From what I have said it does
not follow that the will must act in accordance with the reason
it takes to be overriding, which is the real point of the
necessitarian reading. It can refuse to so act, though again it
makes no sense to say that it can do so save for some other
reason. Moreover all this talk about the indifferent activity of
the will being more or less "difficult" highlights the crucial
point that there are for Descartes degrees to which the will is
able to divert its attention depending on the sort of idea with
which it is faced. This notion has interesting implications for
how we think of the activity and passivity of the will.
(b) Activity and Passivity. Consider first Hiram Caton's claim that Descartes propounds a fundamental asymmetry between truth and error:

The truth of things or ideas can be known prior to judging them because clear ideas are known to be true per se; it follows then that judgement plays no role in knowledge of truth... At no point in the Meditations does Descartes say that knowledge of truth requires judgement, whereas he affirms throughout that the commission of error does. Just this asymmetry of judgement in the two cases marks the asymmetry of truth and error.41

But contra Caton Descartes himself makes a distinction in the Replies between "our clearest and most careful judgements" and those which are false.42 This fits my analysis according to which "judgement" is a stand-in term for "operation of the will". The kernel of truth in Caton's asymmetry thesis, however, is that there must be for Descartes a fundamental distinction between active and passive operations of the will. So rather than saying that the need for judgement as such waxes and wanes depending on the amount of "light" in the understanding, Caton should have said that the knowledge of truth involves only passive judging whereas the commission of error involves active judging. In the presence of a clear and distinct idea for example the will

41 Caton op. cit., 93.

42 (AT VII 143-4), II, 102-3.
judges, but passively, which just means that its propositional attitude -assent- is in this case fully fixed by the idea in question.

My formulation here raises a problem however. For in the Passions Descartes writes that "all our volitions" are actions of the soul, which "...we experience...as proceeding directly from our soul and as seeming to depend on it alone". This statement seems to imply that volitions are always active. But as the next article makes clear Descartes is here taking the active-passive distinction as applying broadly to the distinction between causes and effects. The two types of action of the will he identifies are those which give rise on the one hand to effects in the soul and on the other to effects in the body. In both cases the will initiates a causal sequence which terminates in one of these two sources. This leaves open a third possibility for the will: that it is itself the terminus of an antecedent causal sequence, and is therefore passive. However, a crucial distinction is in order at this point. Not just any response of the will to an antecedent causal sequence is passive in the sense which is relevant to my argument here. We must distinguish between illusory and authentic

\[43\ (AT \ XI \ 342), \ I, \ 335, \ art. \ 17.\]

\[44\ (AT \ XI \ 343), \ I, \ 335, \ art. \ 18.\]
passivity. My merely habitual reaction to a cause, where there is however no compulsion over and above the force of habit itself, may appear to me passive but it is not. Illusory passivity is therefore just a form of activity. We are authentically passive, on the other hand, when our will is really "compelled" in a certain direction in the presence of the truth.

However, for the very same reasons that we need to resist thinking of freedom of spontaneity as precluding choice, we should resist thinking of authentic passivity as precluding activity. It is just such a recognition which leads Frankfurt to deny that the will can be passive and to claim instead that

...it is only as actions that volitions can occur. Thus activity is the essence of the will. Volition precludes passivity by its very nature. 45

Frankfurt argues correctly that no movement of my will, if we restrict the latter to choices and decisions, is an "impersonal occurrence" in the sense that in these cases the will moves without my moving it. No choice of mine as such merely happens so that I am a passive bystander to its occurrence. However, as Frankfurt himself recognizes, this is not to deny the possibility that we may have reasons for action or assent which are so

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45 Frankfurt (1989), 127.
compelling that we will spontaneously in accordance with them.\textsuperscript{46} For example, Luther's, "Here I stand, I can do no other" involves, I would argue, a passive operation of his will which however does not in any way render Luther himself a mere bystander of his own (relevant) actions or beliefs. It follows that an operation of my will can be both determined (therefore passive) and quintessentially mine (therefore active). As with spontaneous choice, the key to this notion of activity is that the operation of my will in the presence of clear and distinct ideas is a determination of my nature as a truth seeker. I want to affirm such ideas, even though the option of not doing so is not available to me. This is the import of Descartes' claim that the more reasons there are pushing my will in a specific direction the more free I am, and that in this case "...freedom, spontaneity and voluntariness are the same thing".\textsuperscript{47}

So clear and distinct ideas will force maximal (authentic) passivity because the will cannot but assent to them. In contrast, we might think of the perfect balance of reasons which occasions ambivalence as the opposite end of the spectrum of ideas. When he first introduces the notion of ambivalence in the

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 129.

\textsuperscript{47} (AT IV 175), III, 246.
Meditations, Descartes does not actually say that we are able to act in such a state, but only that there is "...no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another".\textsuperscript{48} However, humans -unlike the unfortunate ass of lore- do have the power to transcend the balance of reasons and make a choice in these circumstances. Thus Descartes argues to Mesland that in a state of ambivalence we can "...determine ourselves to things..."\textsuperscript{49}, but he reiterates the Meditation Four claim that such determination represents the lowest degree of freedom. This means that ambivalent choice will lack both authentic passivity and the sort of activity which is its concomitant. Conversely, it means that in this state the will is afforded maximal scope for bad activity -or error- and illusory passivity. Since there are no rational forces acting on the will, whatever choice it makes will be unconstrained by consideration of the truth.

But the most problematic kinds of ideas would seem to fall somewhere between the two extremes I have just described. The class of ideas that are especially pertinent to my argument in this thesis as a whole are those which derive from the senses, the appetites, and the emotions. We can see just what sort of

\textsuperscript{48} (AT VII 58), II, 40.

\textsuperscript{49} (AT IV 173), III, 245.
relation these ideas have to the will by examining them through Descartes' doctrine of material falsity.

(c) Materially False Ideas. In the course of classifying his ideas in Meditation Three, Descartes claims that some of his ideas of sense may for all he knows represent nothing as if it were something:

For although...falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can occur only in judgements, there is another kind of falsity, material falsity, which occurs in ideas when they represent non-things as things (non rem tanquam rem repraesentant). ⁵⁰

Descartes goes on to say that the idea he has of cold, for example, does not by itself tell him whether cold is a positive entity existing outside of him or merely the privation of heat. Arnauld thought that Descartes was contradicting his own doctrine of ideas here, according to which falsity is a property of judgements, not ideas proper. Even if the idea in question is not representationally about what it purports to be about, it is not on that score false -we have simply misjudged it. ⁵¹ The crux of Arnauld's argument is this:

What is the idea of cold? It is coldness itself insofar as it exists objectively in the intellect. But if cold is an absence, it cannot exist objectively in the

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⁵⁰ (AT VII 43-4), II, 30.

⁵¹ (AT VII 206), II, 145.
intellect by means of an idea whose objective existence is a positive entity. Therefore if cold is merely an absence, there cannot ever be a positive idea of it, and hence there cannot be an idea which is materially false.\textsuperscript{52}

This is similar to an argument about Cartesian ideas made by Arthur Danto. The point raised by both Arnauld and Danto is that insofar as an idea is representational, is of an object external to itself, it cannot fail to be of that object without at the same time forfeiting its specific representational properties.\textsuperscript{53}

That is, if the causal account of representation is right, then I can only be caused to have an idea by what makes that idea true. A representation of \( x \) therefore conceptually entails the existence of an object \( \text{cum cause} \) satisfying the idea's truth-conditions, otherwise I just would not have an idea of \( x \). As Danto puts it, "...every idea licences an ontological argument".\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} (AT VII 206), II, 145.

\textsuperscript{53} Arthur Danto (1987), 295.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. It is important to note that Descartes himself seems only to be committed to the existence of possible objects answering to his ideas of them, not actual ones. As M. Wilson notes, "...when Descartes asks whether an idea represents something real, or \( \text{rem} \), he is asking whether or not it gives him cognizance of a possible existant". M. Wilson (1978), 107-8. In the citation she uses to support her claim Desartes says, "...for although perhaps one may imagine that [God] does not exist, it cannot be supposed that the idea of such a being represents something unreal" ((AT VII 46), II,
In Descartes' language, every idea has a measure of objective being which tells us something determinate about the formal being of its cause. To say an idea is materially false is therefore apparently to deny that it has objective being. By contrast, the Arnauld-Danto criticism insists that although ideas may represent their putative objects obscurely, just as a faded photograph might, the object must nevertheless be "somewhere" in the representation. In other words, ideas cannot lack objective being altogether. I think Arnauld is right to point out that this is a notion which is so fundamental to Descartes' thinking that to abandon it, as the Meditations articulation of material falsity seems to require, would threaten Descartes' entire epistemology.

In response to Arnauld's questions Descartes therefore shifts his ground very subtly. Rather than insisting on the claim that materially false ideas radically misrepresent their objects he now says that,

...it often happens in the case of obscure and confused ideas -and the ideas of heat and cold fall into this category- that an idea is referred to something other than that of which it is the idea.\(^{55}\)

\(^{31-2}\). My point here carries, however, since all that is required for it is that something "real" answer to the semantic content of representational entities as such.

\(^{55}\) (AT VII 233), II 163.
Although Descartes goes on in this paragraph to reiterate the
Meditation Three claim that the idea of cold may arise from
nothing positive in nature, the focus now is on the extent to
which we tend to refer a certain kind of idea to something other
than that of which it is in fact the idea. Thus the idea of cold,
if it in fact comes from nothing, tends to be seen rather as
proceeding from cold qua positive entity. This leaves open the
possibility that the idea nevertheless does represent cold in the
right way, i.e. as a privation, only that it does not clearly
wear its causal provenance on its face, and so we may be led into
error with respect to it. Descartes is clearly saying here that
this type of error is an instance of formal rather than material
falsity.

What happens in Descartes' reply to Arnauld therefore is that
regardless of the true origin of the idea of cold -whether it
proceeds from something or nothing- it is the intrinsic obscurity
of the idea which may block full comprehension of it. Thus
Descartes in fact now agrees with the Arnauld-Danto line that if
the idea of cold represents a privation, then it is true; while
if it represents a positive entity (assuming that it is a
privation) then it is just not the idea of cold. But, Descartes
continues,
...my only reason for calling the idea 'materially false' is that owing to the fact that it is obscure and confused, I am unable to judge whether or not what it represents to me is something positive which exists outside my sensation. And hence I may be led to judge that it is something positive though it may merely be an absence.\textsuperscript{56}

The argument now rests on the claim that certain ideas "provide subject-matter for error" and that this is the sense in which they are materially false. They are uniquely capable of leading the will to make erroneous judgements about their referents.

Thus Descartes need not be seen as maintaining that the simple constituents of ideas themselves lack objective being. Certain ideas are materially false in virtue of their apparently irreducible "confusion" rather than their lack of objective being.\textsuperscript{57} They are just like faded photographs. We have for example a tendency to refer the sensation of "cold" to an

\textsuperscript{56} (AT VII 234), II, 164.

\textsuperscript{57} This is the view of material falsity on which most commentators appear to be converging. Cf. for example Lilli Alanen, op. cit., 219. In her latest paper on this problem M. Wilson supports the notion that materially false ideas do not lack objective being (this constitutes a retraction of her earlier ([1978], 107-116) position on this question). Instead, she would have us posit a distinction on Descartes' behalf between the "referential" and "presentational" aspects of sensory ideas. Thus an idea may "present" obscure information which as such becomes \textit{materia erroris}, though it must at some level always "refer" to its real object. Cf. M. Wilson (1990), 8-12. Cf. also Norman J. Wells (1984), 37. These three philosophers depart on this point from the position of Calvin Normore (1986), 230.
external object such that we posit coldness, in just the sense that we "feel" it. of that object. Descartes' point is that there is as much (or as little) in the bare sensation to warrant this judgement as there is to warrant its opposite.\(^{58}\) At this point, the most we can say about sensory ideas then is that "...there is in the objects (that is in the things, whatever they may turn out to be, which are the source of our sensations) something whose nature we do not know...".\(^{59}\) Of course, we do not always approach our sensory ideas this patiently, which is why they are often referred to something other than that of which they are in fact the idea. Under pressure from Arnauld, Descartes now seems to be saying that this referring is simply the product of a hasty act of will. To call an idea materially false then is just to say that it gives significant scope to the will for just such activity.

Further, as Martha Bolton has observed Descartes now wants to say that all obscure and confused ideas are as such materially

\(^{58}\) How do we account for that feature of an idea which does not represent the external object, its "presentational" aspect as Wilson would have it? Descartes' answer is that it "...arises simply from the fact that my nature is not perfect in all respects" ((AT VII 235), II, 164). This response is amplified by Wells, op. cit., 48-9. For an alternative answer, cf. David and Alan Hausman (1997), ch. 3.

\(^{59}\) (AT VIII A 34), I, 218.
false. An idea that represents nothing as if it were something is, she says, "...an example of a larger class of confused and obscure ideas that represent things as if they were something they are not". What is especially important for my argument in this subsection is that Descartes now identifies a scale of such ideas:

Yet ideas which give the judgement little or no scope for error do not seem as much entitled to be called materially false as those which give great scope for error. It is easy to show by means of examples that some ideas provide much greater scope for error than others.

Confused ideas "made up at will by the mind", such as those of false gods (sic), are said to provide less scope for error than ideas arriving from the senses and these, in turn, provide less scope for error than do ideas arising from the appetites.

In other words, the more confused an idea is - the more materially false it is - the more readily can we formulate mutually conflicting intentional attitudes towards it. The amount of confusion an idea displays determines the extent to which the will can range over the available alternative explanations of that idea. One result of this is that in hard cases there may be

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60 Martha Bolton (1986), 392.
61 (AT VII 233), II, 163.
no effective method to facilitate the passage from illusory to authentic passivity which constitutes the sort of epistemological therapy driving the Meditations. There are two distinct stages to this process. The first is the attempt to work our way back from a bad judgement to its ideational source. In the Sixth Replies Descartes explains that this process is difficult because we tend not to think of our judgements as judgements and so we "...do not distinguish [the will's] operations from simple sense perception". This is what I mean by illusory passivity. Nevertheless, we can learn to withhold attributing "coldness" to nature and simply examine the properties of the idea in order to determine its causal source.

But, second, even if we find our way back to the simple ideational constituent of our belief, its obscurity may prevent us from moving beyond this stage to that of authentic passivity of belief about it. After all, the problem with the idea of cold that Descartes is stressing is that it does not seem to pick out a clear path to its causal source, so I have, apparently, equal reason to describe cold as arising from either a positive or a negative source. The very attempt to verify our belief may land us in debilitating confusion if the originating idea we arrive at

62 (AT VII 438), II, 295.
via this process is materially false. Again, the problem with such ideas is that the representational information they offer is more or less ambiguous, rather than straightforwardly false. And the more ambiguous the idea is, the more difficult will it be for the will to adopt a rational attitude toward it. The connection between the doctrine of material falsity and that of ambivalence should therefore be clear. The notion of material falsity raises the possibility that an entire class of ideas might involve us inevitably in irrational belief and action. If this is the case, freedom of spontaneity with respect to those ideas may seem like a unattainable ideal.

Descartes moreover identifies ideas which arise from the sensations of appetite as those which provide the "greatest scope for error".63 This is significant for two reasons. The first is that on examination such ideas may bring us about as close to a situation of pure balance as ideas can get. The second is that insofar as they are naturally designed to preserve our bodies they are similar to another type of idea, the passions, which Descartes does not however mention explicitly in the discussion of material falsity. Given the functional similarity of the two kinds of ideas, however, it is plausible to suppose that

63 (AT VII 234), II, 163.
Descartes thought of the passions too as extremely materially false. Indeed, I want to claim that the passions are even more materially false than are the bodily appetites, and that this fact has profound implications for the epistemological status of the passions. Much of what follows in this thesis is an attempt to draw out the implications of this claim.

Let me summarize this section. First, I have attempted to clarify Descartes' thinking on the relation of will and idea. This is a complicated task because of the notion that the capacity of the will to act indifferently depends on the strength of the ideational causes acting on it. It is therefore crucial to approach the question about the scope of the will through an analysis of types of ideas. Second, I have shown that there is no reason to see an evolution in Descartes' views about the scope of the will with respect to clear and distinct ideas. At no point in his career does he hold the view that the will is capable of denying clear and distinct ideas, if we place appropriate restrictions on what qualifies as a clear and distinct idea. Nevertheless, there may be evolution on a different front. That is, the Mesland letter can be read with some plausibility as advocating indifference as the ideal form of freedom from the moral point of view. This, if true, would indeed overturn the
earlier view.

(ii) Indifference and the Search for Truth.

Kenney has argued that in the Mesland letter Descartes is describing a kind of "perversity" in apparently making the claim that we can and even should act contrary to reason.64 Two questions can be separated here. The first is whether or not indifference is being held up as the highest form of freedom, as it indeed seems to be in the Mesland letter. The second is whether or not all indifferent or countercausal activity is a perverse exercise of the will. I will argue that both questions should be answered in the negative.

(a) Indifference versus Spontaneity. To Mesland, Descartes invokes a crucial distinction between the moral and metaphysical aspects of the indifferent will: "...even when a strong reason pushes us exclusively to one of two positions, although morally speaking we can hardly embrace the opposite position, absolutely speaking we can".65 By "morally speaking" Descartes is claiming that for all practical purposes it is not possible for us to act contrary to the weight of reasons because in most cases this is

64 Kenney op. cit., 18.

65 (AT IV 173), III, 245.
just straightforwardly irrational and as such is probably damaging to our own self-interest. This usage of "morally" is suggested by Descartes' distinction between moral and metaphysical certainty, where the former is seen as certainty sufficient for all practical purposes. 66 The distinction which the letter makes between moral and absolute freedom can thus be read as saying that although we can act contrary to the weight of reasons, we should not do so in most cases.

This intuitively plausible interpretation is reinforced by what the rest of the letter says. For the most important contrast it makes is not between indifference and spontaneity where the former is seen as morally superior to the latter. Rather, Descartes is contrasting the two kinds of indifference. The passage needs to be quoted at length:

...we cannot...say that we are freer to do those things which seem to us to be neither good nor evil, or in which we recognize many reasons pro but as many reasons contra, than to do those things in which we perceive much more good than evil. For a greater freedom consists either in a greater facility in determining oneself or in a greater use of the positive power which we have of following the worse although we see the better. If we follow the course which appears to have the most reasons in its favour, we determine ourselves more easily; but if we follow the opposite, we make more use of that positive power; and thus we can always act more freely in those cases in which we see more

66 (AT VIIIA 327), I, 289-90.
good than evil than in those cases which are called ...indifferent. 67

If the exercise of indifference as a "positive power" is here seen as a good thing that is only because it is difficult or unnatural to act contrary to the weight of reasons, so Descartes is expressing a kind of admiration for the sheer power which allows us to do this (recall the Meditation Four claim that our capacity to err is a kind of perfection in us). It does not follow that indifference is in any sense superior to spontaneity. Nor however is it clear that indifference and spontaneity are equivalent in any absolute sense. They are compared only relative to the fact that they are both better than ambivalence: both are willful responses to a specific weight of reasons whereas ambivalence is not. Freedom of spontaneity is characterized as ideal because we are, in such a state, following the truth, in contrast to what we do in a state of ambivalence, while indifference is a "great" exercise of freedom, because with it "we make more use of [a] positive power" than we do in other circumstances, again with the contrast to ambivalence most conspicuously in view. 68 I am not suggesting that this letter

67 (AT IV 174), III, 245.
68 Ibid.
entitles us to the claim that indifference is below spontaneity on the moral scale, only that it does not conclusively establish the contrary thesis, and moreover that any equivalence between the two is drawn solely from comparing them to ambivalence.

What then entitles us to speak at all of spontaneity as the moral ideal for Descartes? It might be objected that there is little textual evidence besides Meditation Four—which is itself not unambiguous—to recommend this claim. The letter to Mesland, we have seen, leaves this point at best unanswered. One may, further, point to the number of places in the Principles where Descartes appears clearly to be defending voluntarism as the ideal of freedom.69 These passages are on the face of it indeed surprising for anyone who thinks the Meditations doctrine is the definitive one. For in them Descartes opposes freedom and determination and he even speaks of voluntary activity, understood in explicit distinction from activity performed automatically, as "the supreme perfection of man". Why not take these statements as Descartes' real position on the matter? There are at least two responses to this challenge. The first is simply to note that the Principles is not univocal in its treatment of this problem. Descartes does say, for example, that whenever we

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69 (AT VIIIA 18-21), I, 205-7.
perceive something clearly and distinctly we give our assent to it spontaneously and are "quite unable to doubt its truth", although he does not connect this claim directly to the problem of freedom.\(^7\) Still, it seems difficult to deny that this text is indeed weighted to a preference for voluntarism as the ideal of freedom.

However, Gilson has provided an illuminating historical explanation of why this might be so. Gilson reminds us that the *Principles* was written by Descartes as a potential coursebook in philosophy which as such Descartes hoped would lead to the rapid dissemination of his philosophy. However, philosophical education in the colleges and universities was at the time under the control of the Jesuits who taught the same brand of scholastic Aristoteleanism which Descartes himself had imbibed at La Flèche. So in order to get the new philosophy out and thus to undermine Aristotle from within the French educational system, Descartes needed to ingratiate himself with such influential Jesuits as Dinet, Charlet, Vatier, Fournier and Mesland. Now in the controversy between the Jesuits and the nascent Jansenism over free will and grace, the Jesuits upheld the doctrine of Molina—basically voluntarism or indifference—while the Jansenists were...

\(^7\) (*AT VIIIA 21*), I, 207.
severe critics of this position. Gilson concludes that the doctrine of freedom propounded in the Principles cannot be taken at face value. Descartes, so goes the argument, thought that a slight distortion of his "real" views on the nature of freedom was a small price to pay for the chance of having his physics

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71 Gilson sums up Descartes' position thus: "a bien plus forte raison Descartes devait-il éviter d'introduire dans son cours tout ce qui pouvait être considéré comme une critique des doctrines théologiques en honneur dans la Compagnie; telle était précisément la critique de la liberté d'indifférence. La liberté d'indifférence, c'est Molina; et s'il est un cas où cette union des membres de la Compagnie que Descartes se plaisait à rappeler peut être constatée, c'est bien celui des controverses de la grâce. En s'attaquant à la liberté d'indifférence et par conséquent à Molina, Descartes s'attaquait à la Compagnie de Jésus tout entière dont l'amour-propre était fort engagé dans la querelle et très sensible sur ce point" (Gilson (1987), 332-3).

The Sixth Set of Objections to the Meditations, written by a number of prominent Jesuit theologians and philosophers and compiled by Mersenne, offers a good illustration both of the extent to which the Jesuits were committed to freedom of indifference as a moral ideal, for both humans and God, and Descartes' disagreement with their position: "...a very clear vision and perception of things does not remove indifference of choice; and if indifference cannot be a proper part of human freedom, neither will it find a place in divine freedom, since the essences of things are, like numbers, indivisible and immutable. Therefore indifference is involved in God's freedom of choice no less than it is in the case of human freedom of choice" ((AT VII 417), II, 281). Descartes replies by denying the univocity of essence between divine and human freedom. Thus, "...indifference does not belong to the essence of human freedom, since not only are we free when ignorance of what is right makes us indifferent, but we are also free -indeed at our freest- when a clear perception impels us to pursue some object" ((AT VII 433), II, 292).
become canonical in the educational system.\textsuperscript{72}

That this was in fact a distortion of his views, whereas the critique of indifference was the real view, is established by the profound respect expressed by Descartes for Gibieuf's De Libertate -a long and bitter attack on molinism- which appeared in 1630. In fact, Descartes' admiration for Gibieuf never waned and the latter's doctrines constituted, according to Gilson, the inspiration for the view of freedom articulated in the Meditations.\textsuperscript{73} In further support of his argument, Gilson notes

\textsuperscript{72} We should note Descartes' stated reasons for wanting to publish the Principles. Disillusioned both by what he took to be the carping criticisms of Bourdin in the Seventh Objections and anxious lest the "undercover criticisms" of his philosophy being put forward by Schook and Voetius began to have some success against him, Descartes was forced to abandon his original intention to withhold publication of his views. Instead he decided to "submit to the public the sum total" of his reflections and to thus "fight for the widest possible acceptance" of his philosophy. The clarification-of-my-real-views motive for publishing is not of course incompatible with the motive argued for by Gilson. Cf. ((AT VII 577), II, 389). Against Gilson's thesis that Descartes' concessions to the Jesuits on the problem of freedom was merely opportunistic, however, we can place the reactions to Cartesian ideas of the theologians at Leiden, who tended to see Descartes as a "Jesuit in disguise", implying that the Descartes of the Principles was the real thing. Of course, it could just be the case that the "disguise" was more complicated than they supposed. On these questions, cf. Verbeek (1992), 47 and \textit{passim}.

\textsuperscript{73} To Mersenne Descartes writes (in 1641), "...I do not know that it is an article of faith to believe that [God] is indifferent, and I feel confident that Father Gibieuf will defend my position well on this matter; for I wrote nothing which is not in accord with what he has said in his book De Libertate" ((AT III 68..."
that the years between the publication of the *Meditations* (1641) and that of the *Principles* (1644) saw a change in fortune for the critics of molinism. Whereas in 1641 the Jesuits considered such critics as relatively harmless, by 1644 this criticism had spread to a dangerously broad constituency of theologians, and was accordingly taken as a far more potent threat to orthodox Jesuitical doctrine. It was therefore simply not prudent for Descartes to criticize molinism at this time. I submit then that Gilson's analysis gives us good reason to suppose that Descartes did not espouse voluntarism as the ideal of freedom, as the *Principles* suggests. As was the case with the question of the scope of the indifferent will, this means that Descartes' views here underwent no substantive alteration between 1641 and 1645.

Gilson takes this point too far, however. Although we can accept his claim that Descartes did not take indifference to be the height of freedom, Gilson argues in addition —by way of an analysis of Meditation Four— that Descartes did not even recognize it as a positive power. In effect, Gilson interprets the Meditation Four passage analogously to what I characterized as a misinterpretation of the Letter to Mesland. That is, he

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74 Gilson op. cit., 370-84.
reads Descartes as arguing most pointedly against indifference. As Robert Imlay has noted, however, Descartes' "clear preference" in this passage for liberty of spontaneity is meant to tell most emphatically against ambivalence.\(^7^5\)

Gilson distorts the sense of the vel potius in the original latin of the passage where Descartes contrasts indifference with spontaneity, effectively converting the first definition of freedom -indifference- into one half of an exclusive disjunction. If one does this, of course, then acceptance of the second disjunct -spontaneity- entails the wholesale rejection of the first. Imlay notes, first, that this type of argumentation "...must strike one as odd in a philosopher otherwise so direct and concise in his style of writing as Descartes". The latin potius is rendered in English as "by preference" or "rather", both of which seem too weak to warrant interpreting the passage as a strict disjunction.\(^7^6\) More importantly, however, as I have also noted in my criticisms of Petrik, such an interpretation does not take adequate account of Descartes' theodicean concerns in the Fourth Meditation. We have seen that he introduces the conception of an infinite will in order to identify humans as the

\(^{75}\) Imlay (1982), 91.

\(^{76}\) Ibid.
source of error and sin and concomitantly to deny that God plays any part in generating these defects. Moreover, just as free will is necessary to the commission of error, so is it in the attempt to rise up out of error and into the light of the truth. Gilson's interpretation cannot account for these subtleties in Descartes' thinking.

(b) Non-Perverse Indifference. However, it could be suggested with some plausibility that the latter criticism applies equally to my own argument. By pressing (authentic) spontaneity of the will as Descartes' moral ideal, have I not been arguing implicitly that all countercausal activity of the will represents an abuse of its powers? If this is so, then it may be the case that I do not take adequate account of the role of the will in the reformation of belief, and that the criticisms I have directed against both Gilson and Petrik on this score can be turned against me as well. This criticism is to some extent just, and my argument can be salvaged as regards it only if I can provide a positive role for the indifferent will. The question amounts to asking how our countercausal power can be exercised non-perversely, and I suggest that this is only possible if this power is used in the service of truth. The most important example of this kind of activity is the sceptical doubt of Meditation One
which presupposes the countercausal power of the will.

Judgement, recall, is the interplay between the two faculties -will and intellect- in any one of a variety of modes. But Descartes also speaks of structuring principles for a will which, because it judges badly, is undergoing epistemological or moral therapy, as in the sceptical doubt or the theory of "determinate judgements" in the Passions.  This theory of meta-judgements whose chief function is to overturn habitual and faulty lower-level judgements. They are constituted by a commitment to a value, the search for truth, and provide the agent with a method for realizing that value in his concrete beliefs and actions. Only if we have them, and they are believed and acted upon, can we fight the dominion of faulty beliefs. Thus the doubt is generated by a prior free commitment on my part to purify my beliefs about the world on a class by class basis.

These meta-judgements are then psychologically entrenched methods which structure the will's response to certain classes of ideas which may contain false individual beliefs. Descartes

77 (AT XI 367), I, 347. I expand on this theory in chapter 4, below.

78 Cf. the Synopsis of the Meditations where the mind, by "using its own freedom", enters upon the process of sceptical doubt ((AT VI 12), II, 9).
compares false beliefs to rotten apples which as such might infect the entire barrel of apples in which they are contained. The strategy then is to empty the barrel, then sort through the apples one by one in order to locate and discard those which are rotten. What is important about the metaphor is that the act of rejecting an entire class of beliefs is, strictly speaking, an error since many of the individual beliefs are true and will eventually be readopted. This Descartes' meditator admits, claiming that he needs to "deceive himself" that all of his former opinions "are utterly false and imaginary". So there are two forces acting on his will, against both of which the doubt is employed. On the one hand, the force of custom inclines him to believe things which may in fact be false, while on the other the truth itself, whether or not it has the sanction of custom, also inclines his assent. Because they are so difficult to separate from one another, however, both of these forces are now actively resisted. For example, I may have the two following beliefs about my sensation of a brown chair: there is an object external to me causing this sensation and it "contains" browning in just the sense that I perceive this colour. The first belief is true, the

79 (AT VII 481), II, 324.

80 (AT VII 22), II, 15.
second false, but both are declared false in the initial stages of the doubt. Both, moreover, incline my will to assent— the first primarily because it is true, the second because I have been taught that it is true and because there is a natural (or common-sensical) tendency to think that objects possess all the qualities they seem to cause in us.

Such structuring principles are therefore required just to the extent that we are to whatever degree in the grip of epistemological and moral prejudice. Acting in accordance with them involves the indifferent power of the will because such prejudices are, in spite of their possible falsity, maintained and reinforced by a causally compelling bond between idea and will. Resisting any of these connections will therefore be more or less difficult, depending on its relative strength. If this were not the case Meditation One would be merely a pedantic and sterile conceptual exercise—as Hobbes for example wrongly took it to be. The ideal outcome of all this activity is that our ideas will all be optimally clear, and we will as a result assent to them spontaneously, "such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force". I conclude therefore that

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81 (AT VII 171), II, 121.
82 (AT VII 57), II, 40.
although perception of the truth does not require, and indeed precludes, countercausal freedom of the will, such a power is necessary to bring us to a situation wherein we can perceive the truth unclouded, assuming we are all to some extent in the epistemological or moral clouds. Getting us to the state of spontaneity therefore represents the only way in which the will can be both indifferent and non-perverse. It seems to me that given his obsession with the search for truth this is what excited Descartes most about our countercausal capacity.

Having said all this, however, perversity remains a real possibility for the will. According to Alquié, for example, the alleged shift in Descartes' thinking on freedom between 1641 and 1645 is profound because it constitutes a recognition by Descartes of the "tragic" character of free but finite beings. Thus we are simultaneously drawn toward the True and the Good, and impelled to assert our freedom by turning away from them. We might say that Descartes prefigures Milton in sympathising, though perhaps only tentatively, with a Satan whose conflict of allegiance to God and ambition to be God encapsulates the human condition.\(^3\) Descartes the proto-existentialist is not the whole

\(^3\) Thus Alquié: "enfin, les propos où Descartes désigne la liberté comme soif d'être expriment à la fois un désir moral de soumission à un Être extérieur au mien, et l'ambitieux besoin de
Descartes but Alquié's view has some force.

D. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to show that we are for Descartes really free only when our ideas are ideally clear and distinct so that we assent to them spontaneously. Liberty of indifference is a mere means for achieving this ideal while all exercises of indifference not in accordance with this design are thereby perverse. A concise way of characterizing my argument is to see it as an attempt to steer a middle course between Gilson and Alquié. Thus Gilson is right to say that freedom of spontaneity is the moral ideal but wrong that freedom of indifference is not a real power, and an important one. And Alquié is right to recognize the reality of this latter power but wrong to see Descartes as moving after 1645 to a position wherein freedom of spontaneity is no longer the moral ideal. Much of what remains of this thesis will involve an attempt to assess Descartes' moral philosophy in the light of this complex doctrine of freedom. To that end, I turn in the next chapter to the development of Descartes' thinking in ethics between 1628 and 1645.

posséder les perfections que je conçois" (Alquié (1950), 287).
A. Introduction

We have seen that Descartes' doctrine of freedom is a function of his complex view of the relations between knowledge and the will. In this chapter I examine the development of his attempts to specify the ideal form of this relation in ethics. I thus track his thinking through three stages: the provisional morality of the Discourse, the Elizabeth correspondence, and the first two parts of the Passions. In the first two of these sources Descartes makes the problems of moral practice immune from his general project of methodical philosophical analysis. In lieu of developing a moral philosophy which can guide practical life definitively, he is content in these sources either to adopt a basically conformist posture as regards practical concerns, or to insist vaguely that the passions, though not wholly corrupt, ought to be brought under the control of reason. In the third source, Descartes does undertake to analyze the substantial union of mind and body, but only through an analysis of the passions—an important qualification. I give a detailed account of his method here, the purpose of which is to show the extent to which this analysis emerges as a response to some of the inadequacies
in the two earlier sources.

B. The Provisional Morality

At the outset of Part Three of the Discourse Descartes stipulates a condition which must be met before the reformation of the sciences - the project he had sketched in the preceding two parts - can proceed. He now tells us that this project cannot go forward if unsupported by set of moral principles, that while we are engaged in what Bernard Williams calls "the project of pure inquiry"¹ we require a relatively stable moral code to live by. This is because Descartes does not want to remain indecisive in his actions during the period when reason obliges him to be indecisive in his judgements. Thus he proffers four maxims of a provisional morality (morale par provision).

(i) Maxim One

The first maxim is as follows:

...to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions - the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of

¹ Williams, 1978 (op. cit.).
those with whom I should have to live.\(^2\)

This maxim, to the extent that it advocates an unflinching social conformism, appears to violate both the spirit and letter of the general Cartesian enterprise. In the first two parts of the *Discourse* Descartes had been at great pains to point out the lack of certainty which he had observed among almost all those people who together inculcated in him his various "childhood prejudices". This includes not just ordinary people but also the bulk of the teachers at La Flèche whose opinions passed for knowledge. Thus, early in the *Discourse* Descartes is emphatic that he must "uproot from his mind all the wrong opinions [he] had previously accepted\(^3\)" in order to arrive at the truth. Why then guide himself precisely according to established opinion?

If there is a tension here, it is not difficult to resolve. Descartes thinks he can separate the search for truth in the sciences from demands arising out of moral practice, or at any rate he thinks he can do so " provisionally". The search for truth in the sciences - chiefly the investigation into the metaphysical basis and corporeal constituents of bodies, but also the investigation of God and the soul- can proceed without direct

\(^2\) (AT VI 23), I, 122.

\(^3\) (AT VI 22), I, 122.
reference to or interference from life's more quotidian concerns. This is true only to a point, of course, since we can well imagine scientists' being hindered in their researches as a result of unfavourable social and political conditions. Descartes is only telling us that the Holland of his day is a relatively good place to conduct abstract research in peace, not that following the rules of one's land is good *simpliciter*. Maxim one is just Descartes' recognition of the contingent historical fact that he lives in a land which is comparatively safe for scientists, but he should not be seen as offering us a well worked out political philosophy here.

In any case, Descartes eventually tempers the blank social conformism of maxim one:

...I saw nothing in the world which remained always in the same state, and for my part I was determined to

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4 Descartes explicitly praises Holland because it allows him both to withdraw into solitude and to enjoy the amenities of a civilised country amid a people "...who are more concerned about their own affairs than curious about those of others" ((AT VI 31), I, 126).

5 Nor should he be seen as endorsing established opinion except insofar as it allows him to pursue his studies. Indeed, Burman characterizes the whole code as a purely instrumental smokescreen: 
"[Descartes] does not like writing on ethics, but he was compelled to include these rules because of people like the Schoolmen; otherwise they would have said he was a man without any religion or faith and that he intended to use his method to subvert them" ((AT V 178), III, 352-3).
make my judgements more and more perfect... For these reasons I thought I would be sinning against good sense if I were to take my previous approval of something as obliging me to regard it as a good later on, when it had perhaps ceased to be good... 

This will allow Descartes to turn away from those opinions which he judges to be misguided or which, though they originally appeared credible, are subsequently seen to be false. And this sort of activity, Descartes implicitly claims, can proceed within the terms of a maxim whose chief purpose is to provide stable adherence to established opinion. Indeed, Descartes points out that we ought not to make any "promises" which result in our relinquishing the freedom to revise our opinions. This last part of maxim one should therefore be seen as a re-emphasis of what was there all along, because Descartes had originally said that he would govern his actions according to "the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom [he] should have to live." So even within the confines of an apparently unreflective conformism the imperative to seek out the "most sensible" opinions remains. However, the "opinions" in question here would seem to be just those of the people generally

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6 (AT VI 24), I, 123.
7 Ibid.
8 (AT VI 23), I, 122 (my emphasis).
regarded as the most sensible among those with whom Descartes the scientist must live. Ian Hacking has argued convincingly that in the Renaissance generally a probable opinion is not one supported by what we now think of as evidence, but rather one which is "approved by authority". Hacking does not mention Descartes in connection with this point but it is likely that Descartes has inherited the usage Hacking points out. Hacking's analysis thus illuminates Descartes' tendency in the provisional code to run together "sensible people" and "probable opinions". 9

(ii) Maxim Two

Maxim two consists in the resolution

...to be as firm and decisive in my actions as I could and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain. 10

Descartes goes on to say that even when no single opinion appears more reasonable or probable to us than any other, we should adopt one, and having done so regard it as "most true and certain". He explains that we can do this "...on the grounds that the reason

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9 Hacking (1975), 18-30.

10 (AT VI 24), I, 123.
which made us adopt [it] is itself true and certain".\textsuperscript{11} What is the "true and certain reason" of which Descartes is speaking here? Vance Morgan has argued that Descartes is placing the criterion of right action not in any sense in which our judgements might conform to the world but merely on the "attitude" of the moral agent making the judgements. Morgan writes,

The second maxim specifies that even if there is no definitive rational blessing on one's chosen action, one can still be moral in that action, because what makes an action moral has nothing to do with the reason behind it. What makes an action moral... is the attitude with which one carries out the action after one has decided to perform it, even when the justification for the action is less than purely rational.\textsuperscript{12}

Here we should equate the "rational" with the most probable and the latter, following Hacking, with that which is approved by authority. The hypothesis then is that, since among the authoritative opinions there are mutually conflicting accounts of what one should do in a given practical situation, one ought simply to choose one course and stick to it. However, contra Morgan, it does not follow that for Descartes "...what makes an action moral has nothing to do with the reason behind it", but

\textsuperscript{11} (AT VI 25), I, 123.

\textsuperscript{12} Morgan (1994), 48.
rather the manner in which we act or the attitude we adopt after having decided to perform the action. What Descartes says is that when circumstances dictate that we must act "without delay" but no single course looks any better than any other—is no more approved of than any other—we should nevertheless choose. *Ceteris Paribus*, if just these circumstances did not obtain, no choice at all would be forced on us. The criterion of rationality still rests in the reason lying behind my action, not in the psychological effects flowing from an otherwise groundless decision to perform that action.

I press my disagreement with Morgan on this point because what he says can be construed as a challenge to an important claim I made in the previous chapter. Descartes, recall, describes action in a situation of a balance of reasons as representing the "lowest degree of freedom". The will is given maximum scope for error and bad activity when it chooses ambivalently. If Morgan is right, however, the claim of the second maxim conflicts with that analysis, since, as he puts it,

> [t]he manner in which one carries out one's actions, regardless of the level of rational justification behind those actions, is the basis of moral certainty and one of the fundamental keys to the Cartesian ethic.\(^{13}\)

\(^{13}\) Ibid.
Morgan takes the situation of balance to indicate a general tendency on Descartes' part to downplay, or deny altogether, the importance of grounding rationally our moral judgements and actions. This interpretation is not warranted by the text, however, since Descartes is clearly talking about situations where, from the general standpoint of prudence or self-interest, any action is better than inaction. Nor does this necessarily deny the hypothesis of balance. Any number of particular actions might suffice to preserve my interests, though it is the case both that I can only choose one of them and to choose none would be imprudent. If we restrict the claim about action in a situation of balance being based on reasons which are "true and certain" in this manner, we need not see Descartes as advocating the view that one's actions can be justified by reference to the sheer "psychological resolve" which occassions and sustains them.\(^\text{14}\)

I would urge a further reading of the second maxim which, although it stretches the text somewhat, nevertheless strikes me as plausible given the general aims of the provisional code. I suggest that the underlying imperative guiding these reflections about balanced reasons is Descartes' desire to preserve the

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
solitude and independence of the scientist. Descartes is saying that in some situations, i.e. when that solitude and independence is somehow threatened, one should act so as to preserve it, even if there is no other justification for such action. And this other justification refers specifically to the sanction of the authorities in the land in which one resides. If one's commitment to the unfettered pursuit of truth fails to gain approval among the "most sensible", or loses the approval it once enjoyed, then one must act "without delay" to find a more accommodating group of sensible people -by moving from France to Holland, say. This reading is bolstered by Descartes' way of phrasing the problem of balance. For he says that no single opinion may be any more probable than any other, rather than any less probable.¹⁵ This implies that there may be no authoritatively sanctioned warrant for any of the opinions one is disposed to hold. Here, however, one must act so as to preserve one's freedom as a thinker. The very fact that one is acting so as to protect the integrity of a putatively unassailable project, the search for truth, confers just the sort of rationality on one's action which I have argued (in chapter two) is of fundamental importance to Descartes. In

¹⁵ The French runs: "et même qu'encore que nous ne remarquions point davantage de probabilité aux unes qu'aux autres, nous devons nous déterminer à quelques-unes".
acting in this manner one is protecting that freedom -the freedom to revise one's opinions- which the first maxim declares one should be unwilling to relinquish for any reason.

Taken together, maxims one and two -which are by far the most important part of the code- carry a thesis about the relation of will and intellect in the sphere of moral practice. Maxim one enjoins us qua scientists to seek out the most sensible people in our culture and follow their opinions. Still, since what is sensible alters over time, the scientist too must be willing to swim with the changing tide. The stress in maxim one is therefore on knowledge: the scientist must keep abreast of all the significant alterations in opinion and adjust his own opinions - or at least appear to do so- accordingly. The second maxim stresses the role of the will. We must, says Descartes, follow our judgements unflinchingly in order to stave off the sort of regrets and remorses which trouble the weak. Far from seeing a contradiction between these two maxims, Descartes claimed to Reneri that they establish a virtuus mean, decisiveness, lying between the contrary vices of indecision and obstinacy. The trick, apparently, is to adhere to one's chosen course while remaining open to the possibility of changing it, but only when

16 (AT II 35-6), III, 97.
appropriately "probable" reasons for doing so become manifest. Again, however, the scientist cannot bend to the opinion which forces her to abandon that project which justified the adoption of the code in the first place.

(iii) Third Maxim

In maxim three, Descartes espouses the basically stoic doctrine that one should attempt to master oneself rather than fortune, and seek to change one's desires rather than the world:

In general I would become accustomed to believing that nothing lies entirely within our power except our thoughts, so that after doing our best in dealing with matters external to us, whatever we fail to achieve is absolutely impossible so far as we are concerned. This alone, I thought, would be sufficient to prevent me from desiring in future something I could not get, and so to make me content.\(^1\)

I do not want to quarrel with Descartes' claim that we can somehow convince ourselves that those things at which we fail are "impossible" for us. There are interesting psychological problems which this claim raises, that of self-deception for example, but I will not examine them here. I want rather merely to point out the insufficiency of the third maxim as a guide to rational practical action. Descartes praises the stoic philosophers who,

\(^1\) (AT VI 25), I, 123.
through constant reflection on nature and their place in it, "...became perfectly convinced that nothing was in their power but their thoughts...". The key to happiness lies then in the extirpation of those desires which attach me to people and things over which I have no control, or not enough control. Morally correct desires are as such thus referred exclusively to my power as an independent moral agent, i.e. the extent to which I am able to regulate my desiderative attachments to people and things based on an assessment of my potential "command" over them.

As I argue in chapter four, this notion of establishing control over the world via the command of desire is a central feature of the doctrine of generosity and thus of Descartes' definitive moral doctrine. At this early point in his career, however, the theory is detached from the larger philosophical concerns -especially the role the passions play in moral life and the way in which knowledge of the self is revealed through the control of desire- which give the later articulation more nuance. Thus although maxim three is preserved in the final morality, without the support it receives there it appears conceptually thin and somewhat unmotivated. What motivation it has is drawn from maxim one: we should control our desire in accordance with

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18 (AT VI 26), I, 124.
the dictates of established morality.

(iv) Fourth Maxim\textsuperscript{19}

Descartes' final maxim resolidifies his commitment to the method of philosophical analysis which the Discourse as a whole elucidates. He writes,

Without wishing to say anything about the occupations of others, I thought I could do no better than to continue with the very [occupation] I was engaged in, and devote my whole life to cultivating my reason and advancing as far as I could in the knowledge of the truth, following the method I had prescribed for myself.\textsuperscript{20}

Rather than acting as an independent criterion for moral action, this maxim in fact adds nothing substantial to what has gone before, except perhaps to give the search for metaphysical truth the added approbation of a moral good. The content of the provisional morality is then articulated fully in the first three maxims alone, but this final maxim does remind us of the chief utility of the code as a whole. It is useful, that is, solely as an expedient to the search for and hopeful attainment of truth in

\textsuperscript{19} It is unclear whether or not Descartes actually means this to be a separate maxim at all. When he introduces the code, he says that it consists of "just three or four maxims" ((AT VI 22), I, 122). And he continues after discussing the third by saying, "...[f]inally, to conclude this moral code..." (AT VI 27), I, 124) without identifying this "conclusion" as a separate maxim. I will however speak of it as the fourth maxim for the sake of simplicity.

\textsuperscript{20} (AT VI 27), I, 124.
metaphysics and the sciences. Innovative thinking cannot yet be fostered in ethics precisely because the very methods for challenging established beliefs generally – the sceptical doubt and the method of analysis – require adherence to current ethical beliefs as their practical support. These methods are therefore denied application in this sphere.

The only solid advice the code gives us, as I have said, is to follow the established rules with an unwavering will while the independent search for truth is underway. I have also argued that if the most sensible people changed their opinions so that they no longer recognize the value of this search, this dictum would obviously need to be revised. In either case, the search for truth is overriding and fully shapes the moral capabilities of the scientific researcher. As such the code may be viewed as a necessary corollary to the free activity of the will required for the establishment of firm foundations in the sciences. We might even go as far as Combès in asserting that it is the condition

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21 Given this assessment of the provisional morality, it is somewhat odd for Burnyeat (1984) to argue that no philosopher before Kant isolated his ordinary beliefs from his speculative scepticism. On this somewhat forced reading of the history of philosophy, Kant invented the practice of asking philosophical questions "safely".
sine qua non of the search for truth.\textsuperscript{22} Descartes himself is frank about the merely instrumental character of the code, claiming that "...the sole basis of the foregoing three maxims was the plan I had to continue my self-instruction".\textsuperscript{23} Given these restrictions on the place and function of the moral code there is no reason at all to see it as deficient, but it is a long way from constituting a working moral philosophy independently of these restrictions. Nevertheless, it is Descartes' first attempt to think systematically about the relation between knowledge and the will in ethics, a feature of his thinking which will exercise us throughout this study. As we will see, Descartes goes a significant distance in establishing a more comprehensive moral philosophy in the next stage of his career to be examined: the letters to Elizabeth.

C. The Descartes-Elizabeth Correspondence.

Elizabeth (1618-1680) was the daughter of Elizabeth Stuart and Frederick V and a descendant, on her mother's side, of the House of Orange. She was also a devoted and perceptive reader of Descartes' Meditations. Elizabeth described herself to Descartes

\textsuperscript{22} Combes (1960), 107.

\textsuperscript{23} (AT VI 27), I, 124.
as having a body which "does not have the force to bring itself into harmony with the soul", and a mind which is persistently vexed as a result of various political and familial troubles.\textsuperscript{24}

She therefore has very good reasons for wanting clarification from Descartes - whom she describes as the "doctor of her soul" - on the workings of the body-soul union. In particular she beseeches him to tell her "how the soul of man (since it is but a thinking substance) can determine the spirits of the body to produce voluntary actions".\textsuperscript{25}

What Elizabeth is implicitly seeking is the elimination of what I have referred to in the previous section as the separation of analytic thought and practice. She wants the doctor of her soul to apply the same sort of methodical analysis to the substantial union as he had applied to the physical world and the soul in the \textit{Meditations}. The assumption guiding this implicit request is that knowledge of the workings of the body-soul system is an integral part of the knowledge of how to live well, that

\textsuperscript{24} Blom (1978), 121-2. Susan James notes that interest in the passions among rulers and \textit{élites} generally was widespread in the seventeenth-century. Advice books to princes tended to teach that to rule successfully, a prince must know how to control his passions. Knowledge of the self via a knowledge of the passions was seen as the key to successful control of others. Cf. James (1997), 3-6.

\textsuperscript{25} Blom, \textit{op. cit.}, 105.
normative principles can somehow be drawn from knowledge of the nature of the substantial union. However, Descartes is at the time of their correspondence not yet ready to recognize fully and develop the link between the metaphysico-physical reality of the substantial union on the one hand and the normative superstructure of moral philosophy on the other. It is the tension between Elizabeth and Descartes arising from this difference which gives the letters much of their flavour.

Descartes' early responses to Elizabeth are guided by his denial that "...the human mind is capable of forming a very distinct conception of both the distinction between the soul and the body and their union".\(^{26}\) We can read this is as Descartes' insistence, held over from the provisional morality, that philosophical analysis has no legitimate purchase in the sphere of moral practice. In the Discourse, the opinions of the most sensible were taken provisionally to carry moral truth, so long as they did not conflict with the autonomy of the scientist. In the early letters to Elizabeth, Descartes is similarly insisting that the substantial union of mind and body is an unanalysable datum, a philosophical surd. We will see that in spite of this

claim, Elizabeth eventually pushes Descartes to extend the method of analysis to the union, but that this step is not taken explicitly by him until the writing of the Passions.

Descartes can hardly have failed to recognize in Elizabeth's questions about the interaction of mind and body an echo, a comparatively gentle one to be sure, of Gassendi's acid criticisms of Meditation Six in the Objections:

Yet what relationship can possibly be understood to exist between corporeal and incorporeal parts? ...must not every union occur by means of close contact? And...how can contact occur without a body? How can something corporeal take hold of something incorporeal so as to keep it joined to itself? And how can the incorporeal grasp the corporeal to keep it reciprocally bound to itself, if it has nothing at all to enable it to grasp or be grasped?27

To get around this problem, Elizabeth insists on thinking of the soul as somehow diffused through the body and therefore as in a way extended or material. This is an interpretation which Descartes eventually allows -though only reluctantly- while adding the caveat that thought, unlike extension proper, does not exclude other bodies.28 Descartes notes in addition that conceiving of mind in this manner will facilitate the passage from thoughts about the distinction of the two substances to

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28 (AT III 694-5), III, 228.
thoughts about their union. Descartes had already, in the Sixth
Response, declared himself amenable to the notion that the mind
is co-extensive with the body, "...the whole mind in the whole
body, and the whole mind in any one of its parts".\textsuperscript{29} But neither
in this source nor in the exchange with Elizabeth is this idea
developed by Descartes in any detail.

The notion of thought as extended but permeable did not in any
case allay the Princess's scepticism - a feature of her
intelligence which Descartes would in general find difficult to
appease. As a consequence, he is forced to rely dogmatically on
the position that it is just not possible to think of the union
of mind and body and their distinction on the same terms or at
the same time. Descartes roots his position here in the important
claim that the substantial union is a notion primitive, which is
not ultimately reducible to either of its constituent elements.
He maintains further that "all human knowledge" consists in
distinguishing these notions accurately from one another.\textsuperscript{30} Thus

\textsuperscript{29} (AT VII 442), II, 298.

\textsuperscript{30} (AT III 665-6), III, 218. The primitive notions are here
described as "...the patterns on the basis of which we form all our
other conceptions". Besides the "very general" notions which apply
to everything - being, number, duration, etc. - there are only three:
extension as regards body, thought as regards mind, and union as
regards body and soul together. From this latter we can learn about
"...the soul's power to move the body and the body's power to act
the union must be considered not through the understanding, which can conceive it only "obscurely", but only by the senses. More particularly, the union must not be viewed on the model of mechanical causation which governs interactions in the corporeal world. The best way to achieve insight into the interaction of mind and body is simply to see it in action, by availing oneself of the "...ordinary course of life and conversation..." and abstaining from metaphysical speculation. Elizabeth is frankly unconvinced by these arguments:

I too find that the senses show me that the soul moves the body; but they fail to teach me (any more than the understanding and the imagination) the manner in which [it] does it.

on the soul and cause its sensations and passions".


32 Nor, however, should the mechanical interaction of corporeal bodies be thought of through our understanding of mind-body interaction. This, Descartes asserts, is just what the Scholastic-Aristoteleans do in attributing "real qualities", such as heaviness, to bodies. Descartes' claim is that the notion of movement or force which they attribute to bodies is derived from the primitive apprehension of the action of the mind on the body ((AT III 667), III, 219). For an excellent discussion of this problem, cf. Garber (1983). Garber argues that since God is the ultimate source of all transference of motion between bodies, Descartes should have argued to Elizabeth that our understanding of mind-body causation can in fact be projected onto our understanding of body-body causation.


34 Blom op. cit., 116.
For the next year and a half the correspondence becomes sparse, then resumes its previous frequency around the middle of 1645. The diminishment in pace comes hard on the heels of the impasse between Descartes and Elizabeth on the point just alluded to. Stephen Gaukroger has argued that when the correspondence picks up fully again, we can immediately detect a shift from a somatopsychic account of the relation between the substances, where the effect of bodily states on the mind is stressed, to a psychosomatic account of that relation, where the effect of the mind on the body is stressed.35

This is an illuminating if somewhat overelegant suggestion. I would argue that the shift has as much to do with Descartes' implicit insistence that his doctrine of primitive notions be taken seriously such that the union is not analytically reduced. What happens is that on full resumption of the correspondence Descartes simply refuses to discuss the nature of the union at the level of the "understanding", that is, as a union of two metaphysically distinct substances, where the distinction rather than the union is stressed. By his own lights this may have seemed a reasonable request, and he must have been somewhat displeased at Elizabeth's apparent refusal to accord the idea of

the union's irreducibility the philosophical weight he thought it merited. If this is correct, Descartes' way of seeing things eventually won the day since in the post-July 1645 letters to and from Elizabeth the metaphysical problem of interaction has been steered resolutely to the side.

In accordance with Descartes' doctrine of the union as a primitive notion, it is simply taken for granted that the soul moves the body and that we experience this fact at a raw phenomenological level. Given this presupposition, it remains merely to work out the details of the interaction on a case by case basis. So Descartes' insistence that the integrity of the union be respected at the metaphysical level does not entail that we cannot investigate its phenomenologically revealed details. This will involve both noting the characteristic connections between thoughts and bodily conditions and examining the extent to which these may be altered. This is mechanical knowledge of a kind. For example, to illustrate the power which the soul has to affect the states of the body, Descartes describes a person who has every reason for contentment but who dwells instead on tragic and lugubrious thoughts. This sort of mental activity,

36 Perhaps Ryle is right to refer to Descartes' philosophy of mind generally as offering explanations at the "para-mechanical" level. Cf. Ryle (1960), 11-24.
Descartes claims, can profoundly affect the flow of blood in the body, which can in turn eventually cause a dangerous cough. On the other hand, the case of a person with much bodily distress to displease her but who nevertheless contemplates only what brings her contentment and joy and can by such means eventually be restored to health, is much more significant to Descartes - both because it offers some potential of psychic relief to the beleaguered Elizabeth and because it accords with Descartes' own conception of the possibilities for the good life.

The key to happiness is development of the ability to "turn one's attention" from what is displeasing to what is pleasing and to form the concomitant habit of seeing the world in the desired way. Stated thus the doctrine seems somewhat facile, but it is related to a key argument of the Passions, a textual connection which when pointed out may give it more philosophical nuance. This is Descartes' claim that the soul cannot directly alter the body's states. Each volition is "naturally" joined to a specific movement of the gland so that if either of the two is stimulated, the other will be as well. This means that in order to alter our states it is not enough simply that we will that they be other

37 (AT IV 219-20), III, 249-50.
38 (AT IV 237-8), III, 253-4.
than they in fact are. The various habitual connections tend to be too deeply ingrained in our physiology for that kind of control to be feasible. Rather, we must represent mentally those things which are joined to the passion we want to have and opposed to the one we want to reject. In this way, it is argued, the entire body-soul system can be gradually remobilized in accordance with (ideally) rational desires, those which bring "perfection" and contentment to the agent.39

But what is and is not rational in the sphere of practice is far from clear and cannot, it seems, be settled by appeal to abstract principles. Such, at any rate, is Elizabeth's position. She argues that in order to measure contentment through the perfection it brings its bearer, it is necessary to have a precise index of the value of concrete goods. Elizabeth, being concerned for obvious reasons with problems of governance, is particularly intent on finding a balance between self-interest and the interest of the whole to which one belongs. She raises here a distinctively modern problem in moral philosophy. Schneewind has argued that the "enduring tension" between our social and our antisocial dispositions or needs is a key component of what he calls the "Grotian problematic". Grotius

39 (AT XI 361-3), I, 344-5.
appeals to the natural law in order to balance the concern with our own benefit with our desire for sociable living. As Schneewind sees it, given both his insistence on this tension and his distinctively empirical way of resolving it, Grotius sets the terms for modern natural law theory, and the history of moral philosophy after him (at least until Kant) is defined to a significant degree by the attempt to come to terms with just this problem.  

Invocation of the natural law in Grotius and his followers rejects, according to Schneewind, "...any appeal to a divine manager of the universe whose governance to natural law will contribute to the cosmic good while bringing us our own as well". Nor is the appeal to the perfection of human nature or God's eternal law. Rather, Grotius takes human conflict as empirically given, and by compiling a list of rights and obligations which individuals and states may claim for themselves and owe to one another, seeks to resolve such conflict. Rights especially thus ground the law for Grotius, they are "personal possessions" which belong to us prior to our inclusion in a

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40 Schneewind (1998), 70-3.

41 Ibid., 73.
community.\textsuperscript{42} Elizabeth evidently sees the potential for conflict between the individual and the collective as very real, and therefore as requiring serious philosophical attention. Indeed, it is tempting to read her line of questioning here as designed to elicit from Descartes a list of natural moral directives similar to that advanced by Grotius (whether she had read him or not).

However, Descartes' disappointingly bland advice on this score reduces to the reminder that we are necessarily a part of a whole whose interests should be looked after ahead of those of the self, though always with "measure and discretion".\textsuperscript{43} Elizabeth responds that the bare consideration that we are necessarily a part of the whole does not suffice in hard cases where, she says, we need a "rule...to compare things not equally known, such as our individual worth and the worth of those with whom we live...".\textsuperscript{44} While I have suggested that Elizabeth takes the Grotian problematic seriously, Descartes, as Schneewind points out, sees no genuine conflict between self-love and love of

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 80.
\textsuperscript{43} (AT IV 293), III, 266.
\textsuperscript{44} Blom op. cit., 155.
others.\textsuperscript{45} The overriding ethical project for philosophers like Descartes is that of discovering the sources of "self-perfection", a project to which the natural lawyers are largely indifferent.\textsuperscript{46} None of this is to suggest, however, that Elizabeth herself is indifferent to it. On the contrary, in spite of the disagreement just noted, the correspondence is overwhelmingly centred on the problem of self-perfection. Indeed, the point about comparing the interests of the whole and those of the self is in large part an example of a more general concern about ranking the goods of this life in order that we may aspire to a contentment compatible with virtue. And this is something Elizabeth cannot apparently accomplish on the scant moral principles Descartes has offered her.

Two principal worries are thus articulated in and persist through Elizabeth's letters. First, she requires more detail on the precise workings of the mind-body union so that she may know

\textsuperscript{45} Schneewind, \textit{op. cit.} (1998), 193.

\textsuperscript{46} Schneewind sees perfectionism as a peculiarly rationalist concern, and thus considers under this rubric Du Vair, Lipsius, Herbert of Cherbury, the Cambridge Platonists, Malebranche, Spinoza, and Leibniz, along with Descartes. The rationalism of these thinkers is revealed in the shared thesis that moral ignorance and error are the impediments to a life of harmony and virtue. The natural lawyers, by contrast, are united by a shared recognition of moral conflict (ibid., 169).
how she can control her passions more effectively. Second, she demands a rational criterion which will allow her to compare and rank the goods of this life so that she may know which to value and desire. The latter concern is addressed by Descartes in an attempt to spell out the precise relation of virtue and happiness or contentment. Virtue he defines simply as the "resolution" to stick to the course prescribed by reason. More specifically, it consists in the firm adherence to "...whatever reason recommends without being diverted by [the] passions or appetites". Virtue, then, would seem to be just this abstract rule to keep the operations of the will attuned to the dictates of reason, whatever the latter turn out to be. To reinvoke the argument of chapter two, this means that virtue thus construed is a crucial element of true moral freedom.

Descartes' stoic leanings emerge distinctly at this point in the correspondence. That they should so emerge is not surprising since he and Elizabeth are reading and commenting on Seneca's De Vita Beata. Since Montaigne, some form of stoic morality had dominated philosophical literature on the passions -especially in France- and in this respect Descartes is very much a child of his

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47 (AT IV 265), III, 257-8.
times. But Descartes would have no truck with the stoic call virtually to eliminate the passions. The reason for this refusal is that for Descartes, in contrast to the stoics, the passions are not false perceptions and so one need not cultivate apatheia as a form of epistemologico-moral purity. Descartes scorns those "tiny jugs" which three drops of water can fill and postulates that the noblest spirits are in fact those which have the most violent and excessive passions, provided of course that the latter are all under reason's sway.

The point is that in investigating the scope of "right reason" with respect to the passions, Descartes refuses to label the latter mere "perturbations" and thus to advocate their wholesale transformation by reason. Descartes dissaproves of those who think of virtue -as he himself has just defined it- in opposition to pleasure. He thus claims to have reconciled the views of Zeno, who considers virtue the highest good, and Epicurus, who thinks pleasure or contentment is. But it is just this attempted

48 Cf. Levi's (1964) exhaustive study of the passions in this period.

49 (AT IV 317), III, 273.

50 (AT IV 287), III, 265.

51 (AT V 83), III, 325. Descartes claims in this letter to be echoing Epicurus in equating contentment or happiness and pleasure.
synthesis which perplexes Elizabeth. If it is the case, she says, that "...there are passions that carry us to reasonable actions", and presumably by extension those that do not, then it becomes necessary to give a comprehensive definition and assessment of all the passions. We need to know which passions are good and which are not, or, if they are all good, in what precise measure they are so. And so, in September of 1645—just a few months before Descartes begins writing the Passions—Elizabeth implores him to define the passions, adding that she is "...assured that [he] will shed more light on this for [her] when [he] shall explain how the force of the passions renders them all the more useful when they are subject to reason". I suggest that what she is asking for here is the formula for moral freedom. We have seen that freedom in general consists for Descartes in the ideal relation of will and intellect. And the synthesis of virtue and contentment is meant to supply just this: the measured enjoyment of the goods brought by the passions plus a steady adherence of the will to this precise measure.

But Elizabeth is not wholly appeased by what she reads in the Passions. Having read a draft of it by the Spring of 1646, she

52 Blom op. cit., 149.
53 Ibid., 149.
was indeed ready to proclaim that its "moral part" "...surpasses everything that has ever been said on this subject". She is not without reservations on this score, however. Responding no doubt to Descartes' claim that "strength of soul is inadequate without knowledge of the truth", she writes,

As for knowledge of the truth, the desire for it is so just that it exists naturally in all men; but it would be necessary to have an infinite knowledge to know the just value of the goods and evils that customarily rouse us since there are very many more of them than a single person should be able to imagine, and because, to imagine them, one would have to know perfectly everything that exists in the world.

Moreover, she has difficulty with particular doctrines contained in the "physical part" of the treatise, and she cannot believe that in practice the will has the sort of control over our desires that Descartes claims for it. The two criticisms of Descartes' doctrines on the union which I have isolated from the correspondence thus seem to remain even after she has read the Passions. She is still sceptical about the scope of the will's control over the passions. But more importantly, she does not think Descartes has resolved the tension between virtue and

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54 Ibid., 178.
55 (AT XI 367), I, 347.
56 Blom op. cit., 179.
happiness, because he has not yet provided an adequate criterion of ethical rationality which allows us to know "...the just value of the goods and evils that customarily rouse us".  

But in the Passions knowing how to act morally actually depends on knowing what the place and function of the passions are, how they are produced, maintained, controlled, and so on. The "moral part" of the treatise follows on the "physical part". This is not of course to say that everything Descartes says in the Passions is right, and that Elizabeth just failed to see that this was the case. In the Passions Descartes does not, for example, offer any real explanation of how body and soul can possibly interact, being metaphysically distinct substances. It may be that Elizabeth just could not get over this fundamental problem (she can hardly be blamed for this) and that this is the source of her dissatisfaction with the "physical part" of the treatise. But, as I have pointed out, after July 1645 she seems content to follow Descartes in bracketing this problem, so her overriding concern now would seem to be not so much the problem of interaction as the normative relation between reason and the passions. If this is so, she has identified a real tension in Descartes' thinking, for he is indeed pulled in two seemingly

57 Ibid.
opposed directions: one which calls for a cultivation of the passions, even to the point of excess, while the other counsels a resolute attachment to reason which is not in any way distracted by the passions and appetites. This tension is summarized curtly by Elizabeth herself: "...it seems to me that [the passions] cannot both be excessive and subject to reason". She thus remains unconvinced by Descartes' attempt to reconcile virtue and happiness.

This is, as I have pointed out in the Introduction, the central problem of Descartes' moral philosophy, and it emerges here for the first time in his thinking. The problem consists, again, in reconciling the significant part played by the passions in the good life with their tendency to mislead and enslave the will. The extent to which we can be morally free, so that our will is guided ineluctably by right reason, will depend crucially on our ability to get clear on this problem. The next two

Ibid., 166. The point can also be seen in Descartes' inconsistency with respect to the metaphor of the jug, which is supposed to illuminate the relation between reason and desire. In contrast to what I have described above as his scorn for "tiny jugs", he claims to Elizabeth: "...a small vessel may be just as full as a large one, although it contains less liquid; and similarly if we regard each person's contentment as the full satisfaction of all his desires duly regulated by reason, I do not doubt that the poorest people...can be entirely content and satisfied just as much as everyone else..." ((AT IV 264-5), III, 257).
chapters explore this problem in detail. The purpose of this section has been to show that in his correspondence with Elizabeth, Descartes is still largely insisting on the separation of speculative philosophy and moral life which he first articulated in the Discourse. Almost to the end of the correspondence Elizabeth is told that metaphysical analysis has no purchase in the sphere of morals. The moral rules he does offer her are explicitly said to be only a reformulation of the rules articulated in the Discourse.\(^{59}\) However, since whatever viability those rules possess is derived entirely from the contingently useful support they provide to the independent advancement of science, the fact that in the correspondence they are divorced from this function makes them problematic guides to behaviour. The split between thought and action thus persists in the Elizabeth correspondence, but now it does not even possess the conceptual support it had in the Discourse.

All of this changes toward the close of the correspondence when Descartes begins thinking more seriously about the passions and about moral philosophy generally. By 1646 the abstract separation between philosophical analysis and moral life dissolves because the Passions is to be a treatise on moral

\(^{59}\) (AT IV 265-6), III, 257-8.
philosophy rooted in an analysis of the substantial union. However, the kind of analysis Descartes undertakes is not the same as the one which he advises Elizabeth to eschew. In the latter case, mind and body are considered qua distinct substances which as such can exist independently of one another. In the former case, however, Descartes proposes to analyse a mode of the body-soul complex, i.e. the passions. It is therefore better to say that it is this mode, rather than the union itself, which comes up for analytic reduction, or that the union is analysed through the analysis of this mode.

So although Descartes will examine the passions as they relate to the two substances taken separately, he does so only to lay bare the structure which underlies the production and maintenance of the passions. The claim is that a knowledge of this structure can help us to control it, and that such control is an indispensable element in living well. The Passions as a whole can thus be seen as Descartes' attempt to answer Elizabeth's two principal worries: Parts One and Two define and classify the passions, the better to allow us to know both the characteristic connections between various passions, and how the will may manipulate these connections; and Part Three, presupposing the knowledge gained in the previous parts, gives the normative
principles which can be used to govern the control of the passions. This, presumably, will result in a ranking of all the "goods of this life". In the next section I will examine the first part of this problem, though only in schematic form.

Before moving to this analysis, however, I should make some attempt to justify restricting myself here to the first two parts of the Passions to the exclusion of Part Three, an approach which I admit has an air of artificiality about it. In the following section, I am concerned exclusively with Descartes' attempt to analyze the passions as a response to Elizabeth's claim that the substantial union needs to be broken down systematically via a classification of the passions. And this project is largely confined to the first two parts of the treatise. Although Part Three is subtitled "specific passions", and does introduce some passions which are not treated in the earlier parts, it does so in the context of specifically normative arguments about how the passions should be controlled in accordance with the ideal of "generosity". Part Three thus transcends the analysis of the passions qua function of the soul-body complex, and can for this reason be treated separately.

There is a further justification for this approach, namely that there are some indications that all of Part Three was a late
addition to the text by Descartes, on which theory the first two parts originally contained a comprehensive theory of the passions. In a letter to Clerselier dated April 23 1649, Descartes writes:

I do not expect that the treatise on the passions will be printed before I arrive in Sweden; for I have been indolent in revising it and adding the things you thought lacking, which will increase its length by a third".60

It is difficult to say exactly what this extra "third" refers to. It may not signify the entire third part of the treatise, since in the Letter-Preface to the Passions Descartes writes that although he has spent more time in revising the treatise than in composing it, he has nevertheless added "only a few things to it".61 Perhaps the revisions were spread throughout the work though its original three-part structure was not altered in the process. Still, it is possible that Elizabeth's praise in 1646 for the "moral part" of the treatise refers to the last few articles of the first and second parts, and it is not implausible to suppose that it is precisely the proto-normative arguments of those articles that Clerselier thought should be expanded by

60 (AT V 354), III, 376.

61 (AT XI 326), I, 327.
adding an entirely new part. However this may be, I will for the nonce postpone analysis of all the treatise's normative arguments.

D. The Union Analyzed: Parts One and Two of the Passions

(i) Part One: articles 1 to 50

The Passions opens with an examination of both the passions in general and "incidentally the whole nature of man". Descartes argues that if we are to understand the exact nature of our internal states we ought first to determine whether they pertain to the body alone or to the soul alone or to the union of the two (articles 1-6). The way we do this is quite straightforward. If our state is something which can be in inanimate bodies, we should attribute it to the body; if we cannot conceive of it as belonging to bodies, then we should attribute it to the soul. It is taken for granted that this distinction leaves untouched a third classification of phenomena, those which belong to the union of mind and body. That said, the task of Part One is to consider successively the nature of the body (articles 7-16), of the soul (articles 17-29) and of the union (articles 30-50).

Of note in Descartes' discussion of the body is his definition

\[ \text{\textit{Comment}} \]

\[ 62 \text{ (AT XI 327), I, 328.} \]
of life which, he says, nearly all previous writers on the passions have misconstrued. These philosophers assume that death occurs primarily as a result of the departure of the soul. The concomitant error is the belief that the body's heat and movements depend on the soul, so that the absence of the latter causes the withdrawal of heat and movement which can be observed in dying and dead bodies. Descartes thinks that this explanation is exactly backward. Death, he argues, occurs not as an immediate result of the soul's departure from the body but because "one of the principal parts of the body decays". A human being is therefore "alive" in virtue of the preservation of its vital heat and the functioning of the totality of its bodily parts. And just insofar as this situation obtains the soul simply will not take leave of the body. This correction of established opinion is of course calculated precisely to allow Descartes to separate the body and the soul in a far more radical manner than had ever been done before him. The way is now clear for him to describe the human-machine in all its monistic complexity.

This section of Part One culminates in the claim that everything which Descartes had been saying about the manner in

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63 (AT XI 330), I, 329, at. 5.
64 (AT XI 330-1), I, 329-30, art. 6.
which the blood, heart and muscles actually move depends in no way on the soul. These articles are thus strongly reminiscent of the Treatise on Man, which Descartes wrote between 1629 and 1633 along with The World, both of which he refused however to publish at the time given the Church's recent condemnation of Galileo. In the Treatise on Man, Descartes constructs a "fictional" human which looks and functions very much like the real thing. Except, that is, for the fact that every function of that mythical entity "follows from the mere arrangement of the [its] organs every bit as naturally as the movements of a clock or other automaton follow from the arrangement of its counterweights and wheels".  

Thus, tempting though it is to see a real human lurking in the guarded pages of the Treatise on Man, the account there is just half the story, for, at least with respect to the passions, it is confined to their "internal movements", those we share with the animals. This is because a separate part of the Treatise on Man, which had offered a picture of a human composed of both body and soul, was lost. After article 16, therefore, the Passions is already moving well beyond what remains to us of the earlier

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65 (AT XI 202), I, 108.

66 Ibid. Cf. also ((AT VI 58), I, 140) where Descartes argues that machines and animals can at best merely "imitate" the "natural movements that display the passions".
account of the human composite.\textsuperscript{67} What follows article 16 of the *Passions* is a detailed breakdown of the various mental phenomena. Nothing, Descartes argues, should be attributed to our souls but our thoughts and these fall into two broad categories. The first are its "actions", the second its "passions". Actions are those states which proceed from the soul itself via the will; passions are those states which the soul receives as perceptions.\textsuperscript{68}

This is a crucial distinction in Descartes' philosophy of mind. Passions are effects in the mind of any nature whatsoever. It remains at this point for Descartes to specify the three species of passions, which he does by way of investigating their sources. He argues that we "refer" some of these perceptions to objects outside of us, some to our own body and some to our soul.\textsuperscript{69} The first are "external sensations" such as colour, sound, etc.; the second "internal sensations" such as pain or hunger; and the third the passions of the soul properly speaking, the passion-emotions. It is, however, difficult to specify the

\textsuperscript{67} Stoothoff postulates that this material on the whole human may have been incorporated into later writings rather than simply lost or discarded by Descartes, so that the Passions, for example, contains ideas taken directly from the earlier source (CSM, I, 79-80).

\textsuperscript{68} (AT XI 342), I, 335, art. 17.

\textsuperscript{69} (AT XI 345), I, 336-7, art. 22.
"proximate cause" of the latter, which may be located in external objects, the fortuitous movement of spirits, the temperament of the body or the will.\(^{70}\) After this analysis, whose principal purpose is to distinguish the passion-emotions from other passions and from actions, Descartes is ready to define the passions of the soul. They are "perceptions or sensations (sentiments) or excitations (émotions) of the soul which are referred (se rapporter) to it in particular and which are caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the spirits".\(^{71}\)

Descartes then explores the nature of the passions insofar as they relate to the body-soul composite. He begins by invoking the doctrine of the "diffused" soul which, as we have seen in the letters to Elizabeth, appears to be necessary to any conception of the union of mind and body:

...we need to recognize that the soul is really joined to the whole body, and...we cannot properly say that it exists in any one part of the body to the exclusion of the others...And the soul is of such a nature that it has no relation to extension [but] is related solely to the whole assemblage of the body's organs.\(^{72}\)

In spite of the fact that the soul is united to all the parts of

\(^{70}\) (AT XI 371-2), I, 349, art. 51.

\(^{71}\) (AT XI 349), I, 338-9, art. 27.

\(^{72}\) (AT XI 351), I, 339, art. 30.
the body conjointly, it nevertheless exercises its function most particularly in one part, the pineal gland. In articles 31 to 43, Descartes presents a detailed analysis of the interaction of mind and body with respect to the passions. As I have hinted, given her propensity to reduce the union to its constituent elements, this is no doubt one aspect of the "physical part" of Descartes' treatise about which Elizabeth had expressed some perplexity. In any case Descartes does at this point attempt to describe the meeting of mind and matter -the latter in the form of animal spirits- in the pineal gland, and these articles are as such indispensable to understanding this notorious area of Descartes' thought.

The remainder of Part One (articles 44-50) discusses the power the soul has over its passions. Descartes argues here that the will is limited in specific ways and it is crucial to grasp the nature of these limitations if we are to be successful in mastering our passions. Each volition we have is "naturally" joined to some specific movement of the gland. What prevents the soul from having full and direct control over its passions is the fact that they are physiologically overdetermined. That is, they are rooted in often powerful disturbances of the heart, blood and animal spirits and are uniquely capable of mobilizing the whole
body and soul to their ends. Thus in cases where the disturbance is particularly strong, the power of the will may be entirely negative with respect to the passions—it can at most refrain from acting in the way it is being prompted to. It will be important to bear in mind this invocation of our will's indifferent capacity in controlling the passions.

Descartes closes this part of the Passions by reminding us that it is not enough for us simply to vanquish our passions. Strength of soul simpliciter is inadequate since it alone may be equally the mark of a consistently intemperate disposition. An agent may act unflinchingly on his judgements, though the latter are themselves corrupt. The closing articles of Part One thus strongly anticipate the normative arguments of the treatise in Part Three. But before getting there, Descartes first gives a detailed "enumeration" of the passions.

(ii) Part Two: articles 51 to 147

Part Two is more complex structurally than Part One. At least four distinct concerns can be isolated here. The first is the enumeration of the six primary passions as they relate to our functional needs (articles 51-69); the second, an explanation of the way in which the primary passions thus enumerated operate
considered by themselves (articles 70-111); next, the manner in
which the primary passions are both mixed with other passions
which are derived from them and what their characteristic
physiological manifestations consist in (articles 112-36); and
finally, an examination of the specific uses of the primary
passions and the crucial role of desire in the formation and
reformation of behaviour (articles 137-147).

Any sound enumerative procedure must be guided by a hypothesis
what Descartes calls a quaestio- which allows the researcher to
lay out data in an orderly manner.73 At the outset of Part Two,
Descartes tells us that his enumeration will be guided by the
metaphysical conclusions of Part One. The principles laid down by
Descartes there do not of course themselves constitute a body of
moral-scientific knowledge, but the threefold distinction he
draws -body, soul, union- is methodologically regulative for

73 Descartes' usage of the concept of enumeration is somewhat
confusing. As Beck points out, three distinct meanings of this term
are employed by Descartes in the Rules. In this part of the
Passions the term means, in Beck's words, a "...survey [of] the
ground to be covered in a demonstration in order to select the
relevant data for the adequate solution of some particular problem"
(Beck (1952), 145). Cf. ((AT X 388-90), I, 25-6); also ((AT X 408),
I, 37). It should also be noted that this kind of enumeration is
for Descartes equivalent to "analysis", i.e. the reductive movement
of thought from a consideration of the composite nature of the
phenomena to a consideration of its simple constituents (Beck, op. 
cit., 169).
everything that follows in Part Two of the Passions. The body operates according to the laws of local motion grounded in God's immutability; the soul is the seat of a non-necessitated will; and the union describes the phenomenologically complex but nevertheless "simple" interaction of the two substances.

Moreover, we are speaking of phenomena -the passions- which are perhaps the most salient feature of a union which is as such irreducible at a fundamental level. The balancing act which marks these two parts of the Passions so strongly is therefore especially acute here: on the one hand Descartes wants to reduce the union analytically while on the other he wants to uphold its integrity as a primitive notion.

Thus in article 52 Descartes maintains that,

...an enumeration of the passions requires only an orderly examination of all the various ways having importance for us in which our senses can be stimulated by their objects.75

By confining the reduction to a consideration of the ways in which the passions have "importance for us", Descartes is respecting the functional integrity of the union, according to which the passions are individuated in virtue of their role in

74 (AT IXB 61), I, 240; (AT IXB 26), I, 211; (AT XI 38), I, 93; (AT XI 43), I, 96.

75 (AT XI 372), I, 371, art. 52.
the maintenance of the body-soul system. This is not to say that it will not be possible to speak of the distinctive role of the body or of the soul in the formation of individual passions. These two elements play important and isolable parts in this process. However, whenever Descartes examines their respective functions he does so as the first level of an analytic reduction. This analysis is then supplemented by reduction at a second level wherein particular passions are examined in isolation from one another whereas in practice they tend to be found together in characteristic ways. The two levels of reductive analysis are often found together. Thus, for example, in articles 139-42 Descartes discusses the primary passions insofar as they relate only to the soul. This is reduction at the first level, where the activity of the soul has been abstractly isolated from that of the body. In article 143, he adds that this approach also neglects the role played by desire, arguing that the latter necessarily mediates the regulation of our behaviour with respect to these passions. This is the second level of reduction, where a passion is considered in isolation from those passions with which

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76 Paul Hoffmann has written a series of articles which emphasize the "unity" of the Cartesian person and the role played by the passions in constituting, maintaining, and revealing that unity. Cf. Hoffmann (1986), (1990), and (1991).
it is characteristically found.\footnote{77 (AT XI 435-6), I, 379, art. 143.}

The primary passions, those from which all the others are "derived", are wonder, love, hatred, joy, sadness and desire. The first section of this part does not isolate the primary passions with ideal precision. The focus at this point is rather on how the primary passions and those passions which are related to them operate in the functional economy. A large number of passions are introduced in this section - mockery, envy, pity, shame, vainglory, anger, approval, self-satisfaction, distaste, regret, gratitude, and so on. Descartes argues that this enumeration distinguishes his account from all previous ones, most of which rely on a form of Platonic soul partition wherein the passions are derived from a basic distinction between the concupiscible and irascible parts of the soul. These philosophers err both in dividing the soul and in nevertheless neglecting to take account of the full range of "powers" it possesses.\footnote{78 (AT XI 379), I, 352, art. 68.} For Descartes, wonder, love, hope, anxiety, etc. are powers of a singular underlying substance which itself admits of no fragmentation.

The second section of Part Two separates out the primary passions more distinctly and explains their physiological
components. Descartes provides a useful summary of the manner in which the primary passions - excepting wonder - are generated through the activity of the animal spirits.79 Every primary passion as such involves this kind of bodily activity and all particular passions - insofar as they are derived from the primary passions - can be recognized for what they are precisely by the differential ways in which they agitate the spirits in the heart and other organs. In cases where a passion is generated by the presence of a stimulating object external to the body - by far the most common case - the process is as follows. The object in question will as it were send a "message" through the muscles, nerves and sense organs. This message then branches off in two directions, one to the mind and one to the heart. The former is the passion proper - love or anger or fear. But it is maintained and (possibly) augmented through the continual production in the heart of a characteristically agitated supply of spirits. These are sent to the pineal gland, where they both "dispose" the soul to have the perception in question and open the brain's pores in determinate ways. This latter movement in turn effects a flow of blood back out to the muscles and limbs, causing appropriate bodily movements - flight from a threatening object for example.

79 (AT XI 401), I, 362-3, art. 96.
The whole process typically lasts for at least as long as the affecting object is present, though it may be overcome in spite of that object's continued presence, or, alternatively, remain for some time after the disappearance of the object.

From this very schematic look at the first two parts of the Passions, we can see that Descartes has given us the tools to understand how the substantial union works through an analysis of how the passions are generated, maintained, strengthened and diminished. The goal here is to reduce the phenomena—the passions—to their "simple terms" so that we may then recompose them synthetically. Descartes does this through an analytic reduction at several levels. The first and broadest level is the

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Analytic reduction need not reach metaphysical simples per se; it can instead operate by way of "abstraction". For example, Descartes claims that when we say that shape is the limit of an extended thing, we can abstract the term "limit" from the notion of "shape" but this does not entitle us to consider the former more simple than the latter. On the contrary, "limit" is a mere abstraction which can equally be derived from the notions of duration, motion, etc., but cannot exist without being instantiated in one of these ((AT X 418), I, 44). Thus Part One of the Passions does, of course, get us to real metaphysical simples (though we need to be careful about identifying the union as a simple in the same way as this term applies to body and the mind taken separately). But the isolation (in Part Two) of a passion from other passions with which it is characteristically found is an abstraction. Simples, however, are equivalent to created substances. They can be thought of as existing independently, while abstractions cannot. Simples can therefore actually exist independently, even if only through God's efficacy.
distinction, articulated in Part One, between the operations of
the soul, the body, and the union considered very generally, i.e.
with reference to the "whole nature of man".\footnote{AT XI 327}, I, 328 (from the subtitle). Descartes' regulatory principles here are carried over from Meditations Two, Five, and Six, in which he isolates the respective essences of the soul, body, and union. Secondly, Descartes isolates the emotion-passions from among the other forms of perception and from actions. And finally, he considers the passions in isolation both from other passions and from the union itself.

E. Conclusion

In this chapter I have isolated three stages in Cartesian ethics. The first is the provisional morality of the Discourse, the second the Elizabeth correspondence, and the third Parts One and Two of the Passions. I have argued that in the first two of these sources Descartes holds to a division between thought and moral life which prevents him from developing a comprehensive moral philosophy. In the years stretching from 1628 to 1645 he is not ready to apply his method of analysis to the passions, the result of which is that ethical problems simply cannot be addressed by him in sufficient philosophical depth. In the first
two parts of the *Passions*, however, Descartes undertakes precisely this analysis, and so the *Passions* can be seen as Descartes' attempt finally to abolish the division between philosophy and moral life. In the next chapter, I will fill in some of the gaps which my analysis of the passions in this chapter has left. In particular, I will investigate in detail both how the passions figure in Descartes' functional account of agency and how they can upset functional harmony. This will get us to the heart of the problem of the passions and how that problem bears on the question of our moral freedom.
4: THE ECONOMY OF THE PASSIONS

A. Introduction

In article 211 of the Passions, Descartes argues that the passions are "all by nature good".¹ This chapter has as its focus the prima facie ambiguity of that claim. For it might be supposed that with it Descartes is telling us that it is in the very nature of the passions, all the passions, to contribute to our good. But on closer examination it becomes clear that the claim is rather that the passions are good if and only if they are in fact natural, a view which obviously implies that an instantiated passion may be non-natural and therefore fail to deliver the good(s). It is, as I argue, the clash between these two types of passions -natural and non-natural- which makes the passions especially difficult to control rationally.

The chapter has four sections. In the first, I examine Descartes' functionalism -his thoughts on intrinsic as opposed to extrinsic finality- and show how the passions figure in the functional explanation of agency. The passions, I argue, reveal our ends to us and thus provide us with overriding reasons for action. Next, I analyze in detail how exactly we display moral

¹ (AT XI 485-6), I, 403, art. 211.
weakness with respect to the ends thus revealed, an analysis
which highlights the centrality of desire to the moral economy.
Third, I examine the most singular feature of the morally weak
person, his habitually conflicted nature. Here I show that
Descartes' general account of the passions -as laid out in
section one- may in fact make acratic conflict among the passions
inevitable. Finally, I argue that Descartes offers the theory of
"determinate judgements" as a response to the problem of conflict
among the passions. I then criticize this theory from the
standpoint of Descartes' theory of freedom and suggest that it
cannot be his final word concerning the rational rehabituation of
the passions.

B. The Function of the Passions

(i) Internal Finality

Few philosophers have been as hostile as was Descartes to the
Aristotelian-Scholastic concept of finality -the notion that
nature is teleologically ordered. In the Principles of
Philosophy, for example, Descartes argues that finality -together
with those other Scholastic occult powers such as real qualities
and substantial forms- is a merely presumptuous anthropomorphism
which tells us nothing about nature. Descartes has two principal objections to these entities. The first is that the human mind has no way of apprehending them, so that when we posit them we are doing little more than constructing fantastic notions from our imaginations. The second is that they have no explanatory power, whereas Descartes thinks that he can explain all the phenomena of nature better without them. All appeals to finality ought therefore to be banished from our explanations of natural phenomena. Physical movement is to be explained solely in terms of local or efficient causation, since it would be absurd for us to go beyond such explanations to "grasp the ends which [God] set before himself in creating the universe". Insofar as we make reference to teleology, we are appealing beyond nature to a force or principle which guides its motions. But although the natural world is for Descartes created and sustained by God's immutable necessity and veracity, our efforts to explain particular corporeal movements on the basis of the divinely established

2 (AT VIIIA 80-1), I, 248.

3 (AT III 648-9), III, 216. Cf. also ((AT VII 442), II, 298); (AT III 420), III, 188; (AT II 200), III, 107; (AT III 694), III, 228; (AT IV 292), III, 266.

4 (AT VIIIA 81), I, 248.
rules of inertia and the conservation of motion do not require overt reference to Him.\(^5\)

However, most commentators allow that Descartes operates with a notion of "internal finality".\(^6\) Appeals to internal finality involve explanation of the parts of an organism by reference to the whole of which they are parts. This kind of finality would seem for Descartes to apply only to humans, that is to minded bodies. Such 'wholes' are capable of resisting a loss of identity upon partial physical disintegration. An organized but mindless complex actually loses 'its' individual identity when subdivided, while living human individuals do not. Loss of identity upon subdivision signals an absence of internal finality because it shows that the individual in question lacked a subsisting principle of organization.\(^7\) So since non-minded complexes may

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\(^5\) For the Cartesian critique of the Aristotelean conception of movement and Descartes' own theory cf. ((AT XI 37-48), I, 92-8).

\(^6\) Cf. for example Laporte (1945), 343-61; Collins (1971), 80-93; Geurout (1968), vol. 2, passim; Rodis-Lewis (1978), 152-70; For a cogent defence of the notion of finality at work here minus the reference to Descartes, cf. Harris (1959).

\(^7\) The fact that Descartes can refer to the "substantiality" of stones ((AT VII 44), II, 30) and clothing ((AT VII 435), II, 293) makes it difficult to say with ideal confidence what a physical individual consists in for him. To Mesland he claims that "...[w]e can say that the Loire is the same river it was ten years ago, even though it no longer has the same water and even though perhaps not
display some part-whole organization, internal finality is a product not of this relation simpliciter, but of the fact that a particular part of extension is attached to a soul. Only if one of the "principal parts" of the human body decays does the soul vacate it and thus permanently dissolve the individual. The human body is the only parcel of nature which has mind in all of its parts "conjointly", and this is said to guarantee that, although no particle of that body remains numerically the same even for a single moment, the human being is nevertheless strictly "indivisible". The key to the notion of internal finality, then, is that although the parts of an organism are individuated only in virtue of their participation in the whole, the whole is not simply the aggregate of its parts. For, again, a single part of the same earth that surrounds the water remains" (AT IV 165), III, 242). Against this common-sensical view, however, he goes on to say that if one particle of matter composing a single body is removed, that body is "...no longer quite the same, no longer numerically the same", and contrasts this scenario specifically with the union of mind and body which does allow for partial physical disintegration while retaining its numerical identity (AT IV 167), III, 243). A good discussion of these problems is in Garber (1992), 175-81.

9 (AT XI 330), I, 329, art. 6.
10 (AT XI 351), I, 359, art. 30.
11 (AT VII 167), III, 243.
if it were, the least subdivision would entail loss of
identity.\textsuperscript{12}

Descartes' most famous discussion of this topic is Meditation
Six. There, he separates clearly nature as pertaining exclusively
to the substantial union of mind and body, from nature as
pertaining to "the ordered system of created things established
by God".\textsuperscript{13} As to the former, he argues that there is "some truth"
in the relatively raw information presented to me by my senses.\textsuperscript{14}
Although I would err if I ascribed this information directly to
the material world, I am justified in taking it seriously at
quite another level. I am, says Descartes, joined to my body in
an irreducible manner. The connection is even more intimate than
the metaphor of the pilote dans son navire suggests, since this
captain does not "feel" the damage his ship undergoes whereas I

\textsuperscript{12} Notwithstanding the mind-criterion of internal finality,
Rodis-Lewis (1972) challenges the claim that internal finality is
applicable only to humans. It certainly does seem strange to say
that an animal which has lost a limb is no longer the same
individual it was when physically whole.

\textsuperscript{13} (AT VII 80), II, 56. Collins (op. cit., 16-25) explains that
nature considered in its "general aspect" comprises, for Descartes,
three elements: (a) the laws of nature; (b) God, the creative
source of the laws of nature; and (c) material stuff. This picture
Collins summarizes under the title "nature-as-God-matter-and-form"
(ibid., 61).

\textsuperscript{14} (AT VII 80), II, 56.
feel most acutely the pains to which my body is subject.¹⁵ At this level "nature teaches me" to pursue pleasure (the useful) and to avoid pain (the harmful).

Meditation Six lays the foundation for Descartes' later treatment of internal finality by allowing me to define my nature qua mind-body composite as uniquely capable of revealing its self-preservative ends to itself through a particular form of perception, in this case sensation.¹⁶ This is Descartes' first detailed treatment of functional truth. His most comprehensive statement on this theme comes in the Passions, where he investigates an entity which in some sense stands apart from the rest of nature and deserves on that account to be accorded the status of notion primitive. But whereas in the earlier work this entity was equipped with sensation as its surest tool of self-preservation, the passions are now added to the basic equipment it requires for this task. This adds a level of complexity to the functional account of the self which is missing in the Meditations. To clarify this claim, it will be necessary to say more about the nature and role of the passions.

¹⁵ (AT VII 81), II, 56.
¹⁶ (AT VII 82), II, 57.
(ii) The Passions Among the Perception-Types

As we have seen in chapter three, passions are for Descartes a species of thought. In a general sense all "perceptions" are passions of the soul. They represent the world to the will which then responds in some way to them. Now of these perceptions generally considered, some are caused by the external objects of the senses and some by the natural appetites and affections of the body. There are, however, those perceptions "whose effects we feel as being in the soul itself...". These are strictly speaking the "passions" of the soul. And despite our not always being able to locate their proximate cause, they may be stimulated by the "fortuitous movement of the spirits", by intellectual judgements or by external objects which "excite" the nerves.

17 (AT XI 346), I, 337, art. 23.

18 (AT XI 347), I, 337, art. 24.

19 (AT XI 348), I, 337-8, art. 25.

20 Ibid.


With external sensory perceptions (like hearing or sight) the object -what the perception is responding to- or remote cause of the perception is located outside us. With the internal sensations (like hunger), the object or remote cause is inside the body. For both these classes of perceptions, then, the locus and cause is entirely related to the body. On the other hand, the "actions" of the soul (desire and will) have their locus and cause in the soul. But the passions have their locus inside the soul, their remote cause or object most often (but by no means always) outside the body (the charging lion which provokes either courage or fear) and their proximate cause in the bodily movements of the spirits.

A problem arises, however, regarding the lack of precision in some of the distinctions Descartes is making here. Perhaps most glaringly, given what has been said so far it is difficult to distinguish clearly the external sensory perceptions from the passions. Both respond principally to external stimuli and result in "ideas" in the soul. To clarify this ambiguity, it is helpful to examine in turn two aspects of Descartes' definition of passions of the soul, the first of which describes a mechanical difference between passions and the rest of the perceptions, the second a functional difference which focusses on the claim that
the perception types have distinct "loci" or "references".

Descartes maintains that the passions of the soul are "caused, maintained and strengthened by some particular movement of the spirits". All passions have their "last and most proximate cause" in this source. This is meant to distinguish passions both from volitions and from other perceptions. Unfortunately, Descartes does not explain here what the last and most proximate cause of these other perceptions could be if it is not the spirits. Stephen Voss has tried to clarify Descartes on this point by asserting that the last and most proximate cause of sensory ideas is an activity of the nerves rather than the spirits. Presumably, this does not mean that in the case of the passions the nerves have no role whatsoever to play. In the case of a situation leading to the passion of fear, for example, the spirits will commonly do two things simultaneously: they will stimulate the nerves which make the body turn and run from the threatening object, and they will stimulate the nerves of the heart to rarefy the blood in such a way that spirits which first

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23 (AT XI 349), I, 338-9, art. 27.
24 (AT XI 350), I, 339, art. 29.
cause, then maintain and strengthen the passion are continually sent to the brain. In both cases the nerves are necessary intermediaries.

However, with internal or external sensations, so goes Voss's argument, the nervous connection between the brain and the various parts of the body is in the end responsible for the generation of sensory ideas. If Voss is right, in distinguishing the passions and the external sensations in this way Descartes would be saying that, for example, the nerves do not require the assistance of the spirits in causing a sensation of (say) yellow. But this explanation collapses on closer inspection. In the Treatise on Man, Descartes maintains that although the nerves are sufficient for imprinting the movements of particular objects on the internal surface of the brain, such movements must at that point be transmitted by the spirits in determinate ways to the pineal gland.\(^2\) With all perceptions, then, the spirits play a crucial role in the conversion of physical entities into mental ones, and Descartes is clear that this function follows that of the nerves in the causal sequence. Without the spirits there could never be ideas, properly speaking. Thus the nerves cannot

\(^2\) (AT XI 142-4), I, 101-03.
be the "last and most proximate cause" of sensory ideas, as Voss maintains.

Descartes' mechanical distinction may still be helpful if we claim that the passions somehow involve "more" spirit-activity than there is for the other perceptions. Thus Voss declares that the spirits may "have only a bit part to play" in the formation of sensory ideas, whereas their role is paramount in the formation of the passions. This quantitative distinction is entirely too vague, however, and is in any case not borne out by the texts Voss cites. We are therefore left to conclude that Descartes offers us no rigorous mechanical distinction between the idea types in question.

But a more promising avenue of inquiry remains open to us, and this is to enquire into the meaning of the claim that the locus of the passions is the soul. According to Descartes, the passions and the sensations have distinct functional references or loci. We refer a passion directly to the soul and not to the stimulus which gives rise to it, whereas we refer an external sensory perception to the object stimulating the body and not to the mind where the idea is represented. Finally, an internal sensation we

refer to the body.  

The importance of our being aware of these loci is different for each of the perception types. In the case of the external sensations, the importance is scientific -we are concerned to know the fabric of the corporeal world in which we move and which we seek to master technologically. For the internal sensations the importance is strictly preservative or practical -we need to know when our body is in danger or is expressing basic needs so that we may preserve it more efficiently. And in the case of the passions, the importance is chiefly moral -we need to know how to enhance or perfect ourselves insofar as we are rational though embodied creatures. Further, although they will never give us strictly clear and distinct information, the internal sensations and passions may nevertheless be, Descartes claims, "sufficiently clear and distinct".  

These distinctions can be made sharper in light of the doctrine of material falsity examined in chapter one. All three perception types are materially false insofar as they provide significant "scope for error" to the will. However, since

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28 For the three separate types of reference, cf. ((AT XI 346-48), I, 337-8, arts. 23-5).

29 (AT VII 83), II, 57.
external sensory perceptions almost always alert us to the existence of real objects in the world, they can be rendered less obscure through the application of mathematical and geometrical analysis. This type of idea is peculiarly two-faced: each presents a surface reality -the perception- and a deep structure -a specific configuration of size, figure and motion. We can as it were fight through the non-resembling idea to reveal clearly and distinctly the deep structure. The function of the sensory idea then is just to indicate to us that a particular parcel of the corporeal world may require more careful investigation, depending on our specific scientific interests. The idea shows us where in nature to look, but not specifically how to look because, though a mental entity, it is also bound up with the body. According to Descartes, however, "...knowledge of the truth of [matter] seems to belong to the mind alone, not to the combination of mind and body".\textsuperscript{30} Descartes' discussion of the wax in Meditation Two exhibits this doctrine concisely.

Even the internal sensations, though characterized by Descartes as more materially false than external sensations, are not terribly problematic. I may of course be deceived by these

\textsuperscript{30} (AT VII 82-3), II, 57.
ideas, if for example I am dropsical. Indeed, Descartes refers to such cases as "true errors of nature". They arise, he says, because the common sense may be in a given state which can be produced by more than one particular condition of the body. This is the very definition of material falsity: the representation does not unambiguously pick out its true referent. In fact, we are in this case very close to a situation of pure ambivalence, since the body may, so far as the idea tells us, either require water or not. Nevertheless, Descartes argues in effect that the status of such conditions as exceptional proves the rule. The one sensation most often produced by a particular relation of bodily parts to idea is the one that is by that fact conducive to the maintenance of a healthy body. And since the preservation of the body is the final criterion for the truth of internal sensations, these can be verified readily by experience.

With the passions it is otherwise. They are, Descartes claims, "so close and so internal to our soul" that, even when severely disordered, they are not susceptible of correction in the same

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31 (AT VII 85), II, 59.
32 (AT VII 86), II, 60.
33 (AT VII 88), II, 60.
way as either of the other perception types. The reason for this is twofold. First, the passions are said to disturb and agitate the soul more powerfully than other perceptions do. We "feel" them as making very strong claims on us, and it is not always easy in practice to transcend such feelings and evaluate them coolly. Second, it is not immediately clear what such evaluation would in any case consist in. The passions are materially false in the same way the internal sensations are, i.e. it is not obvious from the information of the passion-idea alone how we can pin down its precise referent. But this is not just because, as we have seen, a given passion may arise from a variety of sources. It is rather that its proper referent is the soul itself. The passions therefore are like the other two perception types in being caused (usually) by external objects, but unlike them in that they do not refer to what causes them.

In the end, the information of the external senses, once clarified through the universal science of matter, is our guide

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35 Unless of course they are caused by the soul itself. James highlights the similarities of the perception-types by drawing an analogy between the passions and secondary-qualities, though to my mind she lays insufficient stress on the fact that the primary referent of the passions is not the external world, but the soul. Cf. James, op. cit., 102-6.
through the world of extension. And the internal sensations can be fully clarified through the universal science of medicine, which investigates human physiology qua modification of matter. For the purpose of verifying the internal sensations, bodies are in principal mutually interchangeable: what preserves yours most efficiently will *ceteris paribus* do the same for mine.

But ethics, or the science of the passions, does not have this kind of universality because, I suggest, the claim that the passions are referred to the soul means that knowing them involves knowing the self which has them. I think it important to avoid interpreting Descartes as referring to the disembodied soul in the argument about the reference of the passions. Descartes himself is perhaps not as careful as he should be here, for he has already declared that the "principal effect" of the passions is "...that they move and dispose the soul to want the things for which they prepare the body".\(^{36}\) The soul here is the soul which has passions and which therefore also has a body. But we should also avoid the opposite error, that of thinking that the passions serve only to preserve and and enhance the body. In explaining the function of the passions in article 52 of the *Passions,*

\(^{36}\) (*AT XI 359*), I, 343, art. 40.
Descartes writes,

I note that objects which move the senses do not excite different passions in us in proportion to all their diversities, but only in proportion to the different ways they can harm or profit us or, generally, be important to us; and that the use of all the passions consists in this alone: they dispose the soul to will the things nature tells us are useful and to persist in this volition...37

But the concept of "usefulness" as it is employed in the Passions goes beyond its sense in the Meditations, where it was confined to a strict bodily benefit/harm calculus.

In the Passions it covers two separate meanings. The passions are on the one hand sometimes described as working to our preservation in just the same way as internal sensations such as hunger and pain do. But at other times they are described as working to our moral perfection, a function which is not necessarily co-extensive with the drive toward simple self-preservation, and which may in fact come into conflict with it. Descartes argues for example that when the Decii threw themselves against the enemy and into certain death, their goal was most likely both to inspire their fellow soldiers and to gain posthumous glory. The passion of boldness, and that of hope on which it depends, guided their actions. This kind of analysis

37 (AT XI 372), I, 349, art. 52 (my emphasis).
argues strongly against reading the usefulness of the passions as reductionistically preservative of the life of the agent. This is the most significant respect in which the Passions moves beyond the Meditations. Descartes' claim that the passions are all by nature good will extend even to complex emotions -such as gratitude, hope, regret, shame, and boldness- whose workings cannot be reduced to simple self-preservation but require an appeal to the highly individualized demands of self-perfection. So we should baulk at any pure reduction of the passions either to the requirements of the body or to those of the disembodied soul. They answer, rather, to the specific needs of a minded body or self. And coming to know this self is going to be a largely first-personal exersize. It will be the burden of much of what remains of this thesis to give this point more nuance.

Article 52 (just cited) expresses an ideal. It informs us that the passions will tell us what is best for us and that our soul will then be strongly disposed to remain in the thought of what is so revealed. Despite the differences I have identified between the two types of sensation -internal and external on the one hand and the passion-emotions on the other- this point also

forces us to see their similarity insofar as they are all teachings of nature. And given the emergence in Meditation Three of a veracious God, we can according to Descartes be confident that each perception type brings with it functionally vital information which at that level is plainly certain. He therefore describes our being deceived with respect to all perceptions as arising from our "misusing the order of nature",\(^{39}\) rather than from nature itself. The notion of misreading or misusing the information of the senses is important because it means that in principle we can overcome the respective confusions of all three perception types. Moreover, given the fact that the preservation and enhancement of the whole is natural, we can assume not only that there will be very few conflicts in the information presented to the mind by the respective perception processes but also that the corresponding operations of the mental faculties will be fully and smoothly coordinated. As I say, this is the Cartesian ideal. But the natural process of maintaining functional harmony can go wrong in three ways.

The first is through a defect of the mechanism, as in the case of the dropsical person. Now according to one reading of the

\(^{39}\) (AT VII 83), II, 57.
concept of nature in Descartes the idea of a "natural defect" may simply be oxymoronic, since it would contradict God's infinite goodness and power to have created something defective. When seen in the context of the cosmic whole, apparent defects -like blindness- lose their status as strictly defective. Thus although Descartes does speak in Meditation Six of dropsy as an "error of nature", this description makes sense only in relation to similar machines that work properly. And "proper" in this context just means what the majority of such machines do most of the time. In any case, given the fact that the machine in question has broken down somehow, it must act the way it does, i.e. defectively. So, as Descartes argues to Burman, when the body is ill it will give misleading information to the soul. If it did not do this, ...

...it would not be behaving uniformly and in accordance with its universal laws; and then there would be a defect in God's constancy, since he would not be permitting the body to behave uniformly, despite the existence of uniform laws and modes of behaviour.  

So no indictment of God as a faulty creator is possible: in the context of the whole there are no defects, whereas all actually defective machines prove rather than impugn God's goodness and constancy. Although mechanical breakdown is a comparatively rare

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40 (AT V 163-4), III, 346.
source of perceptual defect, it should be noted that it can cause
the organism to behave erratically, and there is every reason to
suppose it can interfere with the natural functioning of the
passions.

The second and more important type of breakdown is a product
of defective habit, where bad prejudices are imposed on us from
the beginning of life by our society and we have adopted as a
kind of second nature the wayward passions which such prejudices
tend to encourage.\textsuperscript{41} In this case because the beliefs a society
holds and inculcates into its members are corrupt, the members
themselves, acting on those beliefs, may be said to be morally
defective. This is like Aristotle's intemperate person: he or she
is morally corrupt but is entirely unconflicted about this and is
for this reason said to be incorrigible.\textsuperscript{42} The situation of
strict intemperance will also be comparatively rare from

\textsuperscript{41} (AT VI 13), I, 117.

\textsuperscript{42} Aristotle (1985), 1150a21, 1180a11. I should note that I do
not claim to be employing Aristotle's notion of intemperance with
much fidelity here. For example, I eschew his description of this
type as "self-indulgent". I only want to stress that this type has
non-natural or corrupted passions and appetites but is unconflicted
about this and therefore acts resolutely on the basis of those
passions and appetites. Nor should this be taken to imply that
there can be no conflict among non-natural passions themselves,
only that this is atypical on Descartes' understanding.
Descartes' point of view. The reason is that the passions, like
the internal sensations, are teachings of nature. Just as it
would be difficult to imagine people who were taught to interpret
the testimony of their internal sensations in a manner which
systematically contradicts nature's promptings, so too with the
passions. Nature, at the level of all three perception types,
will always be trying to break through the shell of corrupt
habits. When it does, the corrupt habits will be challenged and
the individual conflicted. And this situation introduces the
possibility of moral weakness. The third type of defect then is
moral weakness. Given the distinctions I have just been making,
we should reserve this term for describing those cases in which
an agent is (a) conflicted between the teachings of nature on the
one hand and ill-considered judgements on the other; and (b) acts
in the end in accordance with the latter rather than the former.

C. The Pathology of the Passions

43 It could however happen that, although conflicted in what
I take to be the relevant sense, an agent nevertheless acts
invariably in accordance with the teachings of nature or right
reason. This latter type Aristotle calls the enkrates (Aristotle
op. cit., 1146a9-16). For the purposes of this chapter I am going
to overlook this possibility on the grounds that it is, from
Descartes' point of view, less philosophically problematic than the
sort of conflict I am interested in.
(i) Moral Weakness and Attention-Withdrawal

In the Discourse Descartes argues that "we need only to judge well to do well". In clarifying this doctrine to Mersenne in 1637, Descartes emphasizes the power that the intellect has in determining the behaviour of the agent through control of the will:

You reject my statement that in order to do well it is sufficient to judge well; yet it seems to me that the common scholastic doctrine is that 'the will does not tend toward evil except insofar as it is presented to it by the intellect under some aspect of goodness' - that is why they say that 'whoever sins does so in ignorance' - so that if the intellect never represented anything to the will as good without its actually being so, the will could never go wrong in its choice.45 Descartes is responding to Mersenne's suggestion that with the doctrine of the Discourse under discussion he, Descartes, is falling into the Pelagian heresy, where divine grace is subordinated to independent human striving.46 Descartes denies this by claiming that he has merely replaced grace with "moral and natural philosophy", but is not thereby departing significantly from the orthodox Augustinian position on this

44 (AT VI 28), I, 125.
45 (AT I 366), III, 56.
46 The same charge was made ten years later by Revius and Trigland in Leiden. Cf. Verbeek (1992), 43-4.
matter. More importantly for my argument, he reaffirms his allegiance to the view that knowledge suffices for right action and that wrong action only proceeds from faulty perception of the good.

The letter to Mersenne continues with Descartes' specification of the nature of weakness:

But the intellect often represents different things to the will at the same time; and that is why they say 'I see and praise the better, but I follow the worse', which applies only to weak minds...

At the beginning of the letter, Descartes had described a situation in which the intellect puts forward just a single perception, one which is unambiguously of the good. Here, the will can never go wrong in its operations. However, on the revised hypothesis being entertained the will is presented with a good which has some competition, and this -or so we are told- can lead it astray. Thus, to return briefly to a discussion taken up in chapter two, the presence of alternative choices is a necessary condition for the withdrawal of the will from the true good. But if this is true it must also be the case that we have


48 (AT I 366), III, 56.
to soften the claim that in situations like this it really is true that "I see and praise the better, but follow the worse". It cannot be true both that true intellectual perception entails assent and that I can see the better but assent to or follow the worse.

The same letter to Mersenne seems to offer a resolution to this dilemma. Descartes claims to be in agreement with the idea that "the will does not tend toward evil except insofar as it is presented to it under some aspect of goodness".\textsuperscript{49} So we can apparently still characterize the will as bound to assent only to perceptions of the good and the true, even when it makes mistakes. Still, although the false has now been cast as the true, it nevertheless remains the case that I have wilfully disregarded the real perception of truth or goodness and put a spurious one in its place. The really difficult question as to how I may move in the first place from a clearly apprehended truth to a false one, now characterized as true, has still not been answered. This is a problem of rather major importance, since the fact that such a move is possible is what allows us to attribute to Descartes a theory of akrasia. Now it is precisely

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
the inclination to place oneself intentionally in a condition where one can act contrary to the perceived good that Descartes understands as constitutive of moral weakness. Adapting the letter to Mersenne to the problem of moral weakness thus understood, we can say that weakness requires the prior withdrawal of attention from the good in favour of a less worthy alternative, which is itself then seen as the good.

This should not by any means be taken to imply that all attention-withdrawal is acratically motivated. The phenomenon of attention-withdrawal is in itself an epistemological problem, and Descartes recognizes that it occurs quite easily and often as regards all sorts of beliefs. After having been shown that a triangle's interior angles are equal to two right angles, for example, I may call this axiom into question simply because I am no longer paying attention to its proof. But my failure to attend here may be a product of nothing more interesting than a weak memory or my need to take care of more quotidian problems. The proof of a necessarily veracious God is meant to limit the scope of doubt engendered by such epistemological shortcomings. So whereas akrasia requires attention-withdrawal the converse is not

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50 (AT VII 69-70), II, 47-8.
true. On the other hand, attention-withdrawal can in some cases be the product of non-acratic self-deception - a form of motivated irrationality restricted to the sphere of belief and not extending to that of action51 - but that is a problem I will not pursue here.

In cases where akrasia is at work, the moment of attention-withdrawal constitutes what Amelie Rorty calls the "acritic break".52 But although we have thus explained the conditions for the possibility of akrasia, we have still said too little about the mechanism which sets this process going. Unfortunately, Descartes himself does not have a great deal to say on this theme between 1641 and 1645 and so the doctrine of akrasia is as it were left hanging in his thinking in this interval. But the theme is given new life in the Passions, which means that akrasia has become for him a problem specifically associated with the passions of the soul.

I have characterized the passions of the soul as a relatively complex mechanism of perception. They inform us qua embodied

51 A common example of this is the situation wherein a person systematically ignores evidence of his or her lover's infidelity, believing instead that the lover is faithful.

52 Rorty (1980a).
minds of those features of the world which play a role in our preservation and perfection as individuals. The need to establish a concurrence of will and perception with respect to the passions is given normative grounding in Descartes' concept of generosity. The latter consists, he tells us,

...partly in [a person's] understanding that there is nothing that truly belongs to him but this free control of his volitions, and no reason why he ought to be praised or blamed except that he uses it well or badly; and partly in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well...53

On one understanding, this article simply restates what article 52 had said: that volition and right reason can and should work together in furthering the proper interests of the moral agent.

But a significant difference between the two statements is opened up precisely in the normativity of generosity. For what had looked like a simple description of the way things naturally are with us as creatures of a certain sort, now becomes a sort of moral imperative. It follows that the natural process described in article 52 is far from being a simple inevitability. If it were, a moral directive requiring us to bring it about would be superfluous. Generosity is then the passion which disposes us to

53 (AT IX 446), I, 384, art. 153. I expand at length on this definition in chapter five, below.
seek the ideal concurrence of will and reason, where the will has now been specified, if only implicitly, as having the capability of falling away from right reason. The question then arises as to how the faculties can be prised apart like this, a question which returns us to the phenomenon of attention withdrawal, but this time at it applies specifically to the passions. Of course we are not yet talking necessarily about *akrasia*, only about pathological passions in general, and it is possible that these can be fully accounted for solely by appeal to the types of defect identified in the previous section. But as we will see it is those behavioural defects arising from moral weakness about which Descartes is primarily concerned in the *Passions* as a whole.

(ii) The Source of the Problem: Desire

It would seem as though the problem lies for Descartes in the passions themselves. For he tells us that they commonly have two closely related defects. First, they may misrepresent their objects. Thus, for example, an object which is harmful to the body may cause us no sadness -the properly natural response- and may in fact give us joy. Second, the passions "almost always" exaggerate the goods and evils which they represent to us, thus
causing us to display more zeal and anxiety (plus d'ardeur et plus de soin) with respect to certain objects than we should.\textsuperscript{54}

These points would seem to imply that the perceptual contents of the passions regularly misrepresents their objects, even without the intervention of the will or a defect in the mechanism.

However, all the thesis of material falsity requires, or allows, is the claim that materially false ideas as such give significant scope for error to the will, not that they are intrinsically false. So when Descartes speaks of the disorders of the passions, it must be the case that such passions are already tainted by a faulty judgement of some sort. Indeed, if I could be deceived by the teachings of nature as such, in spite of my sincere attempt to understand and act in accordance with them, it follows that God is a deceiver. I could then trust neither my own smoothly running mechanism nor my good will to clear things up and so I would have no means of correcting the disordered passion. So the disorders of the passions come from outside of the passions proper.

Consider then this statement to Chanut: "...all the afflictions which are blamed on love come solely from the other

\textsuperscript{54} (AT XI 431), I, 376-7, art. 138.
passions which accompany it -that is, from rash desires and ill-founded hopes". The key here is desire (hope is said to be an effect of desire). It is itself a passion, but of a distinct order. Descartes tells us that it is a singular drive which has as many different species as there are objects to be sought.

More importantly, desire is the only passion which is also a mode of the will, an identification Descartes makes unambiguously in the Principles, though it is muted in the Passions. Now in spite of his classification of desire as a passion in the latter text, it is clear that Descartes is also employing the concept of desire here in the same way he did in the Principles. According to this usage as it appears in the Passions, desire is that which links the narrowly passionate perceptions of the intellect to action. It directs us both in the movement toward suitable objects and, as aversion, away from unsuitable ones -the two most basic human actions. Desire and desire-as-aversion are to passion-perceptions as assent and denial are to sensory perceptions. Thus the passions are said to govern our behaviour.

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55 (AT IV 614), III, 312.
56 (AT XI 394), I, 359, art. 88.
57 (AT VIIIA 17), I, 204.
solely "by means of the desire they produce" and it is therefore 
"...this desire which we should take particular care to control". 
Descartes goes on to describe the latter task as the "chief 
utility of morality",\(^5\) a claim which leaves little doubt about 
the centrality of desire to the economy of the passions. 

Still, it may be objected that this analysis simply explains 
away Descartes' classification of desire as a passion. As a mode 
of the will, should it not rather be classed as an action? In 
article 19, however, there is a hint as to how we may resolve 
this difficulty:

Our perceptions are...of two sorts: some have the soul 
as their cause, others the body. Those having the soul 
as their cause are the perceptions of our volitions and 
of all the imaginings or other thoughts which depend on 
them.\(^6\)

It is plausible to suppose that Descartes' apparent inconsistency 
about how to classify desire is due to its being both a passion 
and an action, and that as a passion it is a "perception of a 
volition". Indeed this article goes on to say that a volition and 
the perception of it are "really one and the same thing"

\(^5\) (AT XI 436), I, 379, art. 144.

\(^6\) (AT IX 343), I, 335, art. 19.
considered from different aspects.\textsuperscript{60} Descartes does say, however, that since names are determined by what is most "noble", we normally refer to these passion-actions as actions rather than passions, which means that desire should be classed as an act of will rather than a passion. The best way to counter this is to note that as Descartes sees it the (remote) locus of activity of a passion is normally an external object, not the soul. From this perspective desire is best viewed as part of a perception-complex, i.e. a response to an external stimulus which consists both in a passion proper and a perception of the effect this passion has on the will. Thus for example because I find myself overcome with anger at someone I may be simultaneously aware of a strong desire to strike him or for that matter to hold back from doing so. It is this awareness which constitutes the desire-passion. However, even though the cause of the desire for revenge is the external object, or a state of the body consequent on the apprehension of that object, we can still say that insofar as my perception of the desire -as distinct from the desire itself- is awareness of a state of the soul, its proximate cause is the soul. If this interpretation of article 19 is sound, then in

\textsuperscript{60} Cf. also ((AT IX 327), I, 328, art. 1).
calling desire both a passion and a volition but identifying it most prominently as a passion, Descartes is not guilty of any egregious terminological inconsistency.

As crucial as desire is to the total economy of the passions, however, it also gives us the power to thwart their natural goodness and set up distorted passions in their place, because as a mode of the will it is free to exceed or turn away from the determinations of the intellect. Moreover desire is remarkably powerful and protean in its ability to manipulate the workings of the body to its ends, making it "...more agile and ready to move than it normally is" when not in a state of desire.61 David Pears has written that in cases of akrasia "...desire quietly removes the intellectual obstacle to its own fulfilment",62 a point which applies perfectly to Descartes' view of the matter. For Descartes, just as rational action requires true belief, irrational action requires false belief. Akrasia and self-deception are really two faces of the same coin.63 This allows us

61 (AT XI 411), I, 367, art. 111.


63 Not all who have written on the topic of self-deception and akrasia think that this position is the correct one of course. For challenges to it, cf. Mele (1987), ch. 8; also Dennett (1978), ch. 16; and Wilkerson (1997), ch. 2. The alternative -i.e. Cartesian-
to state the key difference between the intemperate person and
the akrates as I have described these types. Both are ignorant
but one is while the other is not ignorant of her ignorance. This
is why the akrates is by definition self-conflicted whereas the
intemperate person is by definition not.

So as far as our emotions are concerned, we display moral
weakness when we become improperly active or causal with respect
to them. We will see that the cure for them lies in the same
direction. Although the possibility of wayward desire, and with
it of akrasia, is the price we pay for free will, this free power
is our most potent weapon against acratic desire: "[t]he
condition for akrasia assures the condition for the self-reform
of akrasia and the precise location of the acratic break locates
the place where intervention is optimally appropriate.""64 Desire
can cause us to turn away from the good, so we need to reform
desire such that it invariably holds to the vision of the good.
We tend to speak in this context of educating -or re-educating-
the passions through the education of desire and if Descartes is
right we can see why this is so. We have seen that the akrates is

64 Rorty (1983), 179.
self-conflicted. It remains however to sharpen the portrait of this type by showing how she is (and is not) self-conflicted.

D. Mental Conflict

According to the theory that "strict acratic action"\(^{65}\) is not possible - the view I am ascribing to Descartes - it cannot be the case that there is in the akrates a clear-eyed battle between right reason and wayward desire. The two forces cannot, that is, be simultaneously present to the mind. If they could, the akrates would not be experiencing his peculiar kind of problem. He would see that vis-à-vis the overriding reason, the desire he now has is inappropriate and should as such be abandoned. Thus, addressing Aristotle's answer to the Socratic claim that it is simply not possible to act contrary to the perceived good since in that case knowledge would be "dragged about like a slave" by passion, Francis Sparshott has written:

...something prevents us [as acratic] from effectively noticing the aspects of the situation that should bring it within the scope of our moral convictions. So Socrates was, in a way, right after all. Knowledge is

\[65\] Mele (1987), 7. For Mele, a "strict acratic act" is performed intentionally and freely and, at the time at which it is performed, the performing agent consciously holds a judgement to the effect that there is good and sufficient reason for his not performing that act at that time.
not dragged about, it is simply bypassed.\textsuperscript{66} Sparshott concludes that Aristotle's entire theory of akrasia "...depends on the moral principle and the acratic desire bypassing each other".\textsuperscript{67} If this did not happen, if the akrates were fully aware of the discrepancy between his (acratic) desire and the reason it contravenes but chose nevertheless to act against that reason, knowledge would indeed find itself dragged about like a slave, something which Descartes, no less than Socrates or Aristotle, cannot allow:

...if we see very clearly that a thing is good for us, it is very difficult - and, on my view, impossible, as long as one continues in the same thought- to stop the course of our desire.\textsuperscript{68}

This is why for Descartes attention must be withdrawn from the perception of the overriding reason before acratic desire can fully triumph.

\textsuperscript{66} Sparshott (1994), 249. This passage should force us to notice an important difference between Aristotle and Descartes. For Aristotle, the problem with the akrates is not so much weakness of will, as an inability to properly perceive the situation at hand as falling within the purview of the relevant moral principle. This is a failure of intellect or perception, not will. Still, although the will is for Descartes ultimately at fault in cases of weakness, on my argument this also and necessarily involves a faulty perception, so the comparison with Aristotle is apposite.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 246.

\textsuperscript{68} (AT IV 116), III, 233.
(i) Conflict in the Indivisible Soul

Descartes has much to say in the Passions on the topic of mental conflict. In fact, it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the seminal concern of this text is the problem of controlling the passions. And of course if "control" is a major worry for a philosopher, so by extension is conflict, since it is by means of the former that we "manage" the latter. The chief target of attack on Descartes' understanding of mental conflict will be those theories which rest on a form of soul-partition, i.e., all theories which claim that conflict takes place between hierarchically ordered parts of the soul. 69

For Descartes, there can be no division within the soul. This is essential given his view of the soul as unitary and indivisible, in contrast to extended substance. Thus article 47:

...all the struggles that people customarily imagine between the lower part of the soul, which is called sensitive, and the higher, which is rational... consist only in the opposition between the movements which the body by its spirits and the soul by its will tend to

69 James notes that this point about conflict is part of a more general problem that the faculty theorists have in explaining how various parts of the soul can "communicate" with one another. Cf. James, op. cit., 90.
produce at the same time in the gland.\textsuperscript{70}

So the soul is not divided against itself. But this of course should not be taken to mean that an agent is never self-conflicted, only that Descartes has shifted the locus of conflict from the soul to the pineal gland. Such conflict is not acratic because it is not fully mental. It is conflict between a thought and the merely habitual movements of the body which are themselves manifested in characteristic ways in the disposition of spirits in the gland. What is missing at this level is a desire -which, again, is a volonté- to speak for the bodily movement. The body simply tends to act in a certain way because it has previously acted in a similar way in the face of similar stimuli.

But contra Descartes it is difficult to imagine bodily movements which do not issue in concrete desires. For example he says that we can recognize that although a particular cause may naturally incite the soul to fear and the body to flight, this complex can be arrested by "the will to be bold". He seems to want to say that this is a case of conflict between the spirits,

\footnote{(AT XI 364), I, 345-6, art. 47.}
muscles, and nerves on the one hand and the will on the other. But surely it is more properly described as a conflict between fear and boldness? If this is true, then it is inter alia a question of conflict between mutually opposed desires considered as thoughts. So although one may act in accordance with corrupt habits without ever being conflicted over them, the moment conflict emerges it no longer appears to make sense to speak of a struggle merely between the body and the soul.

Indeed, Descartes does not in this article - in spite of his avowed purpose to distinguish his notion of conflict from that of the faculty theorists - seem to think that conflict between the body and the soul is in any sense typical. Rather, he argues that the passions are unique among the perception types in that they have a direct influence on the will, i.e. that they always cause the soul to desire something. So if we are talking about a person's habitual emotional reactions to people and things in the world, we are talking not just about the way the body reacts in certain situations, but also and concomitantly the way the will does. If there is conflict between these reactions and more rational desires, then we must say that the will is self-

71 Ibid.
conflicted, not that the body is in conflict with the soul. This is not to deny that the body is one of the sources of the conflicts we experience, only that the body's demands must always be translated into desires.

This however may open up difficulties for the theory of the indivisible soul. In assessing the power which the soul has to upset habitual-representations, Descartes writes that conflict in this case

...makes the soul feel itself impelled, almost at one and the same time to desire and not to desire the same thing; and that is why it has been thought that the soul has within it two conflicting powers.\(^72\)

Descartes makes an implicit distinction in this passage between how the conflict feels to the agent and the way it must really be. As I read it, conflict only seems simultaneous.\(^73\) In what manner then is an agent really conflicted in these cases? Descartes' answer is that two total states - each of which consists of a connection between particular bodily movements, a passion-percept, and a corresponding volition - are in mutual

\(^72\) Ibid (my emphasis).

\(^73\) The word "almost" actually makes this passage somewhat ambiguous. However, I think it is clear from the article as a whole that the illusion as it appears from the perspective of the "soul" is that of simultaneity, not near-simultaneity (which could imply that simultaneity is the reality).
conflict in the akrates. The extent to which the agent is shuttled in succession between these two states determines the quality and level of conflict he experiences. Acratic conflict occurs when one coordinated psycho-physical state usurps the place of or is usurped by another. Everything depends on the time lag, however slight it may be.

If, in the course of one of these pendulum swings, the mind does not manage to overcome the wayward passion decisively such that there remain unregenerate bodily movements at whatever level, the spirits may revert to the previous course, potentially allowing the acratic desire to triumph once more. And so on. Acratic conflict is therefore entirely retrospective and/or prospective: a body-soul disposition may be in conflict with the total state which preceded it, the one which the agent can by appeal to past experience foresee might follow it, or both. According to this last possibility, the acratic state is a time-slice which is in conflict precisely with the continuum of psycho-physical states in which it is embedded and by which it is surrounded, not with an abstract principle available to the agent during that time-slice. For a synchronic model of conflict, Descartes would have us substitute a diachronic model, such that the agent is seen to be in conflict with his own better reasons.
only over time.

All of this seems to make the movement from one state to the next entirely dependent on the fortuitous presence of an external stimulus which can provoke a counter-desire. This may indeed suffice to explain how the akrates moves from a state wherein the good is glimpsed to a contrary state wherein it is forsaken - the state in which the akrates as such acts - then back again. While contemplating how wonderful is my own equanimity in the face of threats to it, I may be thrust rudely out of this state by the sudden appearance of one who has previously affronted me, the result of which encounter is that, against my own better judgement, I fly into a state of rage and rush at him with murderous intent. At this point we can imagine the external stimulus being altered in various ways. Having, say, either killed him or been assuaged by the calm words he addresses to me, I would emerge from a state of anger back into one of relative equanimity, whereupon I would presumably be appalled at what I had just done, or nearly done.

Nor do we need to posit such alterations in the remote - or external - cause of my passion in order to account for weakness. The more common case is no doubt the one where this cause remains the same but the information which it sends continuously to my
brain is 'interpreted' differently by the mind from one moment to the next. Descartes tells us for example that if in the face of an external threat of some kind fear represents death as an extreme evil which can only be avoided by flight while ambition depicts flight as a dishonour worse than death, these passions will "...jostle the will in opposite ways", and cause the soul to be miserable.\textsuperscript{74} The point is that in cases like this the will is pathologically active, which just means that a false judgement about the real state of the soul is brought to bear on the agent's total apprehension of a situation. Ex hypothesi, one of the two states between which the will is wavering is a teaching of nature, but the will cannot as it were hold to the perception of it even though it is seen clearly for what it is. This is a key component of akrasia as Aristotle understood it: it is a lack of self-control. Although one has, say, correctly identified the situation as requiring behaviour which accords with the real ambition-quality of one's soul, one nevertheless acts in a merely prudent or cowardly manner. This results in the kind of self-torment described so well by Descartes in the passages I have just cited.

\textsuperscript{74} (AT XI 367), I, 347, art. 48.
(ii) The Skeptical Challenge

However, there is a problem with this account of conflict arising from the claim that the mind can variously interpret the causes of its passionate states. This problem is at the very centre of Descartes' theory of the passions as I see it. For better or worse, Descartes' moral objectivism requires an appeal to the teachings of nature as one side of an acratic conflict, and so we need to ask how we recognize these teachings for what they are. What is the mark of a passion which expresses a teaching of nature? If the chief purpose of a passion is to represent my soul to myself - which means representing to myself the sort of person I am - how do I know when this has been done accurately? To take Descartes' example of flight from a threatening situation, the question is, 'am I an ambitious person or a prudent one?' Two answers to the problem suggest themselves immediately, but both are inadequate.

According to the first, natural passions are self-verifying and cannot be doubted. But this is patently false and only applies for Descartes to clear and distinct ideas. The second is that the truth of individual passions is guaranteed by appeal to divine veracity. But this is not helpful either because this
appeal is meant to corroborate the truth of those beliefs -like the one about sensory impressions coming from external objects- which I have a "great propensity to believe". However, in the nature of the case at hand this applies both to the belief that I am ambitious and the belief that I am prudent. I suggest therefore that the status of the passions as extremely materially false makes conflict among them inevitable because it makes weakness of will with respect to them seem natural. The obscurity of passion-ideas is so extreme that it may be typical for them to present the will with situations of perfect or near-perfect ambivalence. All passions, those which are false no less than those which are true, claim to be teachings of nature and thus to represent my soul to me. The reason for this is built into the very structure of moral agency. We have seen that an agent can only pursue some moral object insofar as it has been cast, whether accurately or not, as a good. This means that both of the conflicting passions (assuming for the sake of simplicity that there are only two) will be experienced as true by the agent, and this is just what leads to conflict among them.

This is in fact a problem which goes to the root of Descartes'
entire theory of error: an error is a faulty judgement which is nevertheless subjectively apprehended as true and is therefore believed. We cannot therefore appeal to the spontaneity of our wilful reactions to the passions to verify the passions. So the ambiguity in the claim that the passions are all by nature good which I identified in the introduction to this chapter remains intractable. That is, for all practical purposes the second and correct understanding of this claim -according to which the passions are good only in virtue of being natural- collapses to the first one -according to which they are all good by their very nature. If this is true, it is no wonder that I am carried along haphazardly by my passions, and that I am thus in conflict with myself over time. As I see it, this is the sceptical challenge to Descartes' theory of the passions, and it threatens to undermine his entire picture of the place of the passions in the functional economy.

Descartes might respond to these worries by saying that resolute action is of primary importance and that the truth of the judgements on which such action is based is secondary. Indeed, with the theory of determinate judgements laid out toward the end of Part One of the Passions, he seems to offer just this solution. As this theory would have it, the real danger in
practice is irresolution, not irrational action. This effectively dissolves what we might consider an important difference between two types of conflict: the encratic and the acratic. Now conflict as such is to be avoided, and the ability to act resolutely becomes the overriding moral imperative. The theory of determinate judgements can thus be seen as an attempt on Descartes' part to forestall what I have characterized as the chronic tendency of the passions to lead to conflict. It may therefore be the cornerstone of the rehabituation of the passions.

E. A Solution to the Problem of Conflict?

(i) Determinate Judgements

In the Passions, the will is seen in part as that faculty which undertakes the acts of bestowing and of holding assent. Consider the following statement, which connects the problem of free will with that of the love passion:

...in using the word "willingly" (de volonté) I am not speaking of desire which is a completely separate passion relating to the future. I mean rather the assent by which we consider ourselves henceforth as joined with what we love in such a manner that we imagine a whole of which we take ourselves to be only a
part, and the thing loved to be the other.\textsuperscript{76}

Here Descartes wants us to think about that assent by which we consider ourselves as committed, into the future, to a given act or judgement. This describes the ability to "take a stand" on something, to establish a connection with the object in question which is solidified and preserved by the act of assent itself and by the benevolent activity which follows from it.

Now insofar as commitment entails sticking to a single judgement in the face of possible alternatives, this view of the will seems to conflict -at least potentially- with the dominant one in the pre-\textit{Passions} sources. That is, on this view it would be plausible to suppose that the will might establish and preserve its attachment to something even though that attachment had not been corroborated by the understanding. This may of course lead to error: the reciprocity of the love-union which Descartes stresses in the previous citation is not by itself sufficient to eliminate the possibility of moral error, since both parties may be deluded.\textsuperscript{77} The natural response to this sort

\textsuperscript{76} (AT XI 387), I, 356, art. 80.

\textsuperscript{77} James provides an excellent discussion of the types of moral error which are relevant to writers in the seventeenth-century. She lists four: errors of projection, time, scale, and inconstancy. Cf. James, op. cit., 159-83. Cf. also J. Barnouw (1992).
of problem, the one Descartes himself advocates in the
Meditations (and elsewhere), is that we should simply suspend our
judgement until such time as matters become clearer to us. But in
many practical situations, this is neither possible nor
desirable, as Descartes explains to Elizabeth:

...although we cannot have certain demonstrations of
everything, we nevertheless ought to take a position
and embrace the opinions that seem to us the most
probable in regard to all the things in practice, so
that whenever it is a question of acting we may never
be irresolute - which is what causes regrets and
repentances.78

As in the second maxim of the provisional morality, Descartes
here maintains that it is imperative to take a position on
matters of practical importance, whether good reasons for doing
so are evident or not. And it cannot be stressed too much that
ideally good reasons for action will, as Descartes sees it, often
be missing in moral life.79

Descartes can thus be construed as emphasizing commitment over
truth-seeking as the guiding principle for the will in ethical
matters. This means that the actual content of love-judgements
(for example) is less important than the constancy of the will in

78 (AT IV 295), III, 267.

79 A point which Descartes argues to Hyperaspistes on both a
priori and a posteriori grounds ((AT III 422-3), III, 188-9).
creating and sustaining them. This way of viewing the will seems especially relevant to an understanding of what it is to love someone and error in this case does not appear to be a compelling worry for Descartes. Indeed this picture of the will as that faculty which allows for sustained commitment to the beloved object can be seen as the necessary and sufficient condition for establishing the real value of the object.

Descartes' "theory of association" helps clarify and buttress my claim that the will as free bestower of value may be viewed as supreme in this respect. In a letter to Chanut, Descartes tells the story of a little girl whom he, Descartes, had loved when he was a child. This girl had a squint in her eyes which became for Descartes so attached to the love he felt for the girl that he could never thereafter see a person with a squint without feeling an upsurge of love.\(^6\) Descartes is trying to address Chanut's

\(^6\) (AT V 57-8), III, 322-3. Descartes' analysis here is rooted in the speculative physiological account he gives of love in the Passions. Briefly, the thought of an object of love forms an impression in the brain which directs the animal spirits to the muscles surrounding the intestines and stomach. This then forces the alimentary juices to the heart, causing a great swell of heat there. These spirits are so powerful that they cause the soul to dwell on the object of love. Descartes goes on to say that the first and formative experience we all had of love was in the womb where we "fell in love" with the "fuel" which nourished us. The soul wanted to join itself to this fuel because of the heat which it maintained in the body ((AT XI 404), I, 364).
question as to how we can love someone before knowing his or her real worth. Descartes maintains that notwithstanding the blind physiological compulsion to love as a matter of mere associative habit, we can control our love-judgements. He states flatly that a wise man will not merely submit to mere physiological promptings but will reflect carefully on the real worth of the object in question. I do not want to gainsay the strongly objectivist tone of such claims. But, I would suggest, Descartes can be read here as being less worried about the sway of habitual associations than he is about a person's being dominated by the barrage of conflicting bodily impulses. Through association, be it ever so imaginatively distorted, a person at least establishes authority over the body. In the case of love, this authority is precisely what allows for the constancy of the will's attachment to a beloved object.

In speaking about Descartes' principle of association, Anthony Levi makes the following claim:

The ethical importance of the principle of association lies in the fact that we can both destroy and create associations between the passions and the movements of the spirits par habitude and therefore acquire an
empire très absolu over the passions.\textsuperscript{81}

Note that, according to Levi, the primary ethical import of our faculty of association is not that it allows us to dispense with erroneous judgements but that it gives us control over the passions. So the need to act determinately is not synonymous with the need to act in truth, a point Descartes makes in articulating his theory of determinate judgements:

It is true that very few people are so weak and irresolute that they choose only what their passion dictates. Most have some determinate judgements which they follow in regulating some of their actions. Often these judgements are false and based on passions by which the will has previously allowed itself to be conquered or led astray; but because the will continues to follow them when the passion which caused them is absent they may be considered its proper weapons and we may judge souls to be stronger or weaker according to their ability to follow these judgements more or less closely and resist the present passions which are opposed to them.\textsuperscript{82}

Again, although Descartes goes on in this article to say that true judgements are in general to be preferred to false ones since they will give us less cause to repent, the focus is not on the need to supplant false judgements with true ones. Not at all: here what is crucial in the face of conflicting passions is to

\textsuperscript{81} Levi (1964), 280.

\textsuperscript{82} (AT XI 368), I, 347, art. 49.
stick to one's chosen course, even if that course is "false".

This radicalizes Descartes' comment to Elizabeth (quoted above) that in order to avoid regrets and repentances we need to act resolutely. Now the need for resolute or determinate action is seen to extend even to those judgements and actions which are false. The fact that one's belief system might be infused with falsity seems to be of secondary concern for Descartes. The reason this is so is that Descartes does not seem to have a viable criterion to distinguish true ethical judgements from false ones. In spite of his repeated insistence that we should eliminate the bad foundations on which our judgements might rest he both fails to offer a criterion for establishing good foundations and offers us a theory which explicitly countenances the presence of error in our ethical judgements. As I see it Descartes could only have adopted such a stance given the fact that the passions may, as I suggested in the previous section, lead inevitably to conflict and thus to irresolution.

(ii) The Problem of Moral Freedom

These points open up the following problem. Descartes seems unable to decide firmly (!) whether or not error can be allowed to infect the system of determinate judgements as a whole. I have argued that he does countenance this, but his tendency to pull
back from this conclusion should give us pause. This sort of tension is exactly analogous to the situation with the first two maxims of the provisional morality of the *Discourse*. In maxim two Descartes argues that it is imperative to stick to firm resolutions but that this should not lead us into moral obstinacy, precisely because the latter may lead to moral error. We should rather -here the appeal is to maxim one- look to the intellect to show us when our judgements have become false or irrelevant. But, assuming that it is even possible for us to step outside our system of determinate judgements in order to scrutinize them objectively, Descartes has given us no rational criteria to guide such scrutiny. In the absence of such criteria it is just as good to will the false as the true.

The one restriction Descartes does place on the will's activity in the theory of determinate judgements is temporal: he enjoins us to oppose present passions on the strength of past passions as the latter are expressed in fixed judgements. But this distinction is arbitrary. Surely it could be the case that my past passions are wholly or mostly corrupt, so that to oppose possibly salutary present passions by means of them would be

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83 (AT XI 367-8), I 347, arts. 48-9.
manifestly wrong. Further, if the temporal distinction were employed it would follow that a passion-belief could be both good (or right) and bad (or wrong) as its place in the temporal sequence changes. It would be bad qua present, but then good almost immediately after, i.e. as soon as it had become past.

Consider these points in relation to moral freedom. The whole notion of being responsible for our acts of assent becomes problematic if moral judgements are allowed to rest on erroneous foundations. If we are not responsible for the truth of those judgements, in what way are we responsible for them? If error is not a serious worry, or at least not of primary concern in the formulation of moral judgements, then the will is given a voluntaristic sway over our actions which has no readily identifiable normative check. We must conclude that from the standpoint of Descartes' own doctrine of freedom the theory of determinate judgements fails as a standard guiding action. Insofar as the will is not reacting to the presence of the truth, the only way for it to be non-perverse is to confine its activity to the role of a tool in the pursuit of truth, as with the doubt of Meditation One. The disanalogy between the doubt and determinate judgements should now be clear. The former is a temporary exercise of free power designed to get us to a higher
grade of freedom. The latter, on the other hand, gives carte blanche to the free will, and for this reason places an agent in a more or less permanent state of privation with respect to moral truth. The free bestowal of value in ethical judgements must therefore be seen as a perverse exercise of the will from the standpoint of the Cartesian theory of freedom.

Nevertheless, there is a reason Descartes formulates the theory of determinate judgements the way he does. According to the claim that the passions represent the state of the soul to us, and that we can and should seek to grasp this representation, simple intemperance is not an option any more than is habitual conflict itself. Still, if these were the only two options for an agent Descartes would consider simple intemperance better than habitual conflict for that agent, and this point explains why he can allow false judgements to structure an agent's habitual behaviour. That is an option because the only alternative for this agent, given his perhaps congenital weakness of will, is habitual conflict. And this is a greater evil than mere strength of soul because it may prohibit action altogether. Better to act in error than not to act.

(iii) An Alternative Proposal
Of course, the problem with this analysis is that the theory of determinate judgements seems to require just what the analysis of moral weakness precludes: that the agent in question exercise strength of will in adhering to a fixed set of moral judgements. And if he can adhere to false ones, why not true ones? The answer to this has to be that the theory of determinate judgements is not really aimed at all at those who are incorrigibly weak and self-conflicted, but rather at those who, though prone to these defects, are capable of rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{64} Given the extreme material falsity of the passions, the best way for us to proceed with the project of self-perfection is first to become adept at controlling the will, and only then to worry about the actual content of our desires. Determinate judgements are thus a therapeutic stepping-stone on the path to self-knowledge and virtue. When combined with the idea that they are action-enabling, we might characterize determinate judgements thus construed as analogous to the provisional morality. They allow us

\textsuperscript{64} Voss notes astutely that when Descartes argues that "[e]ven those who have the weakest souls could acquire absolute mastery over their passions if we employed sufficient ingenuity in training and guiding them" ((AT XI 370, I, 348, art. 50), the "them" in question should be taken to refer to people not the passions. Descartes thus advocates training people "Pavlov-style", something which may indeed be necessary in many cases. Cf. Voss, op. cit., 47.
to act while the search for moral truth is underway. If this analysis is sound, then the theory of determinate judgements in fact accords with Descartes' doctrine of freedom because willing erroneously turns out to be a mere means to willing properly. It is an exercise designed to prepare the will to respond to knowledge if and when it arises.

And ultimately, the content of judgements based on the passions is going to be important. What then is the criterion of truth for such judgements? It will not consist, as Hume was to insist, merely in the prevalence of the calm passions over the violent ones.\(^5\) For Descartes the description "natural" as applied to the passions cuts across this distinction. Indeed, as he claims to Elizabeth, strong people may have especially violent passions. So Descartes wants full psychic harmony but not at the cost either of suppressing the passions or of allowing such harmony to rest on false judgements. It therefore appears as though he has made the task of rationally rehabilitating the passions very difficult.

Such skeptical worries notwithstanding, Descartes thinks he has a principle which, when properly applied by the strong moral

\(^5\) Hume (1888), 418.
agent, will allow for total psychic harmony and happiness because it rests on a knowledge of good and evil. That principle is generosity, the "key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for every disorder of the passions". The generous person is said to have "complete command over [the] passions" and "mastery over desire...". This virtue-passion establishes in the moral agent that concurrence of nature and habit, volition and right reason, which is the highest goal of Cartesian moral science and which is just the opposite of moral weakness. Conflict arises because the agent has misjudged the state of his soul, and the problem with this is that it causes him to misidentify opportunities for self-perfection. The generous person allegedly does not do this, but is, rather, adept at evaluating present passions in the light of a true knowledge of the self. It is this knowledge which then structures the agent's responses to the world. Generosity and self-knowledge are for this reason inseparably linked concepts in Descartes' moral philosophy.

86 (AT XI 367), I, 347, art. 48.
87 (AT XI 454), I, 388, art. 161.
88 (AT XI 448), I, 385, art. 156.
F. Conclusion

I have argued four points in this chapter. First, that the manner in which the passions fit into Descartes' functional account of the self allows us to posit an ideal state of the moral agent: that in which the passions inform him of his good and his desire, as a mode of the will, is then carried along in accordance with that good. This scenario obviously fits the definition of freedom of spontaneity. However, and this is the second point, the process of achieving functional harmony can go wrong in several ways, the most interesting of which is as a result of weakness of will. We can see exactly why this latter defect is a weakness: it is an active turning away from the good and therefore an abuse of the purely instrumental nature of free will as I have described this in chapter one.\(^8^9\)

Third, it may nevertheless be the case that given the extreme confusion and obscurity of the passions -the difficulty we have in discerning the real state of their proper referent, the soul-conflict among them is inevitable. I have identified this problem

\(^8^9\) Thus, although akrasia involves a display of our will's power, our misusing this power is the locus of weakness. Note the analogous assessment of the evil genius: "...although the ability to deceive appears to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness..." (AT VI 53), II, 37).
as the central skeptical challenge to Descartes' theory of the passions. Fourth, Descartes formulates the theory of determinate judgements in an effort to answer the problem of conflict. That theory however, does not hold up in the light of Descartes' own theory of freedom unless the formulation of determinate judgements without regard to the their content is a mere technique for training the will in the practice of virtue. I suggested that Descartes appeals to the concept of generosity as the real normative cornerstone for the rational rehabilitation of the passions. Another way of saying this is that the generous person has determinate judgements all of which are true. The theory of generosity may therefore be construed as Descartes' attempt to answer the moral skeptic. Whether or not the theory can support the amount of conceptual weight thus placed on it is a fundamental question for Descartes' moral philosophy. I turn to it and related questions in the next chapter.
5: GENEROSITY AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

A. Introduction

One way of viewing the theory of determinate judgements, and this returns us to a theme introduced in chapter two, is in the context of Descartes' attempts to reconcile virtue and happiness. We saw that Descartes defines virtue as the will's constancy, and happiness as the measured enjoyment of the passions. These two elements can only be separated abstractly. Virtue is not simple constancy, irrespective of the contents of the will's operations; nor should we describe someone who, through weakness of will, experiences as much misery as enjoyment through the passions as truly content. It follows that if our moral judgements contain some falsity we are, on Descartes terms, neither truly content nor truly virtuous. And since the synthesis of virtue and contentment is equally a specification of the ideal relation of intellect and will, neither are we in this case morally free.

The obvious next step is to ask how we can be morally free, according to Descartes. In this chapter I take up this problem by means of an examination of Descartes' concept of generosity, and some of the other passions analysed in Part Three of the Pasions that are related to it. The chapter has three sections. In the
first, I examine the claim that the generous person possesses "moral knowledge". In the second, I look at the relation between generosity and wonder, a relation which, I maintain, gets us to the heart of the problem of self-knowledge in the Passions. Finally, I argue that as a corollary to knowing herself, the generous agent is also uniquely capable of seeing her own passions from a transcendental perspective. This both allows her to entertain potentially painful passions and insulates her from the otherwise anarchic or disharmonious effects of such passions.

B. Moral Knowledge

(i) Generosity Defined

It is tempting to conclude that the concept of generosity is inadequate to its stated purpose, that its theoretical promise exceeds the abstract form in which it is cast. In fact, as we will see, there does not seem to be anything in the bare definition of generosity which we have not already encountered in some of Descartes' previous attempts to articulate the ideal relation of will and intellect in his moral psychology. I suggest therefore that the concept can be understood fully only if we inquire into the type of person the generous agent is said to be. This will involve an appeal not only to the way this type is said
to act toward others and toward himself—examining the role played by such passions as esteem, pity, and wonder will be crucial here—but also to Descartes' clear preference for the ideal of wisdom represented by the Epictetan sage. Only by expanding our analysis in this manner can we get a satisfactory picture of the type putatively embodying the full reconciliation of virtue and contentment.

It is certainly not possible to confine Descartes' use of generosity to its place in moral discourse before him. Its links to the classical virtue of magnanimity and to Balzacian gloire, for example, have been noted, but Descartes is quite consciously moving beyond these usages while incorporating some aspects of them. Again, the etymological roots of the word are important, but do not provide a full explanation of its philosophical significance for Descartes. The word "generosity" is rooted in French to génétique and généalogie and in Latin to genus, which can be rendered as "race", "descent", or "lineage". The word thus carries strong etymological connections to nobility and can as

1 On the inadequacy of the classical notion of magnanimity, cf. ((AT XI 453), I, 388). On glory, cf. ((AT XI 462 & 467), 391 & 394). The best study on the relation of these and related concepts to Descartes' terminology is Levi op. cit., passim.

such be viewed as a gift of high birth which one has either been blessed with or not. Moving immediately beyond the classical and etymological associations of the word, however, Descartes offers this definition:

Thus I believe that true generosity, which causes a person's self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be, has only two components. The first consists in his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him but [the] freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using this freedom well or badly. The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well -that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best. To do that is to pursue virtue in a perfect manner.3

Generosity as a virtue consists then in (1) the knowledge that what most belongs to me is my free will, coupled with (2) the feeling of a firm resolution to use my will well.

In this section I will focus on what sense we can make of the notion of using our freedom "well" as this is stated in component (2). I place the emphasis here, at least for the moment, because our freedom is, as both components would have it, clearly circumscribed by the moral quality of our free actions. Moreover, the two components work in tandem. The chief feature of the first component is that it ties our freedom to our self as what most

3 (AT XI 445-6), I, 384.
properly belongs to that self. The second component should then be read as making this description more precise by telling us that the self is only fully revealed in the proper use of this free power as manifested in the agent's firm resolutions.

Although in the definition of generosity Descartes does not tell us what it means to act well or badly, we do not have to look far in the Passions for an attempt at an explanation. For Descartes argues that "strength of soul is inadequate without knowledge of the truth", and that the object of this knowledge, which is to be inscribed in our moral judgements, is the nature of good and evil. As we have seen in the previous chapter, since the ultimate referent of the passions is the soul, this is knowledge of the real state of the agent's soul. So one way of discovering how it is that my passions represent my soul to me is to investigate how the passions are connected to good and evil. Indeed, If we are to make any progress in understanding generosity, we need to ask what the source of the knowledge of good and evil is, how it is to be accessed, recognized, and so on. The following two parts of this section will attempt to answer this problem.

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4 (AT XI 367), I, 347, art. 48.
(ii) God and the Good

Throughout his career Descartes is clear that there are only two sources of knowledge: revelation or faith and natural philosophy. In the Rules (written in 1628) Descartes tells us that intuition and deduction are the "most certain routes to knowledge that we have". These two modes of knowledge exhaust the methodology of natural philosophy, although they do not preclude the certainty of revealed truths. But all other pretenders to knowledge ought to be rejected as liable to involve us in error. This thesis is reiterated as late as the Meditations where grace and natural philosophy are discussed as the only two kinds of knowledge having any relevance to the problem of human freedom. Thus it appears that if we are to understand the kind of knowledge involved in generosity we must look to one or another of these sources.

Revelation seems a not unlikely candidate. After all, revealed truths are passed down to us from God in Scripture and they do

5 (AT X 370), I, 15.

6 (AT VII 58), II, 40. Cf. also ((AT VII 148), II, 105); also ((AT VII 209-10), II, 273). This latter source does imply that there may be "other means" of knowing God, but the context suggests that Descartes means this facetiously.
have a good deal to say about the nature of good and evil and the problem of moral conduct. Thus Descartes asserts that the "way of speaking" about God in Scripture "does contain some truth... albeit truth which is relative to human beings".\(^7\) And, again, to Elizabeth Descartes comments that Seneca's moral philosophy is inadequate given the fact that he, Seneca, was ". . . unenlightened by faith, with only natural reason to guide him".\(^8\) But these comments are only very sparsely spread through Descartes' corpus and do not in any case unambiguously make the case that moral knowledge is derived from revelation or grace.

Even if they do suggest this, however, they conflict strongly with what Descartes says elsewhere. In a letter to Mersenne concerning the conditions under which we "do well" Descartes writes,

> The well-doing of which I speak cannot be understood in a theological sense -for there grace comes into the question- but simply in the sense of moral and natural philosophy where no account is taken of grace.\(^9\)

This passage equates moral and natural philosophy and opposes

\(^7\) (AT VII 142), II, 102.

\(^8\) (AT IV 263), III, 256-7. On the appeal to grace in Descartes' time as a means for controlling the passions, cf. Levi op. cit., ch. 8.

\(^9\) (AT I 366), III, 56.
both to grace. In denying that revelation is relevant to moral
philosophy, this position accords moreover with that contained in
the famous "tree of philosophy" metaphor in the *Principles*, where
morality is seen as methodologically dependent on the truths
established by natural reason in metaphysics and physics.\(^{10}\)
Indeed, Descartes claims elsewhere never to have used the word
"believe" with respect to the problem of "knowledge" but only
with respect to that of faith. In thus contrasting knowledge and
faith, Descartes is confining the latter to the Christian
mysteries, that of the Trinity for example.\(^{11}\) But the truths
which govern moral conduct are nowhere said to come into the
purview of mere belief.

These points force us to the view that moral value is accessed
through natural reason. They should not, however, be taken to
imply that moral value is for Descartes not in some sense *given*,
and that God is utterly irrelevant to our understanding of it. In
the last chapter I argued that the passions provide reasons for
action and that they are "by nature" good. Therefore as the
Creator of the whole natural order, God is equally the source of

\(^{10}\) (AT IXB 14), I, 186.

\(^{11}\) (AT III 425-6), III, 191.
moral value. Terry Keefe puts forward a similar point, arguing that the criterion of rationality in morals for Descartes is "the good" and that this is an eternal truth determined by God's will. Keefe points out correctly that in posing the classic question, "does God will certain conduct because it is good or is that conduct good because he wills it?", Descartes has strong reasons for rejecting the first answer and embracing the second. On Descartes' understanding there can be no standards of any sort existing either logically or existentially prior to God.12

It is on this point that Keefe finds fault with the Cartesian doctrine. Invoking G.E. Moore's attack on naturalism in ethics, Keefe argues that the appeal to the divine creation of the eternal truths on Descartes' part forces us to refer a moral term, the good, to a non-moral term, God. This of course violates the putative "autonomy" of ethics, but more importantly for Keefe it means that we cannot in the end characterize either God or the eternal truths themselves as good in any meaningful sense. The problem is that,

..if one disregards the Autonomy of Ethics by defining "good" in terms other than moral ones, then one is

12 Keefe (1991), 371. Keefe cites ((AT VII 432-3), II, 291-2), as evidence that for Descartes the source of both truth and goodness is God's indifferent will.
unable to commend morally what those non-moral terms denote.\textsuperscript{13}

Descartes can, so goes the argument, reduce the good to "what God wills" only at the price of not being able to characterize "what God wills" as itself good. Any attempt to do so results in the tautology: "what God wills is what God wills". Nor, as I say, can we characterize God himself as good, since to do this would force us to conclude, "non-sensically", that "God is what God wills".\textsuperscript{14}

Keefe's point, with which I am largely in agreement, is that, according to the conception of a fully voluntaristic God advanced by Descartes, the most we can say about the good at a meta-ethical level is that it is what God wills.\textsuperscript{15} But as Keefe himself points out, Descartes commits no formal fallacy here and the argument against him is at the end of the day not very damaging. The reason for this is that we do not need to ask questions at the theological plane about God's will in order to

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\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 372.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} A position of which Leibniz was very critical: "...I am far removed from the opinion of those who maintain that there are no principles of goodness or perfection in the nature of things, or in the ideas which God has about them, and who say that the works of God are good only through the formal reason that God has made them". Cf. Leibniz (1988), II, 4.
discover our good. That is, as Descartes would have it we should
not look for the criteria of ethical rationality in a set of
rules or reasons, defined as the eternal truths, which are the
direct and unsullied product of God's benevolent will and which
humans discover external to themselves. Although the good will
necessarily be the product of a divinely benevolent will, the
real question is how we come to apprehend and believe it and this
shifts the locus of our investigation from the external to the
internal.

(iii) The Primary Passions and the Good

Earlier I said that the good is naturalistically "given", and
this means that moral philosophy does not need to cast about
transcendently in order to discover the proper ends of human
life. Given this point and my account of Descartes' functionalism
in the previous chapter, it should come as no surprise that good
and evil are functions of the natural workings of the passions
themselves. To see this, we need to examine the economy of the
"primary passions" more closely than I have done so far. Indeed,
any theory which links moral agency to the passions in some way
must involve an examination of the primary passions, for insofar
as all the other passions are derived from these, they tell us
what the basic structure of agency is like. Although for Descartes there are six primary passions - love, hatred, joy, sadness, wonder and desire - this list is in fact further reducible. He tells us that the "natural function" of the primary passions is "to move the soul to consent and contribute to actions which may serve to preserve the body or render it in some way more perfect".16

With respect to this fundamental function, however, the passions of sadness and joy would seem as it were to be more primary than the other four. The reason for this is that sadness immediately informs the organism of painful states, those which are contrary to the preservative function. In this case the pain is causally productive of sadness, hatred and aversion in that order. Joy, for its part, is the immediate product of "titillation" (chatouillement), an indication that the body has come into contact with something which may serve it.17 Here the chain following the initial stimulation is: joy, love, desire. Sadness and joy are thus primary indicators of bodily states. A narrowly self-preservative ethic can be deduced fairly easily

16 (AT XI 430), I, 376, art. 137.
17 Ibid.
from this picture. But the problem is more complex than this analysis suggests, for Descartes is speaking here of the primary passions only insofar as they relate to the body.

To the extent that the primary passions relate to the soul, joy and sadness lose their privileged status. In this case, love and hatred become primary. And these passions themselves are said to proceed from judgements concerning good and evil. Love, if it joins us to "real goods", cannot be excessive and always augments our perfection. And hatred that proceeds merely from pain, although it is necessary where the preservation of the body is concerned, must be sharply distinguished from hatred which results from "a clearer knowledge". These considerations should cause us to look with suspicion on the sort of subjectivist interpretation of Descartes' theory of love which I sketched in the previous chapter. As far as desire is concerned, Descartes informs us that it is never bad so long as "it proceeds from true knowledge" and is "governed by this knowledge".

\[\text{(AT XI 433), I, 378, art. 140.}\]

\[\text{18} \quad \text{Cf. Williston (1997) for a defence of love as "bestowal" of value rather than "appraisal" of objective worth. This is an interpretation of Descartes which I now reject, though the relevant texts remain tantalizingly ambiguous.}\]

\[\text{(AT XI 434), I, 378, art. 141.}\]
Although Descartes seems to be drawing a sharp distinction here between actions which issue from a bare homeostatic functionalism on the one hand and those which issue from a consideration of "the nature of things" external to the agent on the other, such a reading is, I believe, inaccurate. There is nothing in the Passions to recommend the claim that the process of coming to know the nature of good and evil involves our reading the objective moral structure of the world with at best secondary regard to the functional perspective of the agent. Indeed, this position is explicitly rejected by Descartes:

But when we think of something as good with regard to us, i.e. as beneficial to us, this makes us have love for it; and when we think of it as evil or harmful, this arouses hatred in us.21

Or even more forcefully:

...when we consider the good and evil which may exist in a single thing, in order to discover what value to put on it...we must take the good to consist in whatever may be advantageous to us, and the evil to consist in whatever may be disadvantageous; the other defects which the thing may have are not taken into account.22

The good/evil dichotomy thus maps directly onto the moral benefit/harm dichotomy. Now although this leaves open the

\[21\] (AT XI 374), I, 350, art. 56.

\[22\] (AT IV 354-5), III, 283.
possibility that we need not think of objects solely with respect to our own self-regard (the will is after free to refuse to think of things in this way), such a position would entail the elimination of the passions, since "this same consideration of good and evil is the origin of all the other passions". But since Descartes thinks that the passions are an integral part of the good life, such a stance would from his point of view commit the Stoic error of denigrating the passions tout court.

The distinction which Descartes draws between the primary passions as related to the body and the soul respectively should therefore be seen as a distinction between a lower and a higher functionalism. The first relates exclusively to the needs of the physical organism, the second to the needs of the soul. But the two levels, though obviously separable analytically, are only actually separable in a non-ideal state, that is, when there is some conflict between the demands of the body and those of the soul. As I argued in the previous chapter, there are various sources of such conflict and in most people most of the time such conflict, at varying degrees of intensity, is no doubt the norm. But Descartes' separation between the two levels here should not

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23 (AT XI 374-5), I, 350, art. 57.
obscure the point that ideally there is no such separation, that
the organism as a whole is from this perspective fully unified.
Accordingly pleasure and pain will in this state largely be a
function of moral benefit and harm. Love and hatred, as products
of the knowledge of good and evil, are thus the primary affective
expressions of the self-perfecting agent comprehensively
conceived. These two passions are nothing more or less than
indicators of morally harmful or useful "objects" in the same way
that joy and sadness are indicators of pleasurable or painful
physical states. But, again, ideally these two levels function in
mutual harmony. This means that at the basic level at which an
agent contacts an affecting external body he will derive pleasure
from a true judgement of good, just as he will derive pain from a
true judgement of evil. The last elements in both sequences are,
respectively, desire and aversion -so Descartes' injunction
against desire's exceeding the bounds of "true knowledge" is not
violated.

It follows that the moral "instincts" will be tied closely to
the physical ones: ideally neither will be fully reducible to the
other, and the highest moral imperative for each agent will be
the promotion of her own self-interest as revealed (ultimately)
through the workings of the primary passions. I would argue that
for Descartes these points reduce to the claim that the good is the useful or the prudent broadly conceived. He suggests just such a connection in these words to Elizabeth:

If prudence were mistress of events, I do not doubt that your highness would succeed in everything she undertakes; but all men would have to be perfectly wise before one could infer from what they ought to do what they will in fact do.24

Here prudence is identified as "perfect wisdom" and a moral "ought". The claim is that although humans are naturally self-interested, they may perversely neglect or perhaps simply misinterpret their own interests, an unfortunate result of which is that their actions become unpredictable and they become more difficult to control.

As one commentator sees it, such arguments, coupled with the claim that "all the good and evil of this life" depend on the passions,25 indicate that Descartes shares with Hobbes, the founder of modern political philosophy, the view that reason serves the passions.26 More particularly, the generous person is the highest type for Descartes because as a "political passion"

24 (AT IV 334), III, 277-8.
25 (AT XI 488), I, 404, art. 212.
26 Kenington (1987), 434.
generosity enjoins or allows us to master nature as the latter is manifested in the passions. And the mastery of the passions is in turn the key to the mastery of other people and of the natural order as a whole. It is interesting to note, in connection with these points, that not even the hyperbolic doubt of the Meditations challenges the claim that the good is the useful since that doubt is based on this very claim.\textsuperscript{27} The reformation of the sciences is necessary to the mastery of nature and Descartes is never interested in metaphysical questions as mere exercises in abstract thinking.

I would suggest, therefore, that contra Keefe we can say a good deal on Descartes' behalf about the criterion of the good. We have indeed supplied a formal account of component (2) of generosity by giving an account of what, at the level of the primary passions, is involved in structuring our will in accordance with true knowledge. This is what it means to use the will "well" (feeling within oneself the "resolution" to use the will thus is an entirely separate matter). The key point is that in ideal states, the good - or the real state of the soul - will invariably be revealed to the agent and she will then instantiate

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
that good in actions which are useful or self-perfecting.
Moreover, it may be the case that all we need appeal to here is
the "inner awareness" of the agent herself that she is engaging
in activity that is useful to her:

...for all the actions of our soul that enable us to
acquire some perfection are virtuous, and all our
contentment consists simply in our inner awareness of
possessing some perfection.\textsuperscript{28}

However, these points alone do not move us very far beyond the
conclusions of chapter three. In particular they do not address
an important theme of that chapter: the extreme material falsity
of the passions which makes it difficult in practice for an agent
to decide which of two conflicting passions really represents the
state of her soul. The problem which our analysis has made acute
is that she may have "inner awareness" of (at least) two mutually
conflicting reasons for action.

So the burden of my argument now is to show the manner in
which, by being generous, we may achieve the sort of psychic
harmony and self-knowledge Descartes describes. What the
preceding analysis has brought to light is the proper end or
object of moral knowledge and thus of moral activity. But the
(perhaps) more difficult part of moral philosophy is the

\textsuperscript{28} (AT IV 283-4), III, 263.
specification of the means to this end. What we need is a method for invariably instantiating our true good in action. This is equivalent to asking how an agent comes to know that a given affect represents either a threat to or an augmentation of her good. And as regards this question we will need after all to appeal to something more solid than the agent's "inner awareness" that she possesses some perfection, since she may be deceived about this. I turn therefore to a closer examination of generosity.

C. The Generous Self

(i) The Self of Meditation Six

In his objections to the Meditations, Gassendi points out that Descartes operates with two apparently conflicting notions of the meditator's reflexive "I". According to the first, articulated in Meditation Two but persisting through Meditation Six, the "I" is purely a thinking thing whose identity as such is entirely distinct from all corporeality and is fully concentrated in the pineal gland. This view, though never abandoned, is complicated later in Meditation Six where the functionally defined "I" becomes much more tightly tied to the operations of its own body and by extension to the external world. This "I" then appears to
be diffused throughout "its" body. Any individuation of the self involves separating that self from what it is not, from what is distinct even if contiguously present to it. Within the confines of Meditations Two and Three this is not especially problematic. The self is represented precisely through its differences from anything pertaining to body. So none of the meditator's ideas -not even those which appear to be adventitious- are a threat to his identity as a thinking thing because none of them seems to presuppose that there is anything else in the world besides himself (the innate idea of God is of course an exception to this). In fact his ideas actually confirm his existence insofar as they require a substance -himself- in which to inhere. The self, on this understanding, is the thinking thing with all of its thoughts, regardless of the sources of these thoughts.

All of this changes with the proof of a veracious God and the reconstitution of the physical world. Now the "I" is connected,

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29 (AT VII 339-41), II, 235-6. I am stretching the meaning of Gassendi's criticisms. He is not so much concerned about the nature of the self as about the "location" of the mind. My point is that if Descartes wavers on this question it is largely due to the problems involved in calling this body mine, something which is not a problem at all until Meditation Six. It is the status of the internal sensations which initially makes this problem acute.
inextricably in this life, with a body and to the world of
matter. However, Descartes makes no sustained attempt in the
Meditations to separate this self from what it is not. If my
ideas are the causal product of an external world of whose
existence I can be sure, then "I" am bound up with that world via
my body. Am "I" then just the mental terminus of a variety of
causal sequences which begin in the physical world and end in my
soul? Where does the world stop and "I" myself begin? Descartes
comes to write a treatise on the passions precisely because these
are pressing questions for him. Another way of putting the
question then is to ask how, given that it has passions which
connect it to a world of separate existences, the soul can
nevertheless assert its identity over and against those
existences.

There is a general tendency in early modern thinking on the
passions to reduce their workings to the movements of appetite
and aversion, i.e. determination toward and away from external
objects. We have seen this at work in Descartes' analysis of the
primary passions. The precise measure in which the self does this
with respect to particular objects defines that self against
those objects. The overriding project is preservation and
enhancement of this individual, so the extent to which I can
attach myself to various objects in fulfillment of this project will determine the way I love and hate, hope and fear. Although the passions are not simply co-extensive with the appetites, these considerations bring out the importance of the appetitive self of Meditation Six to Descartes' later reflections on this theme. The function of both the appetites and the passions is to give us a definite sense of the boundaries of the embodied self. This is the self which seeks to preserve and perfect itself—to either resist other bodies or join itself to them—by moving toward or away from various external objects. This is why love and hatred—which respectively attract us to and repel us from various external objects—are so important to Descartes' moral philosophy.\textsuperscript{30}

I think that the concept of generosity is a clear attempt—the first after the Meditations—on Descartes' part to address these questions. Its first component states that the generous person "knows" that nothing truly belongs to him but the freedom

\textsuperscript{30} This is an important theme in James (op. cit.). She notes the centrality to thinkers in this period of the reciprocally defined notions of resistance to change and self-expansion (ibid., 65-130). She argues, further, that these concepts also define what it means to pursue knowledge. Thus, these philosophers "...aim to articulate a conception of knowledge which guarantees both control and love, separation and connection" (ibid., 252).
to dispose his volitions as he wills. This, taken by itself, is a radical solution to the problem of self-knowledge, because the locus of selfhood is the mere power I possess to control my desires. In other words, I assert my identity not in virtue of the content of my free actions but solely because they are expressions of an abstract power whose reality I cannot apparently deny. This cannot of course be the whole story, however. We must always will something, and we can, Descartes thinks, make a distinction between a proper and an improper use the will. It should be clear now that we can make this distinction in accordance with the criterion of self-interest I have been expounding so far in this chapter. How exactly does Descartes think the criterion should be applied?

(ii) The Generosity Test

I want to argue that Descartes thinks of the self as revealed in the process of coming to know the etiology of its affects:

But, to know how much each thing can contribute to our contentment, it is necessary to consider what causes produce it, and knowledge of these causes is one of the principal kinds of knowledge that can serve to facilitate the practice of virtue; for all the actions of our soul that bring us some perfection are
Here, virtue is explicitly made to depend on our coming to know the causes of our affective states, and this knowledge is directed at the determination of our "perfection". Moreover, Descartes makes a fundamental separation between those states which depend on us and those which depend on forces outside our control. He will argue, further, that ideally only the former should be a part of what Amelie Rorty refers to as an agent's "intentional set", what I will call an agent's affective repertoire: that set of desires and emotional dispositions which pattern an agent's moral attention in specific ways.

Only when all of our passions have been referred to the self are we fully free. The extent to which this sort of activity reveals a self-identity is reflected in the fact that it is intimately tied to an agent's self-esteem. For Descartes, our disposing of the will in an ideal manner produces what Robert

31 (AT IV 283-4), III, 263.

32 Amelie Rorty (1980b), 113. I employ the term "affective repertoire" because I am specifically concerned with the way in which the emotions act to pattern attention.

33 (AT XI 445), I, 384, art. 152.
Solomon calls "the maximization of self-esteem".\textsuperscript{34} Thus generous people are held to possess the perfect balance between humility and esteem because they "...are well acquainted with the causes of their self-esteem".\textsuperscript{35} We can add that they are equally well-acquainted with the causes of their humility. What this doctrine means, in both cases, is that such people esteem themselves to the extent that they are the active source of a given affect and are humble to the extent they cannot establish an active relation between an external cause and the self. That is, legitimate humility and self-esteem follow on a recognition by the agent of the precise scope and power of the will to control a relevant portion of the world. The seemingly pedestrian truth that I am causally connected to a real world which also contains other people and objects and may as such involve me in relations over which I do not have control can, Descartes claims, become a liberating truth if I can train my will spontaneously to disengage itself from relations of this stamp. This is why the

\textsuperscript{34} Solomon (1980), 277-8. Solomon uses this phrase to characterize his own view of the function of the emotions, a view which he declares is "most vehemently opposed" to that of Descartes. Given my argument in this chapter that statement is somewhat surprising. Cf. also Solomon (1976), ch. 9, sec.1.

\textsuperscript{35} (AT XI 452), I, 387, art. 160.
generous person has "...very little esteem for everything that depends on others".\(^{36}\)

According to Descartes, all mental states which have their origin in an act of will are *ipso facto* active. Generosity is a kind of crucible for the affects. When we act in accordance with it, each potential affect is forced to declare its function with respect to the economy of the composite. We might call this process the *generosity test*. It requires that every affect be evaluated as either a potential augmentation of or hindrance to self-perfection and thus to self-esteem:

For, according to the rule of reason, each pleasure should have to be measured by the greatness of the perfection it produces, and it is thus that we measure those pleasures whose causes are known to us.\(^{37}\)

The ultimate measure of an affect or a pleasure is the "perfection" it brings the agent, but this cannot be determined until the causes of our various pleasures are known.

Recall the claim I made in section B(ii) of this chapter that in an ideal state a judgement about good occasions a feeling of pleasure. The obvious problem which that description of things raises is that pleasure cannot itself be an indicator of a good

\(^{36}\) (AT XI 448), I, 385, art. 156.

\(^{37}\) (AT IV 284), III, 263.
judgement since false judgements about the good will also almost always be accompanied by pleasure. But here the argument is more precise. Descaîtes enjoins us, on recognizing a pleasurable state as such, to step back and evaluate the extent to which we can exercise appropriate control over the object of our pleasure. This is an active exercise of free will in the service of the search for moral truth. And since we are being enjoined to resist the blandishments of the passions, it involves the non-perverse indifference of the will. If we cannot exercise appropriate control over the object, the pleasure is unstable since the object may be removed or altered and our psychic harmony be adversely affected as a result. We will in this case be at the mercy of external causes in just the same way as the habitually conflicted person I describe in the previous chapter is.

Knowledge of the causal chain in which a particular passion is implicated allows us to evaluate it with respect to the self. That very process, which again is active in the strict sense, disempowers the affect with respect to an agent's potential behaviour in the same way that suspension of judgement in the face of a sensory idea disempowers the latter with respect to an agent's final judgement about some aspect of the physical world. Understanding exactly where a sensory idea comes from allows us
to transcend the merely habitual apprehension of that idea and whatever prejudicial beliefs come with it. With respect to the passions, if it were not possible to engage in this kind of process, the agent would literally suffer the affect. Generosity is thus the true methodological analogue of the doubt of the Meditations. Just as the beliefs which pass the test of doubt are epistemologically sound, so the affects which pass the test of generosity are by this fact morally sound.

An agent may be said to be rational just to the extent that her affective repertoire has gone through this process. At that point the causes of all her "pleasures" are "clearly known" to her, and she therefore holds in low esteem all those goods which rest unduly on others or on the whims of fortune and which may be "taken away" from her.38 The inference just pointed to is crucial to Descartes' purpose. As I have argued in the previous chapter, all the passions claim to represent the soul to us. So there is a tendency for us to ignore the external causes of our affects and focus instead on the very pressing "internal" claims they make on us. Becoming aware of the causes of our passions is important because it diverts our attention from the internal to the

38 (AT XI 481), I, 401, art. 203.
external. It is only at that point that the passion can be truly
evaluated. The process of coming to know oneself is theoretically
complex because it involves a necessarily active operation of the
will - the turning of attention from the internal to the external-
which may in turn lead to a true judgement about myself in the
form of a statement about the sort of control I can expect to
exercise over a relevant portion of the external world. It should
be noted in addition that this is a procedure which was not
available to Descartes prior to the writing of the Passions
because he had not yet worked out the etiology of particular
passions.

For Descartes the affects do not by means of this process
literally cease to be passions (as they do for example for
Spinoza). But whereas an affect which has not been appropriately
evaluated has its active source external to the agent or in the
fortuitous movements of the spirits, one which has passed this
test thereby becomes rooted in the self. It remains the case that
qua effect in the mind the affect is still a passion, but it is
now a rational passion, i.e. one which truly represents the self.
Not until the self has evaluated a passion's causes and (say)
incorporated it into the affective repertoire does that passion's
locus shift from the external object to the soul. The object of

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course remains but as a merely enabling condition or material cause.

(iii) Wonder

Every time this sort of thing happens we marvel at the strange and plastic power of our will, its "infinite" capacities. As Descartes argues, in these cases the will itself becomes the proper object of "wonder" (admiration).\textsuperscript{39} Wonder plays a very crucial and highly specific role in Descartes' moral psychology. According to my account of good and evil, the process of legitimizing individual affects is internal to the affective repertoire itself. I think that Descartes may be aware of the dangerous subjectivism inherent in this view, and that through the concept of wonder he attempts to forestall this danger to some extent. Wonder can play this role because it keeps us attuned to the presence of novel objects, objects which cannot be fit neatly into our current repertoire and which therefore both

\textsuperscript{39} (AT XI 452-3), I, 387, art. 160. Why should we be so surprised at our will's power given the fact that according to Descartes the will is a necessary component of every behavioural performance? I think the answer is that, given the sway which prejudice has over most of us most of the time, we are blind to the fact that the will is under our control. Breaking habits -think of the doubt of Meditation One- is likely to reveal this power dramatically. On these points, cf. (AT VII 247), II, 172).
surprise us and force us to pay attention to them.  

Descartes argues moreover that almost all the passions have some element of wonder in them and it is this quality which ensures that my passionate apprehension of an object will not be wholly determined by the present use to which I can put the object.  

But Descartes sees wonder too as potentially dangerous. Although only ignorant people are devoid of it, it tends to diminish with experience and should in any case not be cultivated for its own sake. It should rather be subordinated to the quest for "knowledge". Now it is plausible to suppose that Descartes is here simply repeating a key doctrine of his epistemology: that although the senses inform us of the existence of objects in the world, we cannot take their reports at face value in pursuing scientific knowledge. Wonder then, properly tempered, is a necessary tool of inductive science. It informs us of an unusual effect whose cause we must then ascertain through more reliable methods.  

But this cannot possibly exhaust the meaning of the passion of

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40 A useful discussion is in Timmermans (1994).

41 (AT XI 382), I, 353, art. 72.

42 (AT XI 385), I, 355, art. 76.

43 Ibid. Cf. also ((AT VI 76), I, 150).
wonder since Descartes is manifestly employing it as a term of moral psychology. So although it is applicable to problems of scientific epistemology, the subordination of wonder to knowledge must be understood in a different sense when applied to ethics. I suggest that there is for Descartes a kind of dialectic between wonder and generosity, where the latter generates value relative to the agent's, more or less complex needs and the former insures that the agent nevertheless remains open to novel forms of contact and composition with external objects. There is thus a tight and possibly tense interplay between the affective repertoire and the wondering mind. To employ Kuhn's terminology, the object of wonder is to the repertoire as anomaly is to paradigm.44

However, wonder cannot be entirely neutral with respect to the direction of moral development. Ultimately, the function of wonder is to enhance the organism. It is a useful passion because it seeks out new ways of enhancing an agent's affective capabilities through the discovery of objects which cannot be fully evaluated from within the current repertoire because of the particular way it patterns our attention. So an anomalous object

44 Kuhn (1962), chs. V & VII.
or affect which successfully challenges an attention pattern does so by showing the agent that she can be more effectively preserved and/or perfected by incorporating that affect into the repertoire. Descartes is emphatic about the restrictions which are in this way to be placed on the passion of wonder by knowledge. Far from being a challenge to the notion that moral value is agent-relative, therefore, the concept of wonder in fact reinforces this point.

This can be seen in the connection Descartes draws between wonder on the one hand and esteem and contempt on the other. The two latter passions represent the soul's "inclination" to regard an object as either valuable or insignificant.\(^45\) Now as regards the self, we can either esteem ourselves legitimately or not, and in the latter case we display vanity rather than self-esteem proper. Again, legitimate "self-contempt" (Descartes does not use this phrase) is really just humility, while its excess is abjectness or servility. Both vanity and legitimate self-esteem arise from the sequence -wonder, joy, love. And both humility and abjectness arise from the sequence -wonder, sadness, and self-love mingled with self-hatred. What distinguishes the virtuous

\(^{45}\) (AT XI 443), I, 383, art. 149.
from the vicious form in both cases is a distinction between two properties of the movement of wonder: the surprise which makes the movement vigorous from the start and the subsequent tendency of the movement to remain strong. Descartes argues that the first type of movement is prominent in those who are vain or abject, the second in those who are generous.46

The sort of vices in which Descartes is interested here arise from the fact that the vicious person as such cannot evaluate the causes of her states with reference to an accurate conception of herself. She is therefore chronically surprised by the appearance of novel objects and structures her will primarily in accordance with the fortuitous dictates of external causes. It is therefore no accident that this type of person is typically irresolute:

...those with the least knowledge of themselves are the most liable to become prouder or humbler than they ought. For they are surprised by anything new that comes their way, and so they attribute it to themselves and wonder at themselves...But often one thing that makes them proud is followed by another that makes them humble; and for this reason their passion involves a variable movement of the spirits.47

The problem is that because self-knowledge does not structure such an agent's responses to the world, the world itself is

46 (AT XI 452), I, 387, art. 160.

47 Ibid.
allowed to structure this knowledge, the result of which is
precisely the absence of a coherent self-conception. So a lack of
self-knowledge goes hand in hand with a lack of knowledge about
the world, and this is why the world is a continual source of
surprise to the type of person under analysis here. It should be
noted in addition that these points are fully compatible with the
claim (made above) that the conflicted person cannot make the
move from the internal to the external which is a crucial step in
the evaluation of the passions. This person is overwhelmed by
external causes precisely because her attention is focused on
their internal effects and the demands they make on her soul
(through desire).

By contrast, the claim that for the generous person the
internal movements of wonder are more prominent than the initial
stimulation is somewhat perplexing on its face. Descartes says
that the movement of the spirits in the generous person under the
influence of wonder "...are firm, constant and always very
similar to each other". 48 But this is odd because it implies that
for this type of person there simply will be no effective
challenge to the affective repertoire from wonder. This is

48 Ibid.
because the "internal movements" in question are not really those of wonder at all, except insofar as the reports of the wondering mind have been converted into terms which are understandable from within the current repertoire. How is it that a passion whose function is to create novel coordinations of thought and spirit movements creates instead internal movements which are firm, constant, and always very similar to each other?

(iii) Internal and External Reasons

It is instructive to compare these ideas to Bernard Williams' very interesting discussion of internal and external reasons.\footnote{Williams (1981). A similar argument, directed more explicitly at Kantian versions of moral reason, can be found in Williams (1985), 54-70.} Williams argues that there are, strictly speaking, no external reasons for action (the dictates of pure practical reason). One has a reason for doing something only if that reason satisfies some actual desire in one's "motivation set", and \textit{ex hypothesi} external reasons do not satisfy this condition. Wonder, then, can be viewed as attempting to provide an agent with external reasons for action. We must be able to say something like this about it, otherwise its function will be fully coextensive with that of the
affective repertoire. In this case, however, there is no reason to think that any of its discoveries will "surprise" us, for they will be the product of desires which we can discover deductively through the fully internal process of deliberation. Williams therefore forces the question: how can an external reason as such motivate an agent unless it appeals to an already existing desire, in which case it simply is not an external reason?

The argument, though forceful, can be partially countered as follows. Wonder is as it were the emissary of the affective repertoire since it picks out reasons for action which will augment the perfection of the currently existing individual. But it does not follow that an agent could have discovered such reasons solely by deliberating deductively from his current repertoire, i.e. in the absence of wonder. This is the whole point of claiming, as I have, that wonder picks out anomalies. But that claim obviously needs to be tempered in the light of Williams' argument. The reasons for action discovered by wonder cannot be wholly anomalous or there would be no reason to accept their claims as relevant to this individual. But they can trigger affective capacities of which the agent is ignorant because they are undeveloped and which may be impossible to discover solely by
deliberation from within the current repertoire. We can see then why wonder diminishes as an agent's self-conception develops. As more and more of an agent's capacities become revealed and activated through wonder, the self is gradually filled out, the result of which is that the capacity for surprise wanes. If this is the case it is not wholly out of place to talk about external reasons as providing motivation for action so long as we are careful not to detach those reasons utterly from the agent who regards them.

Still, the inescapable conclusion for Descartes is that every agent's affective repertoire is a datum whose basic structure, if we think of this as a finite and relatively unique set of

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50 This sort of criticism of Williams has been advanced by Bond (1983), 32-8. Korsgaard (1986) has advanced a different argument against Williams. She makes two principal points. First, she suggests that Williams' argument does not show that if there were external reasons for action, we could not be motivated by them. Rather, his "motivational skepticism" is based on his "content skepticism" -the claim that there just are no such reasons. But this is a separate claim requiring independent argument. Second, the failure of a reason to motivate an agent does not entail that that reason is not a good one for that agent. Irrational forces - such as self-deception and akrasia - may intervene in the psychological process, causing an agent to disregard what she recognizes as good reasons for action. The upshot of Williams' argument then is not to have refuted any ethical theory, but to have placed specific psychological demands on any ethical theory, an approach with which Korsgaard herself seems to be largely in agreement.
affective capacities, is largely given. Wonder therefore only
enhances or expands an already existing human individual. By
Descartes' own lights this claim is not metaphysically
outlandish, however, since all natural data are the product of
the divine will, and there seems no reason in principle why this
should not extend to human individuals as such. However, all of
this should force us to consider the effect that external causes,
most especially other people, can have on the generous soul. It
appears as though Descartes has elevated a generous agent's
affective repertoire to the status of a virtual untouchable whose
overarching project of self-enhancement governs all its external
encounters. This raises a point of central concern in the history
of modern moral philosophy: the relation between self-interest
and the interest of the social collective in which the self is
embedded. We have seen this theme emerge briefly in the
correspondence with Elizabeth. It is now time to examine it more
carefully. In doing so, we will note another important
characteristic of the generous agent: her ability to incorporate
a surprising diversity of passions into her affective repertoire.

D. The Transcendental Self

The connection between generosity and classical magnanimity is
very pronounced when Descartes comes to consider the social function and effects of generosity. Here, he might seem to be promoting a kind of principled selflessness which as such conflicts with my analysis so far. Consider the following claim:

...while each of us is a person separate from others, whose interests consequently are in some way distinct from the interests of others, nevertheless, one should consider that one could not subsist alone and is, in effect, one of the parts of the earth...of this state, of this society, of this family...And it is necessary to prefer always the interests of the whole, of which one is a part, to the interests of one's own person in particular.\footnote{\textit{AT IV} 293}, III, 266.

This statement is reinforced in the Passions where Descartes tells us that those who are generous esteem "...nothing more highly than doing good to others and [disregard] their own self-interest".\footnote{\textit{AT XI} 448}, I, 385, art. 156. Such a person is further said to be free of hatred for others and to be disposed to pity them in their various misfortunes. In the first case it is because she esteems everyone, while in the second it is because she has good will toward everyone.\footnote{\textit{AT XI} 448 & 470}, I, 385 & 395, arts. 156 & 187. This line of thinking seems to suggest that the generous person looks principally to the real interests of
others as a source of reasons for action and in doing so actually neglects her own interests. It follows that she could have reasons for action which did not have to pass, or even be submitted to, the generosity test as I have characterized it.

(i) Pity

However, if we ask after the deeper sources of the sort of esteem and good will Descartes is discussing in these articles, this picture becomes less of a threat to my argument. Take the passion of pity, which Descartes lists as one of the passions to which the generous agent is prone (though not excessively). It, and the beneficent actions consequent on it, are usually thought to express paradigmatically a virtuous selflessness -produced by the ability to empathize- in the face of the real misfortunes of other people. Descartes, however, understands pity in a highly specific way. He describes those who are excessively given to this passion as subject uncontrollably to the winds of fortune. This is the type of person who is passively buffeted by external causes, and who is therefore perpetually afraid lest the evil he

54 (AT XI 470), I, 395, art. 187.
sees afflicting others will befall him as well.\textsuperscript{55} The generous person, on the other hand, pities others not as a direct consequence of his seeing that others suffer, but because he is strong-minded, beyond chance, and unafraid of evil. The knowledge that he possesses these qualities is re-affirmed for him in the exercise of pity. How?

Pity and compassion bring about a pleasant catharsis in the generous soul:

\ldots the contentment which [the soul] finds in weeping at some pitiably and tragic episode in the theatre arises chiefly from its impression that it is performing a virtuous action in having compassion for the afflicted. Indeed in general the soul is pleased to feel passions arise in itself no matter what they are, provided it remains in control of them.\textsuperscript{56}

Nor does Descartes draw a sharp distinction between events on the stage and those in the real world. The latter is a stage for the generous agent who, though her senses are affected by the play, remains untouched in "the interior of the soul".\textsuperscript{57} Again, this can be understood as a doctrine about causes. The suffering that people undergo is not the object of pity, the weakness or

\textsuperscript{55} (AT XI 469), I, 395, art. 186.

\textsuperscript{56} (AT IV 309), III, 270.

\textsuperscript{57} (AT XI 470), I, 395, art. 187.
ignorance of the sufferers themselves is. These people are held to be in bondage to external causes and it is their inability or refusal to exercise their freedom to transcend these causes which is pitiable.\(^{58}\)

When I am in an unreflective state, the fact that fortune has dealt so rudely with the pitiable person is the cause of my feeling of pity. I recognize through him that psychic harmony and contentment are at best precarious goods. I will in this case no

\(^{58}\) I emphasize that the sufferers may be an object of pity on account of their weakness or ignorance. On a slightly different but related note, Descartes argues (article 154) that the generous person will tend to excuse the wrongdoings of malefactors as "...due rather to lack of knowledge than to lack of a virtuous will" (AT XI 446), I, 384). This is a curious claim because it seems to conflict with how a generous person views himself (as per article 153). That is, the generous person places the locus of praise and blame on the quality of his acts of will, so that when he is blameworthy it is through a failure of will not knowledge. This problem can however be dispelled if we read article 154 as claiming that the malefactor should not be initially approached as an object of moral censure because it may be the case that he is in fact acting through ignorance rather than a vicious will. That happens, as my references to the role of "corrupt custom" in chapter three were meant to show. The generous person, by contrast, must see his failures as failures of will because he is not ignorant (of course he is by definition not weak either so it is more likely that he will not have any real failures). This does not preclude the possibility that the malefactor will eventually be deemed vicious and thus become subject to moral censure. Perhaps what makes Arendt's Eichmann so "banal" is that we find it difficult to see beyond his mere ignorance and thus to censure him. If he were conflicted over his past actions things would be different. These tensions are discussed in some detail by Kambouchner (1995), vol. II, 256-60.
doubt experience profound wonder at the depth of suffering to which this person has descended and be genuinely moved by his situation. This emotion, however, although we might be tempted to think of it as pity pure and simple, the generous soul does not experience because it is only born of an agent's insecurities as reflected in one who has been laid low by fortune. This, again, is why pity is a product of empathy. But if I can detach my will systematically from all goods which might be taken away, then, turning back to the sufferer I may still feel pity but if I do the efficient cause of this passion is now myself insofar as I act magnanimously -by dispensing alms to him, for example. Such magnanimity is then primarily a sign to me of my insulation from despair and fear. In other words, this is pity minus empathy. The pitiable person in this case simply affords me an opportunity to contemplate, and perhaps wonder at, my own ability to annul the effects of passions which disturb weaker or less knowledgable souls.

(ii) Self Knowledge and the Internal Emotions

Descartes' invocation, toward the end of Part Two of the Passions, of the "internal emotions of the soul" reinforces this argument. The example he gives of these emotions is a man whose
wife has just died. This man, although he may experience real remnants of love and pity for the deceased, will nevertheless feel "...at the same time a secret joy in his innermost soul", a joy so powerful that "...the concomitant sadness and tears can do nothing to diminish its force".\(^{59}\) For Descartes, the goal of moral activity is to achieve a kind of "joy" which transcends all pain,\(^{60}\) and he thinks that pity can contribute to this state. The justification of pity that Descartes provides is that it can expand the generous soul. Thus, the more we exercise our minds in the contemplation of our own virtue, the more tranquillity, repose, joy and self-satisfaction we will experience.

The drive toward this state governs the relation of the ideally virtuous agent to other humans. The lack of contempt, anger and hatred toward others which the generous person displays is conditioned by his or her insulation from the real world of moral struggle and emotional pain. And with the resource of the

\(^{59}\) (AT XI.441), 381, art. 147. In an early (1637) letter to Huygens, whose wife was evidently at death's door, Descartes counsels resignation in these terms: "[b]ut now, since it cannot be of any use to her, your grief can no longer be appropriate, and hence can no longer be accompanied by that sense of joy and inner contentment which follows virtuous actions and makes wise people find happiness in all the vicissitudes of fortune" ((AT I 633), III, 54).

\(^{60}\) (AT XI 471-2), I, 396, art. 190.
interior emotions, Descartes can include a large number of affects, including pity, among those which contribute to the elevated state wherein the feeling of joy is furthered. This insight is however compatible with the more general claim that those affects which bring the agent into conflict with others tend as such to cause pain or harm. A more precise way of stating this from Descartes' point of view is that pain and conflict are the result of my being unduly under the influence of causes over which I have not exercised or cannot exercise appropriate control. This is the primary reason the affects consequent on such causes ought to be eliminated or transcended.

The consideration that an affect can be "eliminated or transcended" gives us a clue as to how we may resolve an otherwise nagging tension in the Passions. There would seem to be a conflict between the claim that "all the good and evil of this life depend on the passions" and the claim that "our well being depends principally on internal emotions which are produced in the soul only by the soul itself", and which are not passions. While the argument in the previous chapter emphasized the

61 (AT XI 488), I, 404, art. 212.

62 (AT XI 440), I, 381, art. 147.
importance of the first claim, the argument of this chapter, or at least of this section, emphasizes the importance of the second. Far from seeing an irremediable conflict between these two statements, I think they can be reconciled if properly interpreted.

To see this, we need to unpack Descartes' theatre metaphor to which I have previously alluded very carefully. That is, we should see it as pointing to a kind of bifurcation of the mind into spectator and play as an ideal of morality. The dualism with which the Passions leaves us is thus expressed in the distinction between "the senses" and "the interior of the soul", where the former is the stage and the latter the position of the privileged spectator with respect to the play.63 These two levels have distinct intentional relations. The intentional relation of the passions is -usually but not always- other people, while that of the internal emotions is primarily the affective repertoire -i.e. the self- itself.

Another way of putting this point has been suggested by Amy Morgan Schmitter. She notes that certain emotions can for Descartes function as "higher-order representations" whose

63 (AT XI 469-70), I, 395, art. 187.
purpose is to represent the self to itself. Any representation involves both a "subject-position" and an "object position". With a passion such as love, then, the subject-position is the lover himself (or the thought of love he has) while the object-position is the beloved. But when joy supervenes on love (as it often does), the cognitive process is moved to a different level. Now the original relation between subject and object unite to become the object-position while a meta-self is generated as the new higher-order subject-position. What is represented at this higher level is,

...the enjoyment of a good by the soul as its own. Not only is an object represented, and not only is its representation modified "as good", but its connection with the soul is also represented.\textsuperscript{64}

In the case of joy supervening on love, "...the very causal relations between body and soul and the care the soul exercises for the body form the object of the joyful representation".\textsuperscript{65} Schmitter's analysis is not confined to the relation between love and joy, however, for she argues that "...representations of any sort can generate higher-order representations".\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{64} Schmitter (1994), 346.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 347.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
I agree with this point, but my argument diverges from it as regards its implications. On Schmitter's reading of Descartes every occurrent passion experienced by me is equally mine since each claims to represent my soul to me and can be experienced as such via the transcendental move. But can this account solve the problem of lower-level conflict among the passions? There seems no reason to suppose that on Schmitter's model such conflict will not simply be translated to the transcendental level. In this case an agent might experience conflicting feelings of joy from which conflict an even higher-order self will presumably be pained. In other words there is no solution to the related problems of self-knowledge and moral weakness on Schmitter's reasoning, and the transcendental move therefore appears unmotivated. My model, on the contrary, offers a reason for the transcendental move based on considerations of self-knowledge and psychic wholeness.

Schmitter thinks that only via the transcendental move can the relation of body and soul be perspicuously represented. However, not only will the real self not invariably be apprehended in this manner (as I have just indicated), but in the end it will not always be necessary to remain at the transcendental level in the interests of psychic wholeness and self-representation. A kind of
transcendental move is always necessary in order to evaluate a given affect—for evaluation involves stepping back from an affect in order assess its potential for self-perfection— but that perspective may ultimately be abandoned. That is, as I have characterized them, the generosity test and the internal emotions are not functionally co-extensive such that the sole purpose of the former is to provide fodder for the latter. With respect to a particular affect, the generosity test can accomplish one of three things: (1) it may reject the affect in question as involving us unduly and hopelessly in things beyond our control; (2) it may incorporate the affect as is into the affective repertoire; or (3) it may incorporate the affect through the internal emotions. It is possibility (3) which allows Descartes to include in the affective repertoire some of what Spinoza calls the "sad passions". All three possibilities involve referencing

67 It is interesting for example to compare Descartes' and Spinoza's (1992) treatment of pity. For both pity is, taken by itself, a painful state. But, as I have argued, Descartes thinks we can and perhaps should preserve it if we can transcend it. Spinoza, on the other hand, defines pity (commiseratio) as "pain arising from another's hurt" ((P22S), 116). He argues further that, because pity can only cause us pain, we should "endeavour to free from distress the thing that we pity" ((P27C3), 119). Descartes' transcendental self by contrast might actually feed on another's pain. There are, however, some passions -envy, anger, jealousy- to which the generous person just will not be prone because they are by definition the product of an irrational attachment to external
the affect actively to the self -the first negatively, the last two positively. We can see the power which the claim that the passions are all by nature good has when viewed in light of this scheme. That claim entails that most of the passions will fall into categories (2) and (3).

For, first, I have argued at length in this thesis that the intentional relations which many of the passions establish between ourselves and the world are by themselves conducive to the good. Descartes does not advocate fleeing the emotions in all their rawness and immediacy. And, second, if an affect did cause us some degree of pain, that fact would seem to be irrelevant if we could nevertheless transcend the affect via the internal emotions and thus augment our perfection and joy. On this last scenario, the passions are all by nature good partly because they can be simultaneously entertained and transcended. This explanation has the virtuous effect of removing the apparent conflict between the passions and the internal emotions. This completes the picture of the generous person. This type not only knows himself and is thus able to attach his desire only to objects he can control but he can also establish a non-passionate

objects. Cf. ((AT XI 449), I 386, art. 158).
attachment even to objects which might otherwise pain him. He thus possesses an optimal diversity of affects compatible with full rational control proceeding from self-knowledge.

The referencing of the affects to the self as well as their resulting classification is the key to this aspect of Descartes' moral philosophy. And this, I suggest, is his final word on the rational rehabilitation of the passions. The very act of sorting out the passions into the three categories reveals differences between agents at the most fundamental level. However, it might be argued against me that this process actually presupposes knowledge of these differences. After all, I do speak of these differences being "revealed". This charge is understandable. But it can be answered by noting that the generosity test operates according to a criterion which is not simply equivalent to or operationally dependent on knowledge of the self. It asks what the causal provenance of my affective states are and whether or not the objects of those states are or can be brought sufficiently under my control. Nor should this determination itself be thought to presuppose full-blown knowledge of the self. All that is required to get the generosity test going with respect to a given affect is an inductive generalization from my past attachments to similar objects in similar situations.
Reflecting on this, I can then determine how the affect will cohere with the rest of the repertoire, and categorize it appropriately.

However, these points warrant some degree of vagueness in any philosophical, i.e. third-personal, description of this process. The generosity test is a theory of practical reasoning, but as Bernard Williams argues, it is "...a basically desirable feature of a theory of practical reasoning that it should preserve and account for [the] unclarity" of what an agent might arrive at by "rational" deliberation from an existing set of motivations." It is not my purpose to enter into a philosophical debate about the nature of practical rationality here. Williams' point is that there is an essential indeterminacy in the notion of internal reasoning itself, since the process of deliberation is partly but importantly informed by (at best) quasi-rational forces such as imagination, inspiration, and so on. My point is the different but not unrelated one that it may not be possible to specify from the outside what a given individual will take to be an augmentation of or hindrance to his own self-perfection, and so our ability to predict the direction and scope of his development

is in principle limited. At this point we may well have hit bedrock, as Wittgenstein famously put it.

So although there are strong indications that Descartes thinks of selflessness as a moral ideal, the passages cited at the beginning of this section should be taken with circumspection. There is no reason to deny that the generous person is respectful of others and magnanimous so long as we recognize that these qualities are born of distance and a fundamental self-regard. As I have suggested in chapter two, Descartes' stance on this problem is a product of his perhaps naive belief that, although our own self-perfection ought to be our overriding moral project, there is no necessary incompatibility between the pursuit of this project and the good of "all the other parts of creation".69

The Passions is Descartes' attempt finally to come to terms with a question which emerges but is not answered in Meditation Six: what are the boundaries of a self which has a body and is therefore connected to a world which exists independently of that self? It is no longer sufficient to declare that I am a thinking thing sans phrase, and the reason is that, though I am affected by the world, I want to say that some of those affects are mine.

69 Schneewind, op. cit., 193.
while others are not even though the latter may make claims on me. In Part Three of the Passions Descartes attempts to spell out what is involved for an individual making this distinction.

E. Conclusion

The problem to be resolved through the concept of generosity -and this underlines its centrality to Descartes' entire theory of the passions- is to balance these three truths: (1) there is a natural drive on the part of humans to psychic wholeness and happiness; (2) the passions provide the only sure route to this end; but (3) the passions are prone to mutual conflict because they all make the claim that they are conducive to our good. The generosity test gives us a formal account of how (1) and (2) can be balanced given the problems which (3) will inevitably introduce. The corollary claim is that the very process of bringing these claims into mutual resolution via the generosity test brings the agent carrying out the resolution an increased knowledge of himself. The analysis offered in this chapter should therefore allow us to make a little better sense of Descartes' claim to have reconciled the views of Zeno and Epicurus. The

70 (AT V 84), III, 325.
generous person is both perfectly virtuous - i.e. constant - and capable of enjoying optimally the pleasures afforded by the passions without however being vulnerable to their disharmonious effects. Self-knowledge thus guides and controls desire, and this is precisely the ideal of moral freedom for Descartes.
In chapter two, I argued that judgement of the truth involves a spontaneous operation of the will. This point follows on Descartes' causal theory of truth: that a great "light" in the understanding is followed by an equally powerful inclination of the will to judge in accordance with what that light presents to the mind. But it is crucial to my argument that there be degrees of light and of the amount of force which is correspondingly exerted on the will. This is why I offered an account of the relation of intellect and will for non-clear and distinct ideas in that chapter. Its purpose was to show that as ideas diminish in clarity and distinctness, so too does the will's capacity for responding to such ideas spontaneously. This fact brings to the fore what is really problematic about the relation of the will to all ideas which are not clear and distinct. For it remains the case that in spite of their relative obscurity such ideas are, or can be, purveyors of the truth of some portion of the natural order.

The problem is that alongside the spontaneous response to the presence of an evident truth the will may also feel an inclination to respond differently in the same situation if an alternative reason for doing so is placed before it. But what
this entails is that, just insofar as the original response has been challenged, its spontaneous power with respect to the agent has actually decreased. What else could it mean to say that attention has been withdrawn from an idea except that that idea no longer has the sort of force it once had or seemed to have? What Descartes calls the material falsity of certain kinds of ideas—those of the senses, the appetites, and the emotions—highlights this point. These ideas are said to give "great scope" to the will for error. With respect to the passions, I have interpreted this claim as meaning that there can in practice be mutually conflicting idea-candidates all purporting to represent the proper referent of the passions, the soul or the good of the agent. This point supports the contention that the passions bring us very close to a situation of pure ambivalence in which it is very difficult to act rationally. But since it is not in the nature of the soul to be self-dirempted, only one of two mutually conflicting passions can be the real representor. Descartes therefore requires a criterion of ethical rationality which allows agents to negotiate these seemingly inevitable conflicts. If he can provide such a criterion, Descartes will have shown us a way to effect the reconciliation which I pointed to in the Introduction as the key to his moral philosophy. That is, we will
be able to separate out those passions which truly represent our
good from those which make false claims on us.

The criterion, we have seen, is centred on the amount of
time an agent is capable of, and the generosity test is a
method for applying this criterion. Whatever we may say about the
sources of the various disorders caused by the passions—whether
they are due to ignorance, weak will, or some kind of mechanical
failure—agents who are prone to them share this basic fault:
they do not fully know themselves—i.e., they do not fully know
their own good—and they are as a consequence not fully free.
This does not apply to the generous agent, because she structures
her will systematically in accordance with a knowledge of good
and evil, i.e., perfect self-knowledge. Her desire is therefore
always spontaneously carried along by her invariable apprehension
of the truth about herself, and she feels no contradictory "pull"
on her will by opposing passions. We have seen that she is
nonetheless uniquely capable of incorporating a maximum diversity
of passions into her affective repertoire without sacrificing the
ability to act resolutely. There are, however, at least two
problems with Cartesian generosity.

First, generosity seems to presuppose a strong will rather
than generating one de novo. According to Schneewind, one of the
fundamental questions driving the history of modern moral philosophy is whether or not the knowledge of how we should live is available to everyone or only an elite among us.¹ I think there are good reasons -Descartes' claims to the contrary notwithstanding- for thinking that generosity is a virtue only for the moral elite, a suspicion which is strongly reinforced by the very term Descartes has chosen for his highest virtue. But beyond the etymological associations of the term, the ontology of the passions makes perfect knowledge and an utterly steadfast will with respect to them seem unrealizable. For, given the opacity of passion-ideas as purveyors of the good, no matter how much self-knowledge an agent possesses, there will always be potential for the sort of conflict which upsets the psychic harmony so dear to Descartes' moral ideal. Descartes would surely concede that we would not need generosity, conceived as a moral technique, if free will were not a persistent threat to rational behaviour and belief generally. But it is, and this is why even the generosity test does not provide a guarantee that an agent will hold to the vision of his good once it is grasped.

Perhaps under the influence of a passion one may misjudge the

¹ Schneewind (1990), 18.
extent to which one can control a relevant portion of the world, a faulty judgement which may for example take the form of including in the affective repertoire by regular means what should only have been incorporated via the interior emotions. The reason this possibility remains alive is that, as I have argued, one only judges how much control one can exert over the world through an inductive generalization from past experience. But it is one thing to ground such generalizations in a purely physical world which operates according to regular patterns of movement, and quite another to base them on *free causes*, i.e. other people—and it is in the way they structure our relations to other people that our passions are after all most important. Although, as Hume saw\(^1\), there is much uniformity in human behaviour, its capacity to surprise us is nevertheless very potent and may lead an otherwise steadfast will astray. This may be the reason why Descartes tended to think of generosity, conceived as the sheer ability to hold firmly to the vision of the good, as a gift of birth. You either have a strong will or not and no technique can fully make up for congenital weakness of will, though the right one may go a good way toward this end.

\(^1\) Hume, *op. cit.* (1977), 55-7.
Second, there is an element of philosophical arbitrariness in the moral ideal underlying generosity. Generosity is, as I have characterized it, more of a means or technique than an end in itself. And it is a means to a complex form of ataraxia, a kind of emotional invulnerability. But this is itself a substantive moral ideal which as such requires some justification. I have argued that application of the generosity test does not preclude the presence of significant differences among individuals. Indeed, it can reveal such differences in all their complexity and moral richness. There can be, that is, various expressions of the sort of contentment which is the ideal. But this is obviously difference in the context of a single theory about the sort of people we ought to be. And Descartes' theory leaves no room for moral ideals which challenge this conception. How would he argue for example against the Nietzschean-inspired view that suffering and disharmony can be ennobling and ought therefore to be sharpened rather than eliminated?

Of course, Descartes the naturalist takes the truth that wholeness and happiness are our ends as a description of the way God in his insurpassable if inscrutable benevolence has disposed the moral economy of the human composite. And generosity is the means for realizing this end. Hence in saying that the
application of the generosity test can help us realize our "natural" end, Descartes is after all making an appeal to our rationality. In the absence of this theological support, which is intrinsically problematic, the appeal to our natural end is obviously ungrounded. But even granting (for the sake of argument) that there is a benevolent God, since knowledge of His ends is ruled out, our Nietzschean might want to say that the contest among the passions is a fully natural state, the transcendence of which is a form of escapist nihilism. Descartes would argue that God would be a deceiver if this were the case, since there would then be passions which, in their very nature, fail to contribute to my good. But surely this begs the question at issue if it is good to be more emotionally engaged than Descartes' ideal allows and consequently to suffer on occasion through the passions?

These points aside, the fact remains that in ethics, as in science and metaphysics, knowledge and freedom are for Descartes fully correlative notions. It is only that to state the normative necessity of their correlation in ethics, as distinct from science or metaphysics, is to relate them primarily to judgements about the good of the self rather than to the corporeal world, the soul (qua pure thinking substance), or God. Another way of
saying this is that although ethics replaces the true with the good, this does not alter the formal relation between ideas and the will as it applies in the domain of the true. In both domains, the scope of the will is (ideally) fully circumscribed by knowledge. And it should be obvious by now that this comprises two claims: first, that the countercausal power of the will should only be employed as a means to the true and the good and, second, that the will holds to the vision of the true or the good once it is achieved.

Freedom of spontaneity is an ideal for Descartes because the will and the intellect are in this state fully harmonized whereas the discrepancy between the two faculties is the most conspicuous source of moral error and mental conflict. The Passions ultimately offers a picture of the will and the intellect as fundamentally co-implicating in practice. That the two cannot be for Descartes, as they are for Spinoza, literally co-extensive should not obscure this far-reaching point.
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