

Descartes on the Will in Judgment ¹

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On Descartes' account, the will is the central player in judgment, a role that this essay aims to explain. Section 1 situates the will in Descartes' broader ontology of mind. Section 2 characterizes the will's contributions to judgment. Section 3 addresses the will's voluntary control over judgment. Section 4 considers whether, on Descartes' account, our epistemic responsibility in judgment is best understood as a form of compatibilism or incompatibilism.

1. Will in the ontology of mind

Descartes holds that the whole essence of mind is *thought*. On his view, "each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred"; he adds that "thought [*cogitatio*] constitutes the nature of thinking substance" (1:210, AT 8a:25). Of the word *thought*, Descartes writes: "I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it" (2:113, AT 7:160). The mind's thoughts fall into two main sorts, as noted in *Principles* 1:32:

All the modes of thinking that we experience within ourselves can be brought under two general headings: perception, or the operation of the intellect, and volition, or the operation of the will. Sensory perception, imagination and pure understanding are simply various modes of perception; desire, aversion, assertion, denial and doubt are various modes of willing. (1:204, AT 8a:17)

This cognitive diversity is consistent with the doctrine that the essence of mind is simply thought, because "willing, understanding, imagining, and sensing and so on are just different ways of thinking" (3:56, AT 1:366).

Descartes characterizes the will as a *power* – an ability to do, to act: "the will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid)" (Med. 4; 2:40, AT 7:57). In referring to the will as a *faculty* of the mind, Descartes does not mean to suggest discrete regions of mental infrastructure – the "soul has within it no diversity of parts" (*Passions* 47; 1:346, AT 11:364). Rather, as he writes, "the term 'faculty' denotes nothing but a potentiality" (*Comments*; 1:305, AT 8b:361). When this power is exercised, that is, the potentiality is actualized, the resulting mental operations are *volitions*. Volitions constitute the mind's actions – I return to this point below.

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Volitions come in two main sorts: "one consists of the actions of the soul which terminate in the soul itself," as, say, when we willingly attend to purely intellectual ideas; "the other consists of actions which terminate in our body, as when our merely willing to walk has the consequence that our legs move and we walk." (*Passions* 18; 1:335, AT 11:343) The latter sort sometimes results in conflicts with bodily causes. For though "the will is by its nature so free that it can never be constrained" (1:343, AT 11:359), its effects sometimes run up against opposing motions. Descartes holds that the bodily locus of mind-body interaction is the pineal gland, and it is here that such conflicts come to a head. The will may move the gland one way, while the activity of the nerves (animal spirits) pushes it another way – "the stronger cancelling the effect of the weaker" (*Passions* 47; 1:346, AT 11:365). Conflicts may also arise from the other sort of volition, in the form of competing inclinations in the will; for instance, contemplation of both supporting and undermining reasons relative to some proposition might give rise to opposing inclinations – one towards assent, another towards suspension (cf. *Med.* 4; 2:41, AT 7:59).

Volitions directed at bodily movements bring to the fore the notorious causal interaction problem – namely, concerning how an immaterial mind causally interacts with a material brain. Descartes appears to think that the problem is not especially pressing; that mind-body interaction is merely a special case of causation understood in terms of God having ordained that one sort of item (causes) gives rise to another (effects). More generally, Descartes holds of all principles – whether those concerning mathematics, logic, mechanics, or mind-brain interactions – that they *are* true because God ordained that it should be so (cf. 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne; 3:25, AT 1:151-53). This marks a quite significant difference between our wills and the divine will. "God did not will," writes Descartes, "that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise"; rather, "it is because he willed ... that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise" (*Replies* 6; 2:291, AT 7:431-2).

Descartes characterizes volitions as the mind's *actions*: "strictly speaking, understanding is the passivity of the mind and willing is its activity" (May 1641 letter to Regius; 3:182, AT 3:372). To better understand this, consider that in his view every thought is, at once, an action and a passion – a passion relative to the mind in which it occurs, an action relative to the actor/agent producing it:

I note that whatever takes place or occurs is generally called by philosophers a "passion" with regard to the subject to which it happens and an "action" with regard to that which makes it

happen. Thus, although an agent and patient are often quite different, an action and passion must always be a single thing which has these two names on account of the two different subjects to which it may be related. (*Passions* 1; 1:328, AT 11:328)

To illustrate this, think of two adjacent dominoes, A and B, wherein the motion of A brings about a change in the motion in B. Relative to itself, B's change of motion is a passivity – something induced in it from without. Relative to A, B's change of motion is an activity – the action of A. Applying the distinction to the mind's thoughts introduces complication. For while changes in the motion of a domino are always the actions of something external to it, changes in a mind's thoughts are sometimes the actions of that same mind. Descartes reserves the term *volition* for those thoughts that are actions of that mind (cf. *Passions* 17, 21). So, though every thought can be properly conceived as a perception of the mind in which it occurs, not every thought can be properly regarded as a volition. Where thoughts are properly thus regarded, it is numerically the same thought that counts, in one regard, as an action of the mind, while counting, in another regard, as its passion – the choice in terms being somewhat fluid:

And although willing something is an action with respect to our soul, the perception of such willing may be said to be a passion in the soul. But because this perception is really one and the same thing as the volition, and names are always determined by whatever is most noble, we do not normally call it a "passion", but solely an "action". (*Passions* 19, 1:335-6, AT 11:343)

Note that we have been considering passions in the *general* sense (cf. *Passions* 17, 21, 25), whereby every thought can be properly regarded as a passion. Descartes also discusses a *specific* sense – a "more exact sense" – whereby passions are just those perceptions arising from the pineal gland (*Passions* 21, 27).

Importantly, references to *acts* are subject to ambiguity. In one sense an act is an *actuality*, the contrast case being an unactualized potentiality. In this sense Descartes sometimes refers to any occurrent thought – whether a perception or a volition – as an act or operation of the mind; for instance, he writes to Hobbes that "there are other acts which we call 'acts of thought' [*sunt deinde alii actus, quos vocamus cogitativos*], such as understanding, willing, imagining, having sensory perceptions, and so on" (2:124, AT 7:176). In another sense an act is an *action*, the contrast case being a passion. Hereafter, I reserve *act* talk for actualities – actual occurrences, be they actions or passions. I use the term *action* when referring to those actualities that are contrasted with the passions.

2. Will in judgment

In judgment, the mind either affirms or denies something – either assents to it, or dissents from it. Descartes holds that it is one thing for the mind to be aware of a matter, that is, to perceive it; it is another thing to affirm or deny it. He ascribes these functions to different faculties of mind. Awareness is ascribed to the intellect; affirmation and denial are ascribed to the will. In Descartes' view, awareness aligns well with the passive side of the mind, and assent aligns better with its active side. As David Rosenthal argues, there are good reasons for grouping assent together with other exemplary cases that Descartes catalogues as operations of the will, including desiring and fearing (1986, 411-16). Descartes holds that though judgment requires awareness, it consists in the affirmation or denial. Judgment *is* an act of will.

Relative to judgment, the mind adopts one of three stances toward the content of awareness – i.e., the will is broadly speaking in one of three doxastic states: *assent* to the matter, *dissent* from it, or a *suspension* of judgment. (For brevity, I typically refer simply to assent and suspension. I assume throughout that what is said about assent can be extended to dissent.) In the relevant sense, assent is not simply a speech act, nor any conventional gesture that might be expressed insincerely. As Bernard Williams writes of Descartes' view: "He is concerned with the question of whether I accept some proposition myself – in that sense of 'accept' in which the man who insincerely says 'I agree' does not accept the proposition. Assenting is what is done by one who thenceforth really believes the matter in question." (1978, 176)

To what sorts of perceptual content does the mind assent? According to Williams: "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*. Thus, if Descartes is to say that what we assent to are ideas, he must include propositional ideas. He must allow that there is an idea *that the angles of a triangle add up to two right angles*." (1978, 182) The texts allow for such a reading, for Descartes uses the term *idea* to cover all manner of perceptual content. As Jill Buroker notes: "the content of an idea can be very complex, and this complexity can be expressed propositionally. One famous example is Descartes's statement in the *Fifth Meditation* that understanding the idea of a right triangle entails recognizing that it has 'the properties which license the inference that its three angles equal no more than two right angles' [2:47, AT 7:68]." (1996, 6) It is therefore no surprise that some texts imply that the objects of judgment are propositions (cf. 2:259, AT 7:376f, and 2:300, AT 7:445), while others imply that they are ideas (cf. 2:39, AT 7:56); these two characterizations need only be different ways of expressing the same point.

References to what is *affirmative* are potentially misleading. In one sense, affirmation is a property of propositions, as in affirmative statements predicating some quality of a subject. In

another sense, affirmation is an action of the mind when it assents to a proposition. Judgment may involve both forms of affirmation. For instance, concerning the affirmative proposition *that I am sitting by the fire*, my will may affirm it. Alternatively, I may withhold assent. The method of doubt does indeed presuppose an ability to consider, hypothetically, various affirmative sceptical propositions without assenting to them. As Descartes explains: "what is thus imagined and attributed hypothetically is not thereby affirmed by the will as true, but is merely proposed for examination to the intellect" (1643 letter to Buitendijck; 3:230, AT 4:64).

Related is an ambiguity in *judgment* talk, arising from the tendency to use some mental operation words – *belief, perception, judgment*, and the like – to refer sometimes to the mental action, while other times to the objects of those actions. In speaking of beliefs, or perceptions, we sometimes mean to refer to the items believed, or perceived – e.g., in saying, "Among her beliefs is that our planetary system is heliocentric"; alternatively, we sometimes mean to refer to the mental actions of believing or perceiving – e.g., "The sincerity of her belief in the heliocentric view is not in doubt". It is the same with *judgment* talk. We may mean to refer to the proposition judged, or instead to the mental action of assenting/judging. Descartes generally employs the language of judgment to refer to acts of assent, but there are exceptions. For example, in some cases involving the recollection of past judgments he is clearly referring to the propositions judged, not the past actions of judging (cf. Med. 5; 2:48, AT 7:69-70).

Descartes characterizes proper judgment, in part, in terms of the intellect's perception, though ultimate responsibility is assigned to the will. Properly, the mind should give assent only when the intellect's perception is clear and distinct:

[If] I simply refrain from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly. If I go for the alternative which is false, then obviously I shall be in error; if I take the other side, then it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth, and I shall still be at fault ... (Med. 4; 2:41, AT 7:59-60)

Importantly, the content presented by the intellect (or the negation of that content) is what constitutes an "alternative which is false". (I return to this below.) The point of the passage, however, is not to characterize truth and falsity, but to explain that we are at fault when we assent to propositions that are false – to wit, even when they are merely false for all we know. One of the broader aims of the Fourth Meditation is to advance a theodicy for error showing that the blame for judgment error lies with us, not with God. (For more on the theodicy, see my 1999.) On Descartes' account, I am at fault not because of the state of my intellect, but because of what I do with my will:

I notice that they [judgment errors] depend on two concurrent causes, namely on the faculty of knowledge [*cognoscendi*] which is in me, and on the faculty of choice or freedom of the will; that is, they depend on both the intellect and the will simultaneously. Now all that the intellect does is to enable me to perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgements; and when regarded strictly in this light, it turns out to contain no error in the proper sense of that term.

...

So what then is the source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand. (Med. 4; 2:39f, AT 7:56-58)

The passage adds: "in this incorrect use of free will may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of error" (2:41, AT 7:60). This identification of judgment error with the activity of a free will accords with Descartes' more general understanding of responsibility:

I see only one thing in us which could give us good reason for esteeming ourselves, namely, the exercise of our free will and the control we have over our volitions. For we can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend upon this free will. (*Passions* 152; 1:384, AT 11:445)

Descartes holds that the very possibility of judgment error stems from a scope disparity between the intellect and the will:

[T]he perception of the intellect extends only to the few objects presented to it, and is always extremely limited. The will, on the other hand, can in a certain sense be called infinite, since we observe without exception that its scope extends to anything that can possibly be an object of any other will – even the immeasurable will of God. So it is easy for us to extend our will beyond what we clearly perceive; and when we do this it is no wonder that we may happen to go wrong. (Prin. 1:35; 1:204-5, AT 8a:18)

I take this reference to the will's infinity, along with the comparison with the divine will, to refer only to the will's scope, not its nature. The point of the passage is to clarify not that our wills possess unlimited power – as if comparable to the divine will in this regard – but that we're able to assent to more propositions than we're able to clearly perceive. Limitation in our intellects explains the possibility of judgment error; misuse of our freewill explains its actuality.

Note that Descartes applies this account of proper judgment only in contexts of rigorous inquiry, not practical action (cf. Med. 1; 2:15, AT 7:22). As a practical matter, not only is acting on dubious sense perception necessary to our survival, Descartes holds that such perception is, for all practical purposes, "sufficiently clear and distinct" (Med. 6; 2:57, AT 7:83).

Readers of Descartes have found various aspects of the foregoing account troubling. I want to consider three such concerns. One troubling aspect concerns his remarks about the nature of truth and falsity. Early in the Third Meditation, while inquiring as to which thoughts "can properly be said to be the bearers of truth and falsity," Descartes writes that ideas "cannot strictly speaking be false" (2:25-6, AT 7:36-7); adding, in a follow-up passage, that "falsity in the

strict sense, or formal falsity, can occur only in judgements" (2:30, AT 7:43). On a prima facie reading, these passages are in tension with parts of the account as I have characterized it. The suggestion is that truth and falsity are, strictly speaking, properties not of the propositional contents perceived by the intellect, but of the will's acts of assent. Margaret Wilson contends that Descartes "tends to run together the notions of *falsity* and *error*" (1978, 141) – a charge that surely has merit. She contends further that some such conflation contributes to the mistake of locating falsity in judgment, rather than error, adding: Descartes should allow that the contents perceived by the intellect "are true or false independently of our affirmations or denials"; what "Descartes should say" is that "the ideas 'perceived by the understanding' may be (true or) false, but error arises not in the 'perception', but in the affirmation" (1978, 141).

My own sense is that what Wilson says Descartes *should* say, is what *in fact* he holds. Indeed, the prima facie reading of the problematic Third Meditation remarks conflicts with countless other clear passages. For example, clear statements in the Fourth Meditation – the locus classicus for doctrines pertaining to judgment – imply that the contents perceived by the intellect have truth value independent of the will's assent. We read there that we're to "refrain from making a judgement in cases where [we] do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness" (2:41, AT 7:59f), implying that the intellect's perceptual content has independent truth value. The passage continues: "If I go for the alternative which is false, then obviously I shall be in error; if I take the other side, then it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth" (ibid.) – claims which likewise imply a truth value of the alternatives perceived in the intellect. Consider also the implication of various texts concerning the so-called eternal truths. These are "propositions which are eternally true" (Prin. 1:75; 1:221, AT 8a:38), a status they enjoy even when contemplated without assent in minds "blinded by preconceived opinions" (Prin. 1:49f; 1:209, AT 8a:24). Finally, consider what Descartes writes to Mersenne concerning truth: "the word 'truth', in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object" (16 Oct 1639 letter; 3:139, AT 2:597). On the most natural reading of this, what stands in such relations of *conformity* are contents represented in the intellect, not the actions of the will. Such passages make no sense if, as Wilson supposes, Descartes denies that the contents perceived by the intellect have truth value "independently of our affirmations or denials".

How then are we to interpret the two problematic Third Meditation passages about formal falsity? No consensus interpretation has emerged, but let me offer one line of suggestion. In the first passage, what Descartes actually writes is not that ideas – without qualification – cannot be bearers of truth and falsity, but that "provided they [ideas] are considered solely in themselves

and I do not refer them to anything else, they cannot strictly speaking be false" (2:26, AT 7:37). Given the qualification – ideas "considered solely in themselves" – the remark need not mean that *all* ideas lack truth value, but only non-relational ideas; this is the right result, assuming that truth value belongs only to ideas with propositional structure. This tack doesn't help with the second passage, however, for in stating that "falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can occur only in judgements" (2:30, AT 7:43), that passage appears to rule out that non-judged propositional contents could be strictly false. Before drawing such a conclusion, recall that we earlier noted an ambiguity arising in *judgment* talk. Accordingly, when referring to judgments we sometimes mean to refer to mental acts of judging, while at other times to the propositions judged. If in saying that falsity "can occur only in judgements" Descartes means the propositions judged, the remark is innocuous. Though this is not Descartes' usual way of using *judgment* talk, he does sometimes use it in this way, and the context of the Third Meditation remark will tolerate such a reading. The broader issues are very complex, and there are more texts to reconcile than just these two Third Meditation passages. Whatever is their correct interpretation, we should be cautious about interpreting them in a way that conflicts with so many other clear passages indicating that the perceptual contents considered by the intellect can indeed have truth value.

A second aspect of Descartes' account of judgment that has troubled some readers concerns whether he can countenance *degrees* of belief. It's indisputable that some beliefs are held more strongly than others. Yet Descartes' account seems to have it that the will either fully assents (or dissents), or fully withholds assent – never partially assenting, with respect to a specific bit of content. Edwin Curley thus objects that in taking assent to be "an all or nothing action" Descartes is insensitive to there being degrees of belief (1975, 166). By way of reply, there are multiple ways of understanding degrees of belief. Though some accounts are problematic for Descartes, his critics would need to show that no plausible account is open to him. One sort of account friendly to him locates the variations of degree in the perceptual *grounds* of assent, rather than in the *action* of assent, *per se*. To illustrate this, contrast the cases of assent to a clearly and distinctly perceived proposition, and of assent to a confusedly perceived proposition. In the former case, the ground of assent makes the proposition evident to a *greater degree* than in the latter case, but we can understand both cases to involve full-fledged assent in the will. Likewise, though the gambler may make wagers with varying degrees of confidence, thus betting different amounts of money, she makes full-fledged bets in each case. This understanding of degrees of belief makes good sense of the intuition that our beliefs are held with varying degrees of conviction, and it is fully consistent with Descartes' account.

The third contested aspect of Descartes' account that I want to consider concerns his conception of assent as an operation of the will rather than of the intellect. Articulating an influential objection, Curley asks: "If my intellect affirms that the sun is very large, am *I* not already judging that it is? Is it really necessary for my will to add its concurring 'opinion'?" (1975, 174) In defense of Descartes, the very issue in dispute is *whether* the intellect is properly conceived as *affirming* propositional contents, as opposed merely to being aware of them. Assent is always given *to* some propositional content perceived. Descartes maintains a division of labor whereby the perception is the job of the intellect, while the assent is a further job performed by the will. As Curley conceives the labor, there's just a single job. The perception of the proposition *is* the assent to it, leaving no further work to be done. Curley contends that "conceptual analysis" reveals that when, say, the mind suspends judgment on the basis of considering evenly balanced pro and con arguments, the action of withholding the assent is not "a *consequence* of finding the arguments pro and con are pretty evenly balanced. It *is* simply the state itself of finding them to be so" (1975, 175; italics added). Why, then, does Descartes distinguish two tasks? In the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, he explains:

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, and also that we are often free to withhold our assent, even if we perceive the matter in question. 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. (1:307, AT 8b:363)

Descartes here concludes that the assent to a proposition is "over and above" the perception of it, because such perception may on one occasion result in assent, while on another resulting in suspension. If, as Curley contends, to perceive *p* just *is* to assent to *p*, then there *could* be no circumstances under which we perceive *p* without assenting to it. I take Descartes' remark that "we are often free to withhold our assent" to be an allusion to the method of doubt. For instance, as I look at the tower in the distance today, it may appear in my perception to be rounded at the edges, just as it appeared yesterday; yet, unlike yesterday, I may withhold assent today, by employing sceptical doubts. Descartes thinks such examples show that numerically the same perceptual content – say, *The shape of the tower is as it appears* – may be attended by different doxastic states. It follows, as he writes, that assent is something "over and above perception".

In defense of Curley, one might contend that the situation is different with clear and distinct perception. Descartes writes that "our mind is of such a nature that it cannot help assenting to what it clearly understands" (3:147, AT 3:64-65). As Alan Nelson explains: "A clear and distinct perception is *invariably* accompanied by the assent of the will. It is, moreover,

part of the 'nature' of the will that this happen." (1997, 163) In view of this doctrine, one might argue that in clear and distinct cases the work of assent is fully encompassed in the perception.

Wilson makes such an argument:

[I]f "clearly and distinctly perceiving p" is taken to mean or imply, "perceiving that p is true," all the work of assent is already ascribed to the understanding – there is no room, logically, for an act of will. (1978, 145; cf. Williams 1978, 183)

But here we must ask, What is it to perceive *that* a proposition is true? In what does such perception consist? "Perceiving *that* p is true" cannot simply mean that "in one's perception p is represented as being true"; nor does it help to add that it is "represented as being *certainly* true". Descartes persuasively argues that prior to contemplating the method of doubt it may seem to us that we believe many propositions "about which doubt is quite impossible" – "for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire", and so on (Med. 1; 2:12f, AT 7:18). Though in our perception, such propositions are represented as being certainly true, we learn how to use doubt to withhold assent from them even while perceiving them. What, then, *does* "perceive *that*" talk mean? For cases in which we feel extra certainty, such talk is perhaps a fitting bit of verbal embellishment helping to convey the great strength of psychological conviction. But this is hardly relevant to the metaphysical question of whether assent is something "over and above perception". Perhaps "perceive *that*" talk just means this: that in addition to the proposition being represented as true in one's perception of it, the mind has taken the further mental step of *affirming that* it is true. In that case, *perception* talk is – in this special case – being used for both (a) the awareness of the proposition as seeming to be true, and (b) the affirmation that the proposition is true. If this is what "perceiving *that* p is true" comes to, then it hardly follows that Descartes is wrong to distinguish (a) and (b). The upshot is rather that perception talk is being used with much wider scope than Descartes allows. Given *his* usage, perception talk is narrowly circumscribed to include only the awareness, but not the actual judgment: "all that the intellect does is to enable me to perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgements" (Med. 4, 2:39, AT 7:56). He maintains that when the perception is clear and distinct the assent is compulsory, but from this it does not logically follow that the perception and the assent are identical. One begins to suspect that the Curley and Wilson line of objection amounts to more of a semantic disagreement with Descartes than a real disagreement. As an alternative to "perceive *that*" talk, Paul Hoffman helpfully suggests the kind of language we should use in connection with Descartes' account:

Instead of saying, for example, that I clearly and distinctly perceive that a triangle has three angles, we should say that I have a clear and distinct perception of a triangle having three angles

or that I clearly and distinctly perceive a triangle as having three angles. We might also say that I clearly and distinctly perceive the proposition that a triangle has three angles as true. (2003, 263)

3. Will and voluntary control of judgment

Descartes maintains that "we have free will, enabling us to withhold our assent in doubtful matters and hence avoid error" (1:194, AT 8a:6). His view, as we've seen, is that the will's voluntary control over assent is essential to epistemic responsibility; and more generally, that "the exercise of our free will and the control we have over our volitions" is what makes it possible that "we can reasonably be praised or blamed" (*Passions* 152; 1:384, AT 11:445). The *Meditations* program of methodic doubt involves careful exercise of this voluntary power over the will; indeed it involves, as the meditator remarks, a "plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction," thereby withholding assent from my former opinions (2:15, AT 7:22). The aim of the present Section is to clarify how Descartes understands the manner of this voluntary control.

Two main kinds of accounts are plausibly attributed to Descartes. The one account ascribes to the will a power of *direct* voluntary control over its doxastic states – i.e., states of assent, dissent, and suspension. Control is direct in that voluntary effort is directed straightaway at the doxastic state, not at something else. The mind has the power straightforwardly to will itself to believe propositions. The competing model of voluntary doxastic control denies such direct control, maintaining that the will's control is *indirect*. In what sense indirect? Descartes characterizes such indirect control for the case of the passions:

Our passions, too, cannot be directly aroused or suppressed by the action of our will, but only indirectly through the representation of things which are usually joined with the passions we wish to have and opposed to the passions we wish to reject. For example, in order to arouse boldness and suppress fear in ourselves, it is not sufficient to have the volition to do so. We must apply ourselves to consider the reasons, objects, or precedents which persuade us that the danger is not great; that there is always more security in defence than in flight; that we shall gain glory and joy if we conquer, whereas we can expect nothing but regret and shame if we flee; and so on. (*Passions* 45; 1:345, AT 11:362-3)

Extending this model of indirect control to the case of judgment: our assent cannot be directly aroused or suppressed by the action of our will, but only indirectly through the representation of things which are usually joined with the desired doxastic state – namely, via the representation of *reasons for belief* (broadly construed): *assent* to a proposition is determined by perceptual attention to supporting reasons; *dissent* is determined by attention to refuting reasons; *suspension*, or doubt, is determined by attention to undermining reasons.

On the usual terminology, the former kind of position – direct doxastic control – is called *voluntarism*, but not the latter. That terminology is misleading insofar as non-voluntarist options also allow for voluntary control, albeit indirect. The debate of present interest is not about whether Descartes thinks we have voluntary doxastic control, but instead about whether he thinks such voluntary control is direct, or instead indirect. I shall therefore adopt different terminology, referring to the account of direct control as Direct Voluntarism, and to the account of indirect control as Indirect Voluntarism. As will emerge, though a strong case can be made on behalf of either interpretation, I favor an Indirect Voluntarism reading.

Direct Voluntarism interpretations find some support in the Fourth Meditation account of judgment. According to that account, we have an epistemic duty to "simply refrain from making a judgement in cases where [we] do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness" (2:41, AT 7:59). This seems to suggest that – simply by trying – we can control our assent. As Janet Broughton observes, Descartes "resolves to suspend judgment about everything he fails to grasp clearly and distinctly, and he describes the obstacle to this course of action as being the difficulty of remembering this resolution, not some inability to carry it out while trying" (2002, 58). Of such cases in which we lack clear and distinct perception, Descartes adds that we have "the freedom to assent or not to assent" (2:42, AT 7:61), a remark that Michael Della Rocca thinks "most naturally suggests" a power of "direct control" over assent (2006, 148).

The Direct Voluntarism interpreter might take the method of doubt to provide further support. While explaining the method, Descartes has his meditator say, of his past opinions: "I must withhold my assent from these former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods, if I want to discover any certainty"; and he adds, "I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself" (Med. 1; 2:15, AT 7:21-2). These remarks can be read as suggesting an ability for direct control of assent. As Broughton sums up the First Meditation attitude: "it is here and now within my power to suspend judgment about the truth of anything I have believed" (2002, 58).

Interestingly, Indirect Voluntarism interpreters can, likewise, cite both the method of doubt, as well as the Fourth Meditation account, in support of their interpretation. For instance, consider the manner in which methodic doubt unfolds. The opening two paragraphs of the First Meditation offer a general rationale for methodic doubt. If Descartes means to be assuming direct voluntary control of assent, why doesn't he have his meditator straightaway withhold assent from all of his previous opinions – what is the point in enumerating specific reasons for doubt? What the enumeration of reasons for doubt suggests is that Descartes means to be

invoking indirect voluntary control over assent. As Della Rocca writes, Descartes "makes it quite clear in Meditation I that the suspense of belief comes about after consideration of *reasons* for doubt and not by a simple mental fiat" (2006, 149). To take just one example, early in the First Meditation Descartes clarifies the sort of sense-based beliefs about which we're enjoined to suspend judgment: "that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands" (2:13, AT 7:18). Rather than having us suspend judgment *simply by trying*, Descartes shows how to doubt such propositions by attending to reasons for doubt: I'm to attend to the dreaming doubt, thereby wondering whether I'm *really* "holding this piece of paper in my hands", or merely dreaming that I am. And note that it's the same for every proposition about which we're to suspend judgment. Indeed, as for the meditator's remark that "it will be a good plan to turn [his] will in completely the opposite direction," he immediately invokes reasons for doubt: "I will suppose therefore ... some malicious demon" (2:15, AT 7:22).

Does Descartes regard reflection on reasons for doubt as optional, or instead as integral to carrying out his method? What he writes in the Appendix to the Fifth Replies indicates that the undermining reasons are needed in order actually to determine the will to doubt:

I did say that there was some difficulty in expelling from our belief everything we have previously accepted. One reason for this is that before we can decide [*déterminer*] to doubt, we need [*besoin*] some reason for doubting; and that is why in my First Meditation I put forward the principal reasons for doubt. (2:270, AT 9a:204)

Note too that this understanding of the role of doubt suggests a way to understand the Fourth Meditation account of our epistemic duty to withhold assent unless our perception is clear and distinct: namely, that the duty to withhold assent is a duty to attend to reasons for doubt.

Importantly, there are simplistic objections to which neither kind of interpretation need succumb. Direct Voluntarism accounts need not entail the phenomenally implausible view that *every* doxastic state is directly determined by an act of will. Indeed, the most common variant of Direct Voluntarism interpretations effectively underscore, as Descartes writes in *Principles* 1:39, "that we have power in *many* cases to give or withhold our assent at will" (1:205, AT 8a:19; italics added). The qualification is important because of the doctrine that assent is non-optional when the intellect's perception is clear and distinct. Williams, himself among the direct voluntarist interpreters, explains two related restrictions on the account:

The restrictions are, first, that the will is not invoked against what the thinker regards, and continues to regard, as overwhelming reasons for a certain belief, and, second, that its most important use lies in its being invoked negatively, that is to say, in connection with the suspension of belief. (1978, 178)

As such, the principal circumstance in which the will exercises its power of direct control over assent occurs when the mind is *indifferent* as to whether to give or to withhold assent. A parallel sort of objection aimed at the other interpretive camp is no more persuasive. Indirect Voluntarism accounts need not entail the phenomenally implausible view that *every* doxastic state is indirectly determined by the will. Such accounts do require that every doxastic state is determined by the intellect, but they can allow that the intellect's perception often arises from the senses rather than from the will.

We have considered only a small sample of the texts and considerations that might be cited on behalf of either interpretation. I have focused on considerations related to the method of doubt, and the theory of judgment, since they are often taken to support a Direct Voluntarism interpretation – a conclusion which, as I've tried to show, is by no means clear. In addition to citing textual considerations, interpreters sometimes ask – in the name of charity – what kind of account a smart philosopher like Descartes *should* hold. In connection with this, it is widely held that our doxastic states are not subject to direct voluntary control. Williams argues that "it is far from clear how assenting is even dependent on the will, let alone a mode of it", for voluntariness seems to be neither necessary nor sufficient for belief: "are there not a very large number of things that one just cannot believe, and others that one cannot help believing?" (1978, 176). Wilson adds that "of course we can't just decide to believe or assent to something, and forthwith believe or assent to it" (1978, 145). In the same vein, Curley suggests an introspective psychological experiment to reveal that Direct Voluntarism is a mistaken philosophical theory:

Consider some proposition for which you have literally no evidence at all one way or the other. It may not be as easy as you might suppose to think of an example which strictly satisfies that condition, but I am in this situation with respect to the proposition "it rained three hours ago on Jupiter". Now, paying careful attention to what is happening in your mind, believe it. Or, if you prefer, disbelieve it. Or do both, in turn. Did anything happen? Unless your experience is very unlike mine, I suspect not. Indeed, I fear that if my salvation depended on my either believing or disbelieving this particular proposition, I should be damned. (1975, 178)

It is difficult to disagree with Curley's assessment. It is no wonder, then, that Williams, Wilson, and Curley, each criticize Descartes' theory of judgment as ill-conceived, for each attributes to him a version of Direct Voluntarism. Unfortunately, none of them makes a case for such an interpretation.

I suggest that the apparent implausibility of Direct Voluntarism should – other things equal – motivate more aggressive efforts at an Indirect Voluntarism interpretation. An Indirect Voluntarism interpretation has received *some* attention in the literature (cf. Della Rocca (2006),

Cottingham (2002 and 1988), and Kenny (1972)), though not the systematic defense that in my judgment it deserves.

4. Will, judgment, and the compatibilism debate

Philosophers have long debated two main kinds of accounts of the liberty requisite to assigning praise and blame for actions. Our interest is with a special case of that debate applying to epistemic actions – namely, the actions of giving and suspending assent. The one kind of account is called *compatibilist*, because such accounts allow that our bearing responsibility for our actions is compatible with such actions having been predetermined. The other sort of account is called *incompatibilist*, because such accounts maintain to the contrary that our bearing responsibility for our actions is not compatible with their having been predetermined. The aim of the present Section is to try to establish whether Descartes' account of our epistemic responsibility in judgment is best understood as compatibilist or incompatibilist.

(The debate is often framed in terms of a fully general determinism. For our purposes, however, it will suffice to consider a more limited determinism whereby *every element in the judgment forming process* is predetermined by prior circumstances. This limited thesis is what I hereafter refer to, in speaking about determinism.)

The central problem in the interpretation of Descartes' position arises from an apparent tension in his views. Compatibilist interpretations cite texts and doctrines seeming to commit him either to determinism, or to it being the case that we bear epistemic responsibility even in circumstances that are deterministic. Consider first the latter. Compatibilist interpreters often cite the doctrine already discussed, whereby clear and distinct perception determines the will's assent. In at least these cases, goes the reasoning, the will's assent arises from deterministic circumstances. And importantly, these are paradigm cases of proper judgment. If in these paradigm cases the will's assent is determined, then Descartes' account is compatibilist. This reasoning seems further reinforced by such Fourth Meditation claims as the following:

In order to be free, there is no need for me to be inclined both ways; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction – either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts – the freer is my choice. (2:40, AT 7:57-8)

The apparent point of this passage is that the fact that clear and distinct perception determines the will's assent is compatible with our enjoying freedom over the resulting judgments; indeed, that we're *freer* in those cases.

Other considerations suggest the stronger view that Descartes is indeed a determinist. One way into such a view is via issues of divine sovereignty and preordination. If all things – including the wills of creatures – are dependent on the divine will, the apparent conclusion is that our every volition is subject to divine preordination and control. And since Descartes affirms an especially strong thesis of divine sovereignty, it would seem therefore that he is a determinist.

Such considerations as these make a powerful case for a compatibilist interpretation. Vere Chappell sums up the case: Descartes holds "that volitions are caused by God", as well as "by clear perceptions", all the while "remaining committed to the freedom of every volition"; consequently, "it *follows* that Descartes is a compatibilist with respect to each of these relationships" (1994, 188).

On the other side of the debate, incompatibilist interpretations cite their own supporting texts and doctrines. Among the distinctly incompatibilist libertarian doctrines is the notion of freedom of alternate possibility. Accordingly, one is free only if one can choose among two or more contrary alternatives, each of which is genuinely open – i.e., none of which has been predetermined by the past. By contrast, determinist accounts have it that only one of the "alternatives" is genuinely open, itself being an unavoidable consequence of the past; determinist accounts are thus often characterized as implying that the agent *could not do otherwise* given the past history of the world. Various texts seem to tie Descartes' account of epistemic responsibility to the notion of freedom of alternate possibility. In *Principles* 1:37, while clarifying what makes a person "deserve praise or blame", he 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 would be the case if we *could not do otherwise*. (1:205, AT 8a:18f, italics added)

That Descartes distinguishes our free, praiseworthy behavior and the necessitated behavior of an automaton is significant. His argument is not that automatist behavior fails to be praiseworthy because of the absence of a mind; that would miss the essential point, for we can conceive of minds the thoughts of which unfold deterministically. Rather, the argument is that the automatist behavior is not praiseworthy because it "occurs necessarily" – because of unfolding deterministically, on the present reading of the passage. Freedom of alternate possibility is taken as a necessary condition of responsibility. Descartes' 1644-45 letters to Mesland convey the

same. He characterizes the will's power of self-determination in terms of "a real and positive power to determine oneself" (3:234, AT 4:116); in a follow-up letter he links the account with alternate possibility, noting that the will's positive power is "a positive faculty of determining oneself to one or other of two contraries" (3:245, AT 4:173).

We have, therefore, two kinds of passages seeming to be in tension – some passages suggesting compatibilism, others suggesting incompatibilism. As Lilli Alanen asks:

How can he [Descartes] claim both that the will is determined by the good clearly perceived and yet has a "real and positive power to determine itself" independently of the perceptions of the intellect? (2003, 232)

How are we to reconcile the two sets of texts?

The apparent tension has suggested to some readers a mixed interpretation whereby Descartes changes his view. According to Tad Schmaltz, the account of the *Principles* (published in 1644) "requires indifference and lack of determination" which "seems clearly to be at odds with the view of the 1641 *Meditations*" (1994, 7-8). Schmaltz cites the *Principles* 1:37 passage (quoted above) as marking a telling difference between the 1641 and 1644 accounts. He concludes that the *Principles* marks "a sincere attempt on Descartes' part to modify his account of human freedom in Meditation IV" (1994, 13). Michelle Beyssade offers a slightly different line of argument for the change-of-view thesis, pointing to a significant change from the original Latin text of the *Meditations* to the 1647 French edition. (Descartes is known to have approved the translation, though the details of his approval are unknown.) Beyssade explains:

[W]hat Descartes regards, in the Latin text, as not necessary for human freedom, i.e. as not constitutive of the essence of freedom, is the power of choosing between two contraries. ...

By contrast, what Descartes, in the French text, regards as not necessary for human freedom, that is as not constitutive of its essence, what he dissociates from freedom, is *the state of indifference or wavering or balance* due to ignorance. (1994, 194)

In her view, the Latin text explicitly rejects that the freedom of alternate possibility is needed for epistemic responsibility, whereas the French text backs off of that rejection, using language that is neutral as to such freedom.

Opponents of the change-of-view thesis are not without resources. One strategy for replying to Schmaltz involves showing either that the cited 1641 doctrines continue to be held in 1644, or that the cited 1644 doctrines were already held in 1641 – a strategy that looks promising. For example, the 1641 doctrine whereby clear and distinct perception compels assent is articulated in the 1644 *Principles* (cf. article 43); and it's suggestive that Descartes' 1644 references to deterministic behavior in automatons are, at least in part, continuous with his

earliest published writings. (It should be said that these factors are not unnoticed by Schmaltz, and he discusses them.) As for Beyssade's line of argument, her opponents will surely emphasize that her thesis depends on what even she concedes is a disputed translation of the Latin (1994, 194).

Currently, a compatibilist interpretation is the dominant view in the literature. My own judgment is that the recent literature has not given due attention to the considerations in support of an incompatibilist interpretation. (C. P. Ragland's work is a notable exception. Cf. his 2006.) In what remains of this essay, I sketch some main lines of defense of such an interpretation.

We've noted two main lines of support for a compatibilist interpretation – one concerning the seemingly deterministic character of proper judgment, and the other concerning divine sovereignty. Let's reconsider each.

The doctrine whereby clear and distinct perception compels assent need not be understood in compatibilist terms. In his exchange with Mesland, Descartes indicates that the exercise of freewill extends even to such cases:

For it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing. (3:245, AT 4:173)

As numerous commentators have argued (cf. Kenny (1972, 29), Schmaltz (1994, 11), and Hoffman (2003, 266)), this remark can be interpreted in connection with an earlier letter, in which Descartes refers to our ability to help control the intellect's attention. By diverting our attention away from what is clear and distinct, we can thereby "hold back", and thus "demonstrate the freedom of our will". Nothing in the 1641 *Meditations* texts conflicts with this understanding. To the contrary, Descartes is clear that assent-compulsion only accompanies *occurrent* clarity and distinctness (Med. 3; 2:25, AT 7:36; and Med. 5; 2:48, AT 7:69f) and that such perception is easily diverted, it being in our nature to have difficulty sustaining attention (cf. Med. 4; 2:43, AT 7:62; and Med. 5; 2:48, AT 7:69). As noted in Section 3, in connection with an Indirect Voluntarism interpretation, we enjoy some degree of voluntary input over our attention. On the kind of incompatibilist interpretation I would propose, the will's freedom of alternate possibility arises in connection this power to help direct attention, not with a power of direct control over assent. This interpretation nicely resolves the claimed tension in holding both that clear and distinct perception determines assent *and* that epistemic responsibility depends on the freedom of alternate possibility: the will's doxastic states *are* determined by the intellect's

perceptual states, but the will's epistemic praiseworthiness and blameworthiness derive from its ability help control the intellect's perceptual attention.

Other problematic issues for an incompatibilist interpretation can be explained as well. Recall the Fourth Meditation remark that "there is no need for me to be inclined both ways"; that "the more I incline in one direction ... the freer is my choice". Though such remarks might seem to imply a compatibilist account, Descartes' own explanation of the remarks suggests otherwise. In a letter to Mesland, Descartes writes that the notion of freedom to which he was referring "consists simply in ease of operation," adding:

It was in this sense that I wrote that I moved towards something all the more freely when there were more reasons driving me towards it; for it is certain that in that case our will moves itself with greater facility and force [*majori tunc cum facilitate atque impetu se movere*]. (3:246, AT 4:174f)

In what sense a "greater facility"? I suggest the following answer. When our perceptual attention encompasses opposing reasons – pro reasons, along with reasons for doubt – there's an intellectual tug of war, of sorts, the will being pulled in opposing directions. The pro reasons "may pull me in one direction", while attention to reasons for doubt may "push my assent the other way" (2:41, AT 7:59). Such cases do not avail the will of the same straightforward ease of control over its doxastic states as occurs when it directs perceptual attention straightaway to clearly and distinctly perceived ideas. Either way, we bear the same responsibility, and either way the will enjoys the power of positive freedom, though the will's control over its doxastic states doesn't admit of equal agility. It is in this sense that I'm *freer* insofar as there are "more reasons driving me towards" assent, than in cases where there are fewer such reasons; and I'm *freest* when I perceive none but compelling reasons – i.e., when I'm in no way indifferent. As Descartes adds to Mesland: "If we follow the course which appears to have the most reasons in its favour, we determine ourselves more easily" (3:245, AT 4:174). Thus understood, the *prima facie* problematic remarks comport well with an incompatibilist interpretation.

Neither does the appeal to divine sovereignty make a compelling case. The argument, recall, has it that the fact that everything – including our volitions – is dependent on the divine will implies that Descartes is a determinist. Note, however, that though Descartes concedes that our freewill is "not incompatible" with such dependence on God, he characterizes it as "a dependence of quite another kind" (3 Nov 1645 letter to Princess Elizabeth; 3:277, AT 4:333). In the case of the eternal truths, which, on his view, do also depend on the divine will, Descartes' understanding is that such truths count as necessary *because* God willed it to be so. Descartes

can likewise maintain that creatures have wills that are independent of divine determination because God willed it to be so. This is quite paradoxical – to *our* minds, at any rate. But as Descartes writes to Mersenne: "In general we can assert that God can do everything that is within our grasp but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power." (3:23, AT 1:146) What is important, for our purposes, is that – in the face of issues of divine preordination – Descartes shows no more inclination to abandon an incompatibilist conception of the will, than to give up the necessity of the eternal truths (cf. Ragland 2005). In the final analysis (of which our minds are capable), there are mysteries that we cannot fully resolve. In the same *Principles* passage in which he contrasts our praiseworthy behavior with the necessitated behavior of an automaton, Descartes explains "how to reconcile the freedom of our will with divine preordination":

But we shall get out of these difficulties if we remember that our mind is finite, while the power of God is infinite – the power by which he not only knew from eternity whatever is or can be, but also willed it and preordained it. We may attain sufficient knowledge of this power to perceive clearly and distinctly that God possesses it; but we cannot get a sufficient grasp of it *to see how it leaves the free actions of men undetermined*. Nonetheless, we have such close awareness of the freedom and indifference which is in us, that there is nothing we can grasp more evidently or more perfectly. And it would be absurd, simply because we do not grasp one thing, which we know must by its very nature be beyond our comprehension, to doubt something else of which we have an intimate grasp and which we experience within ourselves. (Prin. 1:41; 1:206, AT 8a:20; italics added)

Descartes is clear that the central problem arising from divine preordination stems from our inability "to see how it leaves the free actions of men undetermined". And this brings to the fore a point worth emphasizing. The very fact that Descartes struggles to square his conception of our epistemic responsibility with divine preordination constitutes powerful evidence that his is a fundamentally incompatibilist conception of responsibility – that *his* conception "leaves the free actions of men undetermined". For on a compatibilist conception, whereby the free actions of men are *determined*, there is no difficulty in reconciling it with divine preordination.

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