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THE MORAL CERTAINTY OF IMMORTALITY IN DESCARTES

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Introduction

In the Dedicatory Letter of the *Meditations*, René Descartes claims that he will offer a proof of the soul's immortality, to be accomplished by reason alone. This proof is also promised by the title page of the first edition of the *Meditations*, which includes the words "in which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated."[1] But in the Synopsis, and later in his replies to objections, Descartes gives a more nuanced account of the possibility of proving immortality and whether an attempt is even to be found in the *Meditations*. To confuse matters further, the title page of the second edition no longer mentions a demonstration of immortality but promises only to prove the distinction between body and soul. The question arises, therefore, whether the *Meditations* contains a purely philosophical demonstration of the immortality of the soul.

One of the oldest criticisms of the *Meditations* is that, despite what Descartes promised, he provided little toward a rational basis for belief in immortality. The second set of objections by Marin Mersenne includes such a worry, and by 1647 this criticism reached England, as we read in Henry More's *Platonick Song of the Soul*.[2] More than 350 years later, the literature on this subject echoes the complaint of Mersenne and More. Most recent authors who have written on Descartes's supposed demonstration of immortality have argued that Descartes himself recognized he was unsuccessful in offering such a proof and consequently appealed to faith to give what he had once hoped reason could provide. These authors have claimed that, even by his own standards, Descartes's premises are at best sufficient only in proving the soul's *natural* immortality, but not its *actual* immortality. By "natural immortality" is meant the impossibility of any natural cause, either external or internal to the soul, ending the soul's existence; by "actual immortality" is meant

the assured reality of a life of the soul after the body's death. Since Descartes held the absolute freedom and omnipotence of God, so the literature goes, he could not furnish a demonstration that God would never annihilate the soul. The most that Descartes could do was prove that nothing natural outside the soul could end the life of the soul (call this "external natural immortality"), and no principle internal to the soul could lead to its eventual cessation (call this "internal natural immortality"); he could narrow down the cause of the soul's mortality to an act of God alone, but he could not rule out this possibility (therefore, Descartes could not prove the "actual immortality of the soul"[3]). Many conclude that Descartes ultimately appealed to faith for his only evidence of actual immortality.[4]

I will argue that Descartes distinguished the different types of immortality listed above and identified different kinds of evidence and levels of certainty that should be expected from the demonstrations of each. Mersenne, More, and recent commentators have tended to search for one master argument for immortality, and to be sure, the rhetoric of the Dedicatory Letter of the *Meditations* is partly responsible for that. However, I will show that Descartes was clear that different demonstrations should be sought for the different types of immortality and that these various demonstrations had various aims, or roles, within his philosophy. As we will see, the two types of natural immortality were foundational for Descartes's metaphysical project, while actual immortality was foundational for his ethics.

The concern of this paper is with actual immortality, the afterlife, first of all because this is what we usually mean when we speak of immortality, and second, because the literature on this subject has been uniform in concluding that Descartes offered little-to-no rational grounds for believing in actual immortality—a claim I wish to oppose. I will argue that we have been asking the wrong question until now and have been demanding too much of Descartes. Rather than searching for a purely rational demonstration of actual immortality, I will ask how and why Descartes, the meditator, became convinced of the soul's actual immortality. An important move in this paper is thus to change the focus of the discussion from demonstrations to kinds of certainty, in particular, to the notion of moral certainty. The thesis of this paper is that Descartes aimed to prove actual immortality with moral certainty and that he had reason to believe he was successful in doing so.[5]

The relevant issues surrounding natural immortality will necessarily be raised along the way; but as we will see, they are just the issues of the real distinction and the simplicity of the mind, both topics for which there is already an abundant literature. I will assume for argument's

sake that Descartes provided demonstrations of natural immortality along the lines that he promised; from there, I will turn to the question of how such demonstrations might have seemed to Descartes rationally to ground belief in actual immortality. It is a rational ground for this step—from a demonstration of natural immortality to the conclusion of actual immortality—that recent commentators, as well as Mersenne and More, found lacking in Descartes.

Initial Objection

Some may object from the outset that I have overlooked the second set of objections to the *Meditations* where Descartes explicitly claims that it is only through God's revelation that we have certainty of the soul's immortality. Let us consider that text immediately so that we may the sooner put it aside.

Mersenne rounds off his seven objections to the *Meditations* with this argument:

> We now make the additional point that it does not seem to follow from the fact that the mind is distinct from the body that it is incorruptible or immortal. What if its nature were limited by the duration of the life of the body, and God had endowed it with just so much strength and existence as to ensure that it came to an end with the death of the body?[6]

What is at stake here is just the step discussed above from natural to actual immortality. While it may be the case that the soul is distinct from every body, and therefore, that the soul does not rely on the body for its life, it may nevertheless be the case that the soul dies with the body and enjoys no life after the present, simply because God so wills.

Descartes responds to Mersenne as follows:[7]

> You go on to say that it does not follow from the fact that the soul is distinct from the body that it is immortal, since it could still be claimed that God gave it such a nature that its duration comes to an end simultaneously with the end of the body's life. Here I admit that I cannot refute what you say. For I do not take it upon myself to try to use the power of human reason to settle any of those matters which depend on the free will of God . . . . But if your question concerns the absolute power of God,[8] and you are asking whether he may have decreed that human souls cease to exist precisely when the bodies which he joined to them are destroyed, then it is for God alone to give the answer. And since God himself has revealed to us that this will not occur, there remains not even the slightest room for doubt on this point.[9]

Against recent commentators, I will argue there are two reasons why we should not interpret this passage as proof that Descartes recommended revelation as the sole foundation for belief in immortality. First, Descartes nowhere *agrees* with Mersenne that the real distinction argument is insufficient as grounds for belief in actual immortality—he merely says that he "cannot refute" Mersenne's suggestion that God gives each soul a life span only as long in duration as the body's. Not being able to refute someone is not the same as agreeing with him. All that can be concluded from Descartes's lack of a refutation of Mersenne's objection is that Descartes never intended to offer a proof of the soul's immortality that ruled out the "absolute power of God" to annihilate the soul.

Second, Descartes not only does not agree with Mersenne, but he is even reluctant to discuss the issue with him—"it is for God alone to give the answer." Descartes avoided speculation into absolute divine freedom, as we read in the Fourth Meditation: "there is considerable rashness in thinking myself capable of investigating the impenetrable purposes of God."[10] Since God is omnipotent, Descartes must agree that it is within divine power to annihilate the soul. But it is another question whether Descartes considered this possibility a *reason* for entirely resorting to faith to establish immortality; it is my contention that Descartes did not. As we will see, Descartes's argument for the actual immortality of the soul was not intended to provide the "mathematical evidence" that More looked for but did not find; the argument was rather intended to be just strong enough that an atheist, who lacks all faith in the afterlife, would have to admit on reading the *Meditations* that the preponderance of evidence points to the actual immortality of the soul and, therefore, that he ought to govern this life on the basis of an expectation of a subsequent life. To achieve this goal, reason was sufficient for Descartes.

The Various Aims of Demonstrating Immortality

I have indicated that much disappointment in the literature concerning Descartes on actual immortality stems from misunderstanding his intentions and from asking too much of him. If we look only at the Dedicatory Letter, Descartes indeed places great importance on giving a sure, rational foundation for immortality, and thus, we might be led to expect to find a demonstration, or several, equally central in the *Meditations* as those for the existence of God; but if we read that letter more closely and if we also look at the Synopsis, we find that there are different senses of immortality distinguished and different reasons for demonstrating each. Moreover, as I shall argue, the difference between these reasons results in different degrees of certainty being sought.

External natural immortality is, for Descartes, an immediate result of the real distinction between body and soul and is therefore intimately related to the metaphysical foundation of physics.[11] Consequently, this result must be established with the highest degree of certainty—metaphysical certainty—and this is accomplished with the *Meditations*. In the Synopsis, Descartes distinguishes external and internal natural immortality and admits he has not pursued the latter in the *Meditations*; he then sketches a proof of it nonetheless, but ultimately puts off a proper treatment of the key issues until the *Principles*. The certainty with which this latter kind of immortality is established is also metaphysical. Actual immortality is a topic that is largely absent in the *Meditations* and the *Principles*. However, that is not to say that belief in it is not justified by what *is* treated in those works. Moreover, when Descartes distinguishes actual from natural immortality (in three places in his oeuvre) by referring in some way or another to the afterlife, his concern is always with giving a foundation for *ethics*, not physics. Consequently, it will be argued, actual immortality needs to be established only with *moral certainty*.

My argument for this last point will avoid what Peter J. Markie has called "a serious mistake" about the distinction between moral and metaphysical certainty, namely, that "moral certainty is the kind of certainty had about propositions regarding practical 'moral' matters and metaphysical certainty the kind had about propositions regarding nonpractical, 'metaphysical' matters."[12] That immortality is known with moral certainty will not be taken as a facile consequence of its relationship to morality but will be the consequence of the kind of evidence available for immortality, of the coherence of the thesis of immortality with our other knowledge, and of the conditions Descartes gives for a foundation of ethics.

External Natural Immortality

In the Synopsis, Descartes identifies the requirements for proving that the soul is immortal:[13]

(1) "a concept of soul which is as clear as possible and is also quite distinct from every concept of body."

(2) "we should know that everything that we clearly and distinctly understand is true in a way which corresponds exactly to our understanding of it."

(3) "a distinct concept of corporeal nature."

(4) Knowledge "that all the things that we clearly and distinctly conceive of as different substances (as we do in the case of

> mind and body) are in fact substances which are really distinct one from the other" (which is an inference drawn from [[1]]–[[3]]).[14]

Descartes here lays out a plan for the real distinction argument, and what he concludes from it is the external natural immortality of the soul—"[t]hese arguments show that the decay of the body does not imply the destruction of the mind."[15] Since the real distinction (and so external natural immortality) is a crucial part of the metaphysical foundation of science, every premise of the argument must be known with metaphysical certainty. This means that not only are there no adequate grounds for doubting these premises, but the certainty attained here must be beyond even hyperbolic doubt.[16] Indeed, (1) is known so clearly that it is beyond even the wildest sceptical objections of the First Meditation, for the fact that the soul is a thinking thing, and exists whenever it thinks, is beyond any doubt. (2) can be known with at least as much certainty as (1) because it follows from the propositions that God is perfect and that he is therefore no deceiver;[17] while (3) is adumbrated by the wax example of the Second Meditation and finally certified as a clear and distinct perception in the Fifth. (4) is a valid conclusion of (1)–(3) and, if recognized as such, consequently preserves their certainty.

Every premise of the argument, and the argument as a whole, can be and has been criticized. What is beyond discussion, however, is that the *Meditations* contains a purely rational demonstration, whether successful or not, of the external natural immortality of the soul and that Descartes had reasons for claiming that his demonstration attained the highest degree of certainty.

Internal Natural Immortality

Descartes then says in the Synopsis that the above argument, the essential elements of which are laid out in the Second and Fourth Meditations, is confirmed by what he says in the Sixth Meditation concerning the opposite natures of bodies and minds. Whereas bodies are divisible, we cannot imagine how a mind can be divided. Descartes does not spell out at this point, however, how the mind's simplicity confirms the external natural immortality of the soul; he says only that he has "not pursued this topic any further in this book."[18] Descartes justifies not pursuing the topic further by claiming that what *is* pursued in the *Meditations* is enough to give hope of an afterlife, a remark that will be analyzed later in this paper.

The second justification for not pursuing the topic further is that "the premises which lead to the conclusion that the soul is immortal

depend on an account of the whole of physics."[19] This is a difficult passage, especially the idea implied in it that the premises leading to a conclusion about the soul (mind) could depend in some way on physics. If Descartes's physics is mechanistic and deals only with the modes of body, then what could it have to say about the simplicity or immortal nature of the mind? A solution to this puzzle is to note that Descartes's familiar way of referring to his *Principles of Philosophy* was to call it his "Physics," even before the publication of that work,[20] and so this passage was a way of putting off the topic in question until the project of the *Principles*. Since an important part of that project is metaphysical (all of part one of the eventual work would deal with metaphysical problems), the worry concerning the role of physics in the proof of immortality is avoided by this suggestion: part of the "whole of physics" is its metaphysical underpinning. This interpretation is confirmed by the clarification and expansion Descartes gives in the Synopsis of this passage, for what he goes on to say next touches on the topics of several sections of part one of the *Principles*.

Specifically, Descartes goes on to sketch a proof of the internal natural immortality of soul, much as he had done for external natural immortality. He writes, clarifying how a proof of immortality depends on the whole of physics, that

(1') "we need to know that absolutely all substances, or things which must be created by God in order to exist, are by their nature incorruptible and cannot ever cease to exist unless they are reduced to nothingness by God's denying his concurrence to them."

(2') "we need to recognize that body, taken in the general sense, is a substance, so that it too never perishes. But the human body, in so far as it differs from other bodies, is simply made up of a certain configuration of limbs and other accidents of this sort; whereas the human mind is not made up of any accidents in this way, but is a pure substance. For even if all the accidents of the mind change, so that it has different objects of the understanding and different desires and sensations, it does not on that account become a different mind; whereas a human body loses its identity merely as a result of a change in the shape of some of its parts."

(3') "it follows from this that while the body can very easily perish, the mind is immortal by its very nature."[21]

It is clear from the conclusion (3') that it is not primarily at external, but internal natural immortality that Descartes aims in this sketch, for

he claims that it is the *very nature* of the mind never to perish, which is to say that there is no principle internal to the soul that threatens to annihilate it. It is also clear that this proof, if carried out in detail, would likewise establish the external natural immortality of the soul, just as Descartes earlier indicated; for first, bodies cannot annihilate the being of a substance that God has created (1'); next, if the mind is simple (2'), then it obviously cannot perish by having its parts dispersed through the impact of some body; and lastly, assuming bodies can affect minds and cause them to have different thoughts, this would not create a different mind (2'); therefore, there is no way for a body to cause the death of a soul.

Some of the elements of the above sketch prove the claim that "the [human] body can very easily perish," and some (not necessarily distinct) elements prove that "the mind is immortal by its very nature." We are interested in the latter elements, which are all of (1'), and the claim in (2') that if all the accidents of the mind changed, it would not thereby become a different mind; that is, the claim that the mind is a "pure substance." Both of these claims are effectively taken up in the *Principles*, and both claims must be established there with metaphysical certainty, since they ultimately ground the mechanistic physics developed throughout the rest of the *Principles*.

In *Principles* I, 51, and following articles, Descartes treats substance and its relation to God, the subject of (1'), and says that created substances first of all differ from God in that they require something outside themselves (namely, God) in order to exist, and then he defines created substances as those things that "need only the ordinary concurrence of God in order to exist."[22] Earlier in the *Principles*, Descartes proved God's existence in a variety of ways and argued that, while we cannot fully grasp it, God's character as "supremely intelligent, supremely powerful and supremely perfect" is "known to us more clearly than any other thing."[23] With this utmost clarity about the threefold supremacy of God, we can conclude with the utmost certainty that what God has created cannot be annihilated by any other thing. In other words, substances, being created by God, are "by their nature incorruptible." Hence (1') is established with the highest degree of certainty.

To establish the relevant part of (2'), Descartes must show that a change in the "accidents" of the mind does not entail that a new mind has come about. I take it that Descartes would consider he had proved this also with metaphysical certainty in the *Principles*, by his distinctions between substances and modes, as well as by his distinctions concerning kinds of distinctions (real versus modal).[24] The subject of personal identity does not come up in any detail in the *Principles*, however, which

offers ample ammunition to criticize Descartes's proof of internal natural immortality.[25] For the purposes of this paper, however, it is sufficient to note that Descartes offered purely rational evidence for belief in this kind of immortality, and that, on his own terms, he would have believed that his evidence attained the highest degree of certainty.

The criticism of Descartes that I am interested in is that he had no reason on the basis of the two previous demonstrations to claim that he had offered rational evidence for the actual immortality of soul. In order to move forward to this criticism, therefore, we will leave aside an evaluation of Descartes's proofs of natural immortality, assume that they in fact rationally ground belief in natural immortality, and ask how, and to what degree, these demonstrations afford us evidence of actual immortality. First, we turn to the passages where Descartes isolates actual immortality and note his aim in so doing.

Actual Immortality

There are three places where actual immortality is singled out by Descartes, one before the time of the *Meditations* and two after: the *Discourse on Method*, the Dedicatory Letter of the *Meditations*, and in a letter to Princess Elizabeth. In all these passages, we know that actual immortality is in question, rather than either form of natural immortality, because Descartes refers to the afterlife. Moreover, in all three places actual immortality is linked with the foundation of morality. First, we will consider the passage from the *Discourse on Method*:

> [A]fter the error of those who deny God . . . there is none that leads weak minds further from the straight path of virtue than that of imagining that the souls of the beasts are of the same nature as ours, and hence that after this present life we have nothing to fear or to hope for, any more than flies and ants. But when we know how much the beasts differ from us, we understand much better the arguments which prove that our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and consequently that it is not bound to die with it. And since we cannot see any other causes which destroy the soul, we are naturally led to conclude that it is immortal.[26]

Descartes recounts here a comparison he had made between animal and human souls in a lost portion of *Le Monde*. He identifies a barrier to moral virtue that is found in "weak minds," namely, the lack of fear and hope in an afterlife. The reference to a life after the present one indicates that we are dealing with the actual immortality of the soul, and it is clear enough that Descartes sees this issue as a foundational one, along with the existence of God, for morality. The natural immortality of the soul is also identified in this passage, since Descartes speaks of the

soul's independence from the body. He suggests that this independence, along with a lack of evidence that anything else could destroy the soul, "naturally leads" us to conclude that the soul is immortal. Descartes does not explain here what it means to be "naturally led" to a conclusion, but he clearly did not mean that we are led by having recourse to faith in something supernatural.

The same concern for the morality of unbelievers and for the role of knowing the immortality of the soul in urging such people toward virtue is found in the Dedicatory Letter of the *Meditations*:

> For us who are believers, it is enough to accept on faith that the human soul does not die with the body, and that God exists; but in the case of unbelievers, it seems that there is no religion, and practically no moral virtue, that they can be persuaded to adopt until these two truths are proved to them by natural reason. And since in this life the rewards offered to vice are often greater than the rewards of virtue, few people would prefer what is right to what is expedient if they did not fear God or have the expectation of an afterlife [*aliam vitam*].[27]

The actual immortality of the soul, that is, the soul's other life (*alia vita*), or afterlife, is again linked in the above passage with morality. The afterlife of the soul is described as providing, along with the existence of God, a motivation toward virtuous behavior. As Descartes explains, belief in the afterlife is needed to motivate moral behavior because there is often less reward for virtue than for vice in this life:[28] virtue is more appealing when it is an investment in the future. Therefore, if we are to convince atheists to live virtuously, we must provide them with a rational basis for belief in God and the afterlife.

This link between actual immortality and morals is once again made in a letter to Princess Elizabeth of September 15, 1645. After discussing the ethics of Seneca over several letters, Descartes claims he will ignore that philosopher and provide the foundation of his own ethics. He begins by stating the two most basic requirements for judging well in moral matters: "one is knowledge of the truth; the other is practice in remembering and assenting to this knowledge wherever the occasion demands."[29] Descartes then says we must identify the most useful truths for the establishment of virtue. There are four such truths, the second of which is the immortality of the soul.[30] Descartes refers here to the afterlife, since he links immortality in this passage with the capacity of "enjoying countless satisfactions not to be found in this life."[31] The chief benefit of knowing the soul's immortality, says Descartes, is that it "prevents us from fearing death, and so detaches our affections from the things of this world that we look upon whatever is in the power of fortune with nothing but scorn."[32] Knowing the soul

is actually immortal, therefore, provides us with courage in the face of death, and with perseverance through this life in our resistance against temptations.

The importance of recognizing immortality, once again, is ethical in nature—it is required to motivate and sustain moral behavior. In particular, knowledge of immortality is needed to motivate moral behavior in three ways: (i) to guide us on an intellectual level by disposing us to judge well; (ii) to produce courage in us; and (iii) to impact us on the level of the affections to combat temptations. There is, therefore, an intellectual *and* a visceral component of this knowledge as it influences our moral life: believing in an afterlife influences the decisions we make, but it also produces courage and perseverance.

Whenever Descartes speaks specifically of the actual immortality of the soul, he speaks of it as a principle needed to ground morality, not metaphysics or physics.[33] This at least suggests that the evidence needed to ground belief in actual immortality would not necessarily have to attain the highest possible degree of certainty. In what follows, therefore, I provide an interpretation of Descartes on moral certainty, following which I argue that he intended to prove, and had reason to believe that he had proved, the immortality of the soul to just such a degree of certainty.

Moral Certainty

Descartes distinguishes "moral assurance" from "metaphysical certainty" in the *Discourse*, saying that when we possess moral certainty about things, "it seems that we cannot doubt them without being extravagant"; however, continues Descartes, moral certainty is of a lower grade than metaphysical certainty, for "we cannot reasonably deny that there are adequate grounds for not being entirely sure about them."[34] The lesson of the *Discourse* is not that moral certainty is a worthless degree of certainty. As Peter J. Markie has said on the basis of this passage, "even though moral certainty is of a lower grade than metaphysical certainty, it has some punch to it."[35]

This punch is used by Descartes in defense against Pierre Bourdin in the seventh set of replies. Bourdin thought he had caught Descartes in a contradiction in Meditation I, where Descartes claims first to know nothing with certainty but then claims that he "knows" that there is no danger in assuming that an evil deceiver exists. Descartes responds to the charge by saying that "I was merely speaking of 'knowing' in the practical sense [*morali sciendi modo*] which suffices for the conduct of life . . . there is a very great difference between this type of knowledge and the metaphysical knowledge that we are dealing with here."[36] In

this passage, moral knowledge, or knowledge with moral certainty, is described as "sufficient for the conduct of life," but again, as falling short of metaphysical certainty.

Thus far, we have collected two features of moral certainty: it renders doubt about its object extravagant, and such certainty is sufficient for conducting our life. We would like a definition of this kind of certainty, and the closest Descartes comes to giving one is toward the very end of the *Principles*:[37] "some things are considered as morally certain, that is, as having sufficient certainty for application to ordinary life, even though they may be uncertain in relation to the absolute power of God."[38] This passage reaffirms things Descartes has already said about moral certainty: it is trustworthy in practical matters, though it is conceivable that we err in acting on such certainty.

Descartes then expands on this "definition" with a vivid example. He imagines a person who tries to read an encrypted letter and who eventually finds an easy key that, when applied to the letter, yields Latin words. Descartes notes that it is possible that the key is incorrect despite its success in forming words; but the longer the string of words received, the more likely it is that the key is correct. This example is meant as an analogy to Descartes's physics: from a few principles, he was able to bring diverse properties of the world, such as magnetism and fire, into a coherent system, and thus, he concludes, his explanations are at least morally certain. This example and this analogy should suggest to us another feature of moral certainty in Descartes: its degree can change depending on the coherence of its object with other known facts and also on the usefulness of the object of belief. For example, if one key for decryption yields meaningful words and sentences but an overall style foreign to the previous works of the author of the encryption, while another key yields words and sentences but also the usual style of the author, then we can be morally certain about both keys but *more* morally certain about the second.[39]

Edwin Curley has argued that there are degrees of moral certainty and also that a further feature of Descartes's account of moral certainty should be recognized; or rather, he has noted that common sense permits us to draw the following conclusion from the scant passages on the topic in Descartes: "we cannot say in general what level of probability a belief must have in order to be morally certain. . . . Whether or not it will be extravagant not to act on a perceptual belief will depend in part on the content of the belief and what is at stake if it is true."[40] Descartes has repeatedly said that moral certainty is sufficient for the conduct of life, but Curley's point is that surely the kind of conduct in question will determine the degree of certainty required. For example, deciphering

encrypted letters from friends requires less certainty in one's key than deciphering messages passed between terrorist cells.

The Moral Certainty of Immortality in Descartes

With these elements of moral certainty in mind, we turn now to the questions of whether Descartes aimed to prove the actual immortality of the soul with moral certainty and whether the evidence he offered for immortality would have been sufficient, on his own terms, to achieve moral certainty. My answer to both these questions is affirmative. But before we proceed, an admission: Descartes nowhere says that he means to establish the belief in immortality with only moral certainty.[41] However, from what we have just read, a number of links immediately appear between his treatment of immortality and his treatment of moral certainty, so a good case can be made that this was in fact his position.

First, as we have seen, Descartes was careful to distinguish the aim behind his demonstration of actual immortality from that of his demonstrations of natural immortality. Actual immortality is needed to ground morality; that is, the belief in the afterlife is required for the proper conducting of one's life. In the Dedicatory Letter, Descartes indicates that he is interested in particular in proving the immortality of the soul in order to ground an ethics applicable to atheists. If Descartes could prove immortality with moral certainty, then it would be "extravagant" for atheists to doubt the soul's afterlife. Such certainty, therefore, would be sufficient for the aim Descartes indicates that he has in mind.

Second, as we have seen, Descartes admits to Mersenne that the actual immortality of the soul *is* doubtful with respect to the absolute power of God; and in the "definition" of moral certainty given in the *Principles*, Descartes indicates that moral certainties in general are "uncertain in relation to the absolute power of God." Descartes seems candid, therefore, in admitting to Mersenne that a proof of actual immortality is something to be aimed at with less than metaphysical certainty.

But the strongest proof that Descartes aimed to prove the immortality of the soul with moral certainty would be to show that, by his own standards, he actually did so. We have just noted along with Curley that consideration for the kind of conduct, or the intended application of one's belief, is necessary to determine whether one has attained moral certainty, in addition to the evidence one has amassed for that belief. My argument that Descartes proved immortality with moral certainty is that the evidence he provided for immortality was sufficient for the conduct it was intended to guide, namely, virtuous conduct in atheists. In Descartes's letter to Elizabeth considered earlier, he identified three

roles in his ethics for the belief in immortality: it guides us in judging well, it produces courage in us, and it helps us to fight temptations. To determine whether Descartes can claim to have established immortality with moral certainty, we must see whether the evidence he gives for immortality should be considered sufficient to achieve these purposes.

Recall that Descartes responds to Mersenne by saying "we do not even have any convincing evidence or precedent to suggest that any substance can perish."[42] When bodies decay, their parts are dispersed but not annihilated. So, even corporeal substance, as far as our physical observations are concerned, is everlasting. And, of course, nobody has ever confirmed that mental substances die with their bodies. Because of Descartes's proofs of natural immortality, we have evidence of the possibility of actual immortality; but we have no opposing evidence on which to doubt the actual immortality of the soul. Actual immortality is the best available, most coherent, hypothesis. In a letter to Henry Reneri for Alphonse Pollot, April or May 1638, Descartes writes that "once one has settled on opinions which one judges doubtful—that is, once one has decided that there are no others that one judges better or more certain—one should act on them with no less constancy than if one knew that they were the best, which indeed they are when so considered."[43]

We are thus permitted to act on the belief in immortality with confidence. This confidence, this certainty, in immortality afforded to us is intellectual in nature—it is reason's assessment of the truth of a proposition as weighed against the alternatives. Because it is based in reason, this certainty is suitable for swaying one's judgment about how best to direct one's will in life. In other words, this certainty satisfies the first category of usefulness that Descartes identifies in his letter to Elizabeth—it prepares us intellectually "to be always disposed to judge well."[44] It would be irrational to base our actions on the belief that our life on earth is the only one we have; that simply does not stand up to the evidence we have about the mind and about substance in general.

Moreover, even despite the doubt that remains because of the absolute freedom and power of God, Descartes claims in the Synopsis that his arguments for immortality are "enough to give mortals the hope of an afterlife."[45] I think we are tempted to read this as a casual statement that, because an afterlife is possible, we can "choose to hope" for it if we want to. But Descartes's claim is stronger—his arguments will "give hope" [*sic ad alterius vitae spem mortalibus faciendam*] to those who meditate on them. For Descartes, hope is a passion, and as such, it arises only under certain mental and physical conditions. On his view, one cannot freely choose to have whatever passion one wills at whatever

time one wills. Concerning the conditions of hope, Descartes writes in the *Passions of the Soul*,

> We are prompted to desire the acquisition of a good or the avoidance of an evil simply if we think it possible to acquire the good or avoid the evil. But when we go beyond this and consider whether there is much or little prospect of our getting what we desire, then whatever points to the former excites hope in us.[46]

The recognition of the possibility of an afterlife is sufficient to give rise to a desire for it; but what is required for hope in the same is a *consideration* of the prospect of such a life. A mere possibility is not enough to cause hope; we need evidence on which we can judge its likelihood. Because Descartes's metaphysical and physical observations about the incorruptibility of all substance make actual immortality the best available hypothesis and because an afterlife is doubtful only with respect to the power of God, the hope that spontaneously arises in readers of Descartes's arguments may be quite strong.

This passion of hope can serve as a basis for courage and perseverance. Even with the imperfect certainty we have based on our rational arguments for immortality, we nevertheless have a considerable reinforcement for our moral behavior on the level of the passions. In particular, since hope is the foundation of boldness,[47] the increase in the former results in an increase in the latter. Concerning the hope of surviving death, we see that this passion augments, through purely physical means,[48] our boldness in facing death, just as Descartes indicated to Elizabeth. As other passions tempt us toward vice, we will have the hope and boldness to choose virtue solely based on the rational arguments that Descartes has provided. Even the atheist, who has no *faith* in an afterlife, would have to recognize upon reading the *Meditations* that the evidence strongly suggests that the soul is actually immortal. He will be "naturally led" by the arousal of these passions to conclude that the soul is immortal, and thus the atheist will have a foundation for moral virtue.

In short, Descartes's demonstrations of natural immortality are sufficient for providing the certainty required for the conduct of life, where that conduct is the practice of virtue. In the absence of evidence of an eventual death of the soul, it would be extravagant to deny the soul's immortality. Thus, we should conclude that those demonstrations provide Descartes with moral certainty of immortality.

Summary

In this paper, I have argued that Descartes distinguished three senses of immortality and that he indicated different aims and conditions for

demonstrating each. Whereas the secondary literature on actual immortality has been uniform in concluding that Descartes provided no rational foundation for belief in an afterlife, I have shown that Descartes aimed to ground that belief in reason with moral certainty. Descartes could not rule out the possibility that God would one day destroy the soul. However, the arguments Descartes did provide were sufficient to establish the natural immortality of the soul to the degree of certainty needed for his metaphysics and physics and the actual immortality of the soul to the degree of certainty needed to give a foundation for ethics. Faith was not needed (nor appealed to) by Descartes in order to provide purely rational arguments for atheists to ground their pursuit of virtue, both on the level of moral decision making and on the level of the passions. This is what Descartes promised, and this is what he delivered.

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NOTES

1. AT VII, xviv.

2. "*Mounsieur des Chartes* hath attempted bravely [to prove the soul's immortality], but yet methinks on this side of Mathematicall evidence . . . yet he has not done nothing, though not so much as he raiseth mens expectations to." Henry More, "A Platonick Song of the Soul," in *Poems of More*, ed. Alexander Grosart (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 7.

3. These terms are not found in Descartes nor in the secondary literature, as such. However, the separate ideas to which these three terms correspond *are* in Descartes, as we will see. As for the secondary literature, see the following note for several examples of distinctions along the same lines. Because actual immortality is usually what we mean by *immortality*, I will sometimes refer to actual immortality simply as "immortality," as in the title of this paper.

4. The only recent full-length work on this subject argues for this conclusion. C. F. Fowler, *Descartes on the Human Soul: Philosophy and the Demands of Christian Doctrine* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), argues that "immortality 'by nature' did not exclude the power of God to annihilate. Only a revelation of God's will in this regard could transform knowledge of the immortal nature of the soul to knowledge of the fact of eternal life" (272). Recent articles on the subject are also in perfect accord here. Marc Elliot Bobro, in "Consolation and Cartesian Immortality" (*Faith and Philosophy* 20, no. 2 [April 2003]), writes that Descartes "thinks that demonstrating that there is hope *of* an afterlife is enough. . . . Descartes does not think he needs to demonstrate that there is hope *for* an afterlife" (204). He concludes that revelation provides the proof for Descartes. Thomas L. Prendergast, in "Descartes: Immortality, Human Bodies,

and God's Absolute Freedom" (*The Modern Schoolman* 71 [November 1993]), concludes that "there is no doubt that Descartes's claim is that we can know that the soul is by nature immortal . . . [but] our knowledge that the soul and body do not cease to exist contemporaneously depends entirely on revelation" (41). Henri Gouhier and Geneviève Rodis-Lewis hold the same views on this subject (see especially Gouhier, *La Pensée Metaphysique de Descartes* [Paris: J. Vrin, 1962], 390–94; Rodis-Lewis, *L'oeuvre de Descartes*, Tome I [Paris: J. Vrin, 1971], 343–45). In an older, full-length work, *Sagesse Cartésienne et Religion* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), Jeanne Russier concludes that, for Descartes, "nous connaissons dans une évidence parfaitement claire l'essence de notre âme, immortelle par nature comme toute substance, d'autre part nous ne savons pas d'une science absolue, si à cette immortalité de nature correspond l'immortalité de fait" (62).

5. The claim here is not the naïve one that Descartes had reason to claim he had proved the immortality of the soul once and for all; rather, it is the claim that Descartes had reason to believe that one of the necessary consequences of his system was that it made the immortality of the soul morally certain. Recent commentators deny that Descartes could view his system as providing rational grounds for belief in immortality.

6. AT 128; CSM II, 91.

7. This is the text that has led many to believe that Descartes was a fideist on this point.

8. As opposed to the ordained power of God. For the distinction between *potentia Dei absoluta* and *potentia Dei ordinata*, see Margaret J. Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy: Gassendi and Descartes on Contingency and Necessity in the Created World* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 15–35.

9. AT 153–54; CSM II, 109.

10. AT 55; CSM II, 39.

11. For Descartes, carefully distinguishing body and soul is foundational for his mechanistic revolution in physics. "[P]eople commonly mingle the two ideas of body and soul when they construct the ideas of real qualities and substantial forms, which I think should be altogether rejected" (Letter to De Launay, July 22, 1641; AT III, 420; CSMK III, 188). See also Marleen Rozemond, *Descartes's Dualism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 4.

12. Peter J. Markie, *Descartes's Gambit* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 39.

13. In this paper, I do not distinguish between the "immortality of the soul" and the "immortality of the mind" because Descartes himself does not do so. There is wide consensus in the literature that Descartes did not carefully distinguish, if he distinguished at all, between *mens* and *anima*. In any case, he certainly did not distinguish the immortality of *anima* from that of *mens* in the Synopsis. For a review of this issue, see Fowler, *Descartes on the Human Soul*, chapter 5: "From Soul to Mind—Descartes' Vocabulary."

14. AT VII, 12–13; CSM II, 9–10.

15. Ibid.

16. AT VI, 38; CSM I, 130.

17. "I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have—that is, having within me the idea of God—were it not the case that God really existed. By 'God' I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me, that is, the possessor of all the perfections which I cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in my thought, who is subject to no defects whatsoever. It is clear enough from this that he cannot be a deceiver, since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect" (AT VII, 51–52; CSM II, 35).

18. AT VII, 13; CSM II, 10.

19. Ibid.

20. See, for example, CSM III, 7, n. 5; 165; 172; 196.

21. AT VII, 14; CSM II, 10.

22. AT VIIIa, 24; CSM I, 210.

23. *Principles* 14, 19 (AT VIIIa, 10, 12; CSM I, 197, 199).

24. Briefly, Descartes would say that these "accidents" are modes, or particular thoughts, of the substance of mind. This means that we can clearly and distinctly conceive of a mind without these or any particular thoughts, but particular thoughts cannot be conceived except as inhering in some particular mind. In other words, the substance of a particular mind is not constituted by any of its particular modes of thought over time; therefore, a change in particular thoughts does not entail a new mind.

25. For a discussion of Descartes on the unity and simplicity of the mind, see Steven J. Wagner, "Descartes on the Parts of the Soul," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45, no. 1 (1984): 51–70; and Paul Hoffman, "The Unity of Descartes' Man," in *The Philosophical Review* 95, no. 3 (1986): 339–70.

26. AT VI, 59; CSM I, 141.

27. AT VII, 1–2; CSM II, 3.

28. Both parts of this claim—(i) that there is less reward in this life for virtue than for vice and (ii) that knowledge of immortality is needed to live a moral life—would have been commonly accepted in Descartes's time, but each claim would very shortly thereafter be the occasion of a great dispute. The pessimistic first claim would find its greatest champion in Pierre Bayle, who elaborated on this theme in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697), especially in the articles "Manicheans" and "Paulicians." Claim (i), as well as Bayle's treatments of the problem of evil more generally, were attacked by Jean Le Clerc and Isaac Jaquelot in Bayle's lifetime, and more famously, by G. W. Leibniz in his *Theodicy* (1710), shortly after Bayle's death. Claim (ii) was the target of François Fénelon and the Quietist writers, Miguel de Molinos and Jeanne Bouvière de La Motte (Madame Guyon) before him. They argued for a

view of morality based on the "pure love" of God: one is moral only if one loves God independently of any "mercenary" interest in immortality. Fénelon was opposed by Nicolas Malebranche, who attacked his ideas in the *Treatise on the Love of God* (1697); but more dramatically by Bishop Jaques-Benigne Bossuet, who ultimately secured the condemnation of Fénelon's views through the papal bull *Cum alias* (1699).

29. AT IV, 291; CSM III, 265.

30. AT IV, 291–94; CSM III, 265–66. The others are the existence of God, the immensity of the universe, and our need to be a part of a society.

31. " . . . capable de jouir d'une infinité de contentemens qui ne se trouvent point en cete vie" (AT IV, 292).

32. AT IV, 292; CSM III, 266.

33. The link between immortality and the foundations of ethics is found from the early provisional theory of the *Discourse* to Descartes's more mature writings. See John Marshall, *Descartes's Moral Theory* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 155, n.12, where it is argued that the *généreux* in Descartes's later theory must be philosophically enlightened—they must have knowledge of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.

34. AT VI, 38; CSM I, 130.

35. Markie, *Descartes's Gambit*, 35.

36. AT VII, 475; CSM II, 320. The CSM translation for "moral sciendi modo" masks that we are again dealing here with *moral* certainty in opposition to metaphysical certainty and gives the impression that there is a third kind of certainty, *practical* certainty, being contrasted here, which there is not.

37. Markie has attempted the most rigorous definition of moral certainty in Descartes (see *Descartes's Gambit*, 37), but Edwin Curley has already noted the deficiency of Markie's definition owing to his neglect of this crucial passage from the *Principles*. See Edwin Curley, "Certainty: Psychological, Moral, and Metaphysical," in *Essays on the Philosophy and Science of René Descartes*, ed. Stephen Voss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 18. See note 39 below for another criticism of Markie's definition. The Markie/Curley dispute over moral certainty is less about defining the concept than about what role it plays in the metaphysics and epistemology of the *Meditations*: for Markie the role is significant; for Curley, nonexistent.

38. AT VIIIA, 327; CSM I, 289–90.

39. One feature of Markie's definition should, therefore, be considered incorrect. The second part of his definition holds that "p is a moral certainty for S = df . . . (2) believing some proposition q is more reasonable for S from the standard perspective than believing p only if q is a metaphysical certainty for S" (*Descartes's Gambit*, 37). In other words, only a metaphysical certainty is more certain than a moral certainty. But on the basis of the passage under consideration from the *Principles*, it seems natural to expect an infinite number

of degrees of moral certainty, depending on the number of facts that cohere with the object of our belief, and the belief's usefulness.

40. Curley, "Certainty: Psychological, Moral, and Metaphysical," 19.

41. Jean-Pierre Schachter argues that moral certainty is a central concept for Descartes and therefore has attended to the "low profile" of moral certainty in Descartes's writings, concluding that "[i]f it is thought that Descartes's prose misleadingly emphasizes metaphysical certainty at the expense of moral, I am inclined to think that it is a consequence of Descartes's perception of which of his doctrines might be the hardest to defend." See "Descartes, Divine Veracity, and Moral Certainty," in *Dialogue* 44, no. 1 (2005): 36.

42. AT VII, 153–54; CSM II, 109.

43. AT II, 35; CSM III, 97.

44. AT IV, 291; CSM III, 265.

45. AT IV, 13–14; CSM II, 10.

46. AT XI, 375; CSM I, 350–51.

47. AT XI, 461; CSM I, 391.

48. Boldness is a certain kind of courage, which is in turn a certain kind of heat for Descartes. Hope is a mixture of joy and desire, which are certain movements of animal spirits. It follows that the link between hope and courage is purely physical (see AT XI, 456–62; CSM I, 389–91).

49. I am grateful above all to Thomas Lennon and Jeffrey Tlumak for their detailed comments on this paper. For helpful criticism of earlier drafts, I acknowledge an anonymous reviewer, Benjamin Hill, Thomas Heyd, Andreea Mihali, Syliane Malinowski-Charles, and others in the audience at the presentation of this paper at the Canadian Philosophical Association Congress in 2008.