

RESPONSIBILITY IN DESCARTES'S THEORY OF JUDGMENT¹

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In this paper I develop a new account of the philosophical motivations for Descartes's theory of judgment. The theory needs explanation because the idea that judgment, or belief, is an operation of the will seems problematic at best, and Descartes does not make clear why he adopted what, at the time, was a novel view. I argue that attending to Descartes's conception of the will as the active, free faculty of mind reveals that a general concern with responsibility motivates his theory of judgment. My account avoids some unappealing features of the standard interpretation, renders the theory more plausible than many have suggested, and explains why his theory does not fall neatly into any current-day position on the issue of the control we have over belief.

1. Introduction

In an early work,² Descartes agrees with his Scholastic predecessors that judgment is an operation of the intellect.³ But in the Fourth Meditation, he says that

1. A number of primary sources in this article are cited by standard abbreviations, which are detailed in the Abbreviations Section near the end of the paper. Translations of *The Passions of the Soul* are from the Voss edition but otherwise translations of Descartes's works are largely from CSM and CSMK with some modifications, which I indicate. Translations without CSM citations, unless otherwise noted, are my own. Translations of *ST* are of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province edition, originally published by Benzinger Brothers.

2. In his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind (Regulae ad directionem ingenii)*, which Jean-Paul Weber's detailed study (1964) dates to the period between 1619 and 1628, Descartes says, "we distinguish between the faculty by which our intellect intuits and knows things and the faculty by which it makes affirmative or negative judgements" (CSM I 45; AT X 420), where by 'faculty' Descartes is referring to a power of the intellect. Anthony Kenny also takes Descartes to hold the view in the *Rules* that judgment is an act of the intellect (1972: 1–5).

3. See Menn (1998: 310) for a general characterization of the scholastic account of the intellect and Kenny (1972: 2–4) for a characterization of Aquinas's conception of judgment.

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judgment is an operation of the will: the will contributes doxastic attitudes—affirmation, denial, and suspension of judgment—to the content of judgments, which the intellect supplies (AT VII 56–57).⁴ Descartes’s change in view seems problematic because on the theory that judgment is an operation of the will, belief then is a kind of voluntary action, akin to deciding what to do.⁵ But, many think, we don’t have the same kind of control over our beliefs as we do over our decisions.⁶ Furthermore, Descartes’s change in view is puzzling, because he does not explain in any intervening texts or in the *Meditations* why he has departed from his predecessors’ view.⁷

On the standard interpretation, Descartes makes judgment an operation of the will because at that point in the *Meditations* he needs a way of absolving God of our errors. So he takes a defense available to him (Aquinas’s⁸ or perhaps Augustine’s⁹) and adapts it for his own purposes, to solve the problem of *epistemic* evil, the problem of error. Descartes’s theory of judgment then falls out of that adaptation. Judgment has to be an operation of the will simply to fulfill the demands of the defense: affirming, denying, and suspending judgment must be operations of the will so that we, not God, are responsible for our errors in judgment.¹⁰

The standard interpretation is problematic for three reasons. First, Descartes could have accomplished the goal of the Fourth Meditation without making judgment an act of will: he could have simply made judgment a voluntary act of the intellect, as his predecessors did.¹¹ So the standard interpretation doesn’t

4. Influential general treatments of Descartes’s theory of judgment include Kenny (1972), Curley (1975), Wilson (1978), and Williams (2005). Recently, the scholarly secondary literature has focused on the question of what Descartes’s theory of judgment entails about voluntarism about belief. See Cottingham (2002), Della Rocca (2006), Newman (2008), Vitz (2010), Schüssler (2013), and Newman (2015).

5. The literature on the topic standardly takes ‘judgment’ to be synonymous with ‘belief’.

6. Edwin Curley interprets Spinoza as making an objection of this sort. See Curley (1975: esp. 167–178). For a contemporary discussion of this issue, see Della Rocca (2006: 148–152). Later in this paper, I will raise considerations that should make us question whether this inference is justified for Descartes’s theory of judgment.

7. See Kenny (1972: 2–7) for a discussion of the difficulty in finding any historical sources that might have influenced Descartes’s change in view.

8. Gilson (1913).

9. Menn (1998: 302).

10. In addition to Gilson (1913) and Menn (1998), see also Caton (1975) and Ariew, Des Chene, Jesseph, Schmaltz, and Verbeek (2003: 148) for examples of the standard interpretation.

11. Or, as Anthony Kenny notes (1972: 9), in Scholastic terminology, he could have made judgment a “commanded” act of the intellect rather than an “elicited” act of the will. Thomas Aquinas explains the distinction: “The act of the will is twofold: one is its immediate act, as it were, elicited by it, namely, “to wish”; the other is an act of the will commanded by it, and put into execution by means of some other power, such as “to walk” and “to speak,” which are commanded by the will to be executed by means of the motive power” (ST I-II, Q 6, A 4). It seems that Descartes is aware of the distinction because he uses the terminology of “elicited” acts in his letter

really explain Descartes's theory of judgment. Second, even if the standard interpretation did explain Descartes's theory of judgment, it would make Descartes look unprincipled, because the reason for the change would be *ad hoc*—the theory would be formulated specifically to solve the particular problem he posits in the Fourth Meditation.¹² Third, the standard interpretation cannot account for issues and texts from earlier in the *Meditations*. Most prominently, in the First Meditation Descartes shows the theory of judgment to be involved in his method of doubt: it is because judgment is an act of the will that we have the ability to suspend judgment about everything we have previously believed.¹³ Thus, the standard interpretation does little to make Descartes's change in view less puzzling.

Descartes's retrospective explanation seven years later in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* (*Comments*) adds to the mystery:¹⁴

I saw that over and above perception, which is a prerequisite of judgement, we need affirmation or 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 [*etiamsi rem percipiamus*]. Hence I assigned the act of judging itself [*ipsum actum judicandi*], which consists simply in assenting (i.e. in affirmation or denial) not to the perception of the intellect but to the determination of the will [*non retuli ad perceptionem intellectus, sed ad determinationem voluntatis*]. (AT VIII B 363; CSM I 307, modified)

Descartes explains that for both judgment and withholding assent, he saw a distinction between the perception, which provides the subject matter, and the at-

of 9 February 1645, possibly to Mesland, in discussing the freedom considered in acts of the will either before they are elicited or while they are elicited (*vel antequam eliciantur, vel dum eliciantur*) (AT IV 173–175; CSMK 245–246, modified). Thanks to the late Paul Hoffman for discussion on this point and an anonymous reviewer for bringing to my attention the Scholastic terminology and the reference to Descartes's letter.

12. This consideration alone doesn't show the standard interpretation to be false but, I believe, provides an additional reason to explore other alternatives. Others may disagree with my methodological point here.

13. See Curley (1975: 167; 1978: 43–44) and Williams (2005: 163–164) for further discussion of this point.

14. The *Meditations* were published in 1641; *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* (*Notae in programma quoddam*) was published in 1648, in response to a broadsheet published anonymously in 1647 by Henricus Regius, a physician and Professor of Medicine at the University of Utrecht. Regius was a correspondent of Descartes's and a supporter of Descartes's philosophy until the publication of his *Fundamenta physices* (1646), a book on natural philosophy in which he departed from and critiqued Descartes's views on physics and metaphysics. Descartes publicly disavowed Regius's work in the Preface to the French edition of the *Principles* in 1647 (AT IX B 19–20; CSM I 189). See Clarke (2014) for more on the relationship between Descartes and Regius.

titude regarding the perception. But even granting Descartes this distinction, it is not clear why judging and withholding assent should be attributed to a separate faculty, or to the will, in particular. Further, the reasons Descartes does provide for why judging and withholding assent are operations of the will seem to be distinct, and the relation between them (if any) is unclear.

The aim of this paper is to develop an alternative explanation for Descartes's theory of judgment that is better than the standard interpretation:¹⁵ one that is truly explanatory—that shows why Descartes did not simply make judgment a voluntary act of the intellect; that stems from broader commitments in Descartes's philosophy and is thus not *ad hoc*; and that is complete, i.e., that accounts for issues and texts earlier in the *Meditations* while also clarifying Descartes's own explanation from the *Comments*. On the account I develop, one element of the standard interpretation will stand: by ascribing to the will our judgments about what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive, Descartes indeed makes us responsible for error. But this, I argue, is not the fundamental motivation for Descartes's theory of judgment. I propose that responsibility for our erroneous judgments is instead the consequence of a deeper explanation: Descartes is concerned more broadly with responsibility, and it is this broad concern that underlies his theory of judgment.

To show this, I discuss Descartes's characterizations of the faculty of the will. For Descartes, responsibility is tied to the will: for example, in a letter to Christina of 20 November 1647, Descartes says, "only what depends on the will provides grounds for reward or punishment" (AT V 84; CSMK 325). I explore two ways Descartes characterizes the will and its operations—volition as "action of the mind" and the will as essentially free—and show that each is connected to responsibility. Descartes conceives of actions of the mind as depending on us alone, and he says that only what depends on us alone is "attributable" to us (where we deserve praise or blame for what is attributable to us). And he makes clear that we are responsible for what we do freely.

I argue that these two characterizations of the will and its operations map

15. Others also disagree with the standard interpretation, e.g., Wilson (1978) and Lennon (2014), but do not offer an alternative. Anthony Kenny, after showing the standard interpretation to be problematic, uses Frege's distinction between the sense of a sentence and the assertion of a sentence (and Hare's related distinction between "phrastic" and "neustic") to derive a possible philosophical motivation for Descartes's theory of judgment. He argues that there is a sensible distinction to be made between the content of a sentence and the attitude one takes toward that content, or "mood of a sentence" (1972: 10–15). I agree with Kenny's point but do not think this serves as a full explanation of Descartes's theory. David M. Rosenthal presents the only developed alternative of which I am aware: he argues that Descartes's theory "is a direct response to the difficulty of conceiving judgments as being due to a single, undifferentiated aspect of our mental nature" (1986: 410). In doing so, Rosenthal accounts for the first reason Descartes presents in his *Comments* explanation but not the second.

onto the two parts of Descartes's *Comments* explanation of why judgment is an operation of the will. I posit that, therefore, Descartes's conception of the will as the faculty tied to responsibility underlies and unifies his explanation of why judgment is an operation of the will. I conclude the paper by briefly discussing the implications of my account for Descartes's position on the control we have over our beliefs and, more generally, the plausibility of the theory of judgment.

2. Responsibility

I begin with a preliminary caveat. Descartes emphasizes different aspects of his conception of the will in different texts: as I will show, in some places, Descartes highlights the will's activity, and in others, the will's freedom. These two aspects are not unconnected, because in Descartes's model of the mind, the will is the active, free faculty. I investigate each of these two aspects of the will separately, because doing so illuminates distinct strands of Descartes's thinking about responsibility: responsibility for (1) what depends on us alone, and (2) for what we do freely.

2.1. Mental Action and Attributability

I have two aims in this section: first, to unpack Descartes's notion of mental action, and second, to illuminate its connection to "attributability," which for Descartes, I will show, is connected to a kind of moral responsibility.

I begin with a brief discussion of the context in which Descartes presents his conception of mental action: his faculty model of the mind. Descartes adopts the faculty model of the mind, in which faculties are mental powers or capacities, from his Scholastic predecessors. Descartes departs from his predecessors, however, in his taxonomy of the faculties: he conceives of only two, the faculty of the intellect and the faculty of the will (AT VIII A 17; AT VIII B 363; AT XI 342).¹⁶ In grouping all types of thought into just two categories, Descartes reconceives the Scholastic conception of the cognitive and volitional faculties. The Cartesian intellect includes not only faculties traditionally conceived as intellectual but also those conceived as sensory and those attributed to the combination of the two: Descartes subsumes sensory perception and imagination under 'intellect'

16. Descartes uses the term 'intellect' (*intellectus*) and its grammatical variants to refer to two different powers. The intellect is, at times, the power to perceive broadly speaking (e.g. AT VII 56). At other times the intellect is the power to perceive clearly and distinctly (e.g., AT VII 60; AT VII 376–377). When distinguishing intellect from will in the discussions that bear on his taxonomy, Descartes means the former.

along with his addition, 'pure intellect' (AT VIII A 17).¹⁷ And Descartes ascribes judgment not to the intellect but to the will: affirmation, denial, and doubt are operations of the will (AT VII 57; AT VIII A 17). These doxastic attitudes join volitions that lead to bodily movement (AT XI 343) under the heading 'will,' as well as at various points in his thinking, pursuit and avoidance (AT VII 58) and desire and aversion (AT VIII A 17).¹⁸

2.1.1. Descartes on Mental Action

Descartes explains the rationale for his taxonomy to his correspondents: modes of thought classified under 'will' are actions, whereas those classified under 'intellect' are passions. In a letter to Regius of May 1641, Descartes explains how his taxonomy differs from his correspondent's conception of the two faculties:

Where you say 'Volition and intellection differ only as different ways of acting in regard to different objects,' I would prefer 'They differ only as the action and passion of one and the same substance.' For strictly speaking, intellection is the passion of the mind and volition is its action [*intellectio enim proprie mentis passio est, et volitio ejus actio*]. (AT III 372; CSMK 182, modified)

Descartes here identifies volition as the action of the mind and intellection as its passion. Similarly, in a letter three years later (dated May 2, 1644, possibly to Mesland) Descartes says,

I regard the difference between the soul and its ideas as the same as that between a piece of wax and the various shapes it can take. Just as it is not an action [*une action*] but a passion [*une passion*] in the wax to take various shapes, so, it seems to me, it is a passion in the soul to receive one or another idea, and only its volitions are actions. (AT IV 113–114; CSMK 232, modified)

And in his final work, *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes reiterates his dual taxonomy and explains that volitions are actions of the soul, and all other mental

17. See Hatfield (1998) for an overview of the late Scholastic background on the cognitive faculties.

18. In the *Principles* (AT VIII A 17), Descartes classifies desire and aversion as operations of the will but, in my view, changes his thinking about them significantly by the time of *The Passions of the Soul*. There, desire is one of his primitive (basic) passions of the soul (AT XI 372–375). He also argues that because evil just is the absence of a good, every desire for a good is at the same time an avoidance of an opposed evil, and thus, aversion is not a distinct passion from desire (AT XI 393).

states are passions in a general sense (AT XI 342). The idea of mental action, thus, is essential to Descartes's conception of the will: volition, and only volition, is the action of the mind.¹⁹

Although it is clear that the notion of mental action underlies Descartes's conception of volition, it is less clear what he means by it. In earlier discussions,²⁰ he uses analogies and gives examples of mental actions, but he does not explain what he means by the notion of mental action until *The Passions of the Soul*. There, in the context of delineating the category of the passions of the soul from other kinds of mental states, he says,

[The thoughts] I call [the soul's] actions are all of our volitions, because we find by experience that they come directly from the soul and seem to depend only on it [*elles viennent directement de notre âme, et semblent ne dépendre que d'elle*]. On the other hand, all the sorts of cases of perception or knowledge to be found in us can generally be called its passions, because it is often not the soul that makes them such as they are, and because it always receives them from things that are represented by them. (AT XI 342; CSM I 335; Voss 28)

Descartes explains that volitions are actions, first, because they "come directly from the soul." I think that what Descartes means by this is that the soul alone causes volitions:²¹ he says later in *The Passions of the Soul* that volitions "are caused by [the soul] itself [*sont causées par elle-même*]" (AT XI 350; CSM I 339; Voss 34). Volitions are never caused by the body or external objects, unlike passions (in a general sense), which are usually caused by the body or external objects ("it is

19. Descartes takes 'soul' and 'mind' to be synonymous, at least for these contexts. In the Fifth Replies, Descartes clarifies the relation between the two terms: "I consider the mind not as a part of the soul but as the thinking soul in its entirety" (AT VII 356; CSM II 246), and he says that the soul "is a thinking substance" (AT VII 356; CSM II 246–247). For this reason, I take Descartes to be referring to the same idea with his language of "action of the mind" and "action of the soul." Following Descartes, I will use the terms 'mind' (and 'mental') and 'soul' interchangeably.

20. For example, in the *Rules*, Descartes compares the "cognitive power [*vis cognoscens*]" in its active capacity to a seal, and the power in its passive capacity to the wax that takes on the shape of the seal (AT X 415). In letter possibly to Mesland, written on May 2, 1644, Descartes repeats his example of the wax to illustrate the distinction between passivity and activity (AT IV 113–114).

21. Ferdinand Alquié and Susan James also interpret the relation between volitions and the soul to be causal. See Descartes (1643–1650/1973: 966, Footnote 2). Susan James says, "volitions are actions of the soul because they seem to depend on it alone or, to put it another way, because the soul possesses the power not just to experience volitions but to initiate them. According to this account, we are capable of starting to will whenever we want" (1997: 91–92). My interpretation of the dependence claim differs slightly from James's, as I will go on to discuss.

often not the soul that makes them such as they are,” my emphasis).²² The passions of the soul, the subset of passions roughly corresponding to the emotions, for example, are caused by the body: they have the animal spirits as their “last and most proximate cause” (AT XI 350; CSM I 339; Voss 34–35).

Second, volitions are actions because “they seem to depend only on [the soul].”²³ Volitions seem to depend only on the soul because the soul—viz., the will²⁴—itself generates them²⁵ and never receives them from anything else. This differentiates actions from passions, which always involve reception²⁶ (“[the soul] always receives them from things that are represented by them”).²⁷ This second condition rules out other mental states that are caused by the soul from being classified as actions. Take, for example, the case of voluntarily looking at the tree outside my window. The resulting visual perception of the tree, Descartes thinks, is a passion,²⁸ not an action, because even though the volition to look at the tree is part of the causal chain resulting in the perception, the tree

22. There are three main types of passions that are caused by the soul: perceptions of our volitions, imaginations, and “when [our soul] applies itself to attend to something which is solely intelligible and not imaginable” (AT XI 344; CSM I 336; Voss 29).

23. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify the second condition in Descartes’s account of mental action.

24. Descartes brings out the role of the will in action in a letter to Elisabeth dated October 6, 1645: “The term ‘passion’ can be applied in general to all the thoughts which are thus aroused in the soul by cerebral impressions alone, without the concurrence of its will, and therefore without any action which comes from it [*sans le concours de sa volonté, et par conséquent, sans aucune action qui vienne d’elle*]; for whatever is not an action is a passion” (AT IV 310; CSMK 270, modified).

25. Descartes uses the language of dependence in a variety of contexts: in addition to the distinction here between action and passion, he uses the notion of dependence, most famously, in his discussions of substance as well as the mechanization of the human body. In the latter context, he differentiates those functions that “depend solely on the body and on the disposition of its organs” (AT XI 224; CSM I 314) from those that depend in some way on the soul. Although I here understand Descartes’s conception of the dependence of volitions on the soul causally, I do not claim that Descartes understands the notion the same way in the other contexts.

26. The precise nature of the reception involved warrants more discussion than I can go into here.

27. See also Descartes’s letter to Regius, May 1641: “It is also paradoxical to say that ‘reception is an action’, when in fact it is merely a passion, quite contrary to action. But what you write could perhaps be retained with the following modification: ‘Reception is an automatic animal action, or rather passion, whereby we receive the movements of things; for here we are linking passions with actions, in order to include under one category everything that occurs in man’” (AT III 373; CSMK 183); and his letter of 2 May 1644, possibly to Mesland: “It is a passion in the soul to receive one or other idea, and only its volitions are actions. [The soul] receives its ideas partly from objects which come into contact with the senses, partly from impressions in the brain, and partly from prior dispositions in the soul and from movements of the will” (AT IV 114; CSMK 232).

28. Specifically, Descartes calls it a “perception we refer to objects outside of us,” a subcategory of passions (in his general sense), and explains: “those [perceptions] we refer to things outside us, namely to the objects of our senses, are caused . . . by those objects, which, exciting movements in the organs of the external senses, excite some in the brain too by the mediation of the nerves, which makes the soul feel them” (AT XI 346; CSM I 337; Voss 31).

causes the perception (the soul "receives" the perception of the tree from the external input of the tree). Innate ideas pose another interesting case because, one might think, they too "come directly from the soul and seem to depend only on it" and thus should count as actions. In the Third Meditation Descartes says that innate ideas "derive simply from my own nature" (AT VII 38; CSM II 26), and in the *Comments*, he elaborates:

I did . . . observe that there were certain thoughts within me which neither came to me from external objects nor were determined by my will, but which came solely from the power of thinking within me; so I applied the term 'innate' to the ideas or notions which are the forms of these thoughts in order to distinguish them from others, which I called 'adventitious' or 'made up.' (AT VIII B 357–358; CSM I 303)

Even though innate ideas "come solely from the power of thinking within me" and thereby seem to satisfy the first condition (the soul alone causes them), they do not satisfy the second condition: the will does not generate them, and reception is involved. In discussing the example of imagining a triangle in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes says:

Even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind. (AT VII 64; CSM II 45)²⁹

Even if the idea of a triangle is not caused by external objects, something other than the soul contributes to our possessing it: the "nature, or essence, or form of the triangle." Descartes similarly explains that the idea of God "is not something fictitious which is dependent on my thought, but is an image of a true and immutable nature"³⁰ (AT VII 68; CSM II 47): the soul receives the innate idea of God from God, and the idea of God thereby represents him in some way.³¹

One last clarification about the notion of mental action: it is a technical notion for Descartes. Something may be a mental action without leading to any bodily movement or involving any mental state related to bodily movement. Although

29. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for directing my attention to this example.

30. Just to be clear, despite the language Descartes uses here, he holds we cannot neither imagine or fully "grasp" or "comprehend" God although we can have a clear and distinct idea of him. On this issue see the Third Meditation (AT VII 46; CSM II 32) and the First Replies (AT VII 112; CSM II 81).

31. The case of innate ideas poses some further complications I cannot address here. For example, Descartes suggests in the *Comments* that all ideas, including sensory perceptions, are innate (AT VIII B 358–359). See Nelson (2008) for an overview of some of those issues.

volitions that lead to bodily movements, such as the volition to raise one's arm, are mental actions, purely doxastic states such as affirmation or denial, as operations of the will, are also mental actions.

2.1.2. Attributability and Responsibility

In conceiving of mental action in part as being dependent on the soul alone (and not on anything external to it), Descartes captures the idea that actions are what *we* do, and not what happens to us. This conception of mental action bears a connection to what Descartes calls "attributability," which is meant not merely in a causal sense, but in a stronger sense tied to moral responsibility.³² Although Descartes himself never uses the term 'moral responsibility,' he has a notion of responsibility that is continuous with a current-day concept of moral responsibility: what deserves praise or blame (AT XI 445, 446; AT VIII A 19).³³ What deserves praise and blame for Descartes, however, is broader than what is typically included in the current-day concept: because willing includes doxastic states involved in purely theoretical beliefs, we are responsible in this sense for what may have implications for no one but ourselves.³⁴

The connection between mental action and attributability in this stronger sense can be seen as early as Descartes's 1638 exchange with Pollot (through Renery) about the third maxim of the *morale provisoire* of *Discourse on the Method*, the set of basic practical maxims he followed while carrying out his project of seeking certainty in theoretical matters. The third maxim

was to try always to master myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than the order of the world. In general I would become ac-

32. It has been suggested to me that Descartes has a third sense of attributability, which might be called 'mere predicability.' In *The Passions of the Soul*, he says, "After having taken into consideration all the functions that belong to the body alone, it is easy to understand that there remains nothing in us we should attribute [*attribuer*] to our soul but our thoughts, which are principally of two genera—the first, namely, are the actions of the soul; the others are its passions" (AT XI 342; CSM I 335; Voss 28). In the predicability sense, perceptions are also attributable to the soul, because they are modifications of the soul's primary attribute, unlike bodily states.

33. What I have in mind is what has come to be known in the current-day literature on moral responsibility as the "attributability" aspect of moral responsibility. See Watson (1996) for a foundational discussion. Descartes's notion of attributability differs from Watson's (and other current-day views) in Descartes's conception of what makes an agent responsible for what she does: as I have mentioned, Descartes holds that we are answerable for what depends on us alone, whereas current-day attributability views specify that we are responsible just in case we possess a certain set of capacities.

34. The broader scope of what deserves praise and blame on Descartes's account should not be surprising given not only Descartes's conception of the will as the faculty responsible for pursuit, avoidance, and the doxastic attitudes but also his grouping together epistemic reasons with practical reasons—"reasons of truth and goodness [*veri et boni*]" (AT VII 58; CSM II 40).

customed to believing that nothing lies entirely within our power except our thoughts, so that after doing our best in dealing with matters external to us, whatever we fail to achieve is absolutely impossible so far as we are concerned [*au regard de nous*]. (AT VI 25; CSM I 123)

Pollot objects to this maxim, calling it not “a resolution of philosophy, but rather a fiction to flatter and deceive oneself,” and he claims, “a person with common sense would never be persuaded that nothing is in his power but his thoughts” (AT I 513).

Descartes's remarks clarifying the claim Pollot finds so implausible suggest the following general principle: our thoughts are attributable to us insofar as they depend on the soul. In his response to Pollot, Descartes first explains what he means by ‘thought’: “all the operations of the soul . . . so far as they depend on the soul [*en tant qu'elles dépendent d'elle*]” (AT II 36; CSMK 97). He then says that only our thoughts are attributable to us:

In philosophical language there is nothing strictly attributable to a man [*qu'on attribue proprement à l'homme*] apart from what is covered by the word ‘thought’; for the functions [*les fonctions*] that belong to the body alone [*qui appartiennent au corps seul*] are said to take place in a man rather than to be performed by him [*se font dans l'homme, et non par l'homme*]. (AT II 36; CSMK 97, modified)

Those functions that belong to the body alone,³⁵ like digestion and the beating of our hearts, are not attributable to us because they aren't things we ‘do,’ they merely happen to us (or ‘in us,’ as Descartes says). Descartes thus implies that only what belongs to us—that is, what depends on the soul (and only insofar as it depends on the soul)—is attributable to us.

Descartes later explicitly narrows the category of what depends only on the soul (and therefore what is attributable to us) from thoughts in general to the operations of the will in particular. The earlier explanation from *The Passions of the Soul* of what makes volitions actions and perceptions passions showed this: one significant way in which volitions differ from most passions is that volitions depend on the soul alone, whereas most passions also depend on things external to the soul. In that work he also says,

35. Relegating certain physiological functions to what “belongs to the body alone” is part of Descartes's mechanization of human bodies, a project he has undertaken not only in the first part of *The Passions of the Soul*, but also in earlier works, particularly, *Treatise on Man*. See Hatfield (1992).

Of the two sorts of thoughts I have distinguished in the soul, of which the first are its actions—namely its volitions—and the others its passions—taking this word in its most general sense, which comprises all sorts of perceptions—the former are absolutely in its power and can only indirectly be altered by the body, whereas the latter depend absolutely on the actions that produce them and can only indirectly be altered by the soul, except when [the soul] is itself their cause.³⁶ (AT XI 359–360; CSM I 343; Voss 41)

Here Descartes tacitly relies on his explanation of why volitions are mental actions (volitions come directly from the soul and seem to depend only on it). Volitions are absolutely in the power of the soul because they are mental actions in this sense: the soul alone causes them, and because they come directly from the soul, the body can only indirectly modify them. Descartes also says, in his letter to Christina of 20 November 1647,

The goods of the body and fortune do not depend absolutely upon us; and those of the soul can all be reduced to two heads, the one being to know, and the other to will, what is good. But knowledge is often beyond our powers; and so there remains only our will, which is absolutely within our disposal [*dont nous puissions absolument disposer*]. (AT V 83; CSMK 325)

Descartes here alludes to his dual taxonomy of the mind, knowing (intellect) and willing (will). He then explains that knowledge (here, of the good) is often beyond our powers. This is because unlike our will, knowledge does not depend on us alone. Here, then, Descartes presents the position I take him to have adopted sometime after his exchange with Pollot:³⁷ only willing always depends on us alone and is therefore attributable to us.

I want to underscore the point already mentioned, that Descartes holds that willing is attributable to us not merely in a causal sense but in the stronger sense

36. With this last clause, Descartes is referring to the category of perceptions that have the soul as their cause, e.g., our perceptions of our volitions (AT XI 343). Descartes takes these to be passions because like other passions, they involve reception.

37. It is possible that there is no change in view. In a letter to Mersenne of 3 December 1640, Descartes indicates that despite what he says in the *Discourse*, he didn't mean to suggest that all thoughts are in our power but instead that if anything is in our power, it is only those thoughts that depend on the will: "I have never said that all our thoughts were in our power, but only that if there is anything absolutely in our power, it is our thoughts, that is, those that come from our will and free choice [*à savoir celles qui viennent de la volonté et du libre arbitre*]" (CSMK 160; AT III 249). The position he takes in this letter is very similar to the one he takes in *The Passions of the Soul*.

tied to moral responsibility.³⁸ In addition to the texts I have already discussed, relevant passages in *The Passions of the Soul* show this clearly. In the context of his discussion of the passion of esteem, he says, "it is only the actions that depend on [our] free will [*libre arbitre*] for which we could rightly be praised or blamed" (AT XI 445; CSM I 384; Voss 103).³⁹ Then, he goes on to repeat the view that only willing belongs to us and connects it explicitly with moral responsibility:

I believe that true Generosity [*générosité*], which makes a man esteem himself as highly as he can legitimately esteem himself, consists only in this: partly in his understanding that there is nothing which truly belongs to him but this free control of his volitions [*véritablement lui appartient que cette libre disposition de ses volontés*], and no reason why he ought to be praised or blamed except that he uses it well or badly. (AT XI 446; CSM I 384; Voss 104)

My account of mental action provides an explanation of the connection between willing and responsibility that Descartes makes in this text: because volitions are caused by the soul alone and the soul never receives them from anything else, volitions depend on us alone and we should be praised or blamed for them. In short, we are responsible for our volitions because they depend on us alone.

2.2. Responsibility for What We Do Freely

In addition to conceiving of the human will as the active faculty, Descartes conceives of the human will in a second way, as inextricably tied to human freedom. It is because human beings possess wills that we are free. 'The will' (*voluntas*) and 'freedom of judgment' (*arbitrii libertas*)⁴⁰ are alternative names for one and the same faculty: Descartes at times identifies the two (AT VII 56, 57)⁴¹ and, at others, simply substitutes '*arbitrii libertas*' for '*voluntas*' (AT VII 59, 60). In his Fourth Meditation explanation of how our errors in judgment come about, he identifies freedom of judgment with the will:

38. Noa Naaman-Zauderer also emphasizes a connection between the will and moral responsibility, but in her view it is our experience of our intellect and our will as unified that serves as the source of moral agency and responsibility. (See Naaman-Zauderer 2010: esp. Chapters 3 and 4.)

39. Descartes is using the term 'action' here in his technical sense.

40. CSM translates '*arbitrii libertas*' variously as 'freedom of the will' and 'freedom of choice,' but '*arbitrium*' may also be translated 'judgment' or 'decision.' See Lennon (2014) on this issue. In this context I favor 'freedom of judgment' to forestall misleading present-day connotations of 'freedom of the will' and 'decision.'

41. Descartes uses the phrase "*voluntas sive arbitrii libertas*" (AT VII 56, 57), where '*sive*,' translated 'or,' identifies the two terms it conjoins.

I notice that [my errors] depend on two concurrent causes, namely on the faculty of knowledge which is in me, and on the faculty of choice or freedom of judgement [*facultate eligendi, sive ab arbitrii libertate*]; that is, they depend on both the intellect and the will simultaneously. (AT VII 56; CSM II 39, modified)

And in the “geometrical exposition” of the *Meditations*, which is appended to the Second Replies, Descartes says explicitly that freedom is “the essence of will [*de essentia voluntatis*]” (AT VII 166). Descartes thus conceives of all operations of the will as free. Further, in the *Principles*, acting freely is acting by means of the will: “*agat libere, sive per voluntatem*” (AT VIII A 18). Since acting freely is identified with acting by means of the will, there are no other free operations of the mind other than volitions, the operations of the will.

Although Descartes’s conception of freedom is a thorny, much debated matter,⁴² one aspect of his conception is uncontroversial: he thinks that our freedom of judgment enables us to withhold assent about things we do not clearly and distinctly perceive. Descartes expresses this view repeatedly. In the Fourth Meditation, he explains: “[God] has given me the freedom to assent or not to assent in those cases where he did not endow my intellect with a clear and distinct perception” (AT VII 61; CSM II 42). In the *Principles*, he says:

[We] experience within us the kind of freedom which enables us always to refrain from believing things which are not completely certain and thoroughly examined. (AT VIII A 6; CSM I 194)

In our attempt to doubt everything, we went so far as to make the supposition of some supremely powerful author of our being who was attempting to deceive us in every possible way. For in spite of that supposition, the freedom which we experienced within us was nonetheless so great as to enable us to abstain from believing whatever was not quite certain or fully examined. (AT VIII A 20; CSM I 206)

For Descartes, our freedom is the basis of our ability to refrain from assenting to what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive. Furthermore, it is because we have the ability to withhold assent about what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive that we are responsible when we do not. In this way, our responsibility for our errors in judgment stems from the freedom we possess.

Descartes’s project in the Fourth Meditation involves explicitly drawing the

42. Descartes’s conception of freedom is a topic of lively, current debate: see, for example, Ragland (2006) and Lennon (2015). See my (2014) for an overview of the difficulties in interpreting Descartes on the issue.

connection between human freedom and responsibility. His aim there is to explain why we, and not God, are responsible for the errors we make in judgment. The problem arises because if God exists, has created us, and is not a deceiver, and yet we make mistakes while properly using the faculties he has given us, God might seem to be at fault.⁴³ According to Descartes's solution, first, both intellect and will are each "perfect of its kind" (AT VII 55; CSM II 38). This means that neither faculty, as given to us by God, in itself leads to error.⁴⁴ Second, as mentioned earlier, judgment requires the contribution of both faculties: the intellect provides the subject matter of judgment, and the will, the assent (the affirmation or denial). Falsity alone does not amount to error for Descartes. Instead, error results when we misuse the will or freedom of judgment by assenting to what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive:

If . . . I simply refrain from making a judgement 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 freedom of judgement [*libertate arbitrii*] 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 [*culpa*] since it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will. In this incorrect use of freedom of judgement [*liberi arbitrii*] may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of error. (AT VII 59–60; CSM II 41, modified)

We behave wrongly whenever we affirm anything we do not clearly and distinctly perceive, regardless of the truth or falsity of the resulting judgment, because it is "clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will" — that is, that clear and distinct perception should always precede our assent. We are responsible for our errors in judgment

43. As Michael Della Rocca (2006: 143) notes, our mistakes raise doubts about the conclusions of the Third Meditation. C. P. Ragland (2007: 126–128) argues that the conclusion that an omnipotent God exists, in particular, is called into doubt by our mistakes in judgment.

44. Descartes says that because the intellect by itself only supplies the ideas that are the subject matter of judgments "it turns out to contain no error in the proper sense of that term" (AT VII 56; CSM II 39). He then suggests that the fact that the intellect is finite, that it lacks some ideas of things that exist, does not constitute an imperfection. What is not clear is why material falsity, which he acknowledges occurs in ideas "when they represent non-things as things" (AT VII 43; CSM II 30) does not constitute an imperfection of the intellect. Descartes's notion of material falsity has been much discussed in the literature, and is beyond the scope of this paper. Descartes conceives of the perfection of the will as connected to its greatness (AT VII 57; CSM II 40), but what he means by this is a matter of dispute.

because our freedom enables us not to make them: whenever we do not clearly and distinctly perceive something, we have the ability to withhold assent.

Although Descartes's focus in the Fourth Meditation is to show how we are responsible for a subset of what our freedom enables us to do (i.e., make errors), Descartes later makes it clear that we are responsible for what our freedom enables us, more broadly, to do. In the *Principles*, as we have seen, Descartes emphasizes the connection between freedom and withholding assent—specifically, that our freedom allows us to refrain from believing what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive. Later in the work, Descartes states, “the supreme perfection of man is that he acts freely, or through the will [*agat libere, sive per voluntatem*], and it is this which makes him deserve praise or blame” (AT VIII A 19; CSM I 205, modified). It is not only our errors for which we are responsible but also more generally, what our wills enable us to do, i.e., what we do freely. We thus are also responsible for doing as we should: withholding assent from what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive, and assenting to what we clearly and distinctly perceive. Indeed, it is in the latter cases, Descartes says, that we are “wholly free [*plane liber*]” (AT VII 58).

As the standard interpretation rightly emphasizes, Descartes's focus in the Fourth Meditation is to explain why we, not God, are responsible for wrongly assenting in conditions in which error is possible. But looking beyond the Fourth Meditation reveals that Descartes makes broader connections between freedom and responsibility. I have argued that he holds that we are responsible for what our freedom of judgment enables us to do—what we do freely. As I have discussed, our freedom is operative in three kinds of cases relevant to judgment: 1) when we assent to what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive, 2) when we assent to what we clearly and distinctly perceive, and 3) when we withhold our assent from what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive.⁴⁵ Thus, we are responsible in all of these cases—not only for erroneously assenting to what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive but also for correctly assenting to what we clearly and distinctly perceive and correctly withholding assent from what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive.⁴⁶

45. Some in the literature (e.g., Alanen 2002; 2003) argue that Descartes thinks, in addition to these three cases, there is a fourth, because we have the ability to withhold assent from what we clearly and distinctly believe. If so, our freedom would be operative in this case as well. Passages in the Fourth Meditation suggest that he does not think we possess such an ability (e.g., AT VII 58–59), but because of what he says elsewhere (most famously, in his letter to Mesland of 9 February 1645, AT IV 173) there is substantial disagreement in the secondary literature on this issue. In the *Comments* passage Descartes says only that “we are *often* free to withhold our assent, even if we perceive the matter in question” (AT VIII B 363; CSM I 307, my emphasis), and defending a position on this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

46. If, as Descartes says, what we do freely is what we do through the will, and Descartes holds that freedom and responsibility bear a general connection, as I have suggested, then it seems

3. Judgment

I will argue that the two ways Descartes conceives of the will that I have discussed correspond to the two reasons Descartes provides to explain his theory of judgment. Recall the *Comments* passage:

I saw that over and above perception, which is a prerequisite of judgement, we need affirmation or 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) not to the perception of the intellect but to the determination of the will [*non retuli ad perceptionem intellectus, sed ad determinationem voluntatis*]. (AT VIII B 363; CSM I 307, modified)

Descartes says that he assigned judgment to the will because first, judging requires something over and above perception, and second, we are often free to withhold our assent. I will argue that his conception of volitions as mental actions underlies the first reason and his conception of the will's freedom, the second. This suggests that Descartes's presented reasons for his theory of judgment are connected by their relationship to responsibility.

3.1. Assent as Mental Action

The first reason, that judging requires something over and above perception, echoes what Descartes says in the Third Meditation. There, he presents a classification of thought that roughly maps onto his dual taxonomy of the mental faculties:

Some of [my thoughts] are as-it-were images of things, to which alone the name "idea" properly applies: as when I think of a man, or a chimæra, or heaven, or an angel, or God. But others have other forms besides this: as when I will, when I fear, when I affirm, when I deny, I still always apprehend some thing as the subject of my thought, but I also embrace in my thought something more than the likeness of that thing [*sed aliquid*

to directly follow that we are responsible for all our volitions. One might wonder whether this makes the previous section on mental action and attributability otiose. As I mentioned in the starting caveat, my concern is to show that Descartes has two strands of thought about responsibility and the connection of each to the will. Underlying each line of thought is a different reason for why we are responsible for what we will—the first, that willing depends on us alone, and the second, that our willing is free.

etiam amplius quam istius res similitudinem cogitatione complector]; and of these some are called volitions or affects [*voluntates, sive affectus*], while others are called judgements (AT VII 37)^{47,48}

The first type of thought includes mental states Descartes will later distinguish by their origin—innate, adventitious, invented by me (AT VII 37–38)—but that all fall under the category of “intellect.” The second type includes some of what Descartes will later classify as modes of will.⁴⁹ He points out a commonality among the thoughts in the second class: they include something more than their subject matter. The “something more,” I posit, is what we contribute that depends on the soul alone: mental actions in Descartes’s sense.⁵⁰

The corresponding passage in the 1647 French translation of the *Meditations* supports this suggestion:⁵¹

47. I take this translation, with slight modification, from Menn (1998: 312). I favor it over CSM II 25–26 because of its greater fidelity to important terms in the original Latin, which I provide above.

48. Stephen Menn also takes this passage from the Third Meditation to be relevant for understanding Descartes’s theory of judgment and its connection to the will’s activity, but he does not argue for its relevance. Menn’s interpretation of what is going on here is similar to mine, although he does not explicate activity as dependence on the soul alone: “Embracing something other than an idea is always an act of will, as Descartes has suggested by grouping judgements together with volitions and affections. In each of these cases the will is assenting to something, or refusing to assent: in the case of judgements it may affirm or deny, or it may refuse to do either. In any case something is ‘put forward to us by the intellect’ (AT VII 57) and we are free to dispose of it as we will: if we are to say that there is any additional content in these acts, it is the content we ourselves contribute by the act of affirming or denying” (1998: 312–313).

49. Descartes does not mention affects (*affectus*) in his category of will in either the Fourth Meditation (AT VII 57) or the *Principles* (AT VIII A 17).

50. The inclusion of fear as a case in which we embrace something more than the likeness of a thing in our thought is perplexing, and Descartes’s curt response in the Third Replies to Hobbes’s questioning does nothing to illuminate his thinking on the issue: “It is self-evident that seeing a lion and at the same time being afraid of it is different from simply seeing it . . . I see nothing here that needs answering” (AT VII 182; CSM II 128). I do not take it to be a problem for my account, because at this point he does not seem to conceive of fear as a passion—in fact, he seems to consider it as falling in the category of “volitions or affects” [*voluntates, sive affectus*]” (AT VII 37), where ‘*sive*’ identifies ‘*voluntates*’ and ‘*affectus*.’ I take his views on this category of thought to be inchoate at this point in his thinking. By *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes drops the language of “affects,” refers to the category as “passions of the soul,” and, as I have discussed, conceives of the passions of the soul as a kind of passive mental state in which we do not add anything to the likeness of what we receive. See Section 2.1.1 above.

51. But it is not definitive, because Descartes did not produce the French translation of the *Meditations* and although he did introduce some changes to the French translation “to correct himself rather than his translator” and “to make his own thoughts clearer” (AT IX 2–3), it is difficult to say whether the changes in this passage were made by him. Duc Louis-Charles d’Albert, duc de Luynes, carried out the French translation in 1647. See Beyssade (1994) for more on this issue in the context of a very detailed examination of differences between the Latin and French texts in Descartes’s Fourth Meditation discussions of freedom.

When I will or I fear, or I affirm or deny, I understand well something as the subject of the action of my mind [*l'action de mon esprit*], but I also add some other thing by this action to the idea [*j'ajoute aussi quelque autre chose par cette action à l'idée*] that I have of that thing; and of this kind of thought some are called volitions or affections and others judgments. (AT IXA 29)

The French translation explicitly calls the “something more” “action”: we “add some other thing *by this action* to the idea.”

The view that judgment involves mental action would likely have been one with which Descartes was familiar. Commentators have noted that Descartes's theory of judgment resembles the Stoic view that judgment involves an act of assent⁵² and that Descartes alludes to the Stoics in other aspects of his philosophy.⁵³ Descartes sometimes explicitly characterizes judgment as involving assent: in addition to the statement from the *Comments*, in the *Principles* he says, “the will is also required [in making a judgement] so that, once something is perceived in some manner, our assent may then be given” (AT VIIIA 18; CSM I 204).

But Descartes, I claim, is not just adopting the Stoics' view that assent is a mental action. Instead, Descartes's conception of a mental action as thought that depends on the soul alone looks to be at work here.⁵⁴ As I have argued, assent (affirmation or denial) is a mental action because nothing but the soul is necessary to cause our assent to any subject matter. This, along with the idea that passive mental states always involve reception, differentiates assent from perception, which Descartes ascribes to the intellect.

Conceiving assent as a mental action not only explains Descartes's remarks in the *Comments* but also helps to make sense of why Descartes ascribes judgments about what we clearly and distinctly perceive to the will. Descartes notably holds that when faced with a clear and distinct perception, we cannot help but assent: regarding the *cogito* he says, “I could not but judge that something which I understood so clearly was true” (AT VII 59; CSM II 41). Some commentators have taken Descartes's attribution of judging to the will in this particular case to be problematic: they have suggested that it is hard to see how the will could be involved if our assent follows straightaway from the perception.⁵⁵ This worry might presuppose one of two things. First, the worry might presuppose

52. For example, see Menn (1998: 311, 313). Thanks to Victor Caston for discussion on this point.

53. See, for instance, remarks Descartes makes as early as the *Discourse on the Method* (AT VI 26–27; CSM I 124). Descartes most clearly refers to the Stoics in his discussions of the passions of the soul in his correspondence with Elisabeth and *The Passions of the Soul*. See Pereboom (1994) for a comparison between Descartes and the Stoics on the passions and how to control them.

54. Although on this point he also might have been influenced by the Stoics. See Charles Brittain's characterization of Stoic assent, for example (2014: 333).

55. See, for example, Evans (1963: 139) and Williams (2005: 164–165).

that for something to be a mode of will, it must be something we can avoid doing. Second, it might presuppose that for something to be a mode of will, it must be something we do deliberately.⁵⁶ But these presuppositions wrongly import our own current-day assumptions about what it means for something to be a so-called act of will. Assent regarding clear and distinct perceptions is an action in Descartes's sense: whether a judgment is about something we perceive only confusedly and obscurely or something we perceive clearly and distinctly, the mind adds something that it generates which it never receives from anything else—a doxastic attitude of affirmation or denial—to the content of the judgment provided by the intellect.⁵⁷

3.2. Assent as Free Operation of the Will

The second reason Descartes presents for his theory of judgment in the *Comments* explanation is “we are often free to withhold our assent, even if we perceive the matter in question” (AT VIII B 363; CSM I 307). Although here Descartes explicitly mentions only withholding assent, I think it is a way of addressing assent itself, Descartes's main concern throughout the passage. After all, Descartes provides the reason as part of a complete explanation for why he “assigned the act of judging itself, which consists simply in assenting (i.e. in affirmation or denial) not to the perception of the intellect but to the determination of the will” (AT VIII B 363; CSM I 307, modified).

By stating that we are often free to withhold our assent even when we perceive something, Descartes distinguishes the faculty of judgment from the faculty of perception. He thereby rejects the view put forward by Regius in his broadsheet that “intellect comprises perception and judgement” (AT VIII B 346; CSM I 296).⁵⁸ Judgment, which just is assent, Descartes explains, is not an operation of the intellect.

But denying that judgment, or assent, is an operation of the intellect is not yet saying what it is. Here Descartes's view that freedom of judgment (*arbitrii libertas*) and the will (*voluntas*) are one and the same faculty enters the explanation. As I discussed in Section 2.2, just as our freedom of judgment enables us to with-

56. See Evans (1963: 138) for this kind of reasoning regarding the case of error in particular.

57. There is a more commonly addressed worry about the will's role in judgments about what we clearly and distinctly perceive: on certain conceptions of what it means to clearly and distinctly perceive something (e.g., apprehending it to be true), there seems to be no need for the will to contribute anything. For variants of this worry, see, e.g., Evans (1963: 139), O'Hear (1972: 98–99, 102–103), Wilson (1978: 141–142), and Williams (2005: 167–168). But I take this worry to arise not from Descartes's conception of the will, but instead from his conception of what it means to clearly and distinctly perceive something.

58. Descartes states “he differs from me on this point” (AT VIII B 363; CSM I 307). See Footnote 14 above for the background of Descartes's *Comments*.

hold assent in certain cases, so our freedom of judgment enables us to assent. And because for Descartes, all and only the will's operations are free, judgment, or assent, must be an operation of the will.⁵⁹

4. Conclusion and Implications

I have argued that Descartes's mysterious and seemingly disjointed explanation of his theory of judgment makes sense when set against the backdrop of his views on responsibility. The two strands of Descartes's thought on responsibility map onto the two parts of his explanation of judgment: we are responsible for our judgments because (1) they manifest our activity, and (2) we assent freely. Because the will is the faculty of responsibility, forms of judgment—affirmation, denial, and withholding assent—are grouped under the heading of 'will.'

My account fares better than the standard interpretation in regards to the three issues I presented at the beginning of this paper. First, my account can better explain why for Descartes, judgment is an operation of the will, rather than a voluntary act of the intellect. One consequence of the view that only willing depends on us alone and is therefore attributable to us is that we are responsible only for our volitions,⁶⁰ and not for what follows from what we will. We see that Descartes makes a distinction between our volitions and what follows from them in his view that willing for human beings, unlike for God,⁶¹ does not include accomplishing things, because accomplishing requires the world's cooperation with our volitions, and we don't have any control over that.⁶² But

59. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this paper for his or her comments on this section, many of which I have incorporated here.

60. Indeed, as already mentioned, in *The Passions of the Soul* Descartes says, "there is nothing which truly belongs to [a person] but this free control of his volitions [*cette libre disposition de ses volontés*], and no reason why he ought to be praised or blamed except that he uses it well or badly" (AT XI 446; CSM I 384; Voss 104).

61. In the *Principles*, Descartes explains that for God, willing and accomplishing (as well as understanding) are one and the same: "there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything" (AT VIIIA 14; CSM I 201). See my forthcoming paper for further discussion of this point.

62. I think this point underlies the third maxim of Descartes's *morale provisoire* in his *Discourse on the Method*, which I quote here again: "My third maxim was to try always to master myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than the order of the world. In general I would become accustomed to believing that nothing lies entirely within our power except our thoughts, so that after doing our best in dealing with matters external to us, whatever we fail to achieve is absolutely impossible so far as we are concerned. This alone, I thought, would be sufficient to prevent me from desiring in the future something I could not get, and so make me content" (AT VI 25; CSM I 123–124). Descartes also relies on the distinction between what depends on us alone and what follows from what depends on us (and therefore depends on other things) in *The Passions of the Soul*, articles 144 and 146 (AT XI 436–437, 439–440).

if judgment were a voluntary act of the intellect, judgment would follow from our volition and not be a volition itself: although commanded by the will, judgment would be, as Aquinas puts it, “put into execution by means of some other power” (*ST* I-II, Q 6, A 4)—the intellect in particular. And then we wouldn’t be responsible for our judgments, a position that Descartes would clearly reject.⁶³

Second, on my account, what underlies Descartes’s theory of judgment are his views on responsibility, which as I have shown, are present throughout his works from as early as his correspondence of 1638 to his last published work. Because of this, the motivation for the theory is not simply the Fourth Meditation objective of defending God against our errors and thus, the theory of judgment on my account is not *ad hoc*.

Lastly, unlike the standard interpretation, in addition to clarifying Descartes’s *Comments* explanation of his theory of judgment, my account can address issues and texts earlier in the *Meditations*, in particular the role of the will in Descartes’s method of doubt. As I have shown, Descartes conceives of the will as the faculty of freedom, and freedom is the basis of our ability to withhold assent from what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive, including everything we have previously believed.

In contrast with much of the literature on Descartes’s theory of judgment, my primary focus in this paper has been neither to work out the implications of the theory regarding the issue of what kind of control we have over our beliefs,⁶⁴ nor to assess the plausibility, more broadly, of the theory from our current-day perspective. But my account of the philosophical motivations for the theory has implications for these issues.

My account interacts in two ways with the issue of Descartes’s conception of the control we have over our beliefs. First, my account shows that the theory of judgment does not entail certain problematic interpretations. As I have mentioned, some have thought that by ascribing judgment to the will, Descartes holds that we can decide to believe,⁶⁵ or that when we assent to given idea, we always assent “just like that, in much the same way that when we will to move

63. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the line of argument developed in this paragraph.

64. This issue has often been addressed under the question of what kind of voluntarism Descartes holds. See Footnote 4 for references to the recent secondary literature on this topic.

65. Although Descartes scholars have repudiated this view, it still has some traction in philosophical folklore because of the current-day connotations of what it means to be an act of will. Bernard Williams says, “Descartes’s formulations . . . strongly encourage the picture of someone who had no evidence whether *p* was true deciding at will to believe that *p*— or, as we should rather say if we are to understand the role of the will in believing, *deciding that p*” (2005: 162). Williams goes on to clarify that Descartes does not in fact hold this position because of the conditions he places on assent (2005: 163–164).

our arm, typically, the arm moves just like that.”⁶⁶ But on my account, the view that we have direct voluntary control over our beliefs does not simply fall out of Descartes's conception of doxastic attitudes as operations of the will. I have argued that Descartes's conception of judgment as involving operations of the will is tied to his view that we are responsible for things our will enables us to do. This is because, on the one hand, the doxastic attitudes involved in judgment are “mental actions,” and on the other hand, the doxastic attitudes involved in judgment are free. But the activity and freedom of our attitudes need not entail that we have direct *control* over them. Our assent could depend on other things in the mind: for example, compatible with my account is the view that in the case of judgments about what we clearly and distinctly perceive, our assent depends on and follows straightaway from the (clear and distinct) perception.⁶⁷ And similarly, the freedom of our assent does not in itself rule out its being caused by other things in the mind (e.g., clear and distinct perception).⁶⁸

On my account, then, Descartes's theory of judgment looks far less implausible than typically has been suggested. Broadly speaking, Descartes is presenting an account of judgment that distinguishes the content of our judgments from the attitudes we take towards that content, and affirms that the attitudes depend on us. But by “us,” Descartes can include reasons and other attitudes—that is, what else is in our minds.

Second, my account provides an explanation of why the interpretive debate about Descartes's position on the issue of control over our beliefs has been substantive and protracted. Even recently, Descartes has been represented as holding contrasting positions: on the one hand, that believing is under the direct control of the will and, on the other, that believing is under only the indirect

66. This quote is from Della Rocca (2006: 148).

67. Ambiguities in Descartes's language leave room for the view that in the case of clear and distinct perception, the relation between our assent and the perception is not causal: e.g., Descartes says only that “a great light in the intellect *was followed by* a great inclination in the will” (AT VII 59; CSM II 41, my emphasis), not that it caused” or “determined” the inclination. My aim here, however, is not to argue for the position that clear and distinct perceptions cause or determine volitions in judgments about what we clearly and distinctly perceive; it is simply to show that my account does not rule out the position.

68. The case of perceptions that are not clear and distinct is more complicated. The activity and freedom of our attitudes in the case of what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive allows for two incompatible possibilities: either that we have direct control over our attitudes or that we have only indirect control over our attitudes. The latter possibility would require that in the case of what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive, we make a judgment or withhold judgment by finding reasons for judging or reasons for doubt, respectively. Newman (2015) provides the most thorough development of the view that in all cases (both regarding what we clearly and distinctly perceive and what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive) Descartes holds that what we have direct control over are not the doxastic attitudes involved in judgment, but instead, the will's power to help direct the intellect's perceptual attention.

control of the will.⁶⁹ According to my account, Descartes does not fit neatly⁷⁰ into a position on the issue because his theory of judgment is motivated not by it, but by two other considerations: that assent is a mental action, and assent is a free operation of the mind. Descartes's conceptions of mental action and freedom interact with the issue of control, but do not reduce to it.

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Abbreviations

For works by Descartes:

AT = Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Eds.) (1964–76). *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Vols. I–XI). CNRS/J. Vrin. Cited by volume and page number.

CSM = John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Eds. and Trans.) (1984–85). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Vols. I–II). Cambridge University Press. Cited by volume and page number.

CSMK = John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Eds. and Trans.) (1991). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Vol. III). Cambridge University Press. Cited by page number.

Voss = Stephen Voss (Trans.) (1989). *The Passions of the Soul*. Hackett Publishing Company. Cited by page number.

69. See, for an example of the former, Della Rocca (2006), and for an example of the latter, Newman (2015).

70. For example, see Footnote 68, above.

For works by Thomas Aquinas:

ST = Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Trans.) (1947). *Summa Theologica*. Benziger Brothers. Cited by part, question, and article.

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