

# Descartes on the Unity of the Virtues

Saja Parvizian

*Journal of Philosophical Research* (Forthcoming)

**Abstract:** Commentators have neglected a tension in Descartes' virtue theory. In some texts, Descartes seems to argue that there are distinct virtues. In other texts, Descartes seems to argue that there is only a single virtue—the firm and constant resolution to use the will well. In this paper, I reconcile this tension. I argue that Descartes endorses a specific version of the unity of the virtues thesis, namely, the identity of the virtues. Nonetheless, Descartes has the resources to draw conceptual distinctions between various virtues. Distinct virtues are conceptually generated when we regard the firm and constant resolution to use the will well in different ways, that is, based on the different ways this resolution manifests in moral situations.

**Keywords:** Descartes, ethics, virtue, unity of the virtues

## I. INTRODUCTION

Descartes' ethics—particularly his theory of virtue—has received increasing attention in recent years (See, e.g., Brown 2006; Frierson 2002; Marshall 1998; Morgan 1994; Naaman-Zauderer 2010; Rutherford 2014; Shapiro 1999, 2008, 2011; Svennson 2010, 2011; Youpa 2005, 2013). However, commentators have failed to notice that Descartes is not always clear about the metaphysics of (moral) virtue.<sup>i</sup>

*Prima facie*, he presents two conflicting metaphysical accounts throughout his ethical writings.<sup>ii</sup> The first is that there are a number of distinct virtues, such as courage, generosity, and humility, each of which are distinct dispositions the moral agent must possess in order to respond virtuously to moral situations. As Descartes writes in the *Passions of the Soul*, virtues “are habits

in the soul which dispose it to have certain thoughts: though different from the thoughts, these habits can produce them and in turn can be produced by them” (AT XI: 453/CSM I: 387).<sup>iii</sup> The second is that there is only one virtue, that is, the disposition to judge well. As Descartes tells Princess Elizabeth, virtue consists only in “a firm and constant will to bring about everything we judge to be the best” (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 18 August 1645, AT IV: 277/CSMK: 262).<sup>iv</sup> The conflict between these two accounts is that the first is *metaphysically complex*, virtue is divided into many distinct dispositions, and the second is *metaphysically simple*, virtue consists in one disposition.<sup>v vi</sup>

What hangs on these two distinct metaphysical pictures of virtue? If we accept the first account, we must dismiss or at least severely attenuate Descartes’ frequent identification of virtue with the disposition to judge well, and we ultimately end up with an account that is Aristotelian. This is at odds with Descartes’ expressed goal of providing an ethics that *progresses* beyond what the ancients provided.<sup>vii</sup> On other hand, if we accept the second account it seems that Descartes’ discussion of distinct virtues becomes inconsequential, and we run the risk of distancing Descartes from a fundamental position that virtue theorists have historically agreed upon, namely, that virtues such as courage, generosity, and humility are actually virtues, and that they play a crucial role in the good life.

In this paper, I aim to reconcile these two readings. I will not pursue a developmental story; that is, I do not think that the source of the tension is that Descartes is simply changing his views over time. Descartes’ mature writings on virtue all appear between 1644-1649, and Descartes seems to express both positions throughout these years.<sup>viii</sup> Instead, I contend that the solution to the tension is unveiling Descartes’ commitment to a specific version of the unity of

the virtues thesis, namely, the *identity of the virtues*. I argue that Descartes maintains that virtue is metaphysically simple, in that it consists only in the disposition to judge well, while also maintaining that there are conceptual distinctions between the virtues.<sup>ix</sup> Drawing from Descartes' theory of *conceptual distinction*, I show that Descartes views each individual virtue as a different manifestation of judging well; thus, courage and generosity, for example, can be understood essentially as different instances of the same resolution to use the will well. The complexity inherent in Descartes' virtue theory is conceptual since it arises from the different ways in which we can *regard* the different manifestations of the disposition to judge well—not from virtue being divided into distinct dispositions.

The paper is divided up as follows. In section II, I examine Descartes' critique of Aristotelian virtue, and argue that Descartes is committed to the identity of the virtues. In section III, I examine the epistemic requirements for virtue. In section IV, I unpack Descartes' account of the identity of the virtues, and offer a reconciliation of the complex and simple accounts of virtue. I also consider the potential objection that the virtue of generosity is a counterexample to the identity of the virtues reading. In section V, I offer some closing remarks.

## II. DESCARTES' CRITIQUE OF ARISTOTLE

Descartes engaged many aspects of ancient philosophy throughout his career, and ethics was not an exception. As the correspondence with Princess Elizabeth shows, he was well-aware of ancient virtue theories that his contemporaries might have advocated, and made an effort to distinguish his account from theirs.<sup>x</sup> Indeed, Descartes was one of many philosophers attempting to provide a new conception of morality (Menn 2002: 18-42). This project not only involved establishing a new metaphysical foundation for ethics, but also providing new conceptions of

wisdom, virtue, and happiness (AT IXB: 14/CSM I: 186). As Descartes tells Princess Elizabeth (1645),

To entertain you, therefore, I shall simply write about the means which philosophy provides for acquiring that supreme felicity which common souls vainly expect from fortune, but which can be acquired only from ourselves.

One of the most useful of these means, I think, is to examine what the ancients have written on this question, and try to advance beyond them by adding something to their precepts. For in this way we can make the precepts perfectly our own and become disposed to put them into practice. (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 21 July 1645, AT IV: 252/CSMK: 256).

According to Descartes, felicity or happiness depends on virtue.<sup>xi</sup> Thus, to give a new account of how happiness is acquired, Descartes needs to offer a new account of virtue. So what exactly is Descartes' problem with ancient theories of virtue? In a passage from a letter to Princess Elizabeth (1645) that has not received much attention by commentators, Descartes writes:

He should have a firm and constant resolution to carry out whatever reason recommends without being diverted by his passions or appetites. Virtue, I believe, consists precisely in sticking firmly to this resolution; though I do not know that anyone has ever so described it. Instead, they have divided it into different species [*divisée en plusieurs especes*] to which they have given various names, because of the various objects to which it applies.

(Letter to Princess Elizabeth 4 August 1645, AT IV: 265/CSMK: 258)

According to Descartes, the problem with ancient theories of virtue is that they have “divided virtue into different species, because of the various objects to which it applies.” That is, they have identified and distinguished different types of virtue, according to the different types of

moral situations that demand moral action. Descartes is unclear about who he has in mind here, but the broader context of his ethical writings suggests that he has some stripe of Aristotelian virtue ethics in mind.<sup>xii</sup>

According to Aristotle, the virtues—such as temperance, courage, and generosity—are distinct character traits or dispositions. More specifically, each virtue (*arête*) is a mean between an excess and a deficiency, and is guided by practical wisdom (*phronêsis*):

Virtue, then, is a state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by reason—the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess, the other of deficiency. (NE II, 1106b-1107a)

For example, courage is the mean between the vice of recklessness and the vice of cowardice. *Phronêsis* guides the process of deliberation by which the moral agent identifies and meets the ends set by courage.<sup>xiii</sup> That is, *phronêsis* guides virtue by helping determine the course of action one must take in a moral situation.

Although Descartes is right that Aristotle divides virtues into different “species,” there remains a close relationship among the Aristotelian virtues. According to Aristotle, *phronêsis* requires all of the virtues, and all of the virtues require *phronêsis*; consequently, possession of any single virtue implies the possession of all the other virtues. As Aristotle puts it in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

It is clear from what we have said, then, that we cannot be really good without practical wisdom, or practically wise without virtue of character. Moreover, on these lines one might also meet the dialectical argument that could be used to suggest that the virtues exist in isolation from one another. The same person, it might be argued, is not best

suiting by nature for all the virtues, so that he will already have acquired one before he has acquired another. This is possible in respect of the natural virtues, but not in respect of those on the basis of which a person is said to be really good; for he will possess all of them as soon as he acquires the one, practical wisdom. (NE VI, 1144b-1145a)<sup>xiv</sup>

Here, Aristotle espouses what is often called the ‘unity of the virtues’ thesis. The virtues form a unity because one cannot possess one virtue without possessing all of the other virtues. Strictly speaking, however, there are different versions of the unity of the virtues thesis. Following Irwin and other scholars who have adopted his terminology, I will call Aristotle’s version of the unity of the virtues the ‘reciprocity of the virtues’ (Irwin 1988, 1995; cf. Curzer 2012). There is a reciprocity between the virtues because although they are distinct, they are *inseparable*.

However, there is a stronger version of the unity of the virtues thesis. On this stronger view, the virtues form a unity because they are all *identical* to each other. Possession of justice implies possession of courage because, at bottom, justice and courage are identical. Following Brickhouse and Smith, I will call this version of the unity of the virtues the ‘identity of the virtues’ (1997).<sup>xv</sup>

I think that Descartes’ ultimate dissatisfaction with the Aristotelian account is that it does not recognize the identity of the virtues, and more importantly, what the true nature of virtue is.<sup>xvi</sup> There are two key texts where Descartes reveals his commitment to the identity of the virtues. In the Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth for the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) Descartes writes:

The pure and genuine virtues, which proceed solely from knowledge of what is right, all have one and the same nature [*unam & eandem omnes habent naturam*] and are included under the single term ‘wisdom’. For whoever possesses the firm and powerful resolve

always to use his reasoning powers correctly, as far as he can, and to carry out whatever he knows best, is truly wise, so far as his nature permits. And simply because of this, he will possess justice, courage, temperance, and all the other virtues; but they will be interlinked in such a way that no one virtue stands out among the others [*sed ita inter se conjunctas, ut nullae supra caeteras emineant*]. (AT VIII A: 2-3/CSM: 191)

Descartes clearly claims that the “pure and genuine virtues” have one and the same nature. If justice has the same nature as courage, then justice and courage are identical. This nature consists in having a “firm and powerful resolve to use his reasoning powers correctly.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Similarly, in a Letter to Queen Christina (1647) Descartes writes:

[K]nowledge is often beyond our powers; and so there remains only our will, which is absolutely within our disposal. And I do not see that it is possible to dispose it better than by a firm and constant resolution to carry out to the letter all the things which one judges to be best, and do employ all the powers of one’s mind in finding out what these are. This by itself constitutes all the virtues [*C’est en cela seul que consistent toutes les vertus*]; this alone really deserves praise and glory; this alone, finally, produces the greatest and most solid contentment in life. So I conclude that it is this which constitutes the supreme good. (Letter to Queen Christina 20 November 1647, AT V: 83/CSMK: 325).

Descartes again clearly commits himself to the identity of the virtues. He writes that the “firm and constant resolution to carry out to the letter all the things which one judges to be best...constitutes all the virtues.” To flesh out Descartes’ commitment to the identity of the virtues we will have to say a bit more about the nature of virtue, and more importantly, the epistemic requirements of virtue.<sup>xviii</sup>

### III. EPISTEMIC REQUIREMENTS OF CARTESIAN VIRTUE

Descartes does not define virtue in an Aristotelian manner. That is, he does not define virtue as a character trait that is a mean between an excess and a deficiency. Rather, he defines virtue in—what he takes to be—a more fundamental manner: as the firm and constant resolution to use the will well (or the disposition to judge well). This definition is more fundamental, because for Descartes virtue is our supreme good, and our supreme good has to consist in something that is wholly within our control.<sup>xix</sup> If some good is beyond our control, then it cannot amount to a good that truly belongs to *us*. The only thing that is truly within our control is how we dispose of our free will, i.e. our volitions: As Descartes writes,

The supreme good of each individual is quite a different thing, and consists only in a firm will to do well and the contentment which this produces. My reason for saying this is that I can discover no other good which seems so great or so entirely within each man's power. (Letter to Queen Christina 20 November 1647 AT V: 83/CSMK: 324-5)

I see only one thing in us which could give us good reason for esteeming ourselves, namely, the exercise of our free will and the control we have over our volitions. For we can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend upon this free will.

*Passions* III.152, AT XI: 445/CSM I: 384; see also *Passions* II.144, AT XI: 436/CSM I: 379; *Passions* III.154, AT XI: 446-7/CSM I: 384).

Although Descartes locates virtue in a perfection of the will, this perfection depends on the perfection of the intellect.<sup>xx</sup> That is, in order to judge well, we need to judge according to the right kinds of perceptions.<sup>xxi</sup> Recall how Descartes introduces the identity of the virtues thesis in the Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth: “The pure and genuine virtues, *which proceed solely from*



*knowledge of what is right*, all have one and the same nature.” Drawing out the connections between knowledge and the will, then, will be crucial to understanding the identity of the virtues.

Descartes identifies two epistemic conditions for exercising virtue: “In order to be always disposed to judge well [*disposé à bien juger*], only two things seem to me necessary. One is knowledge of the truth [*la connaissance de la vérité*]; the other is practice in remembering and assenting to this knowledge whenever the occasion demands” (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 15 September 1645, AT IV: 291/CSMK: 266). Knowledge of the truth is necessary for virtue because:<sup>xxii</sup>

[V]irtue unenlightened by the intellect is false: that is to say, the will and resolution to do well can carry us to evil courses, if we think them good; and in such a case the contentment which virtue brings is not solid. Moreover, such virtue is commonly set in opposition to pleasure, appetite and passion, and is accordingly very difficult to practice. The right use of reason, on the other hand, by giving a true knowledge of the good, prevents virtue from being false; by accommodating it to licit pleasures, it makes virtue easy to practice; and by making us recognize the condition of our nature, it sets bounds to our desires. (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 4 August 1645, AT IV: 267/CSMK: 258)

So, what is knowledge of the truth or the good?<sup>xxiii</sup> First, a clarification. Finite minds cannot have a comprehensive and complete knowledge of the truth (that belongs to God alone). Thus, “we have to content ourselves with knowing the truths most useful to us [*le plus à notre usage*].”<sup>xxiv</sup> According to Descartes, “the safest way to find out how we should live is to discover first what we are, what kind of world we live in, and who is the creator of the world, or the master of the house we live in” (Letter to Chanut 15 June 1646; AT IV: 441/CSMK: 289). Descartes divides such knowledge into four primary truths:

1. The existence and nature of God.
2. The nature of the mind and its distinctness from the body.
3. The immensity of the universe.
4. The moral and political standing one has in the universe.

The first two truths are metaphysical, the third falls under natural philosophy, and the fourth is a social or political truth. I will briefly address each, in turn.

The first truth is that “there is a God on whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immense and whose decrees are infallible.” Knowledge of God helps a moral agent regard every event in her life as a manifestation of the divine will. Thus, divine knowledge prevents an agent from being adversely affected by hardships; she will be able to accept her circumstances and rejoice in knowing that they are “expressly sent by God” (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 15 September 1645, AT IV: 291/CSMK: 265).<sup>xxv</sup>

The second truth, broadly construed, concerns the real distinction between mind and body: “we must know that it [the mind] subsists apart from the body, and is much nobler than the body, and that it is capable of enjoying countless satisfactions not to be found in this life” (AT IV: 292/CSMK: 265).<sup>xxvi</sup> The real distinction between mind and body is of course established in the Sixth Meditation and also treated in *Principles* I. However, this second truth involves more than just the real distinction. Descartes claims that the mind is much more *noble* than the body. Though unclear, there are two ways this claim might be justified. First, it might be justified by Descartes’ claim that the mind is better known than the body. Second, it might be justified by Descartes’ claim that the mind is indivisible and the body is divisible.

Descartes also claims that this second truth helps an agent appropriately orient and prioritize her desires (AT IV: 286/CSMK: 264). It makes the moral agent realize that the pleasures of the soul are more important than the pleasures of the body. Descartes justifies this claim by appealing to the fluctuating nature of extension:

The main difference between the pleasures of the body and those of the mind is the following. The body is subject to perpetual change, and indeed its preservation and well-being depend on change; so all the pleasures proper to it last a very short time, since they arise from the acquisition of something useful to the body at the moment of reception, and cease as soon as it stops being useful. The pleasures of the soul, on the other hand, can be as immortal as the soul itself provided they are so solidly founded that neither the knowledge of the truth nor any false conviction can destroy them. (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 1 September 1645, AT IV: 286/CSMK: 264-5)

Furthermore, this second truth helps prevent an agent from fearing death; by detaching herself from the fleeting pleasures of earthly life, she can direct her efforts toward attaining eternal pleasures. As Descartes says, we must know that 'the pleasures of the soul...can be as immortal as the soul itself' (AT IV: 286/CSMK: 264-5).

The third truth concerns the immensity of the universe. Descartes claims we must possess a "vast idea of the extent of the universe, such as I tried to convey in the third book of my *Principles*" (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 15 September 1645, AT IV: 292/CSM I: 265).

Similarly, Descartes tells Chanut concerning the connections between physics and ethics: "I must say in confidence that what little knowledge of physics I have tried to acquire has been a great help to me in establishing sure foundations in moral philosophy" (Letter to Chanut 15 June 1646,

AT IV: 441/CSMK: 289), and that “these truths of physics are part of the foundations of the highest and most perfect morality” (Letter to Chanut 26 February 1649, AT V: 290-1/CSMK: 368). While it is clear that the moral agent must have some knowledge of physics, Descartes is unclear about what truths of physics he has in mind from *Principles* III (“the visible universe”). Whatever these truths are, Descartes tells Elizabeth that knowledge of physics prevents us from adopting certain problematic beliefs, such as the view that “all the heavens are made only for the service of earth, and the earth only for man,” and that the “earth is our principal abode and this life our best.” Moreover, Descartes thinks that ignorance of physics leads an agent to “be so absurdly presumptuous as to wish to belong to God’s council and assist him in the government of the world” (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 15 September 1645, AT IV: 292/CSMK: 266). In short, physics supplements metaphysics by helping us understand our standing in the universe.

While the third truth concerns our standing in the universe, the fourth truth specifies our moral and political relationships to others:

Though each of us is a person distinct from others, whose interests are accordingly in some way different from those of the rest of the world, we ought still to think that none of us could subsist alone and that each of us is really one of the many parts of the universe, and more particularly a part of the earth, the state, the society and the family to which we belong by our domicile, our oath of allegiance and our birth. And the interests of the whole, of which each of us is a part, must always be preferred to those of our own particular person—with measure, of course, and discretion. (AT IV: 293/CSMK: 266)

Essentially, the claim here is that we must recognize that we are individuals that are parts of larger social communities,<sup>xxvii</sup> and that the overall good of these larger communities should, within reason, be preferred to our own interests.<sup>xxviii</sup> If an agent neglects that she is a constituent

of a larger social, political, and environmental unit she will be unable to obtain “true friendship, fidelity, or virtue.” But “if someone considers herself a part of the community, he delights in doing good to everyone, and does not hesitate even to risk his life in the service of others when the situation demands” (AT IV: 293/CSMK: 266).<sup>xxix</sup> In other words, this truth is claiming that we need to love one another. Regarding oneself as a part of a broader community is central to Cartesian love. Love, according to Descartes, consists of “the assent by which we consider ourselves henceforth as joined with what we love in such a manner that we imagine a whole, of which we take ourselves to be only one part and the thing loved to be the other” (*Passions* II.80 AT XI: 387/CSM I: 356). When one regards another person as belonging to oneself, one “seeks their good as he does his own, or even more assiduously” (*Passions* II.82, AT XI: 389/CSM I: 357).

The above four truths are the primary truths that constitute knowledge of the truth because they “concern all our actions in general.” However, Descartes also claims ‘many others must be known which concern more particularly each individual action’ (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 15 September 1645, AT IV: 294/CSMK: 267). Descartes does not identify all of these secondary truths, but he singles out two in particular. First, we must know that our passions tend to exaggerate the value of the objects they represent. The passions “represent the goods to which they tend with greater splendor than they deserve, and they make us imagine pleasures to be much greater, before we possess them, than our subsequent experiences show them to be” (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 1 September 1645, AT IV: 285/CSMK: 264). Second, when we face difficult moral situations for which we cannot derive a clear course of action, we must “embrace the opinions that seem the most probable” (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 15 September 1645, AT IV: 295/CSMK: 267). I take it that Descartes does not fully enumerate the details of this latter

truth because these probable opinions are contextually and culturally sensitive and will not necessarily apply to all moral agents. As Descartes says: “one must examine minutely all the customs of one’s place of abode to see how far they should be followed” (AT IV: 295/CSMK: 267).<sup>xxx</sup>

Let us now turn to the second necessary condition for exercising virtue. According to Descartes, mere theoretical knowledge of primary and secondary truths is not sufficient for judging well because we must also be able to remember and assent to these truths when the situation demands:

Besides knowledge of the truth, practice is also required if one is to be always disposed to judge well. We cannot continually pay attention to the same thing; and so, however clear and evident the reasons may have been that convinced us of some truth in the past, we can later be turned away from believing it by some false appearances unless we have so imprinted it on our mind by long and frequent meditation that it has become a settled disposition with us. In this sense the scholastics are right when they say that virtues are habits; for in fact our failings are rarely due to lack of theoretical knowledge of what we should do, but to lack of practical knowledge – that is, a lack of a firm habit of belief.

(AT IV: 296/CSMK: 267)

Theoretical knowledge of the truth alone cannot dispose us to judging well because we cannot (at least initially) sustain our attention on these truths. We can be distracted by a variety of things when thrown into moral situations, which makes us susceptible to making poor moral judgments and thus acting viciously. To remedy this, we must frequently meditate on these truths until they are “imprinted in our mind” (*imprimée en notre esprit*) so that they will always be *ready at hand*. This results in a practical knowledge of the truth or a ‘firm habit of belief’. That is, a stabilized

knowledge of the truth which arms one with the relevant beliefs required to judge well in a variety of moral situations.

#### IV. A RECONCILIATION

We are now in a position to reconcile the two seemingly conflicting accounts of virtue in Descartes' ethical writings. Aristotelian virtue ethicists are mistaken in developing a program of virtue in which distinct dispositions are cultivated for different types of moral situations, e.g. courage for battle and justice for politics. This complex apparatus of dispositions is unnecessary for Descartes because an agent's comprehensive theoretical and practical knowledge of metaphysical, physical, and social truths prepares her to judge well in any moral situation. Thus, Descartes replaces the Aristotelian requirement of cultivating a distinct set of virtues with the requirement of cultivating a complex set of truths, and a single disposition to act according to those truths.

Consider the virtue of courage. According to Descartes, "it is the most dangerous and desperate affairs in which we exercise the most boldness and courage" (*Passions* III.173, AT XI: 461/CSM I: 391). In such dangerous situations that demand moral action, the moral agent is often required to make some sacrifice to achieve the moral end that they set for themselves. What often prevents a moral agent from exercising courage is timidity and fear (*Passions* III.174, AT XI: 462/CSM I: 392) The first truth and the fourth truth will help the moral agent regulate her passions and exercise courage. The first truth will prevent the moral agent from falling into despair in the face of danger, for she will remind herself that everything that occurs in her life is

determined by God, and the fourth truth will remind her that she must subordinate her interests to those of her community, which may require her to sacrifice her interests in the service of others. When the Cartesian moral agent exhibits courage, then, it is not due to a distinct cultivated character trait of courage but rather due to virtuous judgment that proceeds from knowledge of the truth.

Nonetheless, we can conceptually distinguish between the virtues because of the different applications of the disposition to judge well. The virtues of courage and humility, for example, are both essentially reducible to the disposition to judge well; however, these virtues are 'distinct' because they are manifested as different practical actions in their respective types of moral situations. In employing an Aristotelian classification of the virtues, then, Descartes is pouring new wine into old bottles. Terms like 'courage', 'justice', and 'temperance', do not designate distinct virtues for Descartes, but rather different ways in which a moral agent can—via the will—judge and act well.

But how exactly should we understand the identity yet conceptual distinction between the virtues? Descartes' preference for the identity of the virtues should be expected given his general tendency towards metaphysical simplicity. To understand the metaphysical simplicity of virtue, it may be useful to take a cue from Descartes' metaphysics. In the context of the metaphysical simplicity of substance, Descartes invokes the theory of conceptual distinction:

A conceptual distinction is a distinction between a substance and some attribute of that substance without which the substance is unintelligible; alternatively, it is a distinction between two such attributes of a single substance. Such a distinction is recognized by our inability to form a clear and distinct idea of the substance if we exclude from it in the



attribute in question, or, alternatively by our inability to perceive clearly the idea of one of the two attributes if we separate it from another. (*Principles* I.62, AT VIII A: 30/CSM I: 214).

Consider the substance mind and the attribute of thought. According to Descartes, one cannot clearly and distinctly conceive the attribute of thought while excluding the mind, and conversely, one cannot clearly and distinctly conceive of mind while excluding the attribute of thought. Consequently, mind and thought are merely conceptually distinct. There is only a distinction of reason [*distinctio rationis*] between them, thus there is no distinction in reality [*in rebus*] between them. Although Descartes never explicitly applies the theory of conceptual distinction to the virtues, I think we can employ the theory of conceptual distinction to understand Descartes' claim that the virtues "all have one and the same nature" and "will be interlinked in such a way that no one virtue stands out among the others." What this implies, for example, is that one cannot clearly and distinctly conceive courage while excluding humility, and conversely, one cannot clearly and distinctly conceive of humility while excluding courage. There is only a distinction of reason between these two virtues, and thus they are identical in reality. And the same goes for all of the other virtues.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Let us consider a possible counterexample to this reading of the identity of the virtues. Descartes seems to claim that the virtue of generosity is a distinct virtue of its own, whose acquisition leads to the attainment of the rest of the virtues. As Descartes writes, "this virtue is, as it were, the key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for every disorder of the passions" (*Passions* III. 161, AT XI: 454/CSM I: 388).<sup>xxxiii</sup> Descartes defines generosity as follows:

[W]hich causes a person's self-esteem [*s'estime*] to be as great as it may legitimately be, has only two components. The first consists in his knowing [*connaît*] that nothing truly belongs [*qu'il n'y a rien qui véritablement lui appartienne*] to him but this freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using this freedom well or badly. The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well—that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best. To do that is to pursue virtue in a perfect manner. (*Passions* III.153, AT XI: 445-6/CSM I: 384)

Generosity has two components. The first is the knowledge that the only thing that truly belongs to us is our free will, and consequently, that we should only be praised or blame for how we use our free will. The second is the firm and constant resolution to use the will well.

Although it seems that this is a distinct virtue, my contention is that generosity, in essence, has the very same nature of virtue that we have described thus far; however, it is the most perfect form of virtue. According to Descartes, although virtue in every instance consists in the right use of the will, this comes in degrees:

Now there are two prerequisites for the kind of wisdom just described, namely the perception of the intellect and the disposition of the will. But whereas what depends on the will is within the capacity of everyone, there are some people who possess far sharper intellectual vision than others. Those who are by nature somewhat backward intellectually should make a firm and faithful resolution to do their utmost to acquire knowledge of what is right, and always to pursue what they judge to be right; this should suffice to enable them, despite their ignorance on many points, to achieve wisdom according to their lights and thus to find great favor with God. Nevertheless they will be

left far behind by those who possess not merely a firm resolve to act rightly but also the sharpest intelligence combined with the utmost zeal for acquiring knowledge of the truth.

(Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth for the *Principles*, AT VIII A: 3/CSM I: 191)

The first component of generosity is an item of knowledge that actually is not listed in the primary or secondary truths that constitute knowledge of the truth. This is an additional item of knowledge that, according to Descartes, takes time and moral practice to attain. Only those with the 'sharpest intelligence' will acquire it, and thus those who acquire it will have a higher degree of virtue. To acquire the first component of generosity, we must:

[O]ccupy ourselves frequently in considering the nature of free will and the many advantages which proceed from a firm resolution to make good use of it—while also considering, on the other hand, the main vain and useless cares which trouble ambitious people. (*Passions* III. 161 AT XI: 454/CSM I: 388)

The process described here takes time. One must empirically observe others' actions and meditate on them so as to arrive at the subtle knowledge that the only thing that truly belongs to oneself is free will. The generous person truly understands that her freedom is the only thing worthy of esteem, and because of this is able to "pursue virtue in a *perfect manner*" (*Passions* III.153, AT XI: 445-6/CSM I: 384, emphasis added). Generosity, then, fundamentally has the same nature as lower grades of virtue, but can be regarded differently (and deserves a distinct name) because it is the most perfect form of virtue. It is more perfect because it consists in a *better use of the will* than lower grades of virtue. In particular, the generous person is perfectly *other-regarding* in a way that other virtuous agents might not be:

Those who are generous in this way are naturally led to do great deeds,

and at the same time not to undertake anything of which they do not feel themselves capable. And because they esteem nothing more highly than doing good to others and disregarding their own self-interest, they are always perfectly courteous, gracious and obliging to everyone. (*Passions* III.156, AT XI: 447-8/CSM I: 385)

I submit, then, that generosity does not serve as a counterexample to the reconciliation developed here.

## V. CONCLUSION

I have argued that there is no *ultima facie* tension in Descartes' metaphysics of virtue. According to Descartes, virtue is *metaphysically simple* because it consists only in the firm and constant resolution to use the will well (or the disposition to judge well), while *conceptually complex* in that this disposition can be regarded in different ways. In regarding this disposition in different ways according to the various applications it has in different moral situations, we can still talk about 'justice', 'courage', 'humility', 'generosity' and so on.

Descartes claims that he has offered a novel account of virtue, that goes beyond what the ancients offered. This is not entirely true. In locating virtue in a perfection of the will, Descartes is certainly doing something novel. However, Descartes is not the first to advocate for the identity of the virtues. As I acknowledged earlier (endnote 16), Socrates also argues for the identity of the virtues. But unlike Descartes, Socrates identifies virtue with knowledge. Descartes would disagree with this claim because ultimately knowledge is beyond our control. While knowledge is a requisite for virtue, virtue proper is located in a perfection of the will. Descartes, then, is still not the first philosopher to claim that the virtues should not be divided into different

species. Putting these qualifications aside, Descartes' virtue theory is nonetheless novel, and deserves further consideration.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> In this paper I am concerned with the nature of *moral virtue*, not *intellectual virtue*. For examinations of intellectual virtue in Descartes see Davies (2001) and Sosa (2012).

<sup>ii</sup> I employ the following abbreviations for primary texts: 'AT': *Oeuvres de Descartes* (cited by volume and page); 'CSM': *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol I. (cited by volume and page); 'CSMK': *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol III (cited by page); 'NE': *Nicomachean Ethics* (cited by book and margin pagination).

<sup>iii</sup> See also *Passions* III.153, AT XI: 446/CSM I: 384; *Passions* III.161 AT XI: 453-4/CSM I: 387-388; *Passions* III.155 AT XI: 447/CSM: I 385).

<sup>iv</sup> See also Letter to Princess Elizabeth 4 August 1645, AT IV: 265/CSMK: 258; Letter to Princess Elizabeth 6 October 1645, AT IV: 305/CSMK: 268; *Passions* II.148, AT XI: 442/CSM I: 382).

<sup>v</sup> Shapiro, for example, sometimes describes virtue as being simple (2008: 455), and other times as being complex (Ibid. 459).

<sup>vi</sup> In this paper, I am concerned only with Descartes' metaphysics of virtue, not with the kind of ethics he espouses. There is no consensus in the literature about the kind of ethics Descartes advocates. Shapiro claims that Descartes is a virtue ethicist (2008), Naaman-Zauderer claims that Descartes is a deontological virtue ethicist (2010), and Svennson claims that Descartes is not a virtue ethicist, but best read as offering a teleological or consequentialist virtue theory (2010).

<sup>vii</sup> A qualification is in order: there are, of course, other philosophers (e.g. Plato) who—as we will see—offer accounts of the unity of the virtues that are seemingly similar to Descartes', and these philosophers should be classified in the same camp. However, the difference lies in the details. Plato argues that there is only one virtue because virtue consists only in knowledge, whereas Descartes says that there is only one virtue because virtue lies in the right use of the will (and importantly, not in the *intellect* as Plato argues).

<sup>viii</sup> The main texts that I will examine are Descartes' correspondence with Princess Elizabeth (1645-1646) and Queen Christina (1647), the Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth for the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), and the *Passions of the Soul* (1649). I am not concerned with the earlier provisional moral code of the *Discourse*.

---

<sup>ix</sup> Two other commentators have acknowledged that Descartes advances a unity of the virtues thesis (Alanen and Svensson 2007: fn. 8; Naaman-Zauderer 2010: 179-181). My argument differs with these accounts in that: (1) I explain how Descartes distances himself from ancient conceptions of virtue (2) I explain why Descartes is entitled to a unity of the virtues thesis given his epistemic requirements for virtue, and (3) I explain how Descartes' unity of the virtues thesis can be reconciled with his description of distinct virtues.

<sup>x</sup> For example, see the series of letters between Descartes and Princess Elizabeth on Seneca's *De Vita Beata* (AT IV: 263-280/CSMK: 256-62).

<sup>xi</sup> For an account of Cartesian happiness, and the relationship between happiness and virtue see Svensson (2011).

<sup>xii</sup> It is not clear how sophisticated Descartes' understanding was of Aristotelian virtue ethics. So, I think that a general formulation of the Aristotelian view will suffice to capture what Descartes had probably encountered. It is highly possible that Descartes was responding to a Stoic virtue theory as well, but I will bracket that for the purposes of this paper. Placing Aristotle as the target is sufficient for clarity.

<sup>xiii</sup> For a more detailed account of the relationship between *phronêsis* and the virtues see Russell (2012) and Telfer (1989).

<sup>xiv</sup> By 'natural virtues' Aristotle means character traits that one could be born with. Natural virtues are separable, because one could be born with the virtue of kindness (or at least an inclination toward kindness), yet not possess the virtue of courage. In the case of the true virtues, however, possession of one virtue requires the possession of all the other virtues.

<sup>xv</sup> There is an important interpretive clarification in order. There are differences in the literature about Aristotle's account of the unity of the virtues. The dominant interpretation is that he holds the reciprocity of the virtues thesis; however, there are some interpreters, such as McDowell, who argue that he espouses the identity of the virtues thesis. According to McDowell, virtue consists in a type of perceptual sensitivity to respond to a moral situation in the right way (1979: 334). All of the virtues have the same nature, then, because they consist in knowledge. My aim here is not to settle this debate in the literature. It is possible that Descartes misinterpreted Aristotle's ethics. However, Descartes' reading is at least one possible way to regard Aristotle's account of virtue, and I am interested in how he distances himself from that view.

<sup>xvi</sup> On at least one prominent interpretation of Socrates, all of the virtues are identical to each other because they are all reducible to knowledge of good and evil (Clark 2015; Irwin 1995: 41-44). Moreover, Socrates employs similar argumentative strategies to Descartes' for reconciling the complexity of virtue with its essential simplicity (Brickhouse and Smith, 1997). According to Socrates, we can conceptually distinguish between the different virtues because of the different applications knowledge of good and evil has, and the different results this knowledge produces in moral situations. Nonetheless, Descartes' account of virtue is still unique. While Socrates locates virtue in the intellect, i.e. knowledge of good and evil, Descartes locates virtue in the will, i.e. in a perfected disposition to judge well. Descartes acknowledges that knowledge of good and evil is a necessary condition for virtue, but it is not virtue itself. Virtue is found in how we exercise this knowledge—vis-à-vis the will—in moral situations.

<sup>xvii</sup> The unity of the virtues thesis, as presented in the Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth for the *Principles*, extends only to the "pure and genuine virtues." According to Descartes, there are lesser degrees of virtue, or "true virtues," which are not unified because they do not proceed from "an exact knowledge of thing" and thus "such virtues differ from each other, they go by different names" (AT VIII A: 2/CSM I: 190-1).

---

<sup>xviii</sup> Deborah Brown seems to argue that Descartes does not espouse the unity of the virtues, writing that Descartes represents a 'general trend in moral thinking away from the unity of virtue and knowledge found in the Greeks and Stoics, and towards a notion of virtue in which resolution is central, a trend which comes dangerously close to granting prudence the status of an end in itself' (2006: 194). However, I think the broader context of this remark shows that Brown is committed to the identity of the virtues, not the reciprocity of the virtues (Ibid. 195).

<sup>xix</sup> This is not to deny that there are other goods in Descartes' ethics, see Svensson (2019).

<sup>xx</sup> There is one text where Descartes does sound Aristotelian in his definition of virtue. Descartes writes that, if we are truly using our will well, then we will 'occupy an intermediate position' between two vices (Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth for the *Principles*, AT VIII A: 2/CSM I: 191).

<sup>xxi</sup> Descartes claims that we need to have knowledge of the truth guide moral deliberation.

However, this knowledge of the truth does not make our first-order moral judgments absolutely certain (i.e. they do not amount to knowledge in the strict sense). This is because when we are in a moral situation, we cannot have clear and distinct perceptions about the moral features of the situation. As such, our first-order moral judgments can only be *morally certain*. Descartes defines 'moral certainty' as "certainty which is sufficient to regulate our behavior, or which measures up to the certainty we have on matters relating to the conduct of life which we never normally doubt, though we know it is possible, absolutely speaking, that they may be false" (*Principles* IV.204, AT VIII A: 327/CSM I: 289, fn. 1).

<sup>xxii</sup> Strictly speaking, Descartes does allow for a *non-ideal* form of virtue that is not grounded in knowledge of the truth. According to Descartes, not all moral agents have the capacity to acquire knowledge of the truth, yet they can still acquire a form of virtue relative to their capacities so long as they resolve to use their will as best as they can: "those who are by nature somewhat backward intellectually should make a firm and faithful resolution to do their utmost to acquire knowledge of what is right, and always to pursue what they judge to be right; this should suffice to enable them, despite their ignorance on many points, to achieve wisdom according to their lights and thus to find great favor with God. Nevertheless they will be left far behind by those who possess not merely a firm resolve to act rightly but also the sharpest intelligence combined with the utmost zeal for acquiring knowledge of the truth" (Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth for the *Principles*, AT VIII A: 3/CSM I: 191). In what follows, we are concerned with the *ideal* form of virtue, which is grounded in knowledge of the truth. This point, however, might lead the reader to an understandable objection against Descartes' claim that virtue is within our control. If the degree of knowledge we acquire is outside of our control, then it seems that acquiring the ideal form of virtue is actually not within our grasp. This is an important objection, but does not bear on the central claim of this paper concerning Descartes' position on the unity of the virtues.

<sup>xxiii</sup> In passages where Descartes discusses the type of knowledge required for virtue, he frequently switches between the following phrases: 'knowledge of the truth', 'knowledge of the good', 'knowledge of what is right', and 'an exact knowledge of things'. I interpret these phrases as being interchangeable because nothing in the surrounding texts suggests otherwise. Furthermore, Descartes seems to equate (or at least closely link) truth and goodness in the Fourth Meditation.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Similarly, with respect to the truths related to tempering the passions, Descartes says: "I do not consider it necessary to have an exact knowledge of the truth on every topic, or even to have foreseen in detail all possible eventualities, which would doubtless be impossible. It is enough in general to have imagined circumstances more distressing than one's own and be prepared to bear them" (Letter to Princess Elizabeth May 1646, AT IV: 411/CSMK: 287).

---

<sup>xxv</sup> Descartes also says that knowledge of divine providence helps one be resolute in the face of uncertainty: “we have no reason to fear what we have no knowledge of. For often the things we most dreaded before coming to know them turn out to be better than those we desired. Thus it is best in these matters to trust in divine providence, and to let oneself be guided by it” (Letter to Princess Elizabeth May 1646, AT IV: 415/CSMK: 288).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Descartes seems to suggest here that the truth of the immortality of the soul must also be known, when he claims that the soul can experience countless pleasure that cannot be experienced in this life. Descartes is notoriously cagey about a proof for the immortality of the soul, thus it is not clear what he might be committing himself to here. For an account of Descartes’ views on the immortality of the soul see Rozemond (2010).

<sup>xxvii</sup> Strictly speaking, I am singling out the political and social dimensions of this passage (i.e. the state, family, and society). But notice that Descartes also says that we are a part of the earth and the universe, which suggests that we have certain obligations to our environment.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Descartes is unclear about what is a reasonable degree of sacrifice for others. Princess Elizabeth presses him on this point, and he admits that he does not have a sure method: “I agree that it is difficult to determine exactly how far reason ordains that we should devote ourselves to the community. However, it is not a matter on which it is necessary to be very precise; it is enough to satisfy one’s conscience, and in doing so one can leave a lot of room for one’s inclination” (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 6 October 1645, AT IV: 316/CSMK: 273).

<sup>xxix</sup> Here Descartes seems to be making the metaphysical claim that human beings really are constituents of larger social units. Thus, one might be tempted to character this passage as offering another metaphysical truth on par with the first two truths, i.e. that humans are metaphysical parts of larger social and political units such as the family or the state. However, at the beginning of this passage Descartes makes a crucial qualification by saying that “we ought still to think that none of us could subsist alone...” In other words, Descartes is claiming that we ought to *regard* ourselves as being real parts of these larger social and political units. But that Descartes thinks we ought to regard ourselves in this way, does not commit him to any further metaphysical theses. In the *Passions*, Descartes reaffirms a non-metaphysical understanding of the part-whole relationship between an individual and a larger For example, he claims that a good father regards his children “as other parts of himself, and seeks their good as he does his own, or even more assiduously. For he imagines that he and they together from a whole of which he is not the better part, and so he often puts their interests before his own and is not afraid of sacrificing himself in order to save them” (AT XI: 389/CSM I: 357). For an account of the non-metaphysical reading see Frierson (2002).

<sup>xxx</sup> In another context, Descartes say that we should follow the “voice within” when knowledge of the truth on its own cannot help us determine the right course of action: “with regard to the important actions of life, when their outcome is doubtful that prudence cannot tell us what we ought to do, I think it is quite right for us to follow the advice of ‘the voice within’” (Letter to Princess Elizabeth October or November 1646, AT IV: 530/CSMK: 297).

<sup>xxxi</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Descartes’ theory of conceptual distinction see Nolan (1997) and Hoffman (2002). According to Nolan, a conceptual distinction implies metaphysical identity, whereas for Hoffman it implies metaphysical inseparability. To be clear, I am not taking a stand on this interpretive debate. Rather, I am using Nolan’s reading as it is a helpful tool for unpacking Descartes’ claim that the virtues are identical—I am not using the theory of conceptual distinction as *evidence* for the identity of the virtues, but as an *explanatory tool*.



---

<sup>xxxii</sup> Shapiro endorses this complex reading of virtue: “Generosity is thus ‘the key to all the virtues’ not only insofar as it is essential to Cartesian virtue, but also insofar as it leads to develop the character traits commonly called virtues—respect for others, humility, courage, kindness, affability, helpfulness, and the like—as well as the temperance that comes with the regulation of the passions” (2008: 459).

<sup>xxxii</sup> For feedback on various stages of this paper, I would like to thank John Whipple, Alan Nelson, David Hilbert, Daniel Sutherland, Alice Sowaal, Joseph Gottlieb, an audience at the Wisconsin Philosophical Association, and two anonymous referees of the *Journal of Philosophical Research*.

## References

Alanen, Lili. and Svennson, Frans. (2007). “Descartes on Virtue.” In *Hommage à Wlodek Philosophical Papers Dedicated to Wlodek Rabinowicz*, ed. by J.B. Petersson, D. Josefsson, and T. Egonsson. Rønnow-Rasmussen. <http://www.fil.lu.se/hommageawlodek>.

Aristotle. (2000). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin (Second Edition). Indianapolis: Hackett.

Brickhouse, Thomas. & Smith, Nicholas. (1997). “Socrates and the Unity of the Virtues.” *The Journal of Ethics* 1(4): 311-324.

Brown, Deborah. (2006). *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clark, Justin. (2015). “Socrates, the Primary Question, and the Unity of Virtue.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45(4): 445–470.

Curzer, Howard. (2012). *Aristotle and the Virtues*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Davies, René. (2001). *Descartes: Belief, Skepticism, and Virtue*. London: Routledge

Descartes, René. (1996). *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. Paris: J. Vrin.

Descartes, René. (1985). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Vol I)*. Tr. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugold Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Descartes, René. (1991). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: The Correspondence (Vol III)*. Tr. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugold Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Frierson, Patrick. (2002). “Learning to Love: From Egoism to Generosity in Descartes.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40: 313–348.

---

Hoffman, Paul. (2002). "Descartes's Theory of Distinction." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64(1): 57–78.

Irwin, Terence. (1988). "Disunity in Aristotelian Virtues: a Reply to Richard Kraut." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*. pp. 87-90.

Irwin, Terence. (1995). *Plato's Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Marshall, John. (1998). *Descartes's Moral Theory*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

McDowell, John. (1979). Virtue and Reason. *The Monist* 62(3): 331-350.

Menn, Stephen. (2002). *Descartes and Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morgan, Vance. (1994). *Foundation of Cartesian Ethics*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press.

Nolan, Lawrence (1997). "Reductionism and Nominalism in Descartes's Theory of Attributes." *Topoi* 16(2): 129-140.

Rozemond, Marleen. (2010). "Descartes and the Immortality of the Soul." *Mind, Method and Morality: Essays in Honour of Anthony Kenny*, ed. John Cottingham and Peter Hacker, 252-271. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rutherford, Donald. (2014). "Reading Descartes as a Stoic: Appropriate Actions, Virtue, and the Passions." *Philosophie antique* 14: 129–155.

Shapiro, Lisa. (1999). "Cartesian Generosity." In *Norms and Modes of Thinking in Descartes*, ed. by T. Aho and M. Yrjönsuuri. *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 64: 249–275.

Shapiro, Lisa. (2008). "Descartes's Ethics." In *A Companion to Descartes* ed. Janet Broughton and John Carriero, 445-463. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Shapiro, Lisa. (2011). "Descartes on Human Nature and the Human Good." In *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, ed. by Carlos Fraenkel, Justin E.H. Smith, and Dario Perinetti, 13-26. Dordrecht: Springer.

Sosa, Ernest. (2012). "Descartes and Virtue Epistemology." In *Reason, Metaphysics, and Mind: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga*, ed. by Kelly J. Clark and Michael Rea, 107-122. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Svensson, Frans. (2010). "The Role of Virtue in Descartes' Ethical Theory, Or: Was Descartes a Virtue Ethicist?" *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 27(3): 215-236

Svensson, Frans. (2011). "Happiness, Wellbeing and Their Relation to Virtue in Descartes' Ethics." *Theoria* 77: 238-260.

---

Svensson, Frans. (2019). "Descartes on the Highest Good." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 93 (4):701–721.

Telfer, Elizabeth. (1989). "The Unity of the Moral Virtues in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 90:35-48.

Youpa, Andrew. (2005). "Rationalist Moral Philosophy." In *A Companion to Rationalism* ed. Alan Nelson, 302-321. Malden: Blackwell.

Youpa, Andrew. (2013). "Descartes's Virtue Theory." *Essays in Philosophy*. 14(2): Article 4.