On the Systematicity of Descartes' Ethics: Generosity, Metaphysics, and *Scientia*

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THESIS

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents (Mehdi and Mahdieh) and my sisters (Zoha and Saba).
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION 1

2 GENEROSITY, THE COGITO, AND THE FOURTH MEDITATION 9

SECTION 1 Ethics, the Tree of Philosophy, and the Question of Systematicity 9
SECTION 2 Acquiring Generosity 15
SECTION 3 Generosity in the *Meditations*? 22
3.1 the first component 23
3.2 the second component 32
3.3 practicing generosity 37
SECTION 4 Conclusion 38

3 DESCARTES ON THE UNITY OF THE VIRTUES 39

SECTION 1 A Tension in Cartesian Ethics 39
SECTION 2 Aristotelian Virtue 42
SECTION 3 Descartes' Theory of Judgment 45
3.1 theoretical judgment 45
3.2 practical judgment 48
SECTION 4 The Intellectual and Volitional Requirements of Virtue 49
SECTION 5 Reconciling the Complex and Simple Account 56
SECTION 6 Descartes' Moral Epistemology 64
SECTION 7 Conclusion 69

4 DESCARTES ON THE PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE PRESERVATION 71

SECTION 1 *Scientia* and Stability 71
SECTION 2 An Overview of *Scientia* 77
SECTION 3 The Regeneration and Memory Solutions 81
SECTION 4 The Dispositionalist Solution 86
SECTION 5 Memory and the Defective Nature Doubt 93
SECTION 5 The Cartesian Circle Revisited 97
SECTION 7 Conclusion 100

5 CONCLUSION 101

APPENDIX 106

REFERENCES 107

VITA 112

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AT	*Oeuvres de Descartes* (cited by volume and page)
CSM	*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vols I and II (cited by volume and page)
CSM	*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol III (cited by page).

SUMMARY

Descartes is not widely recognized for his ethics; indeed, most readers are unaware that he had an ethics. However, Descartes placed great importance on his ethics, claiming that ethics is the highest branch of his philosophical system. I aim to understand the systematic relationship Descartes envisions between his ethics and the rest of his philosophy, particularly his metaphysics and epistemology. I defend three main theses. First, I argue against the recent trend in the literature that claims that the chief virtue in Descartes' ethics—generosity—is acquired in the *Meditations*. On this view, the presence of moral virtue in the *Meditations* shows that ethical practice is intertwined with metaphysics and epistemology. I argue that generosity cannot be acquired in the *Meditations* because acquiring generosity presupposes several metaphysical and physical truths that the meditator cannot access given her epistemic position. Thus, I maintain that metaphysics and epistemology is foundational to ethics. Second, I resolve the tension between Descartes' description of distinct virtues, and his insistence that there is only a single virtue—the disposition to judge well. Drawing from his theory of conceptual distinction in his metaphysics, I argue that Descartes offers a unique account of the unity of the virtues. Although Descartes describes different virtues, he thinks that all of them are identical to each other because they are reducible to the disposition to judge well. Nonetheless, we can conceptually distinguish between the virtues because we can regard the disposition to judge well in different ways given the various applications it has in different types of moral situations. Third, I show that some of Descartes' ethical concepts inform his epistemology. I draw from Descartes' theory of virtue to address "the problem of knowledge preservation," that is, how to render perfect knowledge—*scientia*—stable in light of the instability of clear and distinct perceptions. I argue that Descartes intends to preserve *scientia* by grounding items of *scientia* in virtuous habits of belief. These

SUMMARY (continued)

habits of belief are established through repeated engagement with cognitive routes to clear and distinct perceptions, and are ultimately grounded in memory. This reading has the advantage of explaining Descartes’ notoriously confusing remarks about memory in response to the Cartesian circle.

1 INTRODUCTION

Descartes is not usually recognized as an ethicist by contemporary commentators. Indeed, his peers in the early modern period didn't seem to recognize him as much of an ethicist either. Leibniz, for example, claimed that "Descartes has not much advanced the practice of morality" (AG: 241). As the traditional story goes, Descartes is the father of modern philosophy because he revolutionized the Scholastic framework for understanding the metaphysical and natural world, which undoubtedly still has ripples of influence to this day. Descartes' ethics, the thought goes, is merely a side project or an afterthought to his more prominent metaphysical, epistemological, and scientific system. Though it is indeed true that Descartes was not as influential an ethicist as he was a metaphysician and epistemologist, I contend that this standard view does not accurately capture how Descartes viewed himself *qua* philosopher and his philosophical system.

Descartes never wrote a proper treatise dedicated to ethics. In a letter to Chanut, Descartes expresses his reservations about writing about ethics:

> It is true that normally I refuse to write down my thoughts concerning morality. I have two reasons for this. One is that there is no other subject in which malicious people can so readily find pretexts for vilifying me; and the other is that I believe only sovereigns, or those authorized by them, have the right to concern themselves with regulating the morals of other people. (AT V: 86–7/CSMK: 326)

Despite these reservations, Descartes did write about ethics, and his ethical writings are spread throughout his corpus and correspondence. Descartes' initial concern with ethics actually emerge right at the foundations of his philosophical project. In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes outlines a method for pursuing true knowledge. The essence of the method is a skeptical stance towards one's judgments, that is,

> Never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth: that is, carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions, and to include nothing more in my judgements than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it. (AT VI: 18/CSM I: 120)

This methodic doubt, however, raises a problem for the "conduct of life," that is, one's practical actions. It seems that we cannot attain clear and distinct perceptions concerning practical affairs (at least not until true and certain first principles have been established), thus we ought not undertake practical actions. Noticing this problem, Descartes claims that we should take up a "provisional morality" [*morale par provision*] until we can find certain principles in philosophy:

> Now, before starting to rebuild your house, it is not enough simply to pull it down, to make provision for materials and architects (or else train yourself in architecture), and to have carefully drawn up the plans; you must also provide yourself with some other place where you can live comfortable while building is in progress. Likewise, I should remain indecisive in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgements, and in order to live as happily as I could during this time, I formed for myself a provisional moral code consisting of just three or four maxims. (AT VI: 24/CSM I: 122).

Descartes' provisional morality consists of the following four maxims. Roughly:

(1) To obey the laws and customs of one's country, and to follow God's religion.

(2) To be firm and decisive in one's actions

(3) To try to master oneself, and change one's desires instead of the world

(4) To choose the best occupation

Though the provisional morality is not a fully fleshed out ethics, these maxims are indeed ethical in nature, and serve as a temporary guide for the conduct of life.[1] Arguably, the most important maxim of the provisional morality is the second maxim, as it sketches out a preliminary account of virtue. As Descartes writes about the second maxim:

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[1] At first glance, these maxims might not seem to constitute a view on morality. However, on closer inspection one can see the seeds of a theory of virtue, the passions, and the good.

> Since our will tends to pursue or avoid only what our intellect represents as good or bad, we need only to judge well in order to act well, and to judge as well as we can in order to do our best—that is to say, in order to acquire all the virtues and in general all the other goods we can acquire. And when we are certain of this, we cannot fail to be happy. (AT VI: 28/CSM I: 125)

Descartes will expand upon this maxim in later writings as he develops his virtue theory.[2]

Later in his career, Descartes implies that he has moved past this provisional morality, and has established (or at least is seeking to establish) a perfect moral system. In the *Preface to the French edition* of the *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes represents his philosophical system with the image of a tree:

> The whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals. By 'morals' (*la morale*) I understand the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom. (AT IXB: 15/CSM I: 186)

Descartes' provisional morality shows that Descartes has some interest in ethics. However, this interest could still be interpreted as a non-fundamental part of his philosophical project. Having a provisional morality might be something we just accept in order to keep us grounded while we search for the truth. But, the thought goes, the search for true and certain principles does not encompass a search for a true ethics. The image of the tree of philosophy puts pressure on such a reading. The tree implies that morality is a central part of Descartes' philosophical system.

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[2] Some commentators have argued that Descartes' mature ethics is a reiteration of the provisional morality (Cimakasy and Polansky, 2012). In this dissertation I will not directly take a stance on this issue. However, while I do think that Descartes' mature ethics is consistent with the provisional morality, I think that Descartes' mature ethics is more extensive and developed than the provisional morality. For more on Descartes' provisional morality see Morgan (1994, 39-64) and Marshall (1998, 9-56).

Indeed, it is the highest part of the system. On this view, metaphysics, epistemology, physics, and so on are fundamental to Descartes' philosophy.[3] But at the end of the day, it is just that: fundamental. Or to use more familiar Cartesian language: it is foundational. But foundational to what? If we take Descartes' representation of his philosophical system in the image of the tree of philosophy seriously, then we must reconsider—seriously—our understanding of him as the paradigmatic metaphysician and epistemologist. For metaphysics and epistemology are ultimately foundational to Descartes' real philosophical goal: the establishment of a perfect moral system (*la morale*).

Indeed, *la morale* is not on a par with the other parts of philosophy. As Descartes continues:

> Now just as it is not the roots or the trunk of a tree from which one gathers fruit, but only the ends of the branches, so the principal part of philosophy depends on those parts of it which can only be learn last of all. (AT IXB: 15/CSM I: 186)

Ethics is not just a branch of philosophy, it also provides the fruits of philosophy itself. These fruits are the "principal part of philosophy."

What is the perfect moral system that Descartes envisions? And how is it grounded in the rest of Descartes' philosophical system? Descartes never explicitly lays out his perfect moral system. However, in his writings and correspondence after the *French Preface* Descartes starts to tackle some fundamental moral concepts, such as virtue, the good, happiness, and the passions. Though not decisive, these writings give us a sense of what Descartes' moral system might be. Much of Descartes' ethical views comes in the context of his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia and the *Passions of the Soul* (written in response to many of Princess Elizabeth's queries). The focus of the correspondence is the nature of virtue and the requirements for virtue. In the *Passions of the Soul,* Descartes addresses the relationship between virtue, happiness, and the passions. These writings suggest that ethics was an important subject for Descartes, and that he was making strides towards fleshing out his full moral system.

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[3] "the first part of philosophy is metaphysics, which contains the principles of knowledge" (AT IXB: 14/CSM I: 186).

The general focus on virtue in these writings suggests that at the heart of Descartes' moral system is a theory of virtue. As Descartes claims, virtue is the supreme good:

> I make a distinction between the supreme good—which consists in the exercise of virtue, or, what comes to the same, the possession of all those goods whose acquisition depends upon our free will—and the satisfaction of mind which results from that acquisition. (AT IV: 305/CSMK: 268)

What is Cartesian virtue? Descartes gives varying definitions throughout the correspondence and the *Passions*. In many texts, he identifies virtue with the firm and constant resolution to use free will well, and he often identifies virtue with the second maxim of the provisional morality. In other texts, he distinguishes between different types of virtue, such as generosity, courage, and humility. Though Descartes is not unequivocal about the nature of virtue, what is clear is that pursuing and exercising virtue is the primary task of the moral agent, and that if she is successful in exercising virtue she will attain happiness and mastery of her passions. To acquire virtue, Descartes claims in some texts that we must possess "knowledge of the truth" (AT IV: 291/CSMK: 265). Such knowledge ranges from truths of metaphysics, physics, society, and politics. These epistemic requirements give us a clue as to how Descartes' ethics is supposed to be grounded in the rest of his metaphysical system. We must have knowledge of metaphysics, physics, and so on not only to establish a perfect moral system, but to practice it as well.

In this dissertation, my aim is to make some progress toward understanding Descartes' perfect moral system, as presented in his later ethical writings, by examining his theory of virtue, and how it relates to his metaphysics and epistemology. I aim to answer three main questions:

(1) What is the relationship between the chief Cartesian virtue—generosity—and Descartes' metaphysics and epistemology?

(2) What is the nature of Cartesian virtue, and does Cartesian virtue allow for the possibility of moral knowledge?

(3) Does Descartes' ethics inform his metaphysical and epistemological project in any way?

The dissertation is divided into three chapters, each of which answers one of the above questions. In the first chapter, "Generosity, the *Cogito*, and the Fourth Meditation," I examine the relationship between the virtue of generosity and metaphysical knowledge. In attempting to place ethics in its rightful place within Descartes' philosophical system, several commentators have tried to show that ethics is foundational to Descartes' philosophical system because virtue is intertwined with metaphysics. On this view, ethics is not just the highest branch of philosophy, but it is the root of philosophy as well. Lisa Shapiro, for example, has argued that the chief virtue in Descartes' ethics, generosity, is acquired by the meditator in the Fourth Meditation. The virtue of generosity, according to Descartes, consists of two components: (1) the knowledge that free will is the only thing that truly belongs to us, and (2) the firm and constant resolution to use free will well. In the Fourth Meditation, the meditator seems to achieve both components upon arriving at knowledge of her free will, and resolving to use it well by only affirming her clear and distinct perceptions. Omri Boehm, on the other hand, has argued that generosity is foundational to the *cogito* of the Second Meditation. According to Boehm, the cogito presupposes an affirmation of one's freedom, i.e. the first component of generosity. I argue that both readings are problematic, precisely because generosity in part presupposes the metaphysical knowledge offered in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. For example, I argue that the virtue of generosity presupposes knowledge of the mind-body distinction. The meditator, however, cannot have such knowledge in the Second or Fourth Meditations because the real distinction is not establishing until the Sixth Meditation. Moreover, I argue that the virtue of generosity presupposes knowledge of other truths the meditator cannot have access to, such as knowledge of physics and one's metaphysical standing in the universe. The upshot of my reading of generosity is that ethics is indeed the highest branch of philosophy, and presupposes (some) knowledge of the other parts of philosophy.

In the Second Chapter, "Descartes on the Unity of the Virtues," I offer a new reading of Descartes' virtue theory. In particular, I reconcile the tension between Descartes' complex conception of virtue and his simple conception of virtue. In some texts, Descartes claims that there are many virtues (generosity, courage, humility, etc.), while in other texts he claims that there is only one virtue (i.e. the virtue of judging well). I argue for a metaphysically simple account of virtue, according to which that there is only one virtue, that is, the disposition to judge well. However, there still remains a multiplicity of virtues, as we can regard this one virtue in many different ways based on the kind of situation in which it is exercised. This reading has some significant payoffs beyond reconciling the metaphysical tension in Descartes' virtue theory. In particular, it gives us an account of Descartes' moral epistemology. I argue that Descartes' theory of virtue presupposes that moral knowledge is possible. This puts pressure on the standard reading that knowledge can only be grounded in clear and distinct perceptions.

In the Third Chapter, "Descartes on the Problem of Knowledge Preservation" I offer a re-reading of Descartes' epistemology in light of Descartes' theory of virtue. My aim is to offer a solution to an oft-neglected problem in Descartes' epistemology, what I call *the problem of knowledge preservation*. The issue is how to preserve perfect knowledge (*scientia*) given that the judgments that amount to *scientia* seem to be only obtainable by being grounded in momentary clear and distinct perceptions. I argue that two possible solutions in the literature, the *regeneration* and *memory* solutions fail. The regeneration solution argues that to stabilize our knowledge we ultimately have to regenerate clear and distinct perceptions through “cognitive routes” whenever we make a potential *scientia* type judgment. The regeneration solution is problematic because it overestimates our ability to regenerate clear and distinct perceptions; moreover, it lacks textual support. The memory solution argues that so long as we remember having clearly and distinctly perceived something, we maintain knowledge of it. The memory solution is problematic, however, because it presupposes that God provides a blanket guarantee of our memories of clear and distinct perceptions. Though these solutions fail, I argue that they pick up on features of Descartes’ considered view. Drawing from both solutions, I argue that knowledge is preserved through virtuous habits of belief. I call this view the *dispositionalist* solution. Virtuous habits of belief, I contend, are established through repeated engagement with cognitive routes, and are ultimately grounded in memory. Thus memory does have a role in the preservation of knowledge, just not in the way the memory solution initially imagined. A significant upshot of the dispositionalist solution is that it can salvage Descartes’ remarks about memory in his discussion of the Cartesian circle. Moreover, the reading shows that Descartes’ ethical views, particularly his theory of virtue, informs his epistemology.

2 GENEROSITY, THE *COGITO*, AND THE FOURTH MEDITATION

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1 Ethics, the Tree of Philosophy, and the Question of Systematicity

Recent scholarship on Descartes's ethics has been particularly concerned with understanding the systematic relationship Descartes envisions between ethics and the rest of philosophy. The guiding text is the famous tree of philosophy passage in the French Preface to the *Principles of Philosophy*,[1] as it is one of the few places where Descartes explicitly situates ethics within his philosophical system:[2]

> The whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely, medicine, mechanics, and morals. By 'morals' [*la morale*] I understand the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge [*présupposant une entière conaissance*] of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom [*la sagesse*].
>
> Now just as it is not the roots or the trunk of a tree from which one gathers the fruit, but only the ends of the branches, so the principal benefit of philosophy depends on those parts of it which can only be learnt [*apprendre*] last of all. (AT IXB: 14/CSM I: 186)[3]

Before proceeding, we must distinguish two senses of 'ethics' (here, '*la morale*') at play in this passage and Descartes's broader ethical writings. There is a theoretical sense of '*la morale*,' that is, moral philosophy. This involves a theory of virtue, happiness, goodness, etc. Descartes clearly has moral philosophy in mind when he refers to the most perfect moral system. But there is also a practical sense of '*la morale,*' that is, the practice of morals. This involves the practice of virtue, the attainment of happiness, the pursuit of the good, etc. In the tree of philosophy, Descartes does not explicitly use '*la morale*' in this sense, but he has (in part) the practice of morals in mind when he refers to the fruit and principal benefit of learning philosophy. For earlier in the French Preface he claims, "the study of philosophy is more necessary for the regulation of our morals [*moeurs*] and our conduct in this life than is the use of our eyes to guide our steps" (AT IXB: 3-4/CSM I: 180). The commentators I engage are primarily concerned with ethics understood under the practical sense. In particular, they want to know at what point virtue is acquired in the tree of philosophy.[4] Unless otherwise noted, then, I use 'ethics' and related terms in this practical sense.

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[1] I employ the following abbreviations for editions of Descartes's work: 'AT': *Oeuvres de Descartes* (cited by volume and page); 'CSM': *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vols I and II (cited by volume and page); 'CSMK': *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol III (cited by page).

[2] Many commentators read the tree of philosophy as a genuine representation of Descartes's philosophical system. However, not everyone has read it in this way. Roger Ariew (1992), for example, claims that Descartes leaves out significant parts of his so-called system, such as mathematics, logic, and theology. Although I am in agreement with the standard view, my thesis is consistent with a non-systematic reading. One can agree that the practice of ethics is distinct from metaphysical inquiry, yet deny that ethics and metaphysics figure into a broader system.

[3] See also Early Writings AT X: 215/CSM I: 3; *Rules* I, AT X: 359-61/CSM I: 9-10; Letter to Chanut 15 June 1646, AT IV: 441/CSMK: 289.

The standard interpretation is that the tree of philosophy represents an epistemological order to the attainment of virtue (Marshall 1998, 2-4, 72-4, 59-60; Morgan 1994, 204-11; Rutherford 2004, 190).[5] For example, Donald Rutherford writes that happiness and virtue "can be guaranteed only if reason itself has been perfected through the acquisition and proper ordering of intellectual knowledge" (2004, 190). Thus, on this approach, ethics is a part of Descartes's philosophical system because knowledge of metaphysics and the sciences is supposed to lead the moral agent to virtue.[6] Call this the *epistemological reading*.[7]

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[4] Of course, this has implications for one's interpretation of Descartes's moral philosophy.

[5] These readings draw from the following sorts of texts: *Rules* I, AT X: 361/CSM I: 10; French Preface, AT IXB: 2/CSM I: 179 and AT IXB: 20/CSM I: 190; Letter to Elizabeth 4 August 1645, AT IV: 267/CSMK: 258; Letter to Elizabeth 15 September 1645, AT IV: 291-6/CSMK: 265-7; Letter to Chanut 26 February 1649, AT V: 290-1/CSMK: 368.

In a series of recent papers, Lisa Shapiro (2005; 2008a) has challenged the epistemological reading. Shapiro (2008a, 456-7) does not deny that knowledge of metaphysics and the sciences is useful for virtue. But on her view, the epistemological reading cannot adequately ground Descartes's ethics within his philosophical system. For if ethics does not come into play until after metaphysics and the sciences have been completed, then it seems that ethics is merely "grafted on to a fully developed tree" (Ibid., 447). Instead, Shapiro claims that ethics is actually foundational to the tree of philosophy: virtue is not acquired *after* one completes metaphysics; rather, virtue *contributes* to metaphysics (Ibid., 459).

Shapiro develops this reading by arguing that the meditator acquires generosity [*générosité*] in the Fourth Meditation.[8] In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes claims that generosity is our chief passion and virtue, describing it as "the key to all the virtues and a general remedy for every disorder of the passions" (*Passions* III.161, AT XI: 454/CSM I: 388). Generosity,

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[6] The standard reading does not claim that the virtuous person must be an expert in metaphysics and natural philosophy. Rather, the view is that there are certain general truths of metaphysics and natural philosophy one must know (see section 3.2).

[7] The epistemological reading seems to have the unattractive implication that prior to Descartes's metaphysical discoveries, no moral agent could have acquired virtue because nobody had access to the true metaphysics and natural philosophy. The thought is this: surely there have been courageous people prior to Descartes. There is a sense in which proponents of the epistemological reading have to accept this consequence: Descartes does think his predecessors had the wrong metaphysics, thus they could not have been virtuous. However, Descartes does have the resources to allow for those ignorant of the true metaphysics to possess a degree of virtue. According to Descartes, virtue ultimately consists in the right use of the will. Ideally, we will use our will according to "knowledge of what is right", 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" (Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth, AT VIIIA: 2/CSM I: 191). Those who lack a sharper intellect can still be virtuous "according to their lights" so long as they "do their utmost to acquire knowledge of what is right, and always to pursue what they judge to be right" (Ibid.).

[8] Shapiro (2008a) sees herself as developing Geneviève Rodis-Lewis's (1987) interpretation of generosity. As Shapiro puts it, Rodis-Lewis's view is that "generosity is a seed-bearing fruit, and that seed, if properly cultivated, will grow into the tree of philosophy" (2008a, 459).

> [W]hich causes a person's self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be, has only two components. The first consists in his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him but 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)

Shapiro (2008a, 458-9) acknowledges that the two components of generosity are supposed to lead one to act in traditionally generous ways (e.g. to be kind, charitable, and unselfish) in the "conduct of life." But she contends that they are also central to the "contemplation of truth."[9] On Shapiro's reading, the two components amount to "the recognition on each of our parts that we have a free will, paired with the resolution to use our will well" (2005, 28; see also 2008a, 459; 2008b, 35; 2011, 17-18). In the Fourth Meditation, the meditator satisfies these two components because she understands that she has a free will, and resolves to use it well by adhering to the method for avoiding error (Shapiro 2005, 28; 2008a, 459).

Generosity is supposed to contribute to metaphysics in two key ways. First, it regulates the meditator's disordered passions, especially her excessive desire for knowledge (Shapiro 2005, 25-30).[10] The desire for knowledge that initiates the First Meditation is excessive because the meditator hopes to never make a mistake again. By the end of the Fourth Meditation, however, the meditator desires to know that which she *can* know. Generosity tempers the meditator's desire for knowledge by leading her to acknowledge her cognitive limitations. This change in passion is significant because it helps the meditator reconsider her metaphysical goals and ultimately defeat skepticism. By the end of the Sixth Meditation, the meditator no longer desires to have absolute certainty in all of her beliefs, thus “the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable” (AT VII: 89/CSM II: 61). Second, and more significantly, the practice of generosity is the “key to Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology” (Shapiro 2008a, 459). For it is by adhering to the method for avoiding error—only affirming her clear and distinct perceptions—that the meditator can draw the real distinction between mind and body, and prove the existence of an external world. On Shapiro’s reading, then, ethics is a part of Descartes’s philosophical system because generosity is involved in the construction of its metaphysical foundations. Call this the *organic reading*.[11] [12]

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[9] Descartes's distinction between the contemplation of truth and the conduct of life will be developed in section 3.2. For now, see *Replies* II, AT VII: 149/CSM II: 106.

[10] It is important to note that other commentators have also attended to the meditator's passions, yet without involving generosity. See Schmitter (2002); Beardsley (2005).

Shapiro (2005, 14-5) stresses that her interpretation, as it currently stands, is merely a suggestion and that she is not calling for a wholesale rejection of standard interpretations of Descartes’s metaphysics. Nonetheless, her reading is gaining traction in the recent literature. Noa Naaman-Zauderer confirms that generosity can be extended to “the realm of intellectual inquiry” (2010, 202). Omri Boehm (2014) extends this approach, arguing that generosity is actually foundational to the *cogito* in the Second Meditation. Boehm claims that generosity is not an "ethical counterpart [of the *cogito*] but the ground of theoretical certainty itself." (Ibid., 707, fn. 9). In short, if Shapiro et al. are right, we do have to reinterpret key features of Descartes's metaphysics and the *Meditations* more generally.[13]

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[11] It is important to distinguish the organic reading from the claim that Descartes’s metaphysics is *motivated* by ethical concerns. On this view, one might say that Descartes (in part) draws the real distinction between mind and body because it will help establish (say) the priority of intellectual pleasures over bodily pleasures. Though the organic reading is consistent with this view, Shapiro is making a stronger claim, namely, that ethics itself is involved in the construction of metaphysics.

[12] Morgan’s interpretation, which I have classified as standard, describes the tree of philosophy as organic as well: “in a living organism such as a tree, all the connected parts grow *simultaneously*, dependent upon one another….hence the basic structure of the tree, branches and all, is apparent at the very early stage in its development” (1994, 25). This seems to place Morgan in Shapiro’s camp. However, a closer reading shows that Morgan is not claiming that the tree is organic in virtue of (say) metaphysics involving ethics; rather, the claim is about the dependency relations within the tree: “the most basic conclusions in metaphysics and physics will shape the structure of morals” (Ibid.).

I am sympathetic with the recent trend of situating Descartes's metaphysics within his moral project. However, I will argue that generosity does not contribute to the metaphysical foundations of Descartes's system, and consequently, that we should resist the organic reading.[14] Though I will focus on Shapiro's interpretation, my arguments are general, and thus apply to similar iterations in the literature (I will, however, substantially engage Boehm's interpretation of the first component of generosity). There are two objections that I develop. First, I argue that the meditator is neither in a position to acquire generosity, nor to satisfy particular features of generosity, precisely because she does not know the requisite metaphysics. The claim that generosity contributes to our achievement of this metaphysics, then, is problematic. Second, I argue that in order to construe the meditator as generous, one must strip generosity of everything that makes it ethical in the first place. This is an impoverished conception of generosity, which cannot support the claim that *ethics* is involved in metaphysics.[15]

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[13] As Shapiro points out, "if the meditator feels passions, and passions have a bodily cause, then it seems that either he is not to be thought of as a purely thinking thing or we need to reconsider Descartes's notion of pure thought" (2005, 23). Boehm is also clear about the revisionary implications of his reading: "Freedom, not only in the moral but also in the theoretical domain, is the first indubitable discovery, grounding the philosopher's assertion of his existence" (2014, 720).

[14] I will only address Shapiro's claim about the passions in the *Meditations* insofar as I am denying that generosity has any role in their (alleged) regulation. As I see it, there is nothing inconsistent about granting a role to the meditator's passions, while denying the organic reading.

[15] It is important to keep in mind that Shapiro is using 'ethics' in the practical sense described above. Accordingly, I am only resisting the claim that ethics, *in this narrower sense*, is involved in the *Meditations*. Strictly speaking, my reading is consistent with allowing for certain aspects

The paper is divided up as follows. In section 2, I examine the oft-neglected method for acquiring generosity Descartes offers in *Passions* III.161, arguing that Descartes would not think that the Fourth Meditation could induce generosity. In section 3, I offer a new reading of the two components of generosity listed in *Passions* III.153, arguing that the meditator cannot satisfy either component, and by extension, that generosity cannot be practiced in the *Meditations*. I conclude in section 4 by discussing the importance of distinguishing ethics from metaphysics.

2 Acquiring Generosity

In *Passions* III.161, Descartes offers his method for acquiring generosity:

> [A] If we occupy ourselves frequently in considering the nature of free will and [B] the many advantages which proceed from a firm resolution to make good use of it—[C] while also considering, on the other hand, the many vain and useless cares which trouble ambitious people—[D] we may arouse the passion of generosity in ourselves and then acquire the virtue. (AT XI: 453-4/CSM I: 388; sections added)[16]

We can disambiguate two meditations on the will in the method for acquiring generosity. Broadly construed, the first consists of frequent consideration of the nature of free will [A]. Call this the *metaphysical meditation on the will*. The second consists of frequent consideration of the

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of moral philosophy to be intertwined with metaphysics. Indeed, the meditator considers various moral propositions that are central to Descartes's final moral system. For example, that the contemplation of God "enables us to know the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life" (Third Meditation, AT VII: 52/CSM II: 36), and that free will is "man's greatest and most important perfection" (Fourth Meditation, AT VII: 62/CSM II: 43). (I say "considers" because it is unclear whether the meditator has *knowledge* of these moral propositions).

[16] In the beginning of *Passions* III.161, Descartes claims that generosity is "dependent on good birth" (AT XI: 453-4/CSM I: 388). This seems to suggest that, in addition to the method offered above, Descartes is proposing a separate "natural path" to generosity. However, as clarified in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, Descartes is merely acknowledging that some people are born with a "tendency" to acquire generosity (AT VIIIB: 357-8/CSM I: 303-4). In short, the portion of *Passions* III.161 I have presented is Descartes's method for acquiring generosity. For similar presentations of the method, see Rodis-Lewis (1987, 54); Des Chene (2012, 188); Naaman-Zauderer (2010, 201).

many advantages that proceed from a good use of the will [B], and frequent consideration of the disadvantages that proceed from a bad use of the will [C]. Call this the *consequential meditation on the will*.

Commentators arguing that generosity is present in the *Meditations* have a difficult relationship with *Passions* III.161. On the one hand, some commentators disregard this passage (e.g. Boehm). Perhaps they are motivated by Descartes's suggestion that the method is merely a *sufficient condition* for acquiring generosity: "If [*si*] we occupy ourselves frequently in considering…we may arouse the passion of generosity in ourselves and then acquire the virtue" (AT XI: 453-4/CSM I: 388).[17] The thought here is that whether the relevant part of the *Meditations* (i.e. the Second or Fourth Meditation) resembles Descartes's method is irrelevant to the question of whether the meditator in fact acquires generosity, because the method is not necessary for acquiring generosity. However, disregarding the method is still problematic. Descartes published the *Passions* (1649) about eight years after the *Meditations* (1641). Thus, if he thought that the Second or Fourth Meditation were a path to generosity, presumably he would have indicated as much. But he does not. Thus, I think commentators owe us some explanation; they cannot simply ignore this central passage.

On the other hand, commentators who do try to account for *Passions* III.161 have problematic interpretations of the method for acquiring generosity. Consider Shapiro's interpretation:

> According to Descartes, one 'may excite in oneself the passion and then acquire the virtue of generosity' just by frequently considering 'what free will is and how great the advantages are that come from a firm resolution to use it well.' (1999, 252)

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[17] Strictly speaking, it is unclear whether the method even amounts to a sufficient condition for acquiring generosity. Descartes says the method "may" (*peut*) induce generosity. Perhaps he is being careless. Nonetheless, this passage represents his views about how generosity is acquired, and thus it must be taken seriously.

On this reading of the method, the Fourth Meditation seems to resemble the method for acquiring generosity. In the Fourth Meditation, the meditator investigates truth, falsity, and the source of her errors. A significant part of this meditation turns on understanding the nature of free will: the meditator learns that her false judgments arise from a misuse of her freedom, as opposed to deception on the part of God. In this respect, the Fourth Meditation involves something like the metaphysical meditation on the will. Furthermore, the meditator considers a key advantage that comes from using her will well: if she suspends judgment about her obscure and confused perceptions, and only affirms her clear and distinct ones, she can attain knowledge. In this respect, the Fourth Meditation involves something like the consequential meditation on the will as well. Thus, Shapiro's reading seems to be in good standing.

Here, I will not question whether the Fourth Meditation involves something like the metaphysical meditation on the will.[18] Instead, I want to focus on the consequential meditation on the will. Recall that the consequential meditation on the will involves frequent consideration of two things: "[B] the many advantages which proceed from a firm resolution to make good use of it [free will]" and "[C]…the many vain and useless cares which trouble ambitious people." However, notice that Shapiro omits [C] in her rendition of the method. For Shapiro, we only need to reflect on the many advantages that come from using our will well. No explanation is offered for this omission. Perhaps it is accidental, but it certainly helps Shapiro's case. On its own, [B] is unclear about the sorts of advantages Descartes wants us to consider, and thus admits of a theoretical gloss. That is, Shapiro can read [B] as claiming that we should reflect on theoretical advantages that come from using our will well (e.g. metaphysical knowledge). Thus it seems that the consequential meditation on the will does occur in the Fourth Meditation, because the meditator clearly considers this advantage: “I shall unquestionably reach the truth, if only I give sufficient attention to all the things which I perfectly understand…” (AT VII: 62/CSM II: 43). However, when we include [C], a different reading of the consequential meditation on the will starts to emerge. As I will argue, far from being a meditation about theoretical advantages and disadvantages, the consequential meditation on the will concerns practical advantages and disadvantages.

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[18] Nonetheless, I would resist the claim that the metaphysical meditation on the will does occur in the Fourth Meditation. As I see it, the metaphysical meditation on the will involves reflection on our *knowledge* of the nature of free will. However, I do not think that in the Fourth Meditation the meditator can have knowledge of her free will, because she has yet to draw the real distinction between mind and body. As we will see below, the meditator is still unclear about whether she is a corporeal thing, and consequently, she cannot understand the nature of her (non-corporeal) will.

Let us reconsider the consequential meditation on the will, then, by first examining the disadvantages mentioned in [C]. Descartes says we must frequently consider the many vain and useless cares that trouble ambitious people. It may seem odd that Descartes regards ambitious people as using their will in the wrong way; usually, ambition is a positive trait. Ambition involves determination and hard work, and drives us to achieve difficult goals. But Descartes is not objecting to this type of ambition; rather, he has in mind ambitious people who are *excessive* in their desires. Our desires become excessive when we fail “to distinguish adequately the things which depend wholly on us from those which do not depend on us at all” (*Passions* II.144, AT XI: 436-7/CSM I: 379). The things that depend on us fall within the control of our free will, and the things that do not depend on “other causes” outside of our control (*Passions* II.145, AT XI: 437/CSM I: 379-80). Ambitious people—in Descartes’s sense—fail to make this distinction, and thus value things that do not depend on their free will, such as intelligence, beauty, and wealth (*Passions* III.158, AT XI: 449/CSM I: 386). In this way, they have unjustified self-esteem, and are vain (*Passions* III.157, AT XI: 448-9/CSM I: 385). These vain and useless cares make ambitious people “slaves to their desires,” and because they cannot fulfill their desires, “they have souls which are constantly agitated by hatred, envy, jealousy, or anger” (*Passions* III.158, AT XI: 449/CSM I: 386).[19] In short, the ultimate disadvantage of having excessive ambition is unhappiness.

Recall that [B] was unclear about the advantages we should consider. It merely states that we must consider “the many advantages which proceed from a firm resolution to make good use of it [free will].” But now that we have a better sense of the sorts of disadvantages Descartes wants us to consider, we are in a position to clarify the advantages he has in mind. I propose that Descartes wants us to reflect on the advantages enjoyed by people who do value things that depend on their free will. That is, we should reflect on the behavior of people with justified self-esteem. As one might expect, these virtuous people are not vulnerable to the emotional disorders that afflict ambitious people, enjoying a range of advantages. Most notably, because their desires are in conformity with their finite power, they can fulfill their well-formed desires and achieve happiness (*Passions* II.144, AT XI: 436-7/CSM I: 379).

A practical reading of the consequential meditation on the will can also explain how this part of the method helps induce generosity. In section 3, we will fully consider the complexities of generosity by examining its “two components.” In the present context, however, I suggest that we think about generosity, as Descartes often does, in terms of self-esteem, or more specifically, *maximal* and *justified* self-esteem.[20] Recall that generosity makes a person’s self-esteem “as great as it may legitimately be" (*Passions* III.153, AT XI: 445-6/CSM I: 384). The legitimacy of the generous person's self-esteem is significant, because it distinguishes her generosity from vanity: "vanity and generosity consist simply in the good opinion we have of ourselves—the only difference being that this opinion is unjustified in the one case and justified in the other" (*Passions* III.160, AT XI: 451/CSM I: 386-7). According to Descartes, vanity and generosity are similar because they are produced by the same movement of spirits involved in the passions of wonder, joy, and self-love. But what makes the self-esteem of the generous person justified, while the self-esteem of the vain person unjustified, are the different *causes* of these movements. Vain people lack proper self-knowledge, and are thus "the most liable to become prouder or humbler than they ought…they are surprised by anything new that comes their way, and so attribute it to themselves and wonder at themselves, and have either esteem or contempt for themselves depending on whether they judge the novelty to be to their advantage or not" (Ibid.). Generous people, on the other hand, "are well acquainted [*connaissent*] with the causes of their self-esteem," namely, "the power to make use of our free will, which causes us to value ourselves, and the infirmities of the subject who has this power, which causes us not to esteem ourselves too highly" (Ibid.). On the proposed reading, we can see how the consequential meditation on the will puts us in contact with these causes or *reasons* for maximal and justified self-esteem. By observing the advantages enjoyed by people with proper self-esteem, we come to appreciate the great power our free will affords us, and by observing the disadvantages that

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[19] See also *Passions* III.164, AT XI: 456/CSM I: 389, in which Descartes describes the problems that plague “weak and abject spirits.”

[20] At first glance one might think there is an inconsistency between Descartes’s claim that generosity is a species of esteem, and his claim that generosity causes self-esteem. I will not deal

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with this issue here, but as far as I can tell there is no problem with having generosity qua passion of esteem cause another kind of esteem (e.g. self-esteem).

plague people with improper self-esteem, we come to terms with our own weaknesses and potential for vice.[21]

We are now in a position to see why the Fourth Meditation cannot involve the consequential meditation on the will. Many (if not all) of the advantages and disadvantages considered in the consequential meditation on the will pertain to the consequences of practical conduct. However, such considerations simply do not figure into the Fourth Meditation. Indeed, Descartes stresses that the Fourth Meditation dealt only "with the mistakes we commit in distinguishing between the true and the false and not those that occur in our pursuit of good and evil" (*Replies* IV, AT VII: 248/CSM II: 172), and that "there is no discussion of matters pertaining to faith or the conduct of life [*vitam agendam*], but simply of speculative truths which are known solely by means of the natural light" (Synopsis, AT VII: 15/CSM II: 11).[22]

That these considerations do not occur in the Fourth Meditation is sufficient for showing that the Fourth Meditation *does not* exemplify the consequential meditation on the will. But it is important to see that the Fourth Meditation *cannot* exemplify the consequential meditation on the will. The consequential meditation on the will demands reflection on the actions of others, and how the consequences of their actions affect their lives. This is not a matter of speculative truth: we do not have innate ideas about practical conduct. We must observe, *a posteriori*, other people to learn about them. The problem that this detail poses for Shapiro's reading is that by the Fourth Meditation, the meditator cannot know that other (finite) minds, let alone mind-body composites, exist. The *cogito* argument of the Second Meditation only entails that one *res cogitans* exists. And although the meditator learns about the existence of God (an infinite mind) in the Third Meditation, she understands that she has enough formal reality such that she could be causally responsible for her ideas of other things: "As far as concerns the ideas which represent other men, or animals, or angels, I have no difficulty in understanding that they could be put together from the ideas I have of myself, of corporeal things and of God, even if the world contained no men besides me, no animals and no angels" (AT VII: 43/CSM II: 29). From the perspective of the Fourth Meditation, then, the universe consists of only two substances: the meditator (qua *res cogitans*) and God. It is not until the Sixth Meditation that the meditator is in a position to prove the existence of extension, and that her sensory perceptions of external things are reliable. In short, by the Fourth Meditation, the meditator cannot reflect on the actions of mind-body composites; consequently, the Fourth Meditation cannot exemplify the method for acquiring generosity.

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[21] Reflection on the behavior of other people is crucial to the process of acquiring generosity, and it is emphasized again in Descartes's account of why humility accompanies generosity: "We have humility as a virtue when, as a result of reflecting on the infirmity of our nature and on the wrongs we may previously have done, or are capable of doing (wrongs which are no less serious than those which others may do), we do not prefer ourselves to anyone else and we think that since others have free will just as much as we do, they may use it just as well as we use ours" (*Passions* III.155, AT XI: 447/CSM I: 385).

[22] Earlier (footnote 15), I conceded that the meditator considers various moral propositions in the Fourth Meditation. This seems to conflict with Descartes's claim that the Fourth Meditation does not discuss the conduct of life. Two responses are available here. First, even if Descartes is overstating his case in the Synopsis, it still holds that the consequential meditation on the will does not occur in the Fourth Meditation. Second, the moral propositions considered seem mostly meta-ethical in nature, as they concern the *nature* of the good, evil, and so on. In that sense, they are relevantly speculative, and thus do not immediately pertain to practical action in the conduct of life (arguably, a matter of first-order ethics).

3 Generosity in the *Meditations*?

That the Fourth Meditation does not exemplify Descartes's method for acquiring generosity tells against Shapiro's reading. But given that the method is merely a sufficient condition for acquiring generosity, strictly speaking, the Fourth Meditation could still induce generosity. The tenability of Shapiro’s reading, then, rests on whether the meditator does in fact acquire generosity.

Shapiro claims that the meditator is generous in two respects. First, the meditator satisfies the two components of generosity listed in *Passions* III.153. It is important to note that these two components initially constitute the *passion* of generosity, but upon becoming a habit in the soul they constitute the disposition or *virtue* of generosity (*Passions* II.54, AT XI: 373-4/CSM I: 350; *Passions* III.160-1, AT XI: 451-54/CSM I: 386-8). Shapiro’s original reading (2005) only claimed that the meditator acquires the passion of generosity. However, her more recent account (2008a) claims that the meditator acquires the virtue of generosity as well. This is because Shapiro now wants to say that virtue—not just the passions—contributes to metaphysics.

Second, the generosity of the meditator is not a dormant or idle disposition. If that were the case, then generosity would be an irrelevant feature of the *Meditations*, and could not ground the organic reading. Instead, Shapiro (2008a, 459-61) claims that generosity has an active role in the meditator’s progress in metaphysics. The meditator exemplifies generosity because she practices generosity within the context of metaphysics. In what follows, I argue against both of these claims: the meditator cannot acquire either component of generosity (sections 3.1-3.2) and, by extension, generosity cannot be practiced in the *Meditations* (section 3.3).

3.1 The First Component

Descartes describes the first component of generosity as follows: “the first consists in his knowing [*connaît*] that nothing truly belongs to him [*qu’il n’y a rien qui véritablement lui appartienne*] 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” (*Passions* III.153, AT XI: 445-6/CSM I: 384). According to Shapiro, the first component amounts to “the recognition on each of our parts that we have a free will" (2005, 28). In an earlier paper, Shapiro characterizes this recognition as follows:

> The first step in acquiring generosity is to recognize that we are freely willing, and I have been suggesting that this recognition comes principally with a critical reflection on what we find ourselves taking for granted. For it is precisely with this reflection, which essentially involves turning our thoughts away from those to which we are predisposed, that we exercise our freedom. The primordial exercise of our free will occurs when we do something other than what our senses dispose us to do. Doing this involves taking a risk, but this risk is also accompanied by a feeling toward one's own power in that undertaking. It is this *feeling* that constitutes our *experience* of our free will, and so it is this feeling that completes our understanding that we have a free will. (1999, 257-8)

On this reading, the meditator surely acquires the first component in the Fourth Meditation (AT VII: 57-8/CSM II: 40). But it is not clear that merely knowing that "we have a free will" amounts to the first component of generosity. Descartes tells us that the first component involves two items of knowledge: first, the knowledge that *nothing truly belongs* to us but our free will; and second, the knowledge that we should only be *praised or blamed* for how we use our free will. For simplicity, I will treat the first component of generosity as consisting solely in the knowledge that nothing truly belongs to us but our free will (or that the *only thing* that truly belongs to us is our free will).[23]

In knowing that nothing truly belongs to her but her free will, I take it that the generous person is doing something quite stronger than *acknowledging* that she has a free will (see also Brown, 2006, 25; Boehm 2014, 718-9). Instead, the generous person is *identifying* with her free will. She understands her-*self*, in some sense, as a *willing thing:* a *res volans* as opposed to a *res cogitans*. But in what sense? On a literal reading of the key phrase here, "nothing truly belongs," Descartes is making a strict metaphysical claim about our essence. Boehm reads Descartes in this way: “by Cartesian standards, knowing the only property truly belonging to us amounts to knowing our essence,” thus,

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[23] I use 'will,' 'free will,' 'freedom of will', and 'freedom' interchangeably.

> If I come to experience *générosité*—know that nothing truly belongs to me but my freedom—I come to know what essentially I am. Using strong terms such as ‘know’ (*connaît*) and ‘truly’ (*véritablement*), the definition of *générosité* defines not merely what *générosité* is but what we are. (2014, 718-19)[24]

Call this the *essentialist reading* of “nothing truly belongs.” More specifically:

> [**essentialist reading**]: property φ is the only property truly belonging to subject S if and only if φ alone constitutes the essence of S.[25]

On this approach, then, the first component of generosity consists in the knowledge that free will alone constitutes our metaphysical essence. According to Boehm, the meditator acquires this knowledge in undergoing the *cogito*: “the knowledge that we are free achieved through radical doubt—knowledge that is ‘transparent and clear as anything can be’—just is knowledge of ourselves. By making us aware as generous subjects, radical doubt demonstrates that we exist” (Ibid.).

I do not think that a literal reading of “nothing truly belongs” is the right reading. I will argue that the broader context of *Passions* III suggests something wholly different: Descartes is using “nothing truly belongs” in an evaluative sense. But before offering my alternative reading, I will argue that that even if the essentialist reading is correct, the meditator cannot acquire the first component of generosity in the Second Meditation, as Boehm claims.

By Cartesian standards, to have knowledge of an essence, we must have a *clear* and *distinct* perception or idea of it. Here, I will not discuss how we can achieve a *clear* perception of an essence. Instead, I want to focus on how we can achieve a *distinct* perception of an essence, a perception “so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear” (*Principles* I.45, AT VIIIA: 22/CSM I: 207-8). Descartes proposes the *method of exclusion* for making the idea of an essence distinct (*Principles* I.60, AT VIIIA: 28-9 CSM I: 213; *Fourth Replies*, AT VII: 223/CSM II: 157). Roughly put, the method of exclusion has us consider two ideas together, and try to exclude, separate, or deny the one from the other. For example, we must conceive of something having property *T* (say, thought) without some other property *E* (say, extension). If one can perform a mutual exclusion, that is, show that the judgments ‘*Ta & ~Ea*’ and ‘*Ea & ~Ta*’ are both true, it follows that thought and extension are *really distinct* (Murdoch 1993, 39-42).[26] If one of these judgments is false, then thought and extension are either *modally distinct* or *conceptually distinct* (*Principles* I.61-2, AT VIIIA: 29-30/CSM I: 213-5).[27]

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[24] Boehm is in part inspired by Ernst Cassirer’s reading of the centrality of freedom for Descartes (1995, 93). See Boehm (2014, 720) for a translation of the relevant Cassirer.

[25] As Boehm puts it, “If property φ is the only property truly belonging to S, it is also the only property belonging to its nature or essence” (2014, 718).

Suppose, then, that free will alone constitutes our metaphysical essence, and that in undergoing the *cogito*, the meditator becomes aware of that essence. The problem for Boehm is that while this awareness may be clear, it cannot be distinct; thus it cannot amount to knowledge (a necessary feature of the first component). This is because in the Second Meditation, the meditator is unclear about the metaphysical status of bodies: “may it not perhaps be the case that these very things which I am supposing to be nothing [i.e. bodies], because they are unknown to me, are in reality identical with the ‘I’ of which I am aware? I do not know, and for the moment I shall not argue the point…” (AT VII: 27/CSM II: 18). The meditator expresses this concern again in the Fourth Meditation: “I happen to be in doubt as to whether the thinking nature which is in me, or rather which I am, is distinct from this corporeal nature or identical with it" (AT VII: 59/CSM II: 41). Given her current epistemic position, the meditator cannot exclude extension from her nature. Even if free will, *W*, constitutes her essence, the meditator, *m*, does not yet know what to make of the judgment '*Wm & ~Em*'. For all she knows, the judgment '*Wm & Em*' may be true. It is not until the Sixth Meditation that she is in a position to disprove her long-standing sensory impression that her body is her "whole self" (AT VII: 74/CSM II: 52).

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[26] For a more detailed discussion of the method of exclusion and Descartes’s broader theory of distinction see Wells (1966); Murdoch (1993); Nolan (1997); Hoffman (2002).

[27] Of course, thought and extension are really distinct for Descartes. But if one were considering (say) the property of extension, *E*, and the property of motion, *M*, then the judgment ‘*Ma & ~Ea*’ would turn out false. Consequently, they are either modally or conceptually distinct.

Let me clarify the scope of my objection. First, my objection does not show that an experience of freedom is not foundational to the *cogito*. Rather, it proves that even if the meditator were to have the experience Boehm describes, she still would not satisfy the first component of generosity. Second, my objection does not show that the essentialist reading as such is problematic. Even if Boehm's ascription of the first component to the meditator is mistaken, his essentialist reading may still be correct.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to further discuss Boehm's reading of the *cogito*. However, I do want to resist the essentialist reading. The essentialist reading generates a significant conflict within Descartes's metaphysics of the self (and mental substance). In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes is explicit about the metaphysical nature of the self: "my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing [*res cogitans*]" (AT VII: 78/CSM II: 54).[28] The "I" qua *res cogitans* has various faculties, including the will, intellect, sensation, and imagination. Now Descartes does claim that some of these faculties are not essential to the mind. The mind has sensation and imagination in virtue of being united with a body. Thus they are accidental mental faculties: “I can clearly and distinctly understand myself as a whole without these faculties” (Ibid.). However, Descartes repeatedly stresses that both the intellect and the will are essential to the mind (Sixth Meditation, AT VII: 72-3/CSM II: 50-1; *Principles* I.32, AT VIIIA: 17/CSM I: 204).[29]

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[28] Some commentators have argued that insofar as we are mind-body composites, there is a sense in which our self has a corporeal dimension (Brown, 2014). Though I am assuming a strict immaterial reading of the Cartesian self, the objection raised below does not hinge on this difference.

Boehm acknowledges this tension between the *Meditations* and the *Passions*: “one is not essentially free in virtue of being essentially (intellectually interpreted) thinking” (2014, 719). Boehm says he “will not speculate here about whether, or how, Descartes’ position changed in his later writings,” but nonetheless attempts to ease the tension as follows:

> While all ideas, including those implemented by an omnipotent God or a supremely powerful evil deceiver, are our thoughts (metaphysically depending on our mind), they are separable from us in the sense that they do not depend on us exclusively; they are conditioned by a cause outside us. There is, however, one type of thoughts that are inseparable from us in any sense of that term, namely judgement…Because Descartes is in search of the one thing absolutely inseparable from us (the sixth Meditation uses *nihil plane*), it would not be inappropriate for him ultimately to conclude, as he does when defining *générosité*, that this is freedom and hence judgement alone. (Ibid.)

This sort of response is problematic. It appeals to an ambiguity in the term ‘inseperable’ (and its corollary ‘seperable’). Boehm is using ‘inseperable’ in a causal sense. For Boehm, (free) judgment or volition is inseparable from the mind because it is not conditioned by external causes.[30] However, in determining the essence of the mind, Descartes first and foremost uses ‘inseperable’ in a conceptual sense. This figures into one application of the *method of exclusion*: If I cannot clearly and distinctly perceive *P* while denying *Q*, then *Q* is inseparable from *P*. Though *particular* thoughts (e.g. a thought about an angel) may be separable from the mind in Boehm’s sense, Descartes would not say that the *faculty* of the intellect is separable from the mind in the conceptual sense. Rather, they are mutually inclusive: we cannot conceive of mental substance without intellection, and conversely, we cannot conceive of intellection without mental substance. Consequently they are inseparable in reality (*Principles* I.63, AT VIIIA: 30-1/CSM I: 215; Sixth Meditation, AT VII: 78/CSM II: 54).[31] In short, the essentialist reading does take on a significant explanatory burden.

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[29] That the will is metaphysically essential to the mind is perhaps less well-known. See Mihali (2011) for a developed account of this view.

[30] Still, there remains a sense in which even judgment is necessarily dependent on things external to the will, because there must be some intellectual or sensory content about which we are judging.

But we need not pin Descartes with the essentialist reading. The articles surrounding *Passions* III.153 offer us a different way of thinking about, and distinguishing or identifying the self. Consider *Passions* III.152, the article immediately preceding Descartes's definition of generosity,

> 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. (AT XI: 445/CSM I: 384)

The starting point for this alternative reading is the nature of legitimate praise and blame. If I am to be legitimately praised or blamed for something, whether it be one of my actions or features, then I must be responsible for its existence. I am responsible, in the right way, for an action or feature if my free volitions produced it. If an action or feature does not (or could not) be causally traced back to my will, then I cannot be legitimately praised or blamed for it. For example, I can be praised or blamed for pursuing philosophy, because this action depends on my will; but I cannot be praised or blamed for naturally having brown hair, because this feature does not depend on my will. Legitimate self-esteem, then, is parasitic on legitimate praise and blame. I should have legitimate self-esteem for those actions and features for which I can be legitimately praised. Likewise, my self-esteem should not be affected by actions and features for which I cannot be legitimately blamed. But we must be clear about the object of self-esteem. Suppose that my pursuing philosophy is praiseworthy. Though this pursuit is praiseworthy and can induce legitimate self-esteem, it is so merely in a derivative sense. Strictly speaking, I should not have self-esteem for pursuing philosophy per se; rather, I should have self-esteem because I am exercising my will in a virtuous manner in pursuing philosophy. In short, it is the "virtuous will" alone that is non-derivatively or intrinsically worthy of self-esteem (*Passions* III. 154, AT XI: 447/CSM I: 384).

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[31] There is a debate in the literature about whether a conceptual distinction between *P* and *Q* implies that *P* and *Q* are identical or merely co-instantiated (Nolan 1997; Nelson, 1997; Hoffman 2002). I am not taking a stance on this issue here, but my overall reading of generosity suggests a robust distinction between the intellect and the will.

With this broader context in place, I think Descartes's claim that nothing truly belongs to us but our freedom is best read as an evaluative, not metaphysical, claim. Call this the *evaluative reading* of "nothing truly belongs." More specifically:

> [**evaluative reading**]: property φ is the only property truly belonging to subject S
> if and only if φ alone is worthy of esteem by S.

On this approach, the first component of generosity consists in the knowledge that the only thing for which we should have self-esteem for is our freedom of will. My freedom of will is the only thing that truly belongs to me because it is the only thing for which I can have (legitimate) self-esteem. The other aspects of my nature do not truly belong to me, because *I* (i.e. my free will) cannot legitimately be held accountable for them.

A significant upshot of this reading, then, is that it does not generate a conflict between the *Meditations* and the *Passions*. While the evaluative reading presupposes certain metaphysical claims (e.g. that free will is essential to our nature), it does not require the stronger claim that the will is the *only* property that is essential to our nature. The intellect, will, and even the body can remain essential to the self. Metaphysically speaking, we are *res cogitantes*. Morally speaking, we are *res volantes*.[32]

The question now is whether the meditator can acquire the first component on the evaluative reading. Alas, I think that such an approach will suffer from difficulties similar to those faced by the essentialist reading. In order to know that we should exclusively have self-esteem for some aspect of our nature (in this case, free will), we must have a complete understanding of our metaphysical nature. It would be premature to have self-esteem *exclusively* for one aspect of our nature prior to having understood the rest of our nature. There may be some other aspect of who we are—of which we are currently ignorant—that we should have self-esteem for as well. The problem is that in the Second and Fourth Meditation, the meditator cannot know that free will alone should be the source of her self-esteem, because she has yet to understand her complete nature. In particular, the meditator still does not know whether she is identical with her body. If it turns out that she is identical with her body, then whatever she esteems about herself, it will be something corporeal. But the status of bodies is not an open question for the generous person. In identifying herself with her free will alone, the generous person knows she is not including anything corporeal. Indeed, she is doing the opposite, for she is aligning herself with God: "it [free will] renders us in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves, provided we do not lose the rights it gives us through timidity" (*Passions* III.152, AT XI: 445/CSM I: 384). Even on the evaluative reading, then, the meditator cannot satisfy the first component of generosity.

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[32] Brown arrives at a similar conclusion: "The meditator comes face to face with herself as a *res cogitans*, an essentially thinking thing, the sage, the *res volans*" (2006, 25).

3.2 The Second Component

The second component of generosity "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" (*Passions* III.153, AT XI: 445-6/CSM I: 384). To determine whether the meditator acquires the second component, we must turn to Descartes's distinction between the contemplation of truth and the conduct of life. I will argue that the kind of resolution Descartes describes is restricted to the conduct of life, and cannot be identified with the meditator's resolution to adhere to the method for avoiding error, as Shapiro claims.

Roughly, the contemplation of truth [*contemplationem veritatis*] concerns fundamental metaphysics whereas the conduct of life [*usum vitae*] concerns practical action. The distinction is made frequently in the *Objections and Replies*. For example:

> I should like you to remember here that, in matters which may be embraced by the will, I made a very careful distinction between the conduct of life and the contemplation of the truth. As far as the conduct of life is concerned, I am very far from thinking that we should assent only to what is clearly perceived. On the contrary, I do not think that we should always wait even for probable truths; from time to time we will have to choose one of many alternatives about which we have no knowledge, and once we have made our choice, so long as no reasons against it can be produced, we must stick to it as firmly as if it had been chosen for transparently clear reasons…But when we are dealing solely with the contemplation of the truth, surely no one has ever denied that we should refrain from giving assent to matters which we do not perceive with sufficient distinctness. Now in my *Meditations* I was dealing solely with the contemplation of the truth; the whole enterprise shows this to be the case, as well as my express declaration at the end of the First Meditation where I said that I could not possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude, since the task in hand involved not action but merely the acquisition of knowledge. (*Replies* II, AT VII: 149/CSM II: 106)[33]

Descartes is claiming that the epistemic norms that govern theoretical judgments in the contemplation of truth should not be extended to practical judgments in the conduct of life. In the contemplation of truth, the goal is to acquire knowledge of the true nature of things. To do so, we must ensure that our theoretical judgments are always grounded in clear and distinct perception. But acquiring clear and distinct perceptions takes a lot of time; indeed, it can take weeks to complete a meditation (*Replies* II, AT VII: 130/CSM II: 94). Thus, in the conduct of life, where we have a limited window of opportunity to judge and act, we should not try to ground our practical judgments in clear and distinct perceptions.[34] Instead, we should make the *best practical judgments* we can, so that the opportunity to act does not pass us by.[35] Significantly, our best practical judgments can only achieve "moral certainty," that is,

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[33] See also *Replies* IV, AT VII: 248/CSM II: 172; *Replies* V, AT VII: 351/CSM II: 243.

> [C]ertainty which is sufficient to regulate our behaviour, or which measures up to certainty we have on matters relating to the conduct of life which we never doubt, though we know that it is possible, absolutely speaking, that they may be false. (*Principles* IV.205, AT VIIIA: 327/CSM I: 289, fn. 2)

In order to "judge well" (i.e. make morally certain practical judgments) we must have "knowledge of the truth" and "practice in remembering and assenting to this knowledge whenever the occasion demands" (Letter to Elizabeth 15 September 1645, AT IV: 291/CSMK: 265). Here, "knowledge of the truth" refers to four primary truths of metaphysics and natural philosophy (AT IV: 291-3/CSMK: 265-6).[36] Roughly, we must know,

(1) *The goodness of God*, which teaches us to accept both the good and the bad things that happen to us.

(2) *The immortality of the soul*, which teaches us that the mind is more noble than the body, that we should not fear death, and that we should detach our affections from this world.

(3) *The immensity of the universe*, which teaches us to not think that the earth is only made for man, and that we belong to God's council.

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[34] See *Principles* I.3, AT VIIIA: 5/CSM I: 193; Letter to Hyperaspistes August 1641, AT III: 422-3/CSMK: 188-9; Letter to Elizabeth May 1646, AT IV: 414-5/CSMK: 288.

[35] See Letter to Reneri for Pollot April or May 1638, AT III: 34-5/CSMK: 96-7; Letter to Elizabeth 6 October 1645, AT IV: 307/CSMK: 269; *Discourse* III, AT VI: 25/CSM I: 123.

[36] These four truths are *primary* because they "concern all our actions in general" (AT IV: 294-5/CSMK: 267). However, "many others must be known which concern more particularly each individual action" (Ibid.).

(4) *The interconnectedness of the universe*, which teaches us that the interests of our greater communities should be preferred over our own particular interests.

According to Descartes, if we know these truths, and habituate ourselves to assent to them, we will acquire the disposition to judge well, and consequently to act virtuously (AT IV: 295-6/CSMK: 267). Descartes stresses, however, that having this disposition to judge well does not guarantee that we will make our best practical judgments, or act in accordance with them. In other words, this disposition is not sufficient for virtue. We still face a key psychological barrier to exercising virtue, namely, irresolution. Fundamentally, irresolution is a state of indecisiveness with respect to some course of action (*Passions* III.170, AT XI: 459-460/CSM I: 390-1). Irresolution per se, however, is not the problem; moderate irresolution can help us make the right decision. Excessive irresolution, rather, is Descartes's target. This form of irresolution is the real barrier to virtue, and the source of vice and regret (Letter to Elizabeth 15 September 1645, AT IV: 295/CSMK: 267; Letter to Queen Christina, 20 November 1647, AT V: 83-4/CSMK: 325).

Descartes distinguishes between two stages of irresolution in the conduct of life. First, we can be irresolute at the stage of deliberation. This happens when we spend too much time trying to determine the right course of action. We might believe that if we had more time at our disposal, we could gather further information that would allow us to arrive at a better judgment. Second, we can be irresolute at the stage of action (Letter to Elizabeth May 1646, AT IV: 414-5/CSMK: 288). This happens when we fail to act in accordance with our best judgment, because we fear that we may have nonetheless made the wrong judgment. Given the ways in which irresolution can prevent virtuous judgment and action, the virtuous person not only needs the disposition to judge well, but also the disposition to not be irresolute. As Shoshana Brassfield puts it, the virtuous person must have resolution: "a *character trait* constituted by a *disposition* of the will to determine itself in accordance with a judgment in the face of uncertainty" (2013, 167).

With this account of the contemplation of truth and the conduct of life in place, let us now turn to the second component of generosity. On Shapiro's reading, the second component amounts to "the resolution to use our will well" (2005, 28).[37] Shapiro seems to read the second component as a general, all-purpose resolution. Regardless of the type of activity we are engaged in, we exemplify the second component of generosity if we are resolving to use our will well.[38] Thus the meditator surely exemplifies the second component, for she resolves to use her will well in adhering to the method for avoiding error. However, Shapiro seems to ignore Descartes's clarification about the second component: "the second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well—that is [*c'est-à-dire*], never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best" (*Passions* III.153, AT XI: 445-6/CSM I: 384). I contend that Descartes's complete description of the second component implies that the generous person's resolution to use her will well pertains only to the conduct of life. Consequently, it cannot be identified with that of the meditator's.

Two points are noteworthy here. First, unlike the meditator, notice that the generous person is in the business of making practical judgments: she resolves *to undertake and carry out* whatever she *judges to be best*. One might object that when the meditator affirms her clear and distinct perceptions, she too is making her best (theoretical) judgments. This is true on a broad reading of “best.” However, Descartes only uses phrases such as “best judgment” and “whatever he judges to be best” in discussing the conduct of life; these phrases never appear in the *Meditations* or the *Objections and Replies*. Furthermore, the *content* of these judgments must be about some course of action. However, in adhering to the method for avoiding error, the meditator is not at all concerned with action. Recall, the whole project of the *Meditations* is in part premised on the condition that “the task in hand does not involve action [*agendis*] but merely the acquisition of knowledge” (First Meditation, AT VII: 22/CSM II: 15). When the meditator affirms the real distinction between mind and body, for example, she is not making a judgment about a course of action, which she must then undertake and carry out. Rather, the meditator is affirming a metaphysical truth, the content of which involves no plan of action. Of course, she must always reaffirm this truth in the future, but doing so would not amount to carrying out her original judgment in the relevant sense.

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[37] Given that Boehm attributes generosity to the meditator prior to the Fourth Meditation, he has to locate the resolution to use the will elsewhere. According to Boehm, "the undertaking of a programme of doubt in the first place, the use of good reasons in generating doubt and the stubborn insistence to persist in doubt are expressions of this resolve" (2014, fn. 33). The objections raised below against Shapiro's reading will show that this is not the kind of resolution Descartes has in mind.

[38] This seems to be a divergence from Shapiro's earlier view (1999, 263-9).

Second, notice that the generous person’s resolution is defined with respect to irresolution: in having a firm and constant resolution never to lack the will to undertake and carry out her best judgments, the generous person has *the disposition to not be irresolute*. Recall that irresolution is generated by two key features of practical contexts: (i) a limited amount of time to make a judgment, and (ii) the inability to ground one’s judgment in a clear and distinct perception. However, these features are non-starters in the *Meditations*: the meditator is in no way pressed for time (*Replies* II, AT VII: 130/CSM II: 94), and the method for avoiding error requires her to refrain from affirming obscure and confused perceptions (Fourth Meditation, AT VII: 59-60/CSM II: 41). Moreover, there is no worry about the meditator being indecisive when she has a clear and distinct perception, because her will is compelled to affirm it (Fourth Meditation, AT VII: 58-9/CSM II: 41; *Replies* II, AT VII: 156/CSM II: 111). There seems to be no relevant sense, then, in which the meditator is disposing herself to not be irresolute in adhering to the method for avoiding error. Indeed, if the meditator resolved (say) to make her best metaphysical judgments in the face of obscure and confused perceptions, she would not be in good standing with respect to the method for avoiding error. This is not to say that the meditator is not, in some sense, resolute. However, the resolution exemplified in the meditator's adherence to the method for avoiding error must be a different kind of disposition of the will.

3.3 Practicing Generosity

Given that the meditator cannot satisfy the two components of generosity, it follows that she cannot practice generosity. Indeed, Descartes does not describe generous actions in the way that Shapiro's reading requires, as he does not suggest that metaphysical inquiry counts as an instance of generosity. Descartes always describes the exercise of generosity as a practical, other-regarding activity. As Deborah Brown puts it, "the good will [of the generous person] is the same thing as good will towards others" (2006, 203; see also Frierson 2002). Roughly put, this is because the grounds the generous person has for her self-esteem leads her to have esteem for others. It is not *her* freedom that is worthy of esteem; rather, *freedom* is worthy of esteem. Other people, then, are worthy of esteem because they also have free wills and are capable of "achieving the same knowledge and feeling" about themselves (*Passions* III.154, AT XI: 446/CSM I: 384). Thus generous people "are naturally led to do great deeds" and "esteem nothing more highly than doing good to others and disregarding their own self-interest" (*Passions* II.156, AT XI: 447-8/CSM I: 385).[39]

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[39] See also *Passions* III.154 AT XI: 446/CSM I: 384; *Passions* III.155, AT XI: 447/CSM I: 385; *Passions* III.187, AT XI: 470/CSM I: 395; *Passions* III.164, AT XI: 455-6/CSM I: 388-9.

To be sure, there may be a sense in which a theoretical activity can exemplify generosity. It is plausible, for example, that a philosopher can perform a great deed in writing theoretical texts for the benefit of others (Fennen 2012, 33-6). But this does not imply that metaphysical inquiry per se exemplifies generosity. Though Descartes may be generous in writing and sharing his metaphysical discoveries in the *Meditations*, those who meditate along with him are not.

4 Conclusion

We have encountered a variety of problems with reading Descartes's ethics back into his metaphysics. In closing, however, I would like to emphasize a problem that has only been gestured at throughout our discussion. That is, by making ethics central to the foundations of Descartes's system commentators run the risk of obscuring, if not losing, his ethics. Indeed, Descartes's ethics starts to seem like a recapitulation of his metaphysics and epistemology.[40] But it is not. Generosity is antithetical to the isolated cognitive exercises of the meditator: in acquiring generosity, we are supposed to observe others to learn about our own freedom, and in exercising generosity we must regard other people as worthy of esteem. As I see it, the interesting issues concerning the systematic relationship Descartes envisions between his metaphysics and ethics lie not in bridging a supposed gap between metaphysical inquiry and ethical practice. Rather, they concern how the meditator can emerge from her isolated meditations to become a generous agent committed to the well-being of others.

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[40] For example, Shapiro's stripped-down version of generosity seems to make it an intellectual or epistemic virtue. Epistemic virtue may be central to the *Meditations* (Davies 2001; Sosa 2012; Shapiro 2013). But Shapiro requires moral—not epistemic—virtue for the organic reading.

3 DESCARTES ON THE UNITY OF THE VIRTUES

1 A Tension in Cartesian Ethics

There is no standard interpretation of Cartesian ethics, as commentators are divided about what kind of ethics Descartes espouses. Descartes has been labeled as a virtue ethicist (Shapiro 2008), a deontological virtue ethicist (Naaman-Zauderer 2010), and it has even been suggested that he is a consequentialist (Svennson 2010). However, all commentators agree that a theory of virtue lies at the heart of Descartes' moral philosophy. This is because Descartes claims that our supreme good is found in the exercise of virtue. According to Descartes, the "supreme good is undoubtedly the thing we ought to set ourselves as the goal of all our actions" (AT IV: 275/CSMK: 261), and that goal is virtue:

> I make a distinction between the supreme good—which consists in the exercise of virtue, or, what comes to the same, the possession of all those goods whose acquisition depends upon our free will—and the satisfaction of mind which results from that acquisition. (AT IV: 305/CSMK: 268)

Although commentators have offered extensive accounts of the Cartesian supreme good, they have failed to notice that Descartes is not always unequivocal about what he means by 'virtue', especially with respect to the metaphysics of virtue. *Prima facie*, he presents two conflicting metaphysical accounts throughout his ethical writings. The first is that there are a number of distinct virtues, such as justice, courage, generosity, humility and so on, each of which are distinct dispositions the moral agent must possess in order to respond virtuously to moral situations.[1] The second is that virtue consists strictly in one virtue, that is, the disposition to judge well.[2] On this account, to respond virtuously to a moral situation, an agent must simply strive to judge well to the best of her abilities, and be resolved in carrying out the determined course of action. The conflict between these two accounts is that the first is complex, virtue consists in many dispositions or character traits, and the second is simple, virtue consists in one disposition or character trait.

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[1] See also AT XI: 153/CSM I: 384; AT XI: 161/CSM I: 387-388; AT XI: 447/CSM: I 385.

[2] See also AT IV: 265/CSMK: 258; AT IV: 277/CSMK: 262; AT XI: 442/CSM I: 382; AT IV: 265-268/CSMK: 258.

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 judging well, and we ultimately end up with an account that is similar to that of Aristotle's. This is at odds with Descartes' expressed goal of providing an ethics that progresses beyond what the Scholastics, and even the Stoics have provided. As Descartes tells Princess Elizabeth:

> 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 July 21 1645, AT IV: 252/CSMK: 256; emphasis added).

On the other hand, if we accept the second account we must read Descartes' discussion of distinct virtues as inconsequential, and thus we run the risk of distancing Descartes' account from a fundamental position that virtue theorists have historically agreed upon, namely, that justice, courage, and so on are actually virtues, and that they play a crucial role in the good life.

In this chapter I attempt to reconcile these two readings. Though Descartes may be unclear at some points, I contend that he advances a unique version of the "unity of the virtues" thesis. I argue that Cartesian virtue is metaphysically simple, in that it consists only in the disposition to judge well, while also maintaining that Descartes has a substantial conception of the virtues.[3] I show that Descartes views each individual virtue as different manifestations of judging well; that is, justice, courage, generosity, and so on can be understood essentially as manifestations of our best practical judgments (and their corresponding actions) within different types of moral situations.[4] In this sense, Descartes has a complex account of virtue; but this complexity is only 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 or character traits.

The chapter is divided up as follows. In section 2, I review the tension between Cartesian and Aristotelian virtue theory. In section 3, I provide some preliminary background on Descartes' account of theoretical and practical judgment. In section 4, I examine the intellectual and volitional requirements for virtue. In section 5, I argue that the volitional and intellectual requirements for Cartesian virtue imply that virtue is metaphysically simple, i.e. that there is a unity of the virtues. In section 6, I address the implications that the interpretation on offer has for understanding Descartes' moral epistemology more generally, arguing that Descartes allows for the possibility of genuine moral knowledge.

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[3] 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). Though she doesn't make this explicit, Naaman-Zauderer argues that Descartes advances the unity of the virtues thesis. My argument here differs with her account in that (1) I explain how it differs from the ancient accounts Descartes is trying to distance himself from, (2) I explain why Descartes is entitled to a unity of the virtues thesis given his intellectual requirements for virtue, and (3) I explain how Descartes' unity of the virtues thesis can be reconciled with his description of distinct virtues.

[4] I understand a moral situation as one that involves relevant moral features, i.e. as pertaining to virtue, happiness, the regulation of the passions. There are practical judgments that fall out of the scope of moral situation, e.g. practical judgments about one's health and survival.

2 **Aristotelian Virtue**

Descartes engaged many aspects of Aristotelian philosophy throughout his career, and moral philosophy was no exception. As the correspondence with Princess Elizabeth shows, he was well-aware of Aristotelian virtue theories that his contemporaries might have advocated, and made an effort to distinguish his account from theirs.[5] Indeed, Descartes was one of many philosophers attempting to provide a new conception of morality. This project not only involved establishing a new metaphysical foundation for moral philosophy, but also providing new conceptions of wisdom and virtue (AT IXB: 14/CSM I: 186). In a 1645 letter to Princess Elizabeth, Descartes explains his problem with past theories of virtue:

> 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 to which they have given various names, because of the various objects to which it applies. (AT IV: 265/CSMK: 258)

According to Descartes, the problem with past 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.

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[5] It’s not clear how sophisticated Descartes’ understanding was of Aristotelian virtue theories. So, I think that a general formulation of the Aristotelian view will suffice to capture what Descartes had probably encountered.

According to Aristotle, the virtues—such as courage, generosity, patience, and bravery— are distinct character traits that are each a mean between an excess and a deficiency, and which are guided by practical wisdom (*phronesis*):

> 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, virtuous courage is the mean between the vice of recklessness and the vice of cowardice. As Richard Kraut puts it, the courageous person "judges that some dangers are worth facing and others not, and experiences fear to a degree that is appropriate to his circumstances" (2014). True courage must be also guided by *phronesis*, which, broadly put, contributes to the deliberation process of how a moral agent is supposed to meet the ends set by courage.[6] That is, *phronesis* guides virtue by helping determine the particular course of action one must take in a moral situation.

Although Aristotle divides virtues into different "species," there remains a close relationship among the virtues. Since *phronesis* requires all of the virtues, and all of the virtues require *phronesis*, it follows that the possession of any single virtue implies the possession of all of 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 suited 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

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[6] For a more detailed account of the relationship between *phronesis* and the virtues see Russell (2012) and Telfer (1989).

> will possess all of them as soon as he acquires the one, practical wisdom. (*NE* VI, 1144b-1145a)[7]

Here, Aristotle espouses what is often called the "unity of the virtues" thesis. Although the virtues are distinct character traits, they form a unity because one cannot possess one virtue without possessing the rest of the virtues. Strictly speaking, however, there are different versions of the unity of the virtues thesis. Following T.H. Irwin and other scholars who have adopted his view and terminology, I will call Aristotle's version of the unity of the virtues the "reciprocity of the virtues" thesis (Irwin 1988, 1995; cf. Curzer 2012). There is a "reciprocity" between the virtues because 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. Following Brickhouse and Smith, I will call this version of the unity of the virtues the "identity of the virtues" thesis (1997). In what follows, I will argue that Descartes is committed to the identity of the virtues, because all the virtues have one and the same nature, i.e. they are all reducible to the disposition to judge well.

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

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[7] By 'natural virtues' Descartes mean 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 (See *NE* IV, section 13).

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.

I want to raise three questions to help guide our inquiry into Cartesian virtue:

1) *How does Descartes replace the variety of Aristotelian virtues with just one virtue, the disposition to judge well?*
2) *Why does he still avail himself of an Aristotelian classification of virtues?*
3) *Does Descartes succeed in providing a new conception of virtue?*

I propose that we find our answers in Descartes' account of practical judgment, and how practical judgment is grounded in knowledge of metaphysics, epistemology, and natural philosophy.

3 Descartes' Theory of Judgment

3.1 Theoretical Judgment

Cartesian judgment, in general, is the product of the interaction of two faculties of the mind—the intellect and the will. When we make a judgment, we are either affirming or denying some proposition or idea. The proposition or content of the judgment is supplied by the intellect, and the volitional component—i.e. affirmation or denial—is supplied by the will. When we don't affirm or deny a proposition we are effectively suspending judgment. In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes draws a sharp distinction between the intellect and the will in order to explain the source of error as well as the source of truth. According to Descartes, error is not due to a defect in the intellect or will; rather it is because there is a disparity between their "scopes," that is, the range of perceptions they can operate on. The scope of the intellect—what enables us to perceive ideas—is finite in that it fails to perceive and understand a countless number of things (AT VII: 56/CSM II: 39). The scope of the will—the ability to affirm or deny these ideas—however, has a radically different range. Not only is it infinite in scope, but also perfect in that, "in the essential and strict sense," it's just like God's will:

> It is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp; so much so that it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God. For although God's will is incomparably greater than mine, both in virtue of the knowledge and power that accompany it and make it more firm and efficacious, and also in virtue of its object, in that it ranges over a greater number of items, nevertheless it does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the essential and strict sense. (AT VII: 57/CSM II: 40)

The will, then, is infinite insofar as it can affirm or deny any perception the intellect puts forth for its consideration; as such, there will never be a perception that the will could not operate on. We err when the infinite and finite capacities of the will and intellect (respectively) fail to hook up in the appropriate way, that is, when we affirm things we have not understood.

But we do not always fail. So, how can these faculties coordinate to supply true and justified judgments, i.e. knowledge? In the analysis of knowledge in the *Meditations*, Descartes is first and foremost concerned with indefeasible or perfect knowledge, i.e. *scientia*.[8] Broadly put, according to Descartes, we arrive at *scientia* when the contents that the intellect supplies for the will's consideration are "clear and distinct." Descartes defines clear and distinct perceptions as follows:

> A perception which can serve as the basis for a certain and indubitable judgement needs to be not merely clear but also distinct. I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear
> (AT VIIIA: 21-22/CSM I: 207-8).

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[8] Later in section 6, I will argue that Descartes allows for a less perfect kind of knowledge in the context of moral deliberation.

Essentially, a clear and distinct perception is an idea or proposition that the intellect has fully understood as true. Descartes maintains a classical correspondence theory of truth; so, a clear and distinct perception is a proposition or idea that accurately corresponds to reality (AT II: 597/CSMK: 139). As such, there is no room for error when a judgment is made about a clear and distinct perception. Examples of clear and distinct perceptions are: “I think, I am,” “the nature of body is extension,” and “God is infinitely perfect.” For Descartes, since these propositions are both true and clear and distinct, judgments about them will be true as well.

Notice that I have been assuming the judgments we make about clear and distinct perceptions are always in the affirmative. But isn’t it possible for us to deny clear and distinct perceptions, e.g. negate the truth of “5+7=12”, and thus fail to achieve knowledge? In fact, Descartes rejects this possibility for he claims that when the intellect has fully analyzed an idea into a clear and distinct perception, the will is compelled to affirm it:

> *I could not but judge that something which I understood so clearly was true*; but this was not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will, and thus the spontaneity and freedom of my belief was all the greater in proportion to my lack of indifference. (AT VII: 58-59/CSM II: 41; emphasis added)

The thought here is that we cannot understand a perception like “5+7=12” without simultaneously affirming it. On this picture, knowledge is, in a sense, automatically achieved when clear and distinct perceptions are acquired because the will is compelled to affirm their truth.[9] Anything less than clear and distinct perception or confused and obscure perceptions will not compel the will, which prevents any judgments about them from achieving the status of knowledge.

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[9] According to Descartes in the Third and Fourth Meditations, to have knowledge or *scientia* one must also have understood the existence of God and that he is not a deceiver with respect to our clear and distinct perceptions. Mere clear and distinct perception is not sufficient for knowledge in the strict sense.

3.2 Practical Judgment

For Descartes, theoretical judgments based on clear and distinct perceptions have absolute or metaphysical certainty. This kind of "certainty arises when we believe that it is wholly impossible that something should be otherwise than we judge it to be" (AT VIIIA: 328/CSM I: 290). Judgments that reach this level of certainty form a class of judgments Descartes calls *scientia*, or perfect knowledge [*perfecte scire*]. However, clear and distinct perceptions cannot be acquired in every field of inquiry. Descartes thinks that clear and distinct perceptions are limited to "the contemplation of the truth", that is, metaphysics, mathematics, and certain areas of natural philosophy ("evident reasoning about material things" (AT VIIIA: 328/CSM I: 290). When it comes to practical matters or the "conduct of life", Descartes claims practical judgments cannot be grounded in clear and distinct perceptions. The distinction between the different epistemic norms that govern the contemplation of the truth and conduct of life is made frequently in the *Objections and Replies*. For example:

> I should like you to remember here that, in matters which may be embraced by the will, I made a very careful distinction between the conduct of life and the contemplation of the truth. As far as the conduct of life is concerned, I am very far from thinking that we should assent only to what is clearly perceived. On the contrary, I do not think that we should always wait even for probable truths; from time to time we will have to choose one of many alternatives about which we have no knowledge, and once we have made our choice, so long as no reasons against it can be produced, we must stick to it as firmly as if it had been chosen for transparently clear reasons…But when we are dealing solely with the contemplation of the truth, surely no one has ever denied that we should refrain from giving assent to matters which we do not perceive with sufficient distinctness. Now in my *Meditations* I was dealing solely with the contemplation of the truth; the whole enterprise shows this to be the case, as well as my express declaration at the end of the First Meditation where I said that I could not possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude, since the task in hand involved not action but merely the acquisition of knowledge. (*Replies* II, AT VII: 149/CSM II: 106)

Here, Descartes leaves open the possibility that some of our practical judgments can be grounded in clear and distinct perceptions. But in other texts, he seems fairly clear that practical judgments cannot be grounded in clear and distinct perceptions and thus cannot achieve absolute certainty. Instead, they can only achieve moral certainty:

> [C]ertainty 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. (AT VIIIA: 327/CSM I: 289)

On this view, we cannot clearly and distinctly perceive the objects of a practical judgment, which entails that our judgment cannot be guaranteed to be true (they may, "absolutely speaking," be false). According to the standard interpretation, moral certainty applies to all practical judgments. I am going to argue, however, that Descartes distinguishes between two types of practical judgments. On the one hand, we have *occurrent practical judgments*, judgments that we formulate in order to respond to a present moral situation. On the other hand, we have *retrospective practical judgments*, that is, judgments about our past occurrent practical judgments and actions. I will argue that moral certainty attends occurrent practical judgments; however, retrospective practical judgments can achieve a higher degree of certainty. Before turning to a more in depth analysis of moral certainty and practical judgment, however, we should return to our analysis of Cartesian virtue.

4 The Intellectual and Volitional Requirements for Virtue

Descartes identifies two necessary 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 conaissance de la vérité*]; the other is practice in remembering and assenting to this knowledge whenever the occasion demands" (AT IV: 291/CSMK: 266; cf. AT VIIIA: 3/CSM I: 191).

Knowledge of the truth is essential to virtue because,

> [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. (AT IV: 267/CSMK: 258)

So, what is knowledge of the truth or the good?[10] It is important to note a qualification Descartes makes about ascribing "knowledge of the truth" to human beings. Finite minds cannot have complete knowledge of the truth (that belongs to God). Thus, "we have to content ourselves with knowing the truths most useful to us [*le plus à notre usage*]" (AT IV: 291/CSMK: 266; emphasis added).[11] 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 thinks that such knowledge of the truth consists of four primary truths:

(1) *the existence and nature of God*

(2) *the nature of the mind and its distinctness from the body*

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[10] 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 truth and goodness in the Fourth Meditation.

[11] 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).

(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" (AT IV: 291/CSMK: 265).[12]

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).[13] 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 might be understood. First, one might take it as

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[12] 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).

[13] 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's 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).

Descartes' Second Meditation claim that the mind is better known than the body. Second, it might be because the mind is indivisible, and the body is divisible (Schmaltz 2008, 68). 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. In this context, this is how 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 tie, 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. (AT IV: 286/CSMK: 264-5)

Furthermore, recognizing this truth prevents 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" (CSMK: 264-265).

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*" (AT IV: 292/CSM I: 265). Descartes tells Chanut: "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" (AT IV: 441/CSMK: 289), and that "these truths of physics are part of the foundations of the highest and most perfect morality" (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"). Nonetheless, Descartes is clear in his writings to Elizabeth that knowledge of physics prevents from us adopting some 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.” 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” (AT IV: 292/CSMK: 266). In other words, physics supplements metaphysics by helping us understand our metaphysical standing in the universe, or at the very least that we are not at the same rank as God..

While the third truth concerns our general metaphysical standing in the cosmos, the fourth truth specifies our moral, political, and metaphysical standing in our society, political communities, and universe as a whole:

> 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,[14] and that the overall good of these larger communities should, within reason, be preferred to our own interests.[15] If an agent neglects that she is a constituent of a larger social, political, and environmental unit and falls into, say, egoism, 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).[16] In other words, this truth is claiming that we need to love one another. Regarding oneself as a part of a broader community in this way is the foundation of 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 thing or 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).

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[14] 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.

[15] 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 doesn’t 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” (AT IV: 316/CSMK: 273).

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” (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.

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[16] 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).

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" (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" (AT IV: 295/CSMK: 267). I take it that Descartes does not fully enumerate the details of this latter truth because the 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).[17]

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 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 bad moral judgments and thus acting poorly. To remedy this, we must frequently meditate on these truths until they are "imprinted in our mind" (*imprimée en notre spirit*) such that we have a firm volitional resolve to act accordingly. 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 use the will well (i.e. judge well) in a variety of moral situations. As Descartes writes in the *Passions*, 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).

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[17] 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'" (AT IV: 530/CSMK: 297).

5 Reconciling the Complex and Simple Account

Thus far, we have examined the conditions for judging well, but we still haven't captured what it means to *be virtuous*. Recall, Cartesian virtue consists in arriving at a judgment for an appropriate course of action in a moral situation, and having the resolve to carry it out. However, there is an important and unique caveat: it is "not necessary that our reason should be free from error; it is sufficient if our conscience testifies that we have never lacked resolution and virtue to carry out whatever we have judged the best course" (AT IV: 266/CSMK: 258). This implies that an agent's virtue doesn't depend on the consequences of her moral judgments:

> There is nothing to repent of when we have done what we judged best at the time when we had to decide to act, even though later, thinking it over at our leisure, we judge that we made a mistake. There would be more ground for repentance if we had acted against our conscience, even though we realized afterwards that we have done better than we thought. For we are only responsible for our thoughts, and it does not belong to human nature to be omniscient, or always to judge as well on the spur of the moment as when there is plenty of time to deliberate. (AT IV: 308/ CSMK: 269)

Descartes restricts moral responsibility to the intellectual variables (reasoning, knowledge, control of passions) with which one arrives at a moral judgment and then acts. This ultimately makes the fulfillment of virtuous activity an intrinsic, not extrinsic affair. Because of the limits of our knowledge and power as finite beings, we can neither ascertain all the relevant features of a moral situation in the spur of the moment, nor fully foresee or control the consequences of our actions. Although Descartes maintains that knowledge of the truth will reliably guide us to virtuous judgments and actions, he acknowledges that even our best moral judgments can bring about unintended harmful consequences. This claim, of course, is justified by Descartes' distinction between metaphysical and moral certainty. Metaphysical certainty, is attained only when we are clearly and distinctly perceiving eternal truths (e.g. the nature of God, mind, and body); in contrast, the objects of moral certainty are particular bodies and mind-body unions (or human beings), which entails that we cannot have clear and distinct perceptions about them. In short, so long as the moral agent's conscience testifies that she used her intellect to the best of her abilities, she is virtuous.[18]

I think that we now have a sufficient account of Cartesian virtue to answer our initial questions. Recall the first question: *How does Descartes replace the variety of Aristotelian virtues with just one virtue, the disposition to judge well*? Consider the following passage from the *Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth* for the *Principles of Philosophy*:

> The pure and genuine virtues, which proceed solely from knowledge of what is right, all have one and the same nature 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

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[18] It's unclear exactly what conscience consists of for Descartes. Elsewhere, he seems to suggest that it is the "voice within": "with regard to the important actions of life, when their outcome is so 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).

> 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. (AT VIIIA: 2-3/CSM:191)[19]

At first glance, one might think that Descartes is advancing the reciprocity of the virtues thesis because he says that the virtuous person will possess all of the virtues and that they will be interlinked in such a way that none of them stand out above the others. However, a closer look at the passage shows that Descartes is actually advancing the identity of the virtues thesis. All of the virtues are interlinked because, as Descartes says at the beginning of the passage, they "have one and the same nature". What is this nature? It consists of 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." By possessing a cultivated knowledge of the truth or wisdom, the moral agent will automatically have all the virtues. And because of this, the virtues "will be interlinked in such a way that no one virtue stands out among the others."

The identity of the virtues thesis is confirmed in another key text as well. In a Letter to Queen Christina Descartes writes:

> It seems to me that the supreme good of all men together is the total or aggregate of all the goods – those of the soul as well as those of the body and of fortune – which can belong to any human being; but that 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. For the goods of the body and of fortune do not depend absolutely on us; and those of the soul can all be reduced to two heads, the

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[19] Some commentators have taken this to imply that Descartes' applies his unity of the virtues thesis to Cartesian virtue *simpliciter* (Naaman-Zauderer 2010, 179-181). However, in this letter to Elizabeth, Descartes distinguishes three grades of virtue: *apparent virtue*, *true virtue*, and *pure and genuine virtue* (AT VIIIA: 2-3/CSM: 190-1). While it's unclear whether Descartes thinks that apparent virtue is an instance of virtue, he does think that true virtue is an instance of virtue because it partly proceeds from knowledge of the truth. Descartes is clear that the unity of the virtues thesis does not apply to apparent virtue and true virtue. Because these virtues do not proceed solely from knowledge of the truth they are divided. Thus, we must qualify Descartes' account of the unity of the virtues such that it applies only to pure and genuine virtue.

> 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. 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; 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. (AT V: 83/CSMK: 325).

Here, Descartes distinguishes between two senses of the 'supreme good'. There is a broad sense of the 'supreme good' which consists of all the goods attainable through the mind, body, and fortune. But there is a more strict sense of the 'supreme good', which consists of the "firm and constant resolution to carry out to the letter all the things which one judges to be best." According to Descartes, "this by itself constitutes *all the virtues*." In other words, Descartes is endorsing the identity of the virtues thesis, claiming that all of the virtues have the same nature.

How exactly should we understand Descartes version of the identify of the virtues thesis? I contend that Descartes' preference for the metaphysical simplicity of virtue is, arguably, somewhat expected given his general tendency towards metaphysical simplicity. To understand the metaphysical simplicity of virtue, it may be instructive to see how Descartes argues for metaphysical simplicity in other metaphysical contexts. In the context of the metaphysics of substance, for example, Descartes invokes the theory of conceptual distinction to demonstrate the simplicity of substance:

> 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 VIIIA: 30/CSM I: 214).

Consider the substance mind and the attribute of thought. According to Descartes, one cannot clearly and distinctly conceive of thought without the attribute of mind, and conversely, one cannot clearly and distinctly conceive of mind without the attribute of thought. Consequently, mind and thought are merely conceptually distinct and thus identical in nature.[20] The attribute of thought, then, is just one way of regarding the substance of mind. 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 of generosity without humility, and conversely, one cannot clearly and distinctly conceive of humility without generosity.[21] And the same goes for all of the other virtues.

Let us turn to the second question: *If Descartes maintains a simple account of virtue, why does he still avail himself of an Aristotelian classification of virtues*? Recall the first passage we considered:

> Virtue, I believe, consists precisely in sticking firmly to this resolution [to judge well and carry out what one's reason recommends]; though I do not know that anyone has ever so described it. Instead, they have divided it into different species to which they have given various names, because of the various objects to which it applies. (AT IV: 265/CSMK 258).

Aristotelian virtue theorists 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 certain 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. When the Cartesian moral agent exhibits courage, it is not due to a distinct cultivated character trait of courage but rather due to good moral judgment that proceeds from knowledge of the truth. Nonetheless, we can conceptually distinguish between the virtues in virtue of the different applications of the disposition to judge well. The virtues of courage and generosity are both essentially reducible to the disposition to judge well; however, these virtues are manifested in different ways due to the different moral situations to which they are applicable.

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[20] The reading of conceptual distinction I invoke here is drawn from Nolan (1997). For a dissenting view see Hoffman (2002).

[21] The unity of the virtues thesis, as presented in the Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth for the *Principles*, seems to only extend to the "pure and genuine virtues". According to Descartes, there are lesser degrees of virtue, or "apparent virtue," which are not unified because they do not proceed from "an exact knowledge of things" and thus "such virtues differ from each other, they go by different names" (AT VIIIA: 2/CSM I: 190-1).

To be sure, how exactly can knowledge of the truth (and a resolute will) provide an agent with, say, courage? Recall the fourth truth: if an agent knows that she is merely a part of the universe, and that she must subordinate her interests to those of her community, she would not hesitate to risk her life in the service of others.[22] Thus, if a moral agent has cultivated this truth in her mind, she will have the relevant beliefs necessary to determine and carry out a courageous course of action.

In employing an Aristotelian classification of the virtues, then, Descartes is pouring new wine into old bottles. Terms like 'courage', 'justice', and 'temperance', don't designate distinct virtues for Descartes, but rather different ways in which a moral agent can judge well. Descartes' classification of the virtues is not metaphysical but conceptual, that is, it depends on how we can regard the manifestation of the disposition to judge well in moral situations in different ways.

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[22] I use 'knows' here in a weak sense. As we will see below, this truth can only be morally certain. However, I argue that there still is a sense in which it is knowledge.

Let us now turn to our third question: *Does Descartes succeed in providing a new conception of virtue*? Recall, Descartes claims that (1) his theory of virtue has advanced beyond the ancients, specifically Aristotle, and (2) that nobody has described virtue in the way he has. With respect to (1) it seems safe to say that there are significant differences between Descartes and Aristotle's conceptions of virtue. For starters, while Aristotle advances the reciprocity of the virtues thesis, Descartes endorses the unity of the virtues thesis. For Descartes, the virtues aren't single parts of a larger whole; rather, they are one and the same, that is, identical to each other. Nonetheless, there are similarities between the two theories. Aristotle's conception of *phronesis* or practical wisdom is similar in function to Descartes' account of practical knowledge of the truth. Like Aristotle, Descartes regards this knowledge as a kind of wisdom, and clearly states that virtue proceeds from this wisdom: "The pure and genuine virtues, which proceed solely from knowledge of what is right, all have one and the same nature and are included under the single term 'wisdom'."[23] For both Aristotle and Descartes, this kind of practical knowledge is what guides our action when we are in a moral situation, and allows us to have the right rational and emotional response to a moral situation. Moreover, both Aristotle and Descartes agree that once one acquires this knowledge one will then possess all of the virtues.[24] The difference between the two on this score, of course, is that Aristotle regards the virtues as distinct yet inseparable dispositions, whereas Descartes regards all of the virtues as being encompassed in the single disposition to judge well.

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[23] For a more detailed account of Cartesian wisdom see Morgan (1994, 204-211)

[24] Strictly speaking, the secondary truths of "knowledge of the truth" discussed above involve knowledge particular to certain moral situations. Thus, there might be knowledge that is particularly relevant to exercising the virtue of kindness that is not relevant to courage. These particular truths might help one exercise a virtue better. But the general truths nonetheless prepare one to act virtuously in any moral situation.

Let us now address (2), the claim that nobody has ever described virtue in the way Descartes has. Recall Descartes' claim to Princess Elizabeth:

> Virtue, I believe, consists precisely in sticking firmly to this resolution [to judge well and carry out what one's reason recommends]; though I do not know that anyone has ever so described it. Instead, they have divided it into different species to which they have given various names, because of the various objects to which it applies. (AT IV: 265/CSMK: 258).

At first glance, Descartes seems to be making the claim that nobody has ever argued for the unity of the virtues thesis. While it's unclear whether this is the claim he is making, it is surely false, for there have been other ancient philosophers, most notably Socrates, who have argued for the unity of the virtues thesis. 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.[25] 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.

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[25] One on reading of Cartesian faculties, the intellect and the will are merely conceptually distinct, and thus identical. This is a possibility, and would place Descartes' position closer to Socrates. See Nelson (1997).

6 Descartes' Moral Epistemology

Now that we have an account of Cartesian virtue on the table, I would like to return to Descartes' moral epistemology, and consider whether Descartes allows for moral knowledge. According to the standard interpretation, Descartes' epistemic standards for knowledge are fixed and unchanging. True knowledge is *scientia,* and all other judgments amount to mere opinion (*persuasio*). I contend, however, that Descartes admits that we can have knowledge beyond the realm of metaphysics, epistemology, and mathematics. In particular, I want to argue that Descartes does allow for a stripe of moral knowledge. Although practical judgments are in part grounded in truths that can be clearly and distinctly perceived (knowledge of the truth), when we are morally deliberating, occurrent practical judgments generally cannot be based on any clearly and distinctly perceived features of the moral situation. Thus we need another way of explaining how practical judgments can amount to knowledge. I suggest that Descartes be understood as a contextualist.

Epistemic contextualism is a complicated epistemological theory. Here, I am not concerned with pinning Descartes with a specific version of epistemic contextualism. Rather, I am only concerned with showing that Descartes can be understood as allowing for moral knowledge in a contextualist framework. For the contextualist, the term 'knows' is like the indexical 'here' (Rysiew 2016). For example, if Michael says the sentence "Carmichael is here," the meaning of 'here' depends on the context, i.e. where Michael is when he says it. Similarly, if Michael says "Carmichael knows that *p*", this statement's truth will depend on the context of the utterance. In particular, it depends on the epistemic standards of the situation. Broadly construed, the thought here is that the standards for knowledge in moral deliberation are different than that of, say, metaphysics. While "absolutely speaking" practical judgments may turn out to be false, for all intents and purposes they can nonetheless amount to knowledge.

First, it is important to note that even though practical judgments are not morally certain, Descartes does not think that there is no fact of the matter as to whether a practical judgment is right or wrong. That is, we should not mistakenly take Descartes' account of moral certainty to imply that moral knowledge *per se* is impossible. If this were a commitment of Descartes', then trying to attenuate his claims about moral certainty would be a non-starter. That Descartes allows, in principle, for the possibility of moral knowledge is due to his admitting God in his metaphysics. Though Descartes sheds much of the theological baggage in his philosophical conception of God, he still accepts that God is omniscient and omnipotent. According to Descartes, "every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence" (AT V: 224/CSMK: 358-9) Significantly, this implies that for any moral situation that we are in, God knows what course of action would be most virtuous. At the very least, then, God has knowledge of whether our practical judgments are right or wrong.[26]

With this point in mind, let us turn to Descartes' account of moral certainty as applied to human beings and try to answer the following question: does Descartes' account of moral certainty actually rule out the possibility of moral knowledge for human beings? In other words, do the practical judgments that finite moral agents make ultimately fail to achieve the certainty required for knowledge?[27]

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[26] How does this square with Descartes' voluntarism? Are practical judgments objectively right or wrong? Descartes' voluntarism seems to imply that, all things considered, there isn't an independent standard outside of God's will that makes practical judgments right or wrong. Nonetheless, God provides us with moral guidelines that can help us steer our practical judgments in the right way so that they are virtuous.

Consider the following passage, which I believe clearly indicates the distinction suggested earlier between occurrent practical judgments and retrospective practical judgments:

> There is nothing to repent of when we have done what we judged best at the time when we had to decide to act, even though later, thinking it over at our leisure, *we judge that we made a mistake*. There would be more ground for repentance if we had acted against our conscience, even though we realized afterwards that *we done better than we thought*. For we are only responsible for our thoughts, and it does not belong to human nature to be omniscient, or always to judge as well on the spur of the moment as when there is plenty of time to deliberate.
> (AT IV 308; CSMK 269; emphasis added)[28]

Here, Descartes explains that so long as we did our best when making an occurrent practical judgment, we are virtuous. Strictly speaking, we only have full control over our thoughts, thus, if we do our best at determining an appropriate course of action and are resolved in carrying it out, our virtue is secured. What happens in the world is out of our control, and we cannot be held responsible for things beyond the scope of our power. Given this characterization of moral responsibility, one might expect Descartes to say that we shouldn't concern ourselves with the consequences of our actions, and that our actions are virtuous if and only if they were derived from the right judgments. So long as an agent's "conscience" validates that she used her faculties to the best of her abilities, the story goes, she acted virtuously and the buck stops there.

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[27] Part of the reason why Descartes thinks that moral judgments can only be morally certain is due to his metaphysics of mind and body. According to Descartes, body or extension—the substance of the material world—consists only of geometrical properties, such as size, shape, and motion. As such, Descartes' metaphysics of extension rule out the possibility of natural moral properties. For Descartes, there is no goodness to be found in the extended world. Similarly, mind—the realm of thought—consists only of mental properties, e.g. ideas, sensations, and emotions. Like extension, then, there are no moral properties to be found in the mind. These considerations imply that Descartes is not the type of moral philosopher that finds moral properties in the natural world (In Cartesian terms, this would mean the world of bodies and minds). When we make a moral judgment—e.g. saving burning puppies is good—strictly speaking, there are no natural moral properties that our moral judgments are purporting to track. Nevertheless, Descartes' acceptance of God commits him to moral realism.

[28] Similarly, Descartes writes: "It is also not necessary that our reason should be free from error; it is sufficient if our conscience testifies that we have never lacked resolution and virtue to carry out whatever we have judged the best course" (Letter to Princess Elizabeth, 4 August 1645; AT IV: 266-7; CSMK: 258).

However, this whole account of virtue and moral responsibility is predicated on the idea that we are virtuous despite the fact that our action might bring out bad consequences. In other words, Descartes is allowing for us to determine, after the fact, whether our action was actually good or bad independently of considerations about whether we were virtuous or not. Even if I arrived at a virtuous moral judgment and acted accordingly, I can retrospectively determine that I did something wrong. I take the point of this passage, then, to be that in the case of occurrent retrospective judgments, we can only have moral certainty in our judgment because "it does not belong to human nature to be omniscient, or always to judge as well *on the spur of the moment* as when there is plenty of time to deliberate." In other words, close attention to Descartes' definition of moral certainty, I believe, reveals that it concerns only occurrent practical judgment. As Descartes says, "moral certainty is certainty which is sufficient to regulate our *behavior*," that is, moral certainty pertains to judgments concerning actions we are about to undertake.

In the case of retrospective moral judgments, however, which we can arrive at after plenty of reflection, we actually can determine whether we did the right thing. As Descartes says, "There is nothing to repent of when we have done what we judged best at the time when we had to decide to act, even though later, thinking it over at our leisure, *we judge that we made a mistake*." Thus, retrospective practical judgments have a higher degree of certainty than occurrent practical judgments. That retrospective practical judgments have more certainty than occurrent practical judgments is essential to Descartes' theory of virtue, for if they had the same degree of moral certainty, then it's unclear why Descartes would try to give us a story about repentance at all. That is, if after acting I cannot actually determine whether I did something bad or wrong, then there would be no reason for me to repent, for the question of whether I actually did the right thing or not is a non-starter. Indeed, Descartes' definition of the passion of repentance [*repentir*] requires that our retrospective practical judgments can achieve a higher degree of certainty. Consider the following passage, which distinguishes the passion of remorse from repentance:

> Remorse of conscience is a kind of sadness which results from our doubting that something we are doing, or have done, is good. It necessarily presupposes doubt. *For if we were wholly certain* that what we are doing is bad, we would refrain from doing it, since the will tends only towards objects that have some semblance of goodness. *And if we were certain that what we have already done was bad,* we would feel repentance for it, not simply remorse.
> (AT XI: 464/CSM I: 392; my emphasis)

Here, Descartes claims that we can have certainty that we decided upon a wrong course of action, and that this certainty can cause repentance. Given the considerations raised above, and the fact that Descartes does not qualify his use of certainty here, I take it that Descartes is implying that we can actually achieve a higher degree of certainty in at least some of our retrospective practical judgments.[29][30]

For example, suppose I am presented with a situation where I need to prevent some harmful thing, δ, from happening. I judge that course ϕ is the best way to go about preventing δ.

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[29] Though Descartes claims that our retrospective practical judgments can achieve "certainty," it's unclear whether he means a higher degree of moral certainty or absolute certainty. It seems unlikely that retrospective practical judgments can be grounded in clear and distinct perceptions, and thus it is unlikely that they can be absolutely certain. Nonetheless, Descartes seems to be implying that this level of certainty is nonetheless sufficient for us to have knowledge of whether what was done was right or wrong, and thus it is likely that he is allowing for the possibility of some grade of moral knowledge.

[30] In the *Passions*, Descartes says we need to prepare ourselves for moral situations by developing "firm and determinate judgments". These judgments are the "proper weapons" of the soul because they will tell us how to act in response to particular features of moral situations (Passions I. 48 AT XI 367/CSM I: 347): Being firm and determinate, Descartes seems to suggest that these judgments should be unchanging, suggesting that they have a level of moral certainty as well.

However, after acting out ϕ, I see that course ϕ not only didn't prevent δ, but also brought about some additional harm σ. If presented with such a case, I believe that Descartes would say that we can know with certainty that we didn't do the right thing. Nevertheless, he would say that given our epistemic limitations as finite moral agents, we are still virtuous so long as we did our best at arriving at the judgment to ϕ and acted accordingly. Indeed, we should learn from such an experience and refine our practical moral knowledge so as to avoid similar mistakes in the future (see the discussion of secondary truths in 3.2 above). Descartes' moral epistemology, then, is more complicated than commentators have allowed. If I am correct that a subset of our practical judgments can achieve a higher status than moral certainty, then it seems that Descartes allows for finite human beings to achieve moral knowledge in their practical affairs.[31] Though this may not meet the standards of *scientia*, it may be called *cognitio*.

7 Conclusion

I have attempted to show how two seemingly conflicting strands of virtue theory in Descartes' moral philosophy can be reconciled. That is, Descartes can consistently identify and classify various virtues while also maintaining that virtue is essentially metaphysically simple in that it consists only in judging well. This is not to say that the classification of virtues is a conceptual apparatus Descartes can do away with. One reason to think that such a classification is important for the Cartesian moral philosopher is its practical utility for moral education. By classifying the virtues, Descartes is able to contextualize the disposition to judge well and make specific instructive moral claims: "that act was not courageous because..." If Descartes merely provided a theoretical account of the disposition to judge well without accounting for practical applications of it (which is something he is definitely concerned with in the *Passions*), it's not clear that the aspiring Cartesian moral agent would know how to pursue and exercise virtue.

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[31] For an account of moral certainty and probable knowledge that is consistent with the view presented here see Morris (1970).

This point leads to another crucial respect in which Descartes' account differs from Aristotle's. Descartes makes virtue accessible not only to the philosopher, but to the peasant as well. This is because knowledge of the truth is in principle attainable by anyone. As he explains in the beginning of the *Discourse*, "the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false—which is what we properly call 'good sense' or 'reason'—is naturally equal in all men" (AT VI: 2/CSM: 111). For Descartes, as long as an agent truly employs her knowledge of the truth and moral reasoning to the best of her abilities, she will not only be virtuous, but also have contentment of mind, or happiness (*la béatitude*) (AT IV: 277/CSMK: 262).

4 DESCARTES ON THE PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE PRESERVATION

1 ***Scientia* and Stability**

One of Descartes' main philosophical goals is to achieve perfect knowledge or *scientia*. In *The Search for Truth*, Eudoxus (Descartes' mouthpiece in the dialogue) calls for the need to establish "a body of knowledge which was firm and certain enough to deserve the name 'science'" (AT X: 513/CSM I: 408).[1] In the beginning of the *Meditations*, Descartes says "it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last" (AT VII: 17/CSM II: 12). What exactly is *scientia*, and how is it achieved? In the *Rules*, Descartes defines *scientia* as "certain and evident cognition" (AT X: 362/CSM I: 10) and in the *Second Replies* he writes that "no act of awareness that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called knowledge" (AT VII: 141/CSM II: 101). Commentators generally agree that *scientia* is a property of certain judgments, and that there are two conditions that must be met for a judgment to become *scientia*.[2] First, the judgment must be true. Second, the judgment must be absolutely or metaphysically certain.[3] Descartes tells us that to meet these criteria, we must ground our judgments in clear and distinct perceptions (CDP's). As the story goes, God *qua* non-deceiver guarantees that our CDP's are true and indubitable (Fourth Meditation, AT VII: 43/CSM II: 62). Moreover, when we are in the grip of a CDP, it is impossible for us to doubt its truth; the will is compelled to affirm the CDP, and consequently we cannot go wrong in the judgment we make about it (AT VII: 41/CSM II: 59). When a judgment is grounded in a CDP in this way, it achieves truth and absolute certainty, and thus becomes *scientia* (AT VII: 43/CSM II: 62).[4]

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[1] I employ the following abbreviations for editions of Descartes's work: 'AT': *Oeuvres de Descartes* (cited by volume and page); 'CSM': *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vols I and II (cited by volume and page); 'CSMK': *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol III (cited by page).

[2] See Carriero (2009, 354-5), Cottingham (1986, 24-5), Newman (2016), Williams (1978, 187-8).

[3] These two criteria are often presented in different ways. Keith De Rose, for example, offers the following definition of *scientia*: "S has *scientia* of p if and only if (1) S clearly and distinctly perceives that p is true and (2) S clearly and distinctly perceives the truth of the general principle that what S clearly and distinctly perceives is true" (citation). Here, it seems that truth is central to *scientia*, whereas absolute certainty seems to be left out. However, Keith De Rose's explication of this definition shows that criterion (2) above is what delivers absolute certainty. In this paper, I will not delve into such nuances about truth and absolute certainty, focusing instead on the criterion of stability.

The nature of clear and distinct perception, truth, and certainty have received considerable attention in the literature.[5] In this paper, I am concerned with a feature of *scientia* that hasn't received due attention by commentators. According to Descartes, *scientia* is also supposed to be *stable*, *lasting*, or *enduring*. As Descartes says at the outset of the First Meditation, he seeks to establish something "stable and likely to last" in the sciences (First Meditation, AT VII: 17/CSM II: 17). Similarly, in the *Second Replies* he writes: "the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed" (AT VII: 145/CSM II: 103).

What exactly is the property of stability? Stability is a property ascribed to a judgment over a stretch of time. A judgment is stable—in the relevant sense—when it is *always* absolutely certain and true. While there may be physiological or psychological factors that could cause one to lose knowledge, in normal circumstances, *scientia* must endure in the mind of the epistemic agent. Perfect knowledge does not come and go.

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[4] I will be following the standard interpretation of *scientia*, according to which scientia can be an item of knowledge or intuition. Nicholas Jolley, however, does not interpret *scientia* in this way, arguing instead that "scientia is a body of knowledge as opposed, say, to a set of isolated intuitions" (2010, 86). Lilli Alanen seems to offer a similar interpretation, arguing that *scientia* means true science or true philosophy for Descartes (2008). While I agree that in a broad sense, *scientia* can be interpreted as a body of knowledge or as a systematic science, I think that there is a more specific sense in which *scientia* means an item of perfect knowledge. This is the sense of *scientia* that I will be assuming from hereon.

[5] See Humber (1981), Gewirth (1943), Lennon (2008), Markie (1983), and Tlumak (1982) for accounts of clear and distinct perception. See Wahl (1995) and Vinci (1998) for accounts of Cartesian truth. See Hatfield (1988), Schachter (2005) and Voss (1993) for accounts of certainty.

Now, one might think that if a judgment achieves truth and absolute certainty, then it is automatically stable as well; it will always be true and absolutely certain whenever it is formed in the mind of the epistemic agent. Stability, the thought goes, cannot be an extra condition on *scientia*, rather it is merely a feature that obtains in virtue of the aforementioned criteria. However, the very nature of CDPs—the alleged grounds of *scientia*—threatens the stability of *scientia*. Consider the following passage from the Fifth Meditation:

> Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true. But my nature is also such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly; and often the memory of a previously made judgment may come back, when I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to make it. And so other arguments can now occur to me which might easily undermine my opinion, as if I were unaware of God: and I should thus never have true and certain knowledge about anything, but only shifting and changeable opinions. (AT VII: 69-70/CSM II: 48)

In this passage Descartes considers what I call the *problem of knowledge preservation* (PKP), that is, the challenge of making *scientia* stable. Put simply, the question is this: do I lose *scientia* once I lose my CDPs? Suppose I work through the geometric proof for the Pythagorean theorem, and I arrive at a CDP of "$a^2 + b^2 = c^2$". While I have this CDP, my judgment about the theorem is guaranteed to be true and absolutely certain. But given the limited attention span of my finite mind, I cannot cognitively sustain the proof and I will thus inevitably lose the CDP. What is my epistemic state, then, when I no longer have the CDP? I am still capable of forming the judgment that "$a^2 + b^2 = c^2$" in the absence of the relevant CDP. I can, as Descartes suggests, make the very same judgment based on the memory of the CDP. Does this new judgment also amount to *scientia*?

Assuming that the new judgment about the Pythagorean theorem is identical in content to the original judgment, it seems to follow that it is also true.[6] But what about absolute certainty? Descartes suggests that we can raise intelligible doubts about the new judgment. Perhaps I was mistaken about having clearly and distinctly perceived the Pythagorean theorem, or maybe I have misremembered the CDP and my new judgment has been—albeit unknowingly—infected by some additional false content. Consequently, it seems that I don't have *scientia* about the Pythagorean theorem, but only a "shifting and changeable" opinion. In other words, my knowledge is not stable.

Two important clarificatory remarks are in order about memory and judgments. First, Descartes is working with a genuine conception of memory. One might object that there is no problem of knowledge preservation, because to remember a CDP is simply to regenerate the CDP once again. However, if this were the case, then Descartes would not raise doubts about the status of a new judgment based on a memory of a clear and distinct perception. If this memory of a clear and distinct perception was merely the reappearance of the clear and distinct perception, then it would provide truth and absolute certainty to the new judgment. But since the very epistemic status of the new judgment is what Descartes is questioning, this implies that there is a genuine distinction between a clear and distinct perception and a memory of a clear and distinct perception. To be precise, a memory of a clear and distinct perception is a non-clear and distinct representation of some content that was once clearly and distinctly perceived.[7]

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[6] I am assuming that the new judgment is based on a mental representation of the Pythagorean theorem, as opposed to, say, an auditory or visual representation of the Pythagorean theorem. This is because it's not clear whether judgments based off the latter types of representation will be identical in content.

[7] In this paper I will not delve into the details of what memory consists in for Descartes. For accounts of the nature of memory and Descartes' distinction between corporeal and intellectual memory, see Joyce (1997) and Foti (2000).

Second, we must appreciate Descartes' metaphysics of judgment. Descartes' theory of the mind implies that all thoughts are conscious thoughts. Strictly speaking, then, we cannot have non-occurrent beliefs or judgments. All judgments are occurrent judgments. Given this, how should we understand the claim that we can make a judgment at t_0 that is identical to a judgment made at t_1? Strictly speaking, these judgments are distinct because they are occasioned at different times. However, we can say that they are identical if their intentional content is the same. In other words, two different judgments at t_0 and t_1 can be different tokens of the same type of content.

PKP has not received much attention by commentators, but there are two possible solutions that can be reconstructed from the literature on Descartes' epistemology. The first approach admits that judgments which are not grounded in CDPs can never attain the status of *scientia*. Only judgments that are grounded in CDPs can amount to *scientia*, because only these judgments are guaranteed to be true and absolutely certain. What, then, is the solution to PKP? On this view, to preserve our knowledge, we must become efficient at regenerating the corresponding CDP's vis-à-vis "cognitive routes" (Sowaal 2011, 445). *Scientia* is stabilized, then, in virtue of one's having the ability to regenerate CDPs in multiple ways. Call this approach the *regeneration solution* (Frankfurt 1962, Sowaal 2011, Newman and Nelson 1999).

The second approach argues that so long as we remember having had the relevant corresponding CDPs, judgments that are not currently grounded in CDPs maintain the status of *scientia*. This is because God's non-deceptive nature guarantees the infallibility of memory. On this view, both judgments grounded in CDPs and *memories of CDPs* (MCDPs) can amount to *scientia*. If we forget having completed a certain part of the *Meditations*, or have doubts about whether we really had a certain CDP, we must once again go through the process of generating the CDP. But in the end, we preserve our knowledge over time via MCDPs. Call this approach the *memory solution*.[8]

I think that both solutions pick up on features of Descartes's considered view, but they ultimately fall short because they conflict with other commitments of Descartes'. On the one hand, the regeneration solution overestimates our ability to regenerate CDPs. Descartes warns us that trying to restore past CDPs is difficult and impractical, especially when we are engaged in scientific inquiry or moral deliberation. On the other hand, the memory solution relies on an assumption Descartes should not accept, namely, that God's non-deceptive nature guarantees the infallibility of memory.

Nonetheless, I think we can draw from both approaches to reconstruct Descartes' real solution to PKP. In this paper I argue that preserving *scientia* is a matter of having virtuous habits of belief. That is, an epistemic agent can preserve an item of *scientia* by making it a virtuous habit of belief through engaging the cognitive routes described by the regeneration solution. Significantly, the faculty of memory plays a crucial role in the formation of these habits. Call this approach the *dispositionalist solution*.

One of the benefits of this new reading is that we can make sense of Descartes' references to memory in his discussion of *scientia* and the Cartesian circle. It is well-known that when charged with circularity in the Third Meditation, Descartes often resorts to an obscure discussion of memory. Broadly construed, Descartes claims that so long as we remember having clearly and distinctly perceived some idea, we maintain *scientia* of it even if we are no longer attending to the proofs that led us to said conclusion. Willis Doney argued that in these passages Descartes seeks a divine guarantee of memory (1955). This memory response to the Cartesian circle was refuted by Frankfurt (1962), and it is now the standard view that memory type responses fail. But this leaves us with a problem. What are we to make of Descartes' frequent references to memory in his discussion of *scientia*? Is he really just confused? I contend that although his remarks come in the context of the Cartesian circle, Descartes actually takes himself to be addressing a related but distinct problem, namely, PKP. On the proposed approach, then, we need not charge Descartes with being confused about memeory; rather, the dispositionalist solution can salvage his remarks about memory and incorporate it into his account of *scientia*.

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[8] The memory solution is drawn from Doney's solution to the Cartesian circle (1955).

The paper is divided up as follows. In section 2, I offer a general overview of *scientia*. In section 3, I review the regeneration and memory solutions to PKP, and argue that both face problems. In section 4, I extract the salvageable pieces of these solutions, and piece together the *dispositionalist solution*. In section 5, I argue that while memory is not divinely guaranteed to be infallible, it is divinely guaranteed to be reliable, and that this reliability is all we need for the stability of scientia vis-à-vis virtuous habits of belief. In section 6 I revisit the Cartesian circle, and argue that my new reading of *scientia* is consistent with at least one prominent interpretation of Descartes' response to the Cartesian circle.

2 An Overview of *Scientia*

The *Meditations* is a project that is primarily designed to induce *scientia* concerning the true nature of things in the meditator. Consider how the *Meditations* begin. In the first paragraph of the First Meditation, Descartes reflects on the massive body of beliefs he has accrued from his youth, and realizes that despite his hopes to the contrary, what he took to be knowledge was not knowledge at all (let alone *scientia*):

> Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently

> based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. (First Meditation, AT VII: 17/CSM II: 17)

Here, Descartes begins to give us clues for identifying and distinguishing *scientia*. *Scientia*—it is suggested meets the following criteria:

1. Truth
2. Absolute certainty
3. Stability

At this point, Descartes is unsure about whether any of his former beliefs amount to *scientia*, and perhaps more importantly whether *scientia* is even possible. He will thus examine his beliefs in the following way:

> To accomplish this, it will not be necessary for me to show that all my opinions are false, which is something I could perhaps never manage. Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. And to do this I will not need to run through them all individually, which would be an endless task. Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs are based. (AT VII: 18/CSM II: 17)

Descartes' methodology for assessing the epistemic status of his beliefs is to focus on perhaps the most fundamental criterion, i.e. certainty. If any of his beliefs admit of even a shred of doubt, then, they do not amount to *scientia*. Of course, Descartes cannot examine each of his beliefs individually. As he admits, this is an impossible task for a finite mind. Instead, he will assess the "basic principles" or *sources* of his beliefs (AT VII: 18/CSM II: 17). If these sources are dubitable, then the beliefs that proceed from them must be dubitable as well; for once you undermine the foundation of an edifice, the entire structure is subsequently compromised as well (cf. *Seventh Replies*, AT VII: 537/CSM II: 366).

According to Descartes, we have two main sources for our beliefs and perceptions about our own selves and the external world, namely, our sensory and intellectual faculties. Here, I will not recite Descartes' famous skeptical arguments concerning the reliability of sensation and intellection. For it is well-known that, by the end of the First Meditation, Descartes has achieved hyperbolic doubt: "I have no answer to these arguments, but am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised" (AT VII: 21/CSM I: 14-15).

At this point, it seems that there is no way out of hyperbolic doubt. So where does this leave Descartes? The skeptical arguments of the First Meditation were about external things and truths. Descartes doubted, for example, the accuracy of his sense perception of the size of the sun and the truth of a geometrical theorem.[9] At the beginning of the Second Meditation, however, there is a significant shift in the direction of hyperbolic doubt, as Descartes directs it inward, i.e. at himself:

> Yet apart from everything I have just listed, how do I know that there is not something which does not allow even the slightest occasion for doubt? Is there not a God, or whatever I may call him, who puts into me thoughts I am now having? But why do I think this, since I myself ma perhaps be the author of these thoughts? In that case am not I, at least, something? But I have just said that I have no senses and no body. This is the sticking point: what follows from this? Am I not so bound with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: If I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (Second Meditation, AT VII: 24-5/CSM II: 16-17)

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[9] Of course, a geometrical truth such as the Pythagorean theorem is, for Descartes, ultimately a prime example of *scientia*. However, in the First Meditation Descartes can cast an indirect doubt on the reliability of the intellect (the so called "defective nature doubt), which thus calls into question such truths.

We have finally arrived at what seems to be the first item of *scientia* for the meditator: self-knowledge.[10] More specifically, knowledge of the existence of a subject—an “I”—that is doing the doubting. Of course, the nature of that subject is a separate issue. But Descartes is clear that he cannot intelligibly doubt that an “I” exists while he thinks of himself. This self-knowledge is the one thing, at least so far, that seems to survive hyperbolic doubt.

According to standard interpretations, a judgment—such as the *cogito*—meets these criteria when it is grounded in a CDP.[11] One cannot directly doubt that one exists while thinking of one’s existence. As Descartes says at the end of the Fourth Meditation:

> If, I restrain my will so that it extends to what the intellect clearly and distinctly reveals, and no further, then it is quite impossible for me to go wrong. This is because every clear and distinct perception is undoubtedly something, and hence cannot come from nothing, but must necessarily have God for its author. Its author, I say, is God, who is supremely perfect, and who cannot be a deceiver on pain of contradiction; hence the perception is undoubtedly true. So today I have learned not only what precautions to take to avoid ever going wrong, but also what to do to arrive at the truth. For I shall unquestionably reach the truth, if only I give sufficient attention to all the things which I perfectly understand, and separate these from all the other cases where my apprehension is more confused and obscure. And this is just what I shall take good care to do from now on. (AT VII: 62/CSM II: 43).

In the next section we will refine this standard view of *scientia* by examining two specific conceptions of *scientia*, and how they are designed to meet the criterion of stability.

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[10] I say ‘seems’, because although Descartes claims that the *cogito* is the “first item of knowledge” (Third Meditation, AT VII: 35/CSM II: 24; *Principles* I. 7/CSM I: 195) it is a debated issue whether the *cogito* actually amounts to knowledge.

[11] Descartes does not explicitly reference having a CDP in the famous *cogito* passage. However, for an account of how an underlying CDP is at works in the *cogito* passage, see Carriero (2008, 339-342). Some commentators argue that the *cogito* is still subject to doubt at this point in the *Meditations*. Curley argues that, strictly speaking, the cogito is subject to doubt in the Third Meditation because the meditator has yet to prove the existence of God and that God is not a deceiver (2006, 40).

3 The Regeneration and Memory Solutions

For the regeneration solution, only judgments that are occurrently grounded in CDPs can amount to *scientia*. Any judgments detached from their corresponding CDPs will not amount to *scientia*. This is because, as Cottingham puts it "once our attention lapses, we can no longer be sure of the truth of the proposition intuited" (1986, 77). This is the view of *scientia* on the regeneration solution:

[**scientia$_1$**]: a judgment, *J*, is *scientia* if and only if *J* is grounded in an occurrent CDP.

What, then, is the solution to PKP? According to the regeneration solution, to achieve stability in our knowledge, we need to stabilize our CDPs. The view is not that we can somehow achieve an ability to cognitively sustain, at all times, our CDPs. The regeneration solution admits that CDPs are temporally indexed, momentary states of perception. The claim, rather, is that we need to stabilize our CDPs by becoming better at regenerating them. Thus, whenever we need to make a judgment that is a potential candidate for *scientia*, we can easily retrieve the corresponding CDP's.

According to the regeneration solution, we become better at regenerating a CDP, and thus stabilize it, when we have more "cognitive routes" to that CDP. As Alice Sowaal puts it, a (successful) cognitive route is a "series of considerations—the starting point, the series of reflections, and the terminus of the reflections, which is the clear and distinct perception" (2011, 439). Cognitive routes are not mysterious; and should be familiar to any reader of the *Meditations*. In the *Meditations*, for example, the meditator takes one cognitive route to the CDP of God in the Third Meditation (a cosmological argument), and another cognitive route in the Fifth Meditation (an ontological argument). The thought is that the meditator's CDP of God has become more stable over the course of the *Meditations*, because she has more than one way of arriving at the CDP. And she will stabilize it further as she discovers other cognitive routes to the CDP of God. In short, on the regeneration solution, we meet the criterion of stability by training ourselves to regenerate CDPs in multiple ways.[12]

The regeneration solution faces three main problems. First, although there is evidence for the view that Descartes engages multiple cognitive routes to attain CDPs, there is no direct evidence to suggest that this is how he intended to stabilize *scientia*. As such, the regeneration solution is speculative. Second, the regeneration solution is unclear about how many cognitive routes one must engage to stabilize *scientia*. In the case of the CDP of God, Descartes provides two cognitive routes, the cosmological argument and the ontological argument. But there are many other arguments for the existence of God. Do we only need to engage those provided in the *Meditations*, or are we required to learn other cognitive routes as well? Third, and most importantly, there is evidence that suggests that Descartes did not want us to stabilize *scientia* in the way suggested by the regeneration solution. Consider the following excerpt from a 1643 letter to Princess Elizabeth:

> I believe that it is very necessary to have properly understood, once in a lifetime, the principles of metaphysics, since they are what gives us the knowledge of God and of our soul. But I think also that it would be very harmful to occupy one's intellect frequently in meditating upon them, since this would impede it from devoting itself to the functions of the imagination and the senses. I think the best thing is to content oneself with keeping in one's memory and one's belief the conclusions which one has once drawn from them *(retenir en sa mémoire et en sa créance les conclusions qu'on a une fois tirées)*, and then employ the rest of one's

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[12] It should be noted that there are some contents that we will clearly and distinctly perceive as soon as we think of them, and thus a cognitive route is unnecessary. As Descartes writes in the *Second Replies*: "now some of these perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true. The fact that I exist so long as I am thinking, or that what is done cannot be undone, are examples of truths in respect of which we manifestly possess this kind of certainty. For we cannot doubt them unless we think of them; but we cannot think of them without at the same time believing they are true" (AT VII: 145-6/CSM II: 104).

> study time to thoughts in which the intellect co-operates with the imagination and the senses (AT III: 695/CSMK: 228).

According to Descartes, it is difficult for us to cognitively sustain CDP’s. As embodied finite minds, we will quickly be distracted by passions, imaginings, sensory perceptions, and even other intellections—as frequently seen in the case of the meditator. So, what are we to do when no longer in the grip of CDPs? Do we need to keep regenerating our CDP’s to sustain our knowledge? Descartes seems to addresses this question directly here, at least with respect to the fundamental inventory of CDPs, that is, of God, mind, and body. Descartes tells us that generating these CDPs and meditating on them need only be engaged once in a lifetime. Once a person has done so, she must abstain from meditating on these truths any further because it will not epistemically fruitful. Instead, she must keep “in one’s memory and one’s belief the conclusions” previously drawn, and focus her attention on thoughts that involve sensation and imagination.

The passage to Elizabeth seems suggestive of the memory solution, for Descartes claims that we should content ourselves with preserving our knowledge in memory. Let us consider the memory solution more closely. This is the view of *scientia* on the memory solution:

[**scientia$_2$**]: a judgment, *J*, is scientia if and only if *J* is grounded[2] in a occurrent CDP or an MCDP.

The memory solution is inspired by Willis Doney’s infamous solution to the Cartesian circle. The Cartesian circle is the objection that Descartes offers a circular argument in the Third Meditation. Roughly put, the objection runs as follow:. Descartes’ proof for the existence of God assumes the truth and indubitability of CDPs. However, Descartes’ proof for the truth and indubitability of CDPs presupposes the existence of God. Thus, the argument is circular (AT VII: 214/CSM II:150).

According to Doney, however, there is no circle because Descartes never doubted the reliability of CDPs in the first place. Descartes does not need to rely on God (and his non-deceptive nature) to secure the reliability of CDPs, rather he needs to rely on God in order to secure the infallibility of memory and thus MCDPs. Descartes seems to confirm this view in the *Fourth Replies*:

> when I said that we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge of those conclusions which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them. (AT VII 140)

Here, I am not concerned with Doney's solution to the Cartesian circle, but with how his solution can be reconstructed into a solution to PKP. Let us look at some of the texts Doney relies on, to see how they can be viewed as a solution to PKP. In the *Second Replies* Descartes tells Mersenne:

> There are other truths which are perceived very clearly by our intellect so long as we attend to the arguments on which our knowledge of them depends; and we are therefore incapable of doubting them during this time. But we may forget the arguments in question and later remember simply the conclusions which were deduced from them. The question will now arise as to whether we possess the same firm and indubitable conviction concerning these conclusions, when we simply recollect that they were previously deduced from quite evident principles (our ability to call them 'conclusions' presupposes such a recollection). My reply is that the required certainty is indeed possessed by those whose knowledge of God enables them to understand that the intellectual faculty which he gave them cannot but tend towards the truth; but the required certainty is not possessed by others. (AT VII: 146, CSM II: 104-105).

Here, Descartes draws a distinction between judgments made during occurrent CDPs, and judgments detached from those CDPs. Descartes then raises the very question that is at the heart of PKP, namely, "whether we possess the same firm and indubitable conviction concerning these conclusions, when we simply recollect that they were previously deduced from quite evident principles." According to Descartes, if one has understood God's existence and his non-deceptive nature, then one will maintain the same firm and indubitable conviction in judgments detached from CDPs. This view is articulated again in the *Fourth Replies,* where Descartes clarifies for Arnauld his reply to Mersenne:

> I made a distinction between what we in fact perceive clearly and what we remember having perceived clearly on a previous occasion. To begin with, we are sure that God exists because we attend to the arguments which prove this; but subsequently it is enough for us to remember that we perceived something clearly in order for us to be certain that it is true. This would not be sufficient if we did not know that God exists and is not a deceiver (AT VII: 246/CSM II: 171).

Descartes tells a similar story in a 1640 letter to Regius:

> A man who has once clearly understood the reasons which convince us that God exists and is not a deceiver, provided he remembers the conclusion 'God is no deceiver' whether or not he continues to attend to the reasons for it, will continue to possess not only the conviction, but real knowledge of this and all other conclusions the reasons for which he remembers he once clearly perceived. (AT III: 64-65/CSMK: 147)

For advocates of the memory solution, the extension of the divine guarantee of the veracity of CDPs to MCDPs cannot be more explicit. Once one has knowledge of God and his non-deceptive nature, one need not regenerate CDPs in order to possess *scientia*; rather, one can remember a CDP and still have the same level of certainty in the corresponding detached judgments. God guarantees the infallibility of MCDPs, and thus MCDPs can render judgments detached from CDPs into *scientia.*

I think that these texts—coupled with the 1643 letter to Princess Elizabeth—clearly suggest that Descartes has a significant role for memory in his account of *scientia*. That much is undeniable. Indeed, in my dispositionalist solution to PKP, I too will invoke memory. However, the memory solution's understanding of the role of memory, namely, that God guarantees the infallibility of memory faces significant problems. According to Doney, memory is fallible, and "God must vindicate its use" (1955, 326). However, as Frankfurt objects: "if memory is actually fallible, how can it be vindicated, by God or in any other way? If it is really vindicated by God, on the other hand, how can it be fallible?" (2008, 218). The question, then, is whether Descartes views memory as fallible. According to John Cottingham,

> If Descartes had claimed that once God's existence is established the accuracy of our memory is guaranteed, then he would be flying in the face of common sense, since it is notorious that human memory is weak and fallible. (1986, 77 fn. 25)

Descartes does recognize the fallibility of memory in a few texts. In the *Rules*, for example, Descartes claims that memory is "weak and unstable" (AT X: 408/CSM I: 38). Moreover, consider Descartes' remarks in his *Conversation with Burman*:

> Burman: Someone, however, may still raise the following objection: after I have proved that God exists and is not a deceiver, then I can say that my mind certainly does not deceive me, since a reliable mind was God's gift to me; but my memory may still deceive me since I may think I remember something which I do not in fact remember. This is because of the weakness of memory.
>
> Descartes: I have nothing to say on the subject of memory. Everyone should test himself to see whether he is good at remembering. If he has any doubts on that score, then he should make use of written notes and so forth to help him. (Conversation with Burman, CSMK: 334)

Burman presents Descartes with a clear opportunity to clarify his stance on memory. If Descartes thought that memory was infallible, then presumably he would state as much. However, he seems to accept that memory is fallible, claiming that anyone who has doubts about their memory should test themselves, and use notes to aid them.

4 The Dispositionalist Solution

Broadly put, the dispositionalist solution claims that *scientia* is stabilized through virtuous habits of belief. This reading builds on both the regeneration solution and the memory solution. For the dispositionalist, habits of belief are created by engaging cognitive routes in order to imprint the cognitive routes and judgments made about CDPs into memory. The difference with the prior readings is, roughly, as follows. For the dispositionalist, engaging cognitive routes is a practice designed to preserve knowledge in memory. However, it is not mere MCDPs that preserve our knowledge, rather it is through a habit of belief that is created vis-à-vis the faculty of memory. To unpack this view, we will have to say a bit more about habits of belief, and the role of memory in their formation.

Habits of belief are dispositions to have certain thoughts (*Passions* III.161 AT XI: 453/CSM I: 387). A central goal of Descartes' philosophical program is to uproot our vicious habits of belief based on obscure and confused perceptions, such as those formed during our childhood when we were immersed in the senses or those passively acquired from the popular Scholasticism of the day, and to replace them with virtuous habits of belief based on clear and distinct perceptions (or so I will argue).[13]

Let us consider the nature of vicious habits of belief more closely, as it will help clarify their counterpart. In *Principles* I. 71, Descartes says the "first and main cause of all our errors" starts in childhood when "the mind was so closely tied to the body that it had no leisure for any thoughts except those by means of which it had sensory awareness of what was happening to the body." In childhood "the mind judged everything in terms of its utility to the body in which it was immersed, it assessed the amount of reality in each object by the extent to which it was affected by it." This resulted in the formation of many erroneous judgments; the mind "supposed that there was more substance or corporeality in rocks and metals than in water or air, since it felt more hardness and heaviness in them." These erroneous judgments eventually become vicious habits of belief:

> right from infancy our mind was swamped with a thousand such preconceived opinions; and in later childhood, forgetting that they were adopted without sufficient

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[13] Nolan and Easton also argue that Descartes wants us to replace vicious habits of belief with virtuous habits of belief (2016, 349).

> examination, it regarded them as known by the senses or implanted by nature, and accepted them as utterly true and evident (AT VIIIA: 35-6/CSM I: 218-9).

Although Descartes does not explicitly reference habits of belief in this article, it is clear a few articles later that he has habits of belief in mind. Descartes writes regarding the cause of our errors: “we become tired if we have to attend to things which are not present to the senses; as a result, our judgements on these things are habitually based not on present perception but on preconceived opinion” (*Principles* I.73, AT VIIIA: 37/CSM I: 220).

Although these habitual judgments are produced by the cooperation of the intellect and the will, Descartes is clear that the habits of belief are ultimately formed in memory. In *Principles* I. 72 Descartes continues:

> In later years the mind is no longer a total slave to the body, and does not refer everything to it. Indeed, it inquires into the truth of things considered in themselves, and discovers very many of its previous judgments to be false. But despite this, it is not easy for the mind to erase these false judgments from its memory; and as long as they stick there, they can cause a variety of errors. (AT VIIIA: 36: CSM I: 219-220).

Here, Descartes is clear that these habits of belief are formed in memory. Let us define a vicious habit of belief as follows:

> [**vicious habit of belie**f]: a habit of belief, *H*, is vicious if and only if *H* is grounded in obscure and confused perceptions.[14]

Let us now turn to virtuous habits of belief. Descartes explicitly claims that the *Meditations* is designed to inculcate virtuous habits of beliefs. These habits of belief are created through repeated meditation. One will not have successfully engaged the *Meditations* by giving it a quick read; rather a successful meditation requires weeks or even months. In the *Second Replies*, Descartes writes:

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[14] Strictly speaking, there are more conditions that need to apply to distinguish a vicious habit of belief. A vicious habit of belief could also derive from CDPs. For example, one might have CDPs but use the wrong rules of inference. I could have CDPs of individual premises of an argument, but commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent. Conversely, a virtuous habit of belief must be derived from CDPs and the right rules of inference.

> And I should like my readers not just to take the short time needed to go through it, but to devote several months, or at least weeks, to considering the topics dealt with, before going on to the rest of the book. If they do this they will undoubtedly be able to derive much greater benefit from what follows (AT VII: 130/CSM II: 94)

Descartes continues, explaining that his method is designed to replace vicious habits of belief with virtuous habits of belief:

> The nature of the method is such that scrutinizing it just once is not enough. Protracted and repeated study is required to eradicate the lifelong habit of confusing things related to the intellect with corporeal things, and to replace it with the opposite habit of distinguishing the two; this will take at least a few days to acquire (AT VII: 131/CSM II: 94; cf. *Seventh Replies*, AT VII: 506/CSM II: 344)

What exactly is a virtuous habit of belief? The clearest statement of a virtuous habit of belief is given in the context of Descartes' theory of virtue. According to Descartes, virtue requires that we have knowledge of the truth (Letter to Elizabeth 15 September 1645, AT IV: 291/CSMK: 265). However, in order to act according to this knowledge of the truth in a moral situation, we need to make this knowledge a habit of belief:

> 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 reason 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, lack of a firm habit of belief. (AT IV: 295-6/CSMK: 267)

Though presented in the context of moral deliberation, notice that Descartes argues for the inculcation of virtuous habits of belief because of similar considerations that generate PKP.

Because we cannot sustain our attention on the truth, we need some way of stabilizing our knowledge so we don't forget to act according to it when we are in a moral situation. Descartes' suggestion is that we frequently meditate on the truth—i.e. clear and distinct perceptions—until is imprinted in our mind and has become a settled disposition within us. This suggests that Cartesian meditation vis-à-vis the engagement of cognitive routes is not just a way of arriving at knowledge, but it is also a way of establishing habits of belief that also stabilize that knowledge. By repeatedly engaging cognitive routes to a particular CDP, the content of said CDP can become a habit of belief.

This notion of imprinting knowledge in the mind is presented in the *Meditations* as well, and significantly, is directly linked to memory. At the end of the Second Meditation, for example, Descartes famously learns that the nature of the mind is better known than the nature of the body. This is a significant discovery, for up until now Descartes had thought that the nature of the body was clearly better known than the nature of the mind (a childhood sensory prejudice). Notice how Descartes ends the Second Meditation:

> But since the habit of holding on to old opinions cannot be set aside so quickly, I should like to stop here and meditate for some time on this new knowledge I have gained, so as to fix it more deeply in my memory. (AT VII: 34/CSM II: 23)

Descartes is making it clear to his readers that merely arriving at some new knowledge is not sufficient to counteract our prior false beliefs. Since we are so engrained in our sensory prejudice and have habits of belief that condition how we see the world and thus do metaphysical inquiry, we must actively combat our prior habits of belief by meditating on the truth to form new, virtuous habits of belief. Here, Descartes explicitly claims that the new virtuous habit of belief is formed in memory.

Descartes makes the connection between a virtuous habit of belief and memory the end of the Fourth Meditation as well:

> Admittedly, I am aware of a certain weakness in me, in that I am unable to keep my attention fixed on one and the same item of knowledge at all times; but by attentive and repeated meditation I am nevertheless able to make myself remember as often as the need arises, and thus get into the habit of avoiding error. (AT VII: 62/CSM II: 43)

Descartes once again acknowledges the limitations of his attention, and seeks to remedy this by repeated meditation to fix an item of knowledge in memory. Here, the item of knowledge is the "truth rule" of the Third Mediation: "I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true" (AT VII: 35/CSM II: 24). According to Descartes, by frequent and repeated meditation on this rule he will be able to fix it in his memory in a way such that he will form the habit of believing it, which will thus prevent him from falling into error. Similarly, Descartes writes in the Appendix to the *Fifth Objections*,

> No matter how much we have resolved not to assert or deny anything, we easily forget our resolution afterwards if we have not strongly impressed it on our memory; and this is why I suggested that we should think about it very carefully (AT IXA: 205/CSM II: 270)

Let us define a virtuous habit of belief as follows:

[**virtuous habit of belief**]: A habit of belief, *H*, is virtuous if and only if *H* is grounded in CDPs.[15]

With these distinctions in hand, a new conception of *scientia* emerges:

[**scientia$_3$**]: A judgment *J* is *scientia* if and only if *J* is grounded in a virtuous habit of belief.

Let us get clear on how scientia$_3$ satisfies the criterion of stability and thus solves PKP. Recall, PKP is generated by the fact that we are finite minds. Unlike God, we cannot sustain our attention on CDPs. As finite minds, we are easily distracted by other thoughts, sensations, passions, and imaginings (moreover, we are simply forgetful). Descartes has a reasonable response to this challenge . If we engage cognitive routes until CDPs become imprinted in our memory, we will always have our knowledge ready at hand because we will have a disposition to produce *scientia*. This disposition protects us, under normal circumstances, from forgetting this knowledge. And even if we are distracted by other sensations or passions, we are still disposed to make the right judgments when the situation demands (even though we may fail from time to time).

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[15] For a more in depth account of virtuous judgment and habits of belief see Chapter 5 of Vitz (2015). The account of virtuous habits of belief presented here is, for the most part, consistent with Vitz's account, although Vitz does not employ his account of virtuous habits of belief to address PKP.

Notice how the dispositionalist solution builds on the two prior readings. For the dispositionalist, repeated engagement with cognitive routes is essential to forming habits of belief. We must repeatedly work through these cognitive routes to imprint CDPs onto memory. Indeed, this is arguably why Descartes say we must repeatedly work through the *Meditations*; we won't reap the benefits of the *Meditations* through a mere first pass. Like the memory solution, memory is a central part of the dispositionalist solution. However, it is not divinely guaranteed MCDPs that ground *scientia*. Rather, it is memory used in a certain way. On this view, memory has a preservative function, which if engaged properly, can create virtuous habits of belief that can stabilize our knowledge. The problem with the original memory solution is that it suggests we need only engage meditation once in order to achieve MCDPs that can secure our knowledge. This is an overestimation of God's guarantee of the non-defective nature of our faculties. God does not give a guarantee that memory is reliable *tout court*; rather, it must be used in the proper way. For the dispositionalist, this means that in order to stabilize our knowledge, we have to practice and repeat our meditations in order to fix knowledge in memory.

5 **Memory and the Defective Nature Doubt**

Let us consider an objection one might raise against this reading of *scientia*. Recall, the standards for *scientia* in the *Meditations* are very high. *Scientia* is indefeasible knowledge. Is it really the case, then, that these judgments grounded in virtuous habits of belief meet the standards of *scientia*? The thought here is that in trying to account for stability or preservation, the dispositionalist solution has failed to account for truth and absolute certainty. While we now have a mechanism—habits of belief—for preserving knowledge, these judgments are *merely judgments* and simply do not amount to *scientia*. This is because virtuous habits of belief could be compromised over time by sensory prejudice or other forms of false content. In short, virtuous habits of belief might be subject to the defective nature doubt of the First Meditation.

In response, I want to return to Descartes' discussion of PKP at the end of the Fifth Meditation. Recall the first passage we considered in section 1:

> Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true. But my nature is also such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly; and often the memory of a previously made judgment may come back, when I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to make it. And so other arguments can now occur to me which might easily undermine my opinion, as if I were unaware of God: and I should thus never have true and certain knowledge about anything, but only shifting and changeable opinions. (AT VII: 69-70/CSM II: 48)

Here, Descartes explicitly raises the question at the heart of PKP: do judgments that are no longer grounded in CDPs still amount to *scientia*? Let us now consider Descartes' Fifth Meditation response to PKP:

> Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true. Accordingly, even if I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to judge that this is true, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived it, there are no counter-arguments which can be adduced to make me doubt it, but on the contrary I have true and certain knowledge of it. And I have knowledge not just of this matter, but

> of all matters which I remember ever having demonstrated, in geometry and so on. For what objections can now be raised? That the way I am made makes me prone to frequent error? But I now know that I am incapable of error in those cases where my understanding is transparently clear. Or can it be objected that I have in the past regarded as true and certain many things which I afterwards recognized to be false? But none of these were things which I clearly and distinctly perceived: I was ignorant of this rule for establishing the truth, and believed these things for other reasons which I later discovered to be less reliable. (ibid.)

Descartes' response is as follows. Once it has been established that God exists and that he is not a deceiver, I can have certainty that my faculties are—in normal circumstances—reliable. As Descartes writes in the *Second Replies*: "Since God is the supreme being, he must also be supremely good and true, and it would therefore be a contradiction that anything should be created by him which positively tends toward falsehood" (AT VII: 144/CSM II: 103). This means that so long as we use our faculties correctly (be it the intellect or memory), we can have confidence that we are tracking the truth. Thus, I no longer need to doubt the reliability of my past CDPs, nor do I need to doubt my memories that I had said perceptions.[16] As such, I do not need to constantly regenerate past CDPs. To see this, compare the epistemic situation of the "theist geometer" with that of the "atheist geometer":

> The fact that an atheist can be 'clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles' is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this awareness of his is not true knowledge, since no act of awareness that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called knowledge. Now since we are supposing that this individual is an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident (as I fully explained). And although this doubt may not occur to him, it can still crop up if someone else raises the point or if he looks into the matter himself. So he will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists. (Second Replies, AT VII: 141/CSM II: 101)

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[16] What is the scope of *scientia*? I take a wide reading, that is, *scientia* does not just include fundamental metaphysical truths. But it extends to any propositions that can be grounded in CDPs (e.g. other metaphysical truths and mathematics). Science and ethics, however, must be excluded as Descartes suggests that we cannot have absolute certainty in these fields—we can only have moral certainty.

The atheist geometer is capable of clearly and distinctly perceiving a theorem. However, when she loses the CDP of the theorem, she is subject to the defective nature doubt. That is, she can indirectly doubt the truth of the CDP, or even whether she had a CDP at all. The theist geometer is not subject to the defective nature doubt because she knows that God's non-deceptive nature guarantees the reliability of her intellect and memory. Thus, when she exits the CDP, she can still be certain of the truth of the CDP, and that she had the CDP.

To be sure, Descartes is not claiming, as the advocates of the memory solution would have it, that there is a divine guarantee of memory. Rather, the claim is that the hyperbolic doubts about memory are no longer intelligible, because it is not the case that memory is prone to frequent error. Given that God exists and that he is not a deceiver, I can assume that my memory is reliable about my past intellectual achievements.[17] That Descartes believes memory is reliable is also confirmed at the end of the Sixth Meditation, when he discharges the dreaming doubt:

> I now notice that there is a vast difference between the two, in that dreams are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are. If, while I am awake, anyone were suddenly to appear to me and then disappear immediately, as happens in sleep, so that I could not see where he had come from or where he had gone to, it would not be unreasonable for me to judge that he was a ghost, or a vision created in my brain, rather than a real man. But when I distinctly see where things come from and where and when they come to me, and when I can connect my perceptions of them with the whole of the rest of my life without a break, then I am quite certain that when I encounter these things I am not asleep but And I ought not to have even the slightest doubt of their reality if, after calling upon all the senses as well as my memory and my intellect in order to check them, I receive no conflicting reports from any of these sources. For from the fact that God is not a deceiver it follows that in cases like these I am completely free from error. (AT VII: 89-90/CSM II: 61-2).

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[17] Veroniqué Foti similarly argues that even if memory is weak, this does not pose a problem for *scientia*: "Descartes states in the Second Replies that, given knowledge of God, one may even forget the arguments for a conclusion one remembers having demonstrated without jeopardizing one's 'firm and immutable conviction' as to its truth. The weakness of memory can thus be admitted without endangering scientia" (2000, 600).

If Descartes thought that memory was defective, then he would not be able to discharge the dreaming doubt by appealing to the intellect and the senses alone. Descartes needs memory to be reliable to successfully complete the *Meditations*, and what allows him to do so is his having established that God is not a deceiver. The upshot for the reading on offer is that because memory is reliable, it is safe to assume that the habits of belief that I establish vis-à-vis memory will—in normal circumstances—preserve the truth and certainty that the original judgments grounded in CDPs had.

There is one last worry one might have about my account of the reliability of memory, namely, that I have simply repackaged the original memory solution. The objection is that there doesn't seem to be a significant epistemic distinction between MCDPs being infallible and being reliable, and thus scientia is ultimately stabilized through MCDPs. In response, I think that we need to read Descartes' remarks about memory in his discussion of *scientia* against the more subtle account of memory I have drawn out from the *Meditations*, namely, that it is through repeated engagement with cognitive routes that memory can reliably regenerate the contents of CDPs. Although memory is reliable, a mere memory based off one generation of a CDP might not be accurate. We might indeed misremember the CDP. As Descartes admits in the *Rules*, there is a sense in which memory is “weak and unstable.” However, as Descartes goes on to explain in the context of his account of enumeration or induction, memory can be strengthened through “continuous and repeated movement of thought” (AT X: 408/CSM I: 38), and this is why the certainty of induction “depends on memory” (AT X: 408/CSM I: 37). Similarly, my claim is that memory has to be utilized in a certain way to stabilize *scientia*. In short, there is a significant distinction between the sense of reliability of memory I have developed, and the infallibility of memory invoked by the memory solution.

6 The Cartesian Circle Revisited

How does the dispositionalist solution to PKP square with solutions to the Cartesian circle? There have been many attempted solutions to the Cartesian circle, and I will not be able to address each of them here. However, I want to examine briefly one prominent solution, that of Newman and Nelson, and show that the dispositionalist solution does not conflict with their view, but actually supplements their reading of *scientia*.

Recall, the Cartesian circle is the objection that Descartes commits circular reasoning in the Third and Fourth Meditations. The circle consists of the following two arcs: (1) Descartes is certain that God exists because he is certain that his CDPs are true and (2) Descartes is certain that his CDPs are true because he is certain that God exists. The memory response solves the Cartesian circle by essentially restricting the scope of doubt in the *Meditations*. This is *grounds exemption*. On this view, Descartes' doubt is not hyperbolic because there are a class of perceptions that are always assumed to be indubitable and true, namely, CDPs. Thus, we do not need God to vindicate CDPs, rather we need the existence of a non-deceptive God to secure memory, that is, MCDPs. The memory response, then, rejects the second arc of the Cartesian circle, namely, that Descartes is certain that his CDPs are true because he is certain that God exists. Newman and Nelson resist this strategy, arguing that Descartes' doubt is fully hyperbolic: all perceptions—CDPs in particular—are subject to the skeptical doubt of the First Meditation. More specifically, the skeptical doubts of the First Meditation call into question the very reliability of our faculties. The skeptical doubts shows that even when I am in my best cognitive states—a state of clear and distinct perception—I may still be in error.

Newman and Nelson offer a more subtle reading of the two arcs of the Cartesian circle:

> (1*) I am certain that God exists only because (I am certain that *p*, if I clearly and distinctly attend to *p* and its proof).

> (2*) (I am certain that the C&D Rule is perfectly reliable, if I clearly and distinctly attend to it and its proof) only because I am certain that God exists. (1999, 381)

The C&D Rule is the "truth rule" mentioned above, namely, that I can be certain that clear and distinct perceptions are always true. Newman and Nelson's solution is complex, but their main insight is to provide the meditator with *grounds enhancement*. More specifically, they argue for a way to access the C&D rule in a self-evident intuition, instead of a proof:

> the meditator's ground of assent to the divine guarantee is enhanced from mere demonstrative clarity and distinctness, to self-evident, axiomatic, intuitive, clarity and distinctness. As a consequence, during moments of attention his bottom-most epistemic ground *is* his understanding that the C&D Rule is grounded in the ultimate divine ground; the truth of the divine guarantee is evident *in itself*, rather than resting on premises that are epistemically more basic. (.ibid 386)

Newman and Nelson claim that in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes achieves an intuition that involves both the existence of God and the reliability of the C&D rule. Significantly, this intuition does not rest on any proof, like the Third Meditation proof for the existence of God, but is self-evident: "when one has a *readily accessible* cognition of God that is *due* and *sufficient* to resist hyperbolic doubt, it conceptually contains a recognition of the divine guarantee of the C&D Rule" (ibid. 389). Hyperbolic doubt is thus discharged because every skeptical hypothesis becomes self-defeating in the face of a self-evident and assent-compelling intuition of the C&D Rule (ibid., 390-1). Unlike the Third Meditation proof, any attempt to formulate hyperbolic doubt in the face of a self-evident intuition of God and the C&D Rule is automatically defeasible.

Newman and Nelson are effectively trying to secure the foundational grounds for *scientia*, by establishing how the grounds of *scientia*—i.e. the existence of God and the reliability of the C&D Rule—are indefeasible. As far as I can tell, the dispositionalist account of *scientia* does not conflict with their interpretation. The dispositionalist does not require us to limit the scope of hyperbolic doubt, nor does it preclude the possibility that one can have a simultaneous intuition of God's existence and the C&D Rule. However, Newman and Nelson do have doubts about "the accumulation of items of *scientia* at the object level" (ibid. 392), doubts which are grounded in questions about memory. Their worry is that items of *scientia* depend on CDP's of their corresponding proofs, and when our attention lapses away from the proof, we can question the veracity of our memory and whether we had the CDP.

My response to this worry is two-fold. First, as I argued at the end of the previous section, God's non-deceptive nature guarantees that our faculties tend toward the truth – we are not "prone to frequent error". This implies that our memory is reliable. As such, we can have confidence in the reports our memory makes about past CDPs. This point ultimately comes down to how serious one takes the texts about the reliability of memory, and Newman and Nelson might not buy into my reading of the texts. However, there is a second point that I think Newman and Nelson might concede. Newman and Nelson's argument that the C&D Rule can become self-evident rests on the claim that this self-evident intuition is made possible through repeated meditation. Through repeated engagement of a proof, the conclusion of the proof can become transparent and self-evident to the meditator:

> By analogy, considering that our beginning logic students may need, initially, to work hard to understand the significant difference between affirming the antecedent and affirming the consequent; by the end of the term—after repeated, reflective meditation—many of these same students begin pounding their fists, along with us, that nothing is more obvious than *modus ponens*. (ibid. 388)

The thought here is quite similar to the view I have developed, namely, that *scientia* must be grounded in virtuous habits of belief. Indeed, Newman and Nelson cite some of the same texts about habits of belief to justify their claim about the possibility of self-evident intuitions (See AT IV: 295-6/CSMK: 267). I propose that one way of viewing the process of establishing virtuous habits of belief—that is repeated engagement with cognitive routes to a CDP—is that the resultant judgments become self-evident.[18] While I do not think that my view of *scientia* requires this further point, we can modulate it so that it is amenable to Newman and Nelson's reading of *scientia*. In short, I think that the dispositionalist account of *scientia* is consistent with Newman and Nelson's solution to the Cartesian circle, and under a certain light, can be viewed as an extension of their account of *scientia*.

7 Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to draw attention to a feature of *scientia* that has not been duly appreciated by commentators, namely, the stability of *scientia*. We considered two possible solutions to PKP—the regeneration solution and the memory solution—and have seen that while they pick up on features of Descartes' considered view, they ultimately fall short. I have argued for an alternative view, the dispositionalist solution, which argues that *scientia* is stabilized through virtuous habits of belief. These are habits of belief grounded in CDPs, and formed through memory. Beyond solving PKP, this view is attractive because it can explain Descartes' frequent appeals to memory in his account of *scientia*, without relying on the problematic assumption that God's non-deceptive nature implies the infallibility of memory.

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[18] Mathew Homan (2018) has recently argued that symbols and written notes can help strengthen memory, which can help us progress from foundational *scientia* to *scientia* at the object level. I think this view of memory is consistent with the view developed here, although I would say that such aids can help strengthen memory in the development of virtuous habits of belief.

5 CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have tried to make headway towards understanding Descartes' ethics, particularly the moral system that he envisions in the image of the tree of philosophy. In what follows, I will explain how each question has been answered, and piece together the overall interpretation of Descartes' ethics that I have developed.

The first question I have addressed is the following: what is the relationship between the virtue of generosity and the rest of Descartes' philosophical system? At first glance, a plausible reading based on the tree of philosophy is that generosity would be a fruit of the tree, and thus presupposes the philosophical fields that come before it. However, as we have seen, some commentators have argued that the virtue of generosity is the so-called "seed" of Descartes' philosophical system by being fundamental to Descartes' metaphysics and epistemology in the *Meditations*. Lisa Shapiro has argued that generosity is central to the Fourth Meditation, and Omri Boehm has argued that generosity is foundational to the *cogito* in the Second Meditation.

I have argued for the claim that generosity—the chief virtue in Descartes' ethics—is indeed a fruit of philosophy. In particular, it presupposes knowledge of metaphysics, epistemology, and physics (the roots and trunk of philosophy).[1] The central move of my argument has been that generosity presupposes knowledge of the mind-body distinction, which is not available to the meditator in the Second Meditation or Fourth Meditation. This is because the first component of generosity states that the only thing that truly belongs to oneself is free will. In the Second and Fourth Meditation, however, the meditator has yet to distinguish the body from her mind, and thus it is still a possibility that the body could be fundamental to the nature of her self. Indeed, in the Fourth Meditation the meditator considers this exact possibility, and is not yet in a position to deny it. Moreover, Descartes' method for acquiring generosity requires that one meditate on the actions of other mind-body composites in order to understand the advantages and disadvantages that come from using the will well or poorly. In the *Meditations*, however, the meditator is not yet aware of the existence of other people and thus cannot engage in such a reflection. Generosity, then, cannot be acquired until one successfully completes the *Meditations*, and completes further reflections on her fundamental nature.

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[1] Strictly speaking, the tree of philosophy would imply that generosity also presupposes knowledge of mechanics and medicine. Descartes, however, never spells out how this is supposed to work, and I have not ventured to sketch an account in this dissertation.

The second question I have addressed is the following: What is the metaphysical nature of Cartesian virtue, and does Cartesian virtue allow for the possibility of moral knowledge? As we say in the first chapter, Descartes distinguishes the virtue of generosity, and provides a unique two component definition of generosity. Descartes also distinguishes other virtues as well, such as courage and humility. However, Descartes also offers a universal definition of virtue, arguing that virtue consists of the firm and constant resolution to use the will well or the disposition to judge well. *Prima facie*, then, there is a tension in Descartes' virtue theory. On the one hand, there is a complex account of virtue where there are distinct kinds of virtue. On the other hand, there is a simple account of virtue, where there is only one virtue, i.e. the disposition to judge well.

I argue that this is not an *ultima facie* tension. Though Descartes distinguishes different types of virtue, what he is ultimately trying to do is articulate a unique version of the unity of the virtues thesis. In particular, he advances a version of the unity of the virtues thesis where all the virtues are identical to each other and thus reducible to the same nature ("the identify of the virtues" thesis). This fundamental nature is the disposition to judge well. The different virtues, for Descartes, are distinguished at a conceptual level according to the different objects to which they apply. Courage and generosity, for example, fundamentally consist of the firm and constant resolution to use the will well. However, we can distinguish them because these virtues are manifested in different types of moral situations. Courage may be exemplified on the battlefield, whereas generosity may be exemplified in one's interactions with the less fortunate. Nonetheless, both virtues are tokens of the same type of disposition.

This reading of the unity of the virtues has interesting implications for Descartes' moral epistemology. Descartes grounds virtue in "knowledge of the truth." This knowledge ranges from items in metaphysics, physics, to society and politics. However, not all of these truths can be grounded in clear and distinct perceptions. For example, Descartes third truth is that we must know the physics of *Principles* III. However, the physical principles therein cannot have the level of certainty of the truths established, for example, in the *Meditations*. Descartes also claims in the fourth truth that we must recognize that we are parts of our community, society, and the universe. However, this "truth" does not meet the standards of knowledge outlined in the *Meditations* either. Perhaps Descartes is not being rigorous. But another possibility is that Descartes is shifting the standards of knowledge. The requirement of indefeasibility for metaphysics may not apply in the context of moral deliberation. Indeed, Descartes distinguishes a different kind of certainty for our practical judgments, namely, moral certainty. While moral certainty is not indefeasible like metaphysical or absolute certainty, Descartes does think such certainty is sufficient for the conduct of life. I argue that if our practical judgments do meet moral certainty, Descartes would accept that such judgments amount to moral knowledge.

The first two chapters considered how Descartes' ethics is systematically grounded in his metaphysics and epistemology. The view I have developed is that Descartes' ethics is grounded in his metaphysics and epistemology in virtue of his ethics—virtue in particular—presupposing knowledge of metaphysics and epistemology. In the last chapter, I take a different approach to understanding the systematicity of Descartes' ethics. The third question I have addressed is the following: Does Descartes' ethics inform his metaphysics or epistemology? I argue that Descartes' virtue theory informs his account of perfect knowledge or *scientia*. Traditionally, *scientia*, has been understand as a judgment that is true and absolutely certain. I argue, however, that there is a third condition that *scientia* must meet, namely, stability.

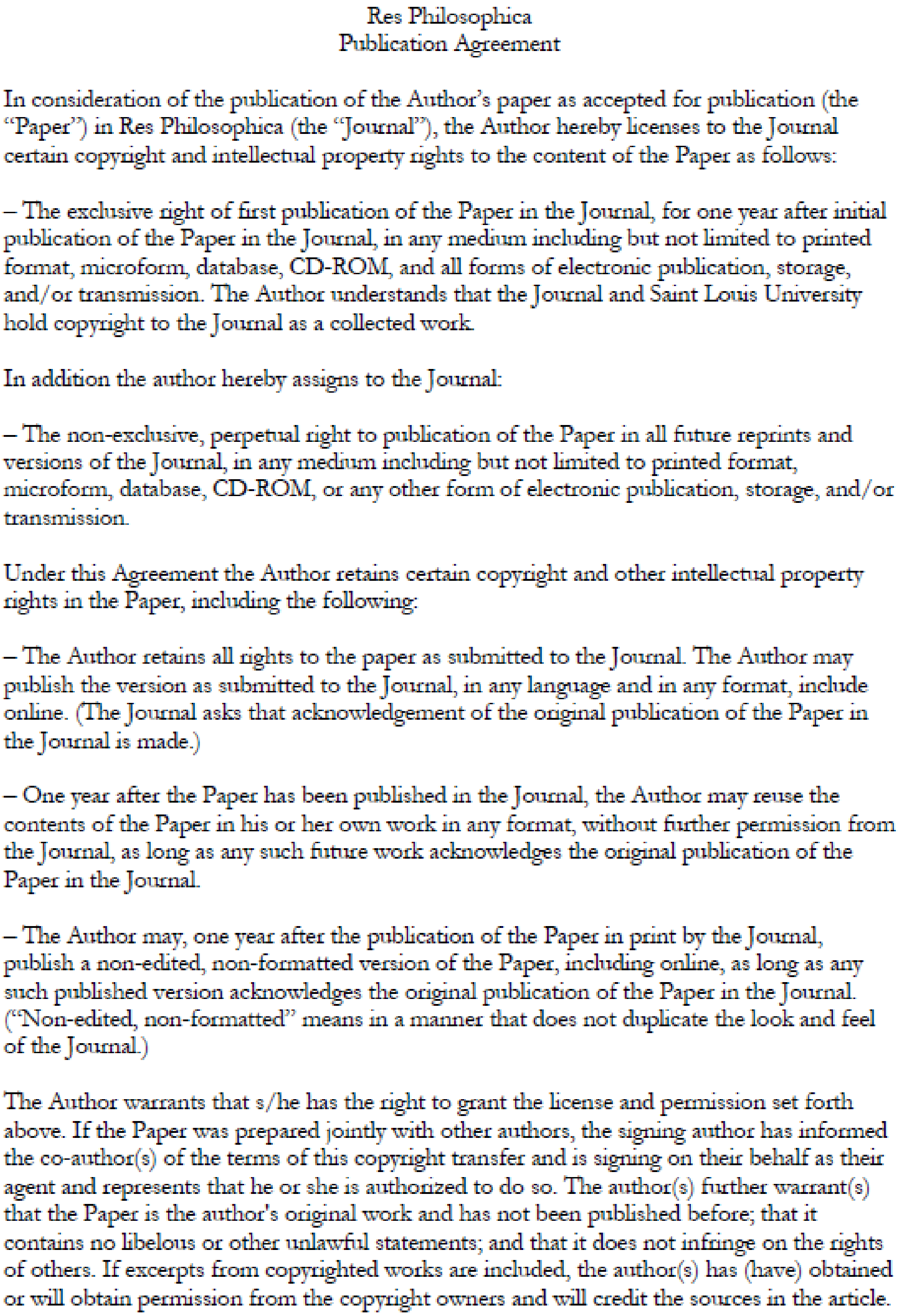
There is a unique problem that arises when trying to account for the stability of *scientia*, namely, the problem of knowledge preservation. The problem is that the source of a judgment's truth and absolute certainty is the clear and distinct perception it is grounded in. However, clear and distinct perceptions are temporally indexed, momentary mental states. What is the epistemic status of a judgment then, when our attention lapses and we lose the clear and distinct perception it was once grounded in? In the literature, one can find two solutions to the problem of knowledge preservation. The regeneration solution argues that we must become better at regenerating clear and distinct perceptions vis-à-vis cognitive routes, so that we can reground a judgment in a clear and distinct perception whenever needed. The memory solution argues that so long as we remember having a clear and distinct perception (a memory of a clear and distinct perception) our judgment maintains that status of scientia even if it is no longer grounded in the corresponding clear and distinct perception.

I argue that both solutions are problematic, though they pick up on features of Descartes' considered view. Drawing from both solutions, I argue that the right solution is that *scientia* is stabilized or preserved through virtuous habits of belief. Here, I draw on Descartes' account of virtue as a habit of belief. The thought here is that we stabilize scientia type judgments by transforming them into habits of belief. These habits of belief preserve truth and absolute certainty because they are formed through repeated engagement of cognitive routes (i.e. routes that terminate in clear and distinct perceptions), which grounds these habits of belief in memory. This explains why Descartes talks about cognitive routes and memory in the texts on *scientia*, particularly in the context of the Cartesian circle.

The main upshot of my interpretation of Descartes' ethical views is that Descartes was a systematic moral thinker. First and foremost, Descartes' ethics is systematic in and of itself: he identifies several fundamental moral concepts out of which he builds a coherent moral philosophy. His theory of virtue, for example, informs his account of happiness, goodness, and the passions. Descartes' ethics is also systematic in that it is informed by and informs the rest of his philosophy. Descartes did not develop his ethics in isolation from his mature metaphysics and epistemology. As my interpretation of Cartesian generosity shows, for example, generosity is grounded in knowledge of the real distinction between mind and body. Moreover, virtue in general is grounded in knowledge of other Cartesian truths, as account for in the "knowledge of the truth" texts. However, Descartes' ethics also informs his metaphysics and epistemology. As I have argued, Descartes' virtue theory informs his theory of *scientia*. This point might seem odd, given that Descartes' mature views on virtue were developed after the *Meditations*. However, Descartes' virtue theory was present much earlier than the Meditations, as evidenced in the provisional morality of the Discourse. The second maxim of the discourse provides the outlines of Descartes' virtue theory. Moreover, one can see that Descartes is developing an account of virtuous habit of belief in the *Meditations* and the *Principles*.

APPENDIX

Chapter Two, “Generosity, the Cogito, and the Fourth Meditation”



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VITA

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EDUCATION

Ph.D. Philosophy, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2018

Visiting Student, University of California at Berkeley, 2016-2017

M.A. Philosophy, San Francisco State University, 2010

B.A. Psychology, University of California at Davis, 2007

PUBLICATIONS

"Cartesian Imperativism" (w/ Joseph Gottlieb), *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming)

"Generosity, the Cogito, and the Fourth Meditation" *Res Philosophica* 93(1): 219-243 (2016)

PRESENTATIONS (SELECTED)

"Descartes on the Problem of Knowledge Preservation"
- Atlantic-Canada Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy, Dalhousie University (Halifax, Nova Scotia), July 2018
- Finnish-Hungarian Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy, Central European University, (Budapest, Hungary), May 2018

"Descartes' *Passions of the Soul* Part Three"
- Descartes Graduate Seminar, SFSU, October 2016

"Leibniz on Progress"
- Leibniz Doctoral Seminar (Hanover, Germany), July 2016

"Leibniz on Pleasure"
- X. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongress, (Hanover, Germany), July 2016

"Leibniz on the Antecedent and Consequent Will" w/ John Whipple
- Department of Philosophy, Southern Illinois University (Carbondale, IL), March 2016

"Cartesian Imperativsim" w/ Joseph Gottlieb
- Chicago Modern Philosophy Roundtable (Chicago IL), May 2016
- *Invited Talk*. Iranian Academy of Philosophy (Tehran, Iran), June 2015

"Generosity, the Cogito, and the Fourth Meditation"
- *Invited Talk*. Department of Philosophy, Ferdowsi University (Mashad, Iran), June 2015
- *Invited Talk*. Workshop in Early Modern Philosophy. Department of Philosophy, San Francisco State University (San Francisco, CA), August 2014
- Israel-Atlantic Canada Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy: Reason, Freedom, and the Passions in Descartes and Spinoza. Tel Aviv University (Tel Aviv, Israel), May 2013

"Avicenna Versus Aristotle on Necessity and Contingency"

- *Invited Talk*. Department of Classics and Mediterranean Studies. University of Illinois at Chicago (Chicago, IL), March 2015

"Rethinking Descartes' *Lumen Naturale* through al-Ghazâlî's *Nur*"

- 32nd annual joint meeting of the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy with the Society for the Study of Islamic Philosophy. Fordham University-Lincoln Center (New York, NY), October 2014

"Descartes on Color Eliminativism and Color Representation"

- Joint Meeting of the Indiana Philosophical Association and the Midwest Study Group of the North American Kant Society. Indiana University Southeast (New Albany, IN), March 2013

Comments on Andrew Youpa's "Spinoza's Ethical Objectivism"

- Joint Meeting of the Indiana Philosophical Association and the Midwest Study Group of the North American Kant Society. Indiana University Southeast (New Albany, IN), March 2013

"On the Ontological Simplicity of Cartesian Virtue"

- Wisconsin Philosophical Association. University of Wisconsin (Oshkosh, WI), April 2012

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

UIC

Primary Instructor

- Islamic and Jewish Political Philosophy, Spring 2019
- Introduction to Islam, Fall 2018
- Critical Thinking, Summer 2014; Fall 2014; Spring 2018
- Introduction to Philosophy, Fall 2015; Summer 2013
- Introduction to Logic, Summer 2015
- Special Studies Seminar: Islamic Philosophy, Spring 2015

Teaching Assistant

- Critical Thinking, Fall 2017
- Philosophy of Psychology, Spring 2016
- Introduction to Philosophy, Spring 2014
- Philosophy of Love and Sex, Fall 2013
- Introduction to Ethics, Spring 2013
- Introduction to Political Philosophy, Fall 2012
- Introductory Logic, Spring 2012; Fall 2011

AWARDS

- Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching Award, UIC, 2016
- Max Planck Institute for Mathematics in the Sciences Travel Award, 2016
- Interdisciplinary Collaboration in the Arts and Humanities w/ John Whipple, UIC 2015
- Provost Award for Graduate Research, UIC 2013
- Graduate Student Travel Award, UIC 2013, 2014
- Graduate Fellowship, SFSU 2009–2010