The Rational Force of Clarity: Descartes's Rejection of Psychologism

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Abstract: Descartes holds that when you perceive something with perfect clarity, you are compelled to assent and cannot doubt. (This is a psychological claim.) Many commentators read him as endorsing Psychologism, according to which this compulsion is a matter of brute psychological force. I show that, in Descartes's view, perfect clarity provides a reason for assent—indeed a *perfect reason,* which precludes any reason for doubt. (This is a normative claim.) Furthermore, advancing a view I call Rational Force, he holds that the normative claim explains the psychological one: since your will is naturally responsive to reasons, you are compelled to assent because you have a perfect reason to assent. This coheres with his view that will is essentially active, self-determined, and free. The force that clarity exerts on the will is not the brute push of an efficient cause, but the rational pull of a final cause.

Descartes famously holds that clear and distinct perception is indubitable—but in what sense? Commentators discuss two options:

> **Psychological Indubitability**: During the time that you perceive *p* clearly and distinctly, you *cannot doubt p*—i.e., you irresistibly assent to *p*; you are unable to doubt or withhold assent from *p*.
>
> **Rational Indubitability**: During the time that you perceive *p* clearly and distinctly, you *shouldn't doubt p*—i.e., it's rational for you to assent to *p*, and it would be *ir*rational for you to doubt or withhold assent from *p*.

A prominent trend is to read Descartes as embracing Psychologism, according to which clear and distinct perception compels assent by brute psychological force. This view comes in two versions. One version—Mere Psychologism—says that clear and distinct perception is *merely psychologically*, and not rationally, indubitable. To the contrary, as we'll see, Descartes maintains that clear and distinct perception is both rationally and psychologically indubitable. While other commentators have made this point, I go further by diagnosing the model of rational assent assumed by Mere Psychologism, and by showing that Descartes rejects it for good reason.

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Interpreters who acknowledge both forms of indubitability tend to ascribe the other form of Psychologism to Descartes—Priority Psychologism—which says that psychological indubitability explains, or is explanatorily prior to, rational indubitability. On this view, the reason we *shouldn't* doubt something while we perceive it clearly and distinctly is because we *can't* doubt it.

On my reading, Descartes turns Priority Psychologism on its head. It's not that we have no reason to doubt clear and distinct perceptions because we can't doubt them. It's the other way around. Endorsing a view I call Rational Force, he holds that since our minds are naturally responsive to reasons, we cannot doubt clear and distinct perceptions because we have no reason to doubt them.

Psychologism treats clarity in the intellect as the efficient cause of the will's assent, which would entail that the will is passive, externally determined, and coerced to assent. But given Rational Force, clarity *doesn't* cause assent. Rather, clarity provides a reason for the will to cause itself to assent, as the will is naturally attracted to the truth or goodness presented to it. This coheres with Descartes's view that, contrary to what Psychologism implies, the will is always, indeed essentially, active, self-determined, and free—even when it cannot help but assent. And it fits with his teleological of the mind, in which the intellect draws the will toward final causes rather than pushing it around with efficient causes.

1 Preliminaries

What Descartes calls a 'perception' or 'idea' is a mental state with intentional content; it is *of* or about things (AT 7:37, 44).[1] Perceptions are not limited to the senses: they can be sensory, imaginative, or purely intellectual. The term 'perception' refers to the *act* of perceiving. The term 'idea' can also refer to the act of perceiving, but it more often refers to the *object* of perception, the thing perceived (AT 7:185; cf. AT 7:181).

A perception is not by itself a belief or judgement; it merely provides the content for a possible judgement (AT 7:37, 56; AT 8A:17). Given that the content can be expressed as some proposition, *p*, the will responds either by assenting to it (judging that *p*) or by withholding assent. When the will with-

[1] For Descartes's works, I generally quote from the standard translation (CSM[K]), citing the volume and page number from the Adam and Tannery (AT) edition of the original texts. (CSM[K] provides AT references in the margins.) I use (*) to indicate when I have altered the translation or provided my own, and (†) when I have added italics or boldface.

I use the following abbreviations and short titles:

Discourse	Descartes, *Discourse on the Method/ Discours de la Méthode* in AT 6.
E	Elisabeth, *The correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*
M	Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy/ Meditationes de Prima Philosophiae* in AT 7.
O/R	*Descartes*, *Objections and Replies to Objections* in AT 7.
Pr.	Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy/ Principia Philosophia* in AT 8.

holds assent, it may either dissent from *p* (forming the opposite judgment, that ~*p*) or it may suspend judgment altogether in a state of doubt (AT 7:37).

Sense-perception and imagination can be clear to varying degrees, often enough for practical purposes (AT 7:83).[2] But Descartes is a Rationalist, in one sense of the term, because he maintains that only perceptions from the pure intellect or pure reason (*ratio*) can be perfectly clear and distinct, as required for perfect certainty (AT 7:145).

What does it mean for a perception to be "clear and distinct"? I offer a detailed account elsewhere (Paul 2020), but a few points will be useful here. Start with clarity:

> I call something 'clear' when it is present and open <Fr. manifest> to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something clearly when, being present to the eye's gaze, it strikes it with enough force and openness. (AT 8A:22†*)

Clarity is *presentationality*—the quality you experience when something is presented to you, or strikes you, as true. Clarity/presentationality is a phenomenal quality, a matter of what it's like, or how it feels, when you have a certain kind of perception.

Like many philosophers, Descartes holds that phenomenal qualities are *primitive* or unanalyzable in the sense that they cannot be defined in terms of other, more basic qualities. The only way to understand what it's like to see a certain color, for example, is to experience examples of that color for yourself—a point Descartes himself illustrates with the color white: "Thus it would be pointless trying to define, for someone totally blind, what it is to be white: in order to know what white is, all that is needed is to have one's eyes open and to see white" (AT 10:524). Since clarity is a phenomenal quality, it too is primitive. That is why, even in the characterization above, Descartes never attempts to define clarity by analyzing it. Instead, he *points* to clarity, partly by using other terms by which we might recognize it: 'open' and 'manifest' (*aperta*, *manifeste*) are synonyms for 'clear' (*clarus*). In other texts, when something is perfectly clear he says it is 'perspicuous' (*perspicuus*) or, for intuition, 'evident' (*evidens*) (AT 10:369–370, 408). When something is imperfectly clear, it is 'plausible' (*probabile*), 'seems/appears true' (*veri simile*), or, for the senses and imagination, 'lively and vivid' (*vives & expresses*) (AT 6:38; 7:22, 75; 8A:34). In keeping with the primitive nature of clarity, Descartes says the difference between clarity and its opposite, obscurity, is to be "learned by examples rather than by rules" or formal definitions (7:164). So let's consider examples.

Start with visual experience. If you're looking at an owl from far away, it may be obscure to you that it's an owl. When you get closer, it may then become clear to you that it's an owl. There is something it's like to see the

[2] Compare AT 6:38, 40; AT 7:63, 73, 75, 90, 113, 145; AT 8A:34; AT 10:400–401; and see Rickless 2005 (313–318).

owl clearly, a quality that is absent when you see it obscurely. The more clearly you see that it's an owl, the more strongly that proposition is *presented* to you, or strikes you, as true.

Now for intellection. The only propositions that can be completely clear to the pure intellect are truths, according to Descartes, and the relevant truths range across mathematics, logic, and metaphysics. It's especially useful to consider a case where a truth *becomes clear* to you after being obscure to you at first:

> The sum of the numbers 1, 2, and 3 is equal to their product.

This proposition should become clear to you through a simple deduction:

> $1 + 2 + 3 = 6$
>
> $1 \times 2 \times 3 = 6$
>
> Therefore, $1 + 2 + 3 = 1 \times 2 \times 3$

When the proposition becomes clear to you, it goes from being a proposition you're merely considering to one that strikes you as true. Notice what it's like when that happens. It's like the truth gets *illuminated*. That is why Descartes describes intellectual clarity as "a light in the intellect" (AT 7:192).

All three kinds of perception—sense-perception, imagination, and intellection—can vary in degrees of clarity. The more clearly you perceive something, the more strongly it strikes you as true.

What about distinctness? Continuing the passage above from *Principles* i.45, Descartes writes:

> I call a perception 'distinct' when, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear. (AT 8A:22†)

Distinctness is defined as clarity *in the absence of*—"sharply separated" from—anything *un*clear. A perception is distinct when it is fully or perfectly clear. When they are used in their strict senses, then, the terms 'clear' and 'distinct' are synonyms, and the conjunction 'clear and distinct' is an emphatic redundancy, like 'the one and only.'

2 Mere Psychologism?

For as long as a perception is clear and distinct, it is indubitable, Descartes says, and he means this at least partly as a psychological claim:

> **The nature of my mind** [*natura mentis*] is such that *I cannot but assent* to these things, at least so long as I clearly perceive them. (*M5*, AT 7:65†)

> **My nature** [*naturae*] is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I *cannot but believe* it to be true. (*M5*, AT 7:69†)

> [Axioms are indubitable] during the time they are clearly and distinctly understood; for **our mind is of such a nature** that it *cannot help assenting* to what it clearly understands. (To Regius, 24 May 1640, AT 3:64†)

> The **minds of all of us have been so moulded by nature** that whenever we perceive something clearly, we spontaneously give our assent to it and are quite *unable to doubt* its truth. (*Pr.* i.43, AT 8A:21†)

It is a law like psychological fact—built into "the nature of the mind"—that we "cannot doubt" and "cannot help but assent" to a proposition during the time that we perceive it clearly and distinctly. As some commentators put it, such perceptions are "irresistible" or "utterly assent-compelling" (Loeb 1990, 6; Newman 2019, §6.3).[3]

What compels assent is not a proposition itself but the clarity with which you perceive it. Notice the temporal caveat underlined in the block quotations above: you are compelled to assent to a proposition only "during the time" or "so long as" you perceive it clearly and distinctly (AT 7: 59, 65; AT 3:64). This allows that you can doubt the very same proposition at another time, before or after you perceive it clearly and distinctly.[4]

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[3] A complication appears in what is standardly referred to as the 1645 letter to Mesland (though the identity of its recipient has been contested by Lennon 2013), where Descartes says that although it's impossible "morally speaking," it *is* possible "absolutely speaking" for us "to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by doing so" (AT 4:173). Pointing to this letter, some commentators argue that Descartes never held that clear and distinct perception is psychologically indubitable (Moyal 1987, 38–40, 46–47; 1996, 89–93, 101–102, 292–293; Alanen 2002, 294; 2003, 242ff.; Della Rocca 2006, 155), or that he retracts that claim in the 1645 letter (Alquié 1950, 286, 288–292; Beyssade 1994). However, the evidence is overwhelming that Descartes is committed to the psychological indubitability claim before then, from 1640 to 1644, including another letter to Mesland in 1644 (AT 4:115–116) as well as the *Meditations* (1641) and *Principles* (1644). (Compare *M3*, AT 7:35, 38; *M4*, AT 7:59–60; *2O/R*, 7:144, 147–148; *Pr.* i.13, AT 8A: 9; and *Conversation with Burman* AT 5:148. See Loeb 1990, 12–20 for a compendium.) So, we should acknowledge that claim at least for those works. Furthermore, scholars have developed cogent ways of reconciling that claim with the 1645 letter (Embry 2018; Dicker 2013, 195–197; Kenny 1972, 23; Lennon 2011; 2013, 237–238; 2016; Newman 2015; 2023; Ragland 2006a; 2006b; 2016). So, there is good reason to think Descartes doesn't renounce the psychological indubitability claim in 1645, even if he begins to shift his emphasis away from it (Schmaltz 2008, chap. 5). Other interpreters who recognize this claim include Curley (1978; 1993), Kenny (1968, 179–182), Frankfurt (1970, 154, 163–169), Markie (1986, 56), Newman (1999, 2008, 2015, 2019), Tlumak (1978, 54), B. Williams (1978, 180, 183–187, 306;) and B. Williams (1983, 345–346).

[4] This point is widely acknowledged. See Della Rocca 2005; Bennett 1990, 229–230, 236–237; Carriero 2008, 2009; Frankfurt 1965, 149; Larmore 1984, 62, 64; Loeb 1990; Markie 1979, 98; Newman 2019; Pasnau 2017, chap. 5; Wilson 1978, 133; and B. Williams 1978, chaps. 2, 7.

In his classic paper "Descartes's Psychologistic Theory of Assent," Charles Larmore notes that, for Descartes, it is "an inalterable psychological fact about our minds" (1984,61) that clear and distinct perceptions compel assent. Larmore assumes that the two forms of indubitability are mutually exclusive (more on this in section 3). So he concludes that, for Descartes, "in such cases, our assent is *not rationally obligatory,* but rather psychologically compelled." Introducing a new meaning for an old term, Larmore adds, "For this reason, I have chosen to call Descartes's theory of assent a 'psychologistic' one" (1984, 61, my italics). I refer to this view as **Mere Psychologism** (**MP**) to distinguish it from the other form of Psychologism we'll encounter later.[5] According to MP, our clear and distinct perceptions merely cause us to assent, without giving us with any normative reason, or justification, for assent. Jonathan Bennett defends the same interpretation when he asserts that such perceptions secure "factual indubitability" rather than "normative indubitability." It would be bizarre if we could have justification for doubt but never for assent. So, as Bennett explains, MP applies equally to the sources of doubt and assent. In both cases, he claims, Descartes is concerned with our perceptions of "arguments, considerations, etc. in their role as *causes, not as justifiers*, of doubt or confidence" (1990, 231†; cf. 2001, 377).

MP is not Descartes's view. He tells Mersenne that it's good to consider whether we have "*titre*"—that is, "justification" or "warrant"—for assent (13 November 1639, AT 2:598). He is avidly concerned with the normative question of whether we should or shouldn't assent, given the reasons that confront us on either side. His skeptical arguments, for example, don't simply cause doubt; they give rise to "powerful and well thought-out reasons" for doubt (*M1,* AT 7:21)—"reasons for doubt concerning the things that can be perceived by the senses" and "reasons for doubting even mathematical demonstrations" (*Principles,* AT 8A:5–6; cf. AT 8A: 16; *Discourse* AT 6:29). Bennett claims that Descartes uses "reason" (typically *ratio/ la raison*) to mean "cause" with no normative connotation (2001, 377). I grant that the term can be used that way, as in "the reason one ball moved is because it was struck by another."

[5] Before Larmore, the term "psychologism" was widely used to refer to what I call Priority Psychologism (see footnote 12). Larmore does not acknowledge that usage, although he distances himself from another usage, where "psychologism" names the kind of view "Frege attacked," the view, for example, "that mathematics consisted in psychological states or acts" (1984, 61). Enlisting allies for his MP reading, Larmore claims that "far more than anyone else, Jean Laporte [1950, 139ff., 267] and Harry Frankfurt [1970; 1977, 36ff.] have insisted on the importance of Descartes's psychologism" (1984, 62). As Alanen (1999, n. 40) points out, however, Larmore misrepresents Frankfurt, who says Descartes is concerned with "can never *reasonably* be doubted" (1970, 145†). Others who ascribe MP to Descartes include Gewirth (1941, 386; 1970; 1971), Rubin (1977), and Bennett (1990, 233; 2001, 374–384; but see footnote 13). Some scholars do so in the course of interpreting his theory of inference (Gaukroger [1989]; Hacking [1980]; Nolan [2005, 526]).

But Descartes is talking about normative reasons. The central text here is Meditation Four, where he says we are "at fault" and committing "error and sin" when we violate the following norm: "I *should never* make a judgement about anything which I did not clearly and distinctly understand" (AT 7:61). Indeed, he stresses, "In this improper [*non recto*] use of free will may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of error [*formam erroris constituit*]" (AT 7:59–60*†; cf. *Discourse* iii, AT 6:24–25; *Pr.* i.3, AT 8A:5).[6] We shouldn't assent unless we have perfect clarity.

In the *Second Replies*, Descartes clarifies that this exacting norm doesn't apply to "ordinary life," but only to a context like the *Meditations,* where we are engaged in nothing but "the contemplation of the truth," or "pure inquiry," and our aim is certainty:[7]

> When we are dealing solely with the contemplation of the truth, surely no one has ever denied that **we should refrain** from giving assent [*assensionem esse cohibendam*] to matters which we do not perceive with sufficient distinctness. (*2O/R*, AT 7:149†)

He illustrates with "the case of the infidel":

> If, despite the fact that these doctrines are obscure to him, he is induced to embrace them by fallacious arguments, I make bold to assert that he will not on that account be a true believer, but will instead be **committing a sin by not using his reason properly** [*in eo peccaturum, quod ratione sua non recte uteretur*]. (*2O/R*, AT 7:148*†)

This is astonishing. The person in question believes Christian doctrines that, in Descartes's view, are true. Nevertheless, Descartes calls him an "infidel" who is "committing a sin by not using his reason properly" because he believes these truths while they are "obscure to him." The infidel's beliefs are true, but, since they are not based on clear and distinct perception, they are not rationally justified. Descartes is concerned with epistemic rationality here. A reason for assent, provided by clarity, is the kind of reason we should follow in pursuit of truth and the kind that is required for knowledge. A reason for doubt, arising in the absence of clarity, bars us from knowledge. Descartes calls it a "sin" to believe in God without epistemic justification given that God wants us to use our will properly.[8]

Just as we shouldn't assent when we don't have perfect clarity (in pure inquiry), we *should* assent when we do. We use our will "properly [*recte*]" or "as one should [*comme il faut*]," Descartes says, "by assenting only to

[6] For a close reading of this passage, see Naaman-Zauderer 2010, chap. 2.

[7] The term "pure inquiry" is due to B. Williams (1978).

[8] This is why "our errors, if considered in relation to God, are merely negations; if considered in relation to ourselves they are privations" (*Pr.* 31, AT 8A:17; cf. *M4* AT 7:60–61). God is not obligated to create us with a more perfect intellect, but we are obligated not to misuse our will (Schmaltz 2017, 62 n. 33).

what we clearly and distinctly perceive." Indeed, "no other proper method of employing this faculty can be imagined" (*2O/R*, AT 7:144*). He is again invoking a duty or requirement of rationality. Thus, it would be "highly irrational [*a ratione valde alienum*] to doubt something which is . . . manifest by the very light of nature" (*2O/R*, AT 7:134)—and remember, this "light . . . means perfect clarity" (*3O/R*, AT 7:192*). During the time that something is perfectly clear to you, it would be irrational for you to doubt it—i.e., it's *rationally indubitable*.[9]

3 The False Dichotomy

When Larmore ascribes Mere Psychologism to Descartes—the view that perceptions which are clear and distinct (or "evident") are merely psychologically indubitable—he begins by assuming this is one of two mutually exclusive options:

> In general, there are two ways of approaching the relation between evidence and assent. The first urges us to see this relation as fundamentally a normative one: we should assent to a proposition we recognize as evident because we can understand this to be in accord with a norm of rationality. On this view, we [**A**] *remain free to withhold assent from such a proposition and* [**B**] *give our assent only in virtue of heeding a norm.*
>
> The second kind of solution [Mere Psychologism] is the one we find in Descartes. It construes the relation between evidence and assent as founded, not upon free obedience to a rational norm, but instead upon an inalterable psychological fact about our minds. Propositions which we recognize as evident are ones to which we cannot help but assent. In such cases, our assent is *not rationally obligatory, but rather psychologically compelled*. (Larmore 1984, 61†)

From the outset, then, Larmore assumes the following model of what it would mean for assent to be rational ("rationally obligatory" or "in accord with a norm of rationality"):

> If I assent rationally to (my clear and distinct perception that) *p*, this means that

[9] Here I concur with Frankfurt (1965, 210; 1970, 145), Kenny (1968, 192), Van Cleve (1979, 61), Lennon (1980, 710; 2000, 16), Bennett (1990, 2001), Moyal (1987, 38–40, 46–47; 1996, 89–93, 101–102), Alanen (1999, 2002, 2003), Broughton (2002), Della Rocca (2005, 2006, 2011), Loeb (1990, 1992, 1998), Ragland (2006a; 2006b; 2016, 78; 2017), Fulmer and Ragland (2017), Ragland and Fulmer (2020), Carriero (2008, 2009), and Pasnau (2017, chap. 5). These scholars differ as to whether clear and distinct perception is also psychologically indubitable.

(A) I have a two-way power to assent to *p* or not (so it *isn't* psychologically indubitable), and

(B) I "freely assent" to *p* only because I recognize that I should assent to *p*.

With requirement (A), this model entails that being compelled to assent is incompatible with assenting rationally; being rationally compelled is an oxymoron.

Descartes disagrees. As we've seen, he denies (A) as he maintains that when you clearly and distinctly intuit that 2 + 3 = 5, for example, you "cannot help but assent" *and* you assent "properly," "rationally," with "justification" or "reason," as you "should."

The same point suggests that (B) isn't required either. Perceiving *p* with perfect clarity is *sufficient* to make you assent to *p* and to do so rationally. Nothing further is necessary. So, (B) is not necessary.

Notice that to implement (B), as Larmore describes it, you would need to engage in *higher-order* reasoning. In his words:

(1) I "recognize [*p*] as evident" (as clear and distinct).

(2) It is a "norm of rationality" that "we should assent to a proposition we recognize as evident."

Therefore,

I "should assent" to *p*.

Only when you reach this conclusion would you be in a position to satisfy (B), to choose to assent because you recognize that you should. But the moment you intuit 2 + 3 = 5, for example, you are already rationally compelled to assent—without any higher-order reflection, and so without satisfying (B).

For illustration, consider the *cogito* in *Meditation Two*. In that moment, the meditator clearly and distinctly perceives, "I am, I exist" (*M2*, AT 7:25), and so she is rationally compelled to recognize that she exists.[10] Contrary to what (B) requires, however, she does not additionally recognize premise 1, that her perception of her existence is clear and distinct. She does not step back to examine her perception to form any higher-order judgment about its qualities at all. It is only later, in *Meditation Three*, that she reprises the *cogito* to inspect her perception and identify it as clear and distinct: "I am certain that I am a thinking thing. . . . In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting" (*M3*, AT 7:35).[11] Likewise, during the *cogito*, the meditator does not recognize the general normative claim in premise 2, nor the particular

[10] Like many other commentators, I use feminine pronouns to refer to the meditator to distinguish her from the author, Descartes.

[11] The *Discourse* proceeds in the same order (AT 6:33). I argue elsewhere that a clear and distinct perception of the *cogito* does not come easily and is hard-won through radical doubt (Paul 2018).

one in the conclusion. She doesn't articulate such normative claims until the passages I quoted earlier from *Meditation Four*.

If (B) were required for rational assent, it would generate a vicious infinite regress. When you clearly perceive that 2 + 3 = 5, (B) entails that you cannot rationally assent to 2 = 3 = 5 unless you have a second perception to recognize that you should assent to your first one. (B) also entails that you cannot rationally assent to your second perception unless you have a third perception whereby you recognize that you should assent to your second one. And so on, ad infinitum.

Descartes averts this regress. He grants that you can engage in higher-order reasoning about your clear and distinct perceptions. But contrary to (B), he doesn't think you need to do so in order to assent to them rationally. Since (B) isn't required, the regress it would launch never gets off the ground.

The "free assent" in (B) is supposed to be an exercise of the two-way power stipulated in (A). That's why (A) and (B) come as a package. So, the fact that Descartes doesn't require (B) for rational assent reinforces the point that he doesn't require (A) either.

In sum, Mere Psychologism is predicated on a false dichotomy between rational and psychological indubitability. That dichotomy comes with a model of rational assent that Descartes rejects. And he is arguably right to reject it, since it requires higher-order reasoning that isn't required, and it would entail an infinite regress if it were required.

4 Priority Psychologism?

Having established that Descartes takes clear and distinct perception to be indubitable in both senses, psychological and rational, we can ask: Does one of them explain the other, and if so, which explains which?

Many commentators hold that psychological indubitability explains rational indubitability—this is **Priority Psychologism** (**PP**).[12] According to Lex Newman, for example, Descartes thinks "that he **should** assent only to clear and distinct perceptions . . . because these are the only perceptions to which he ***can't but*** assent" (Newman 2019, §6.3, his italics, my bold; cf. Newman 1999, 2007). David Scott says that "Descartes is commonly taken" to embrace this form of Psychologism, and that interpreting him this way is "fairly uncontroversial" and the "prevailing view" (Scott 2008, 582–583; cf. Scott 2009, 170).[13] But six considerations unsettle this or-

[12] Priority Psychologism fits what Hatfield calls "the classical meaning" of the term "psychologism," as it was introduced by J. E. Erdmann (1870, 2:636) to denote "the attempt to base epistemology on psychology" (Hatfield 1997, n. 32). This is the standard definition in dictionary entries on "Psychologism" (Abbagnano 1967; Dewey 1960) and several scholars continue to use the term this way: e.g., Hatfield (1990, 1997, 1998); Lennon (2000, 15–16); Scott (2008, 583; 2009).

[13] Scott is responding to Lennon, who says Descartes "espoused psychologism" (Lennon 2000, 16)—indeed, "fully blown psychologism" (Lennon 1980, 710)—by which he means

thodoxy. The first two are philosophical problems with PP itself, as I will explain in the remainder of this section. The last four are textual problems, which I'll cover in the next section.

As a warm-up for the first problem with PP, consider this simple theory:

You should assent to *p* because you assent to *p*.

Obviously, the fact that you do something does not make it the case that you should do it or ought to do it. Descartes recognizes this when he stresses that we often assent when we shouldn't. Now compare PP:

You should assent to *p* because you are compelled to assent to *p*.

The fact that you are compelled to do something does not make it the case that you should do it.[14] To cite a stock illustration, the fact that a kleptomaniac is psychologically compelled to steal does not mean that he should steal (Markie 2006, §2; Bengson 2015, 744). It may reduce his culpability or excuse him for stealing. But being excused for doing what's wrong is not the same as being justified in doing what's right. Likewise, the fact that you cannot help but assent to clear and distinct perception might explain why you would be excused for assenting in the absence of justification, but it does not plausibly explain why you would be justified in assenting. In effect, PP mistakes excuse for justification.[15]

PP. Lennon and Scott take it as established common ground that Descartes accepts PP, and then they debate whether Malebranche does too: Lennon says 'no'; Scott says 'yes,' citing Labbas (1931), Alquié (1974), and Pyle (2003) on his side. Since Descartes actually embraces the Rational Force alternative, as I argue below, it's worth considering whether Malebranche and other Cartesians do, too.

Other commentators who ascribe PP to Descartes include Loeb (1990, 1992, 1998), Ragland (2016, 78), Fulmer and Ragland (2017), Ragland and Fulmer (2020), and Pasnau (2017, chap. 5). Bennett (1990, 2001) is unique in ascribing PP *and* MP to Descartes, though he knows the two are incompatible. He complains that Descartes "tangles," "jumbles," "tended to be confused about" and "often conflated" "factual and normative indubitability" (1990, 226, 228, 244), and that, as a result, he vacillated between MP and PP. According to Bennett, Descartes's more promising idea is MP—whereby, for example, he "helps himself to [*cogito*, 'I am thinking'] because he cannot do otherwise . . . not because he can justify it but because he cannot call it in to question. His (factual) inability to doubt it is bedrock" (233). Bennett thinks Descartes lapses into PP, however, when he "bases a normative claim on a factual one" (227; cf. 247).

[14] Wilson makes this point when she says that an inability to doubt is "epistemically irrelevant" (Wilson 1978, 117). Compare Pasnau 2017, chap. 5 and Bennett 1990, 244. It is because of this problem that Bennett thinks MP is philosophically more promising than PP (recall footnote 13).

[15] As Gary Hatfield observes, some critics would charge PP with "the fallacy of 'psychologism,'" which is "a species of the naturalistic fallacy." He explains: "The alleged 'fallacy' lies in the move from fact to norm, from descriptions of how things are—for example, with patterns of human behavior, or with habits of human thought—to conclusions about how things ought to be" (Hatfield 1997, 31). For examples of such critics, Hatfield cites Rorty (1979, 140–143), who in turn cites allies in Green (1968, 19), Sellars (1963, 169), and M. Williams (1977, chap. 2). Like Hatfield and many others, I *don't* think it is necessarily fallacious to explain a normative feature in terms of a natural one. Hatfield suggests that, for Descartes,

The second problem with PP is that it doesn't differentiate between possible sources of compulsion. Bennett (2001, 381) imagines a case where someone is compelled to hold a belief because they took a "belief pill." More realistically, consider someone who cannot give up certain obscure dogmas because of non-evidential psychological forces stemming from how vital these beliefs are to his sense of well-being and family belonging. If PP is right, this person is just as epistemically justified in his dogmatic beliefs as someone who believes things because she perceives them clearly.

In sum, PP mistakes an excuse for a justification, and allows that irrational sources of compulsion provide justification. One might suppose that Descartes held PP despite these two setbacks. On a more charitable reading, his texts reveal a different view which happily avoids them.

5 Rational Force

Descartes's actual view, I will argue, is this:

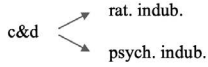
> **Rational Force**: Since you are rational by nature, during the time that you perceive *p* clearly and distinctly, you cannot doubt *p* (i.e., *p* is psychologically indubitable for you) because you have no reason to doubt *p* (i.e., *p* is rationally indubitable for you).

As I develop this reading, I'll unearth four further, textual problems for the PP interpretation in the four sub-sections below.

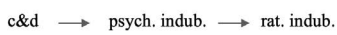
5.1 The Order of Explanation

The evidence cited for the PP interpretation boils down to the fact that Descartes thinks clear and distinct perception is both psychologically and rationally indubitable. But this fact by itself says nothing about the order of explanation, and so it is neutral between the following three options (where the arrows mark the order of explanation):

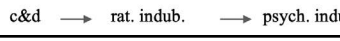
(a) Although clear and distinct perception is both psychologically and rationally indubitable, neither of those features explains the other.



(b) PP: Clear and distinct perception is rationally indubitable because it is psychologically indubitable.



(c) Clear and distinct perception is psychologically indubitable because it is rationally indubitable.



perfect clarity is rationally indubitable because it's infallible (an interpretation further developed by Della Rocca [2006, 2011]). On my reading, it's because of the nature of clarity itself (as we'll see in section 5.2.1). Infallibility and clarity are natural features; philosophically, both are viable contenders. The problem with PP is not that it appeals to a natural feature, but that the one it picks is a nonstarter.

Attributing (c) to Descartes, Frankfurt suggests that when someone has rational certainty "it is only reasonable that he should be unable to withhold his belief, because he has the best possible basis for assenting" (Frankfurt 1970, 164). This is in the right ball park, but it's lacking on two fronts. First, while Frankfurt offers (c) as a philosophical suggestion, he does not marshal textual evidence to show that Descartes favors it, as I will do in the remainder of this subsection. Second, (c) is incomplete because it does not identify the crucial mediating factor—the rational nature of the will—which I will introduce in section 5.2 as I develop the fuller view I call Rational Force.

I have not seen Descartes formulate (a) or (b), but he does assert (c). Consider the passage in *Meditation Four* where he explains his distinction between two grades of freedom: "indifference" and "spontaneity." Start with the former:

> The **indifference** I feel when there is **no reason pushing me** in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom. (*M4*, AT 7:57–58†)

For illustration, he invokes the *cogito*—"which I understood so clearly" that there was no room for indifference—and he contrasts this with a case where he lacks clarity and thus *does* experience indifference:

> my intellect has not yet come upon any **persuasive reason** in favour of one alternative rather than the other. This obviously implies that I am indifferent as to whether I **should** assert or deny either alternative, or refrain from making any judgement on the matter. (*M4*, AT 7:59†)

I experience complete indifference when I have no clarity and thus have "no reason pushing me" to assent. For example, when I wonder whether the number of stars in the sky is even or odd, I don't perceive either alternative with any degree of clarity, and so I have no reason inclining me toward one rather than the other, and I am completely indifferent between them. The kind of reason I am lacking in this case—the kind of reason that clarity would provide—is a normative reason which would speak to "whether I should assent," and this reason would have psychological power in being "persuasive."

Descartes fleshes this out when he describes the opposite of complete indifference—complete spontaneity—which comes with complete clarity:

> For example, during these past few days I have been asking whether anything in the world exists, and I have realized that from the very fact of my raising this question it follows quite evidently that I exist. I could not but judge [*non potui quidem non judicare*] that something which I understood so clearly was true; but this was not because I was coerced [*coactus*] 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 7:58–59*)

This fits interpretive option (c) above. When a truth, for example that I exist, is fully illuminated or clear to me, I thereby have reason to assent, and, in turn, this "reason pushes me" to assent spontaneously. Returning to this theme in the *Second Replies*, Descartes says that "perfect clarity" or an "inner light" provides the "formal **reason** which **moves the will** to assent" (AT 7:147–148*†). So, when he goes on to speak of "the clarity or transparency which can move [*moveri*] our will to give its assent" (AT 7:148) and of the illumination which "disposes [*disponere*] us to will" (AT 7:149; cf. *M4*, 7:58), he is saying that clarity compels assent, but it does so only because it provides reason for assent. Clarity is *rationally* compelling.

5.2 Our Rational Nature

Bennett rejects Frankfurt's suggestion of (c) above—the view that clear and distinct perception is psychologically indubitable because it is rationally indubitable. He objects that (c) doesn't "get the two concepts [rational vs. psychological] properly disentangled from one another" (1990: 227). He has a point. The two concepts are distinct. Neither one of them entails the other. As we've already seen, the fact that someone cannot doubt something doesn't make it the case that they shouldn't doubt it. Conversely—contrary to (c)—the fact that someone shouldn't doubt something doesn't make it the case that they cannot doubt it. So, as it stands, (c) is inadequate.

To sharpen Bennett's objection, as a counterexample to (c), one might conceive of beings who have fully clear perceptions which they shouldn't doubt, but who doubt them, irrationally, nonetheless. Descartes holds that we as humans cannot be irrational in this way. Why not? This is especially curious since he insists that we *can* be irrational in other ways, by assenting to what is not fully clear (during pure inquiry). So, he's committed to a puzzling pair of claims:

- When you lack perfect clarity, you have a two-way power to assent or not (and you can exercise that power as you should or as you shouldn't).
- When you have perfect clarity, you lack a two-way power, and you cannot help but assent (as you should).

Why is it that we can do what we shouldn't when, and only when, things aren't fully clear?

Descartes's answer appeals to the kind of beings we are, namely beings endowed with "natural reason (ratio *naturalis*)" (e.g., AT 7:2, 210, 254, 306, 431, 598). The human mind is rational by nature, in the sense that we are naturally equipped with rational faculties or capacities. We have two

complementary rational capacities: intellect and will. Your intellect is your capacity to *have reasons*. The will is your capacity to *respond to reasons*. Let's look closer at each of them in turn.

5.2.1 Having Reasons

Your intellect is your capacity to have perceptions, and thus to have reasons for assent to the extent that your perceptions are clear. Why does clarity provide reasons for assent?[16] In the only passage where Descartes addresses the question, what he names is nothing other than clarity itself:

> We must distinguish between the subject-matter, or the thing itself which we assent to, and the formal reason which moves the will to give its assent: it is only in respect of the reason that transparent clarity is required. (*2O/R*, 7:147–148*)

Descartes contrasts the *content* or "subject-matter" of a perception with the form of perception—namely clear perception—which provides a reason to assent to the content. Indeed, he adds, "this formal reason consists in a certain inner light" (*2O/R*, 7:147–148), and that light, as we've seen, is clarity. Mental illumination—clarity—is something over and above the content it shines upon, and what gives you reason to assent is not the content itself but the clarity with which you perceive it. Clarity, by its nature, is presentationality, as we saw in section 1. So, clarity provides reasons because of its presentational nature. More precisely:

> **Descartes's Presentationalism**
> Because of the (presentational) nature of clarity, to the extent that you are perceiving *p* clearly (i.e., to the extent that *p* is presented to you as true) you thereby have a reason to assent to *p,* and so you should assent to *p*—unless your reason for assent is defeated by a reason for doubt.[17]

Since clarity comes in degrees, so too does the quality of the reason it provides. Other things equal, the more clearly you perceive *p*, the better the reason you have for assenting to *p*. When you are looking at something from afar and it is only somewhat clear to you that it's an owl, you have some reason but not a very good reason to judge that it's an owl. When you get close and it becomes clearer to you that it's an owl, you now have much better reason to judge that it's an owl.

[16] I develop the arguments of this subsection more fully in Paul (forthcoming-a).

[17] I borrow the label "Presentationalism" from John Bengson (2015), who defends a similar view in contemporary epistemology. Others who identify a phenomenal quality of certain perceptions as a source of epistemic justification include Bealer (1992, 102), Pust (2000), Huemer (2001), Chudnoff (2013), Brogaard (2014), Dabbagh (2018), Koksvik (2017, 2020), and Berghofer (2022, 38)—though they specify the relevant quality differently. In Paul 2023, I argue that Descartes's view is bolder in that he posits perfect reasons (due to perfect clarity), as I explain below, while these contemporary figures rest content with imperfect reasons.

Even so, vision does not afford perfect clarity, so the kind of reason it gives you is accordingly imperfect.

> **Imperfect reasons**
> During the time that you perceive *p* with imperfect clarity, you thereby have an *imperfect reason* to assent to *p*—one that can coexist with, and be defeated by, a reason to doubt *p*.

This point is illustrated at the end of Meditation One. Having confronted a battery of skeptical arguments culminating with the hypothesis that she has been created by a deceiving God who brings it about that all of her perceptions are fallible, the meditator concedes that she has "powerful and well-thought out reasons" to doubt "all of my former opinions." Paying special attention to her sensory beliefs, she says:

> I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions, so long as I suppose them to be what in fact they are, namely very plausible opinions—opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny. (*M1*, AT 7:22*)

The meditator's visual experience that she has hands, for example, is very clear—very "plausible" (in other words, it "appears true")—and so it provides very good reason to assent, making it "much more reasonable to believe than to deny."

At the same time, however, she is entertaining the deceiver hypothesis, and so she also has reason for doubt. Thus, she is in a state of *indifference*: she experiences a conflict between her reason for assent and her reason for doubt, and so she can deliberate between them. Which reason determines what she should do?

As I noted in section 1, it depends on the context. In ordinary life, Descartes says, one shouldn't doubt for such a skeptical reason (AT 7:149). But the meditator is in the unforgiving context of pure inquiry, where her aim is certainty, and so even the slightest reason for doubt means she should doubt.

In the *Sixth Replies*, Descartes says again that we experience "indifference" when we lack perfect clarity and can deliberate between competing reasons:

> [A person] is never indifferent except when he does not know which of the two alternatives is the better or truer, or at least when he does not **see this with such perfect clarity as to rule out any possibility of doubt** [*vel certe quando tam perspicue non videt, quin de eo possit dubitare*]" (*6O/R*, AT 7:432*†)

He says in the same paragraph that when you have perfect clarity, you assent with total spontaneity, without any indifference, as a function of

"rationally determined reason." Perfect clarity "rules out any possibility of doubt" because it precludes any possible reason for doubt.

> **Perfect reasons**
> During the time that you perceive *p* with perfect clarity, you thereby have a *perfect reason* to assent to *p*—one that cannot be defeated by any reason to doubt *p*, because it cannot even coexist with any reason to doubt *p*.

The fact that perfect clarity precludes any reason to doubt explains why you cannot rationally doubt. It also explains why you cannot be indifferent and cannot deliberate: you have no competing reasons to deliberate between.

5.2.2 Responding to Reasons

Your will is your capacity to respond to reasons. Before showing that this is Descartes's view, it will be helpful to explain the view itself by considering a series of cases.

> Case 1: A gust of wind forces a dinghy to fall into the lake.
>
> Case 2: A gust of wind forces *you* to fall into the lake.

In Case 1, the wind and the dinghy are non-rational things, devoid of rational capacities. The wind cannot provide the dinghy with a reason to fall; it simply pushes the dinghy by brute force. The dinghy cannot have a reason to fall, and, a fortiori, it cannot fall for a reason. Whether someone is behaving rationally, or as they should, is a matter of whether they are acting for the best reasons they have, all things considered. Since a non-rational being like a dinghy can never act for a reason, it never makes sense to ask whether it is acting for the best reason it has, or whether it is behaving rationally, or as it should.

You differ from the dinghy, of course, because you have rational capacities. But in Case 2, you are like the dinghy because the wind bypasses your rational capacities and forces you to fall. The wind does not provide you with a reason to fall, and, a fortiori, you do not fall for a reason. Thus, it makes no sense to ask whether you fall rationally, or as you should.

> Case 3: It appears (it is to some degree clear) to you that it would be awesome to dive into the lake, but while you are still deliberating, a gust of wind forces you to fall in.

This case involves one of your two rational capacities—namely, your intellect. You have a relatively clear perception that it would be good in some way (awesome) to dive into the lake, which gives you a reason in favor. At the same time, let's say it's also fairly clear to you that, in another way, it would be bad to dive in (because it would be annoying to walk home in wet clothes afterward), which gives you a reason against. As you are weighing these competing reasons, the wind preempts your decision by

pushing you in. In a variant of the case, let's say you decide not to dive in, but the wind happens to push you in anyway. In both variants of this scenario, you have a reason to move as you do, but you do not move *for* that reason. Furthermore, in both variants, you don't will to move as you do; you move *un*willingly, either without or against your will.

> Case 4: It appears (it is to some degree clear) to you that it would be fun to dive into the lake, and so—for that reason—you dive in.

At last, both of your rational capacities are engaged. Your perception gives you a reason to dive in, and you do so *willingly*, for that reason.

Taken together, these cases illustrate that what you do is an act of will (you do it willingly) when and only when you do it for a reason. This is not a coincidence. Rather, it's because your will *is* your capacity to respond to (or to act for) reasons. That is the sense in the which the will is rational by nature.

If this is Descartes's view, we should expect him to say that you (your will) cannot assent to or pursue something if you have no reason for doing so—that is, if that thing doesn't appear to you to be true or good in some way. And that is in fact what he says, repeatedly:

> The will does not tend toward evil except in so far as it is presented to it by the intellect under some aspect of goodness. (AT 1:366)

> 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. (AT 11:464)

> If the intellect never represented anything to the will as good without its actually being so, the will could never go wrong in its choice. (AT 1:366)

> The will cannot tend toward anything [other than] truth or goodness. (AT 7:432)[18]

Likewise, the rational nature of the will entails that you (your will) cannot doubt something if you have no reason to doubt it:[19]

[18] Here I'm indebted to C. P. Ragland (2016, 133), who makes this point well. This point is neutral on the relation between the appearance of goodness and the appearance of truth. Perhaps the two are distinct phenomena. Or perhaps the appearance of truth can be assimilated to the appearance of goodness, insofar as it's a good thing to assent to what is true (as Ragland suggests). Or perhaps the appearance of goodness might be assimilated to the appearance of truth insofar as any case where *x* appears to be good can equally be described as a case where the proposition *x is good* appears to be true.

[19] Other commentators who make this point include Della Rocca (2006, 149), Newman (2008, 344–345), and Clark (2019, 650–651).

> I did say that there was some difficulty in expelling from our belief everything we have previously accepted. One reason for this is that before we can decide [*déterminer*] to doubt, we need [*besoin*] some reason for doubting; and that is why in my First Meditation I put forward the principal reasons for doubt. (*5O/R Appendix,* AT 9A:204)

Philosophers who agree that the will is essentially responsive to reasons go one of two ways, depending on how they specify which kind of reason the will can respond to. A bold view says that the will can only respond to *the best reason* it has, all things considered. This view entails that the will always acts rationally as opposed to irrationally, and, historically, it has often been linked with the counterintuitive claim that there is no such thing as weakness of will, or *akrasia*.

Descartes doesn't go that far. He adopts a modest view, which says that the will needs to respond to *at least some reason* it has, even if it isn't the best reason, all things considered. This view allows that—in cases of indifference, where we have competing reasons—we are able to follow the worse reasons and act irrationally.

Still, the strong and weak views are variants on the shared idea that the will, by its nature, is rational as opposed to non-rational. They agree that—in contrast to behavior of a non-rational being like a dinghy, or a person who is moved unwillingly—it always makes sense to ask whether the will's behavior is rational as opposed irrational. The bold view always answers "yes" to this question; Descartes's modest view says, "It depends."

We can now explain Descartes's puzzling pair of commitments. First, why is it that—when you lack perfect clarity—you have a two-way power to assent or not? The answer flows from two facts about your rational nature, which respectively pertain to your will and your intellect:

> *(1) Rational will*: You (your will) cannot do something unless you have at least some reason to do it.
>
> *(2) Imperfect reasons*: During the time that you perceive *p* with imperfect clarity, you thereby have an imperfect reason to assent to *p*—one that can coexist with, and be defeated by, a reason to doubt *p*.
>
> Consequently,
>
> > During that time, you have a two-way power to assent to *p* or to doubt *p*.

Second, why is it that—when you have perfect clarity—you lack a two-way power, and you cannot help but assent? Answer:

> *(1) Rational will*: You (your will) cannot do something unless you have at least some reason to do it.

(2) *Perfect reasons:* During the time that you perceive *p* with perfect clarity, you thereby have a *perfect reason* to assent to *p* and no reason to doubt *p*—i.e., it's *rationally indubitable*.

Consequently,

During that time, you are compelled to assent to *p* and cannot doubt *p*—i.e., it's *psychologically indubitable*.

When Descartes says that "our mind is *of such a nature* that it cannot help assenting to what it clearly understands" (AT 7:65), he is talking about our *rational nature*. Psychologistic interpretations overlook this point. The fact that we cannot help but assent to perfectly clear perceptions is not a brute psychological fact. Rather, it's a consequence of two more basic facts involving rationality.

Notice, too, how this differs from Larmore's model of what it would take for the will to assent rationally. On Descartes's picture, perfect clarity provides a perfect reason to assent which precludes any reason to doubt, and since the will can only do what it has reason to do, you assent automatically and irresistibly—without having a two-power (contra Larmore's condition (A)), and having to recognize or even consider the higher-order maxim that you should assent (contra (B)). Thus, Descartes evades Larmore's false dichotomy between rational and psychological indubitability. Instead he combines the two—and has the former explain the latter—in the view I call Rational Force: given the rational nature of the will, perfect clarity is psychologically indubitable because it's rationally indubitable.

5.3 The Will's Activity, Self-Determination, and Freedom

In his mechanistic physics, Descartes seeks *causal explanations* of the movements of matter. When the wind pushes a dinghy into the lake, it is an efficient cause operating by brute force. (Following conventional English, whenever I say "cause" without qualification, I mean efficient cause.) Descartes is offering some kind of explanation when he says that a clear perception "impels," "moves," "inclines," or "disposes" the will to assent. What kind?

According to Psychologism, it is also a causal explanation: a clear perception acts as an efficient cause which moves the will to assent by brute force. Just as the states of certain bodies are causes or compellers of states of other bodies, Bennett explains that, according to Psychologism, the relevant perceptions are "causes or compellers of states of mind," and they effect the will by "forcing" it (1990, 230). MP says this brute compulsion is all there is to it; PP tries to add that a normative reason somehow arises out of that. Either way, the fundamental explanatory relation is one of efficient causation and brute force. This clashes with Descartes's views in three ways.

First, if Psychologism were correct, then clarity in the intellect would be *active* (as the cause) while the will's assent would be *passive* (as the effect).

But Descartes's view is exactly the opposite: "intellect is the passivity of the mind and willing is its activity" (*To Regius*, May 1641, AT 3:372*). Psychologism reverses the allocation of activity and passivity within the Cartesian mind.

Second, if a gust of wind propels you into the lake, you would feel that you were coerced by an external force, as indeed you would be. Psychologism entails that the will's response is likewise coerced by something *external* to the will—namely, a state in the intellect. But Descartes, once again, says the opposite: "when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do *not* feel we are determined by any external force"; and indeed, when perfect clarity compels him to assent, he says, "this is *not* because I was coerced [*coactus*] so to judge by any external force" (*M4,* AT 7:57, 58–59*†). To the contrary, he says the will has a "positive faculty of determining [itself] to one or other of two contraries" (AT 4:173). The Cartesian will is not externally determined but *self-determined* to act as it does.

Third, Descartes links external determination with coercion, as we've just seen, and he places coercion in opposition to *freedom*. By treating clear perception as the external cause of assent, Psychologism entails that the will is coerced and not free. But yet again, Descartes asserts the opposite: "the will is by its nature so free that it can never be coerced" (AT 11:359; cf. AT 7:166, 191).[20] The will's freedom doesn't vanish when clarity compels it: "the will of a thinking thing is carried *voluntarily and freely* (for this is the essence of the will), but nevertheless *inevitably*, toward a clearly known good" (AT 7:166). In fact, when we assent inevitably in this way, we realize our highest grade of freedom (AT 7: 57–58).

In his view, a clear perception explains assent not by causing assent but by providing a reason for assent. This is a *rational explanation*. It's worth noting that, thanks to Elizabeth Anscombe (1957) and Donald Davidson (1963), it is now commonplace in theories of agency that voluntary acts are subject to rational explanations, as they are explained by the reasons for which agents perform them. Moreover, Anscombe and Davidson agree that to act voluntarily (intentionally) *just is* to act for a reason.[21] This echoes Descartes's view that your will (*voluntas)* is your capacity to act for reasons, and so to do something willingly, or voluntarily, is to do it for a reason. An important difference, however, is that Davidson views reasons (or the mental states which provide reasons) as causes of voluntary acts; thus, he treats rational explanation as a species of causal explanation. Anscombe does not. In this respect, Descartes is closer to Anscombe.

[20] For discussion, see Ragland 2016, 85ff.

[21] Philosophers today generally agree that there is a close connection between the two, even if it isn't identity. See, for example, Mele and Moser 1994; Mele 2003; Enç 2003; and Clarke 2010. For an overview, see Schlosser 2019, §2.

5.4 Rational Explanation and Final Causes

Let me connect my Rational Force interpretation with Tad Schmaltz's (2017) insightful proposal that Descartes understands the will teleologically, in terms of its characteristic ends, or final causes.

Aiming to supplant the teleological physics of traditional Aristotelian Scholasticism with his own mechanistic physics, Descartes famously declares "the customary search for final causes to be totally useless in physics" (*M4,* AT 7:55). But his arguments for that conclusion imply that while a material object itself doesn't have final causes, a mind, endowed with a will, does. The reason it's "totally useless" to seek out the final causes, or purposes, which explain the behavior of inanimate bodies is because those purposes belong to God, the infinite mind; and, Descartes completes the sentence, "there is considerable rashness in thinking myself capable of investigating the <impenetrable> purposes of God."

As an illustration of the misguided attempt to locate final causes in matter itself, Descartes picks on the Scholastic account of gravity. In his portrayal of this theory, the reason that a released stone falls is because it contains a "real quality" called "heaviness" (*gravitas/pensateur*) whose purpose is to get to the center of the earth, and so it tends in that direction whenever it can. From his point of view, this theory effectively says that a stone tends to move downward because its heaviness intends to move it downward. The behavior of matter is assimilated to intentional action, which requires a mental representation of the intended end. Since Descartes thinks Scholasticism is largely the codification of confused common sense, he shares, in the Sixth Replies, that he himself once harbored the idea that "heaviness carried bodies towards the centre of the earth as if it had some cognition of the centre within itself." But this idea is spurious, he adds, "For this surely could not happen without cognition, and there can be no cognition except in a mind" (*6O/R,* AT 7: 442*).[22] Inveighing against this theory further in his correspondence with Elizabeth, he suggests that it treats the heaviness as if it were a mind moving its body (the stone) in the same way that you and I move our bodies: voluntarily. The problem, he explains, is not that the Scholastic's notion of end-directed activity is incoherent, but that they misapply it to bodies whereas its proper home is in the mind (To Elisabeth, May 21, 1643, *E* 66/AT 3: 667; June 28, 1643, *E* 69/AT 3: 691).[23]

It is fitting, then, that when Descartes describes the rational nature of the will, he uses the traditional language of final causation: "the will does not *tend toward* evil" (AT 1:366); "the will *tends only toward* objects that have some semblance of goodness" (AT 11:464); "the will cannot *tend toward* anything but truth or goodness" (AT 7:432). Truth and goodness are the will's natural ends. You (your will) can tend toward those ends only to the extent that you have reason to do so; only to the extent that goodness

[22] As Garber notes, "Descartes Cartesianizes Scholastic ontology" in a way they would likely reject as a caricature (2000, 267).

[23] Compare AT 5:222–223 and AT 3:667–668.

and truth appear to you (become clear to you) in your intellect. Clearly perceived goods or truths rationally draw the will toward them, but if the will assents, it causes *itself* to assent in response to that attraction—an attraction which it cannot resist when goods or truths are perfectly clear. In a sense, then, Descartes does think reasons (or the clear perceptions which provide us with reasons) are causes, but they are final causes, not efficient ones.

6 Conclusion

Unlike the prominent psychologistic readings, Rational Force does not confuse excuse with justification. It distinguishes clarity from non-rational sources of compulsion. It follows Descartes's order of explanation. It respects the crucial role he assigns to our rational nature. It accords with his contention that the will is never passive, externally determined, or coerced, but is always, by its very essence, active, self-determined, and free. And it coheres with his teleological conception of the mind, wherein the force that a clearly perceived good or truth exerts on the will is not the brute push of an efficient cause; it's the rational pull of a final cause.[24]

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[24] In other work, I situate Descartes's Rational Force view in his larger epistemological framework, which I call "Clarity First" (Paul forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b, forthcoming-c).

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