

Brian Embry,  
University of Toronto

### **Descartes on Free Will and Moral Possibility<sup>1</sup>**

[Revised version forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*]

There is a long-standing debate about whether Descartes was a libertarian or a compatibilist about free will.<sup>2</sup> This debate is occasioned by some apparently contradictory claims made by Descartes. In several contexts Descartes seems to endorse a version of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP). PAP can be understood in a number of ways, but for the purpose of this paper I'll understand it as saying, roughly, that free agents can act otherwise than they do (when acting freely).<sup>3</sup> Every time Descartes endorses PAP, he straightaway endorses a claim dubbed by Scott Ragland 'Clear and Distinct Determinism' (CDD). According to CDD, if an agent S has a clear and distinct perception that  $x$  is true (or good), S cannot refrain from endorsing (or pursuing)  $x$ .<sup>4</sup> To the extent that one emphasizes Descartes's endorsements of PAP, he looks like a libertarian; to the extent that one emphasizes Descartes's endorsements of CDD, he looks like a compatibilist (given, of course, his clear commitment to free will).

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the standard abbreviations for Descartes's works. I follow CSM(K)'s translations unless stated otherwise. Translations of Vega and Molina are my own. Special thanks are due to: Will Brian, Megan Embry, Elliot Paul, Martin Pickavé, participants in the NEH seminar, "Between Medieval and Early Modern" in Boulder, CO, participants in the University of Toronto History of Modern Philosophy Research Group, participants in the 2016 New England Colloquium in Early Modern Philosophy, two impressively careful referees, and above all to Marleen Rozemond, a dedicated teacher and mentor.

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to the literature, see Jayasekera (2014); for something more thorough and opinionated, see Ragland (2006a).

<sup>3</sup> Frankfurt (1969) originally formulated PAP in terms of moral responsibility. Here I want to bracket the question of moral responsibility and focus only on what Descartes thinks is required for free will.

<sup>4</sup> For references, see §2. Presumably, we can have clear and distinct perceptions that something is false (or bad), and those would determine us to deny (avoid) the contents of our perceptions. For simplicity I'll ignore this minor complication.

In a letter (allegedly)<sup>5</sup> to Mesland (AT IV, 173 / CSMK 245) Descartes claims that in the face of a clear and distinct perception, “absolutely speaking” we are able to refrain from pursuing the good or affirming the truth perceived, but “morally speaking” we are “hardly” able to so refrain. This claim suggests that PAP and CDD should be read with two senses of modality in mind: PAP with the “absolute” sense, and CDD with the “moral” sense. If PAP and CDD are to be read with two senses of modality, the apparent contradiction between them vanishes. The distinction between moral and absolute possibility might therefore provide the key to understanding Descartes’s theory of free will. But the moral/absolute distinction does not exactly wear its meaning on its sleeve: recent commentators call it ‘puzzling’ and ‘perplexing’ (Ragland 2006a, 392; Jayasekera 2014, 534).

What seems to have gone unnoticed is that the concept of moral possibility was a technical concept for sixteenth and seventeenth-century scholastics, and scholastics introduce it to solve a puzzle structurally identical to the one generated by Descartes’s apparent commitments to PAP and CDD.<sup>6</sup> In this paper I argue that if Descartes’s endorsement of CDD is cashed out in terms of the mainstream scholastic conception of moral possibility, the tension between PAP and CDD vanishes, and both sides of the libertarian/compatibilist debate are somewhat vindicated. What emerges is a philosophically interesting, historically grounded, yet completely unexplored interpretive option concerning Descartes’s theory of free will. My aim is to show that this unexplored option deserves more attention.

To prevent misunderstanding, I want to emphasize that my thesis is a conditional: *if* Descartes’s endorsement of CDD is cashed out in terms of the mainstream scholastic conception of moral possibility, then the exegetical

---

<sup>5</sup> For questions about the historiography of this text, see Lennon (2013) and Kenny (1972). Lennon provides very strong evidence that this letter was not to Mesland. But the historiography of the letter is irrelevant to my purposes, and I’ll continue to call it ‘the Mesland letter’ in accordance with AT.

<sup>6</sup> See any of the works listed in the bibliography by Knebel, Murray, and Anfray.

puzzles surrounding Descartes's apparently conflicting remarks about free will can be resolved. I do not attempt to provide anything like a deductive argument or smoking-gun evidence for the claim that Descartes endorsed the mainstream scholastic conception of moral possibility; however, if my thesis is true, it provides evidence that Descartes held the mainstream scholastic conception of moral possibility, and it establishes that this neglected interpretive option is worth pursuing further.

### I. Descartes's (Apparent) Commitments to PAP and CDD

In Meditation IV Descartes says, "the will consists only in the fact that we can do or not do (that is, affirm or deny, pursue or flee) the same thing" (AT VII, 57 / CSM II, 40).<sup>7</sup> On a natural reading of this passage, Descartes defines the will as a power for opposites. Suppose I am considering whether to take a bribe or not. If the will is a power for opposites, then I have the power both to take and to reject the bribe. Hence, if I take the bribe, I could have rejected it. And if I reject it, I could have taken it. The above definition of the will therefore seems to imply PAP.

Yet a few lines after endorsing PAP, Descartes claims that the will is sometimes determined by clear and distinct perceptions. Providing an illustration of his claims about the will, he says,

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 that which I understood so clearly to be true. Not because I was compelled to it by an external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will. (AT VII, 58-9 / CSM II, 41)

---

<sup>7</sup> There is a controversy over whether Descartes immediately retracts or merely clarifies this definition (Ragland 2006a). I agree with Ragland that Descartes does not retract but rather clarifies his initial definition of the will in the Fourth Meditation. But nothing in this paper hangs on this controversy, since Descartes appears to endorse PAP elsewhere, even if he retracts it in the Fourth Meditation.

When the meditator has a clear and distinct perception that he exists, he cannot refrain from judging that he exists. This passage suggests that clear and distinct perceptions determine the will – that is, it appears to endorse CDD.<sup>8</sup>

In *Principles* I.37, Descartes writes, “It is a supreme perfection in man that he acts voluntarily, that is, freely...when we embrace the truth, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than would be the case if we could not do otherwise.” (AT VIIIa, 19 / CSM I, 205). Here Descartes first identifies acting voluntarily with acting freely (see also AT IV, 116 / CSMK 234); he then contrasts acting voluntarily with not being able to do otherwise. This contrast strongly suggests that if we do something voluntarily – that is, freely – then we could have done otherwise. Just six articles later, however, Descartes claims, “The minds of all of us have been so molded by nature that whenever we perceive something clearly, we spontaneously give our assent to it and are quite unable to doubt its truth” (AT VIIIa, 21 / CSM I, 207). This looks like a straightforward endorsement of CDD.

The tension between PAP and CDD recurs in Descartes’s correspondence with Mesland. I alluded to the following passage in the introduction:

But perhaps others mean by ‘indifference’ a positive faculty of determining oneself to one or other of two contraries, that is to say, to pursue or avoid, to affirm or deny. I do not deny that the will has this positive faculty. Indeed, I think it has it not only with respect to those actions to which it is not pushed by any evident reasons on one side rather than on the other, but also with respect to all other actions so that when a very evident reason moves us in one direction, although morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction, absolutely speaking we can [*moraliter loquendo, vix possumus in contrariam ferri, absolute tamen possumus*]. (AT IV, 173 / CSMK 245).

Here Descartes claims that the will has (or is) a power for opposites with respect to *every* action. He also suggests a way of reconciling PAP and CDD. “Morally

---

<sup>8</sup> In the geometrical exposition Descartes writes in a similar vein, “The will of a thinking thing is drawn, voluntarily and freely, since that is the essence of the will, but nonetheless infallibly, toward a good clearly known to it” (AT VII, 166 / CSM II, 117).

speaking” the will is determined by clear and distinct perceptions, but “absolutely speaking” the will can always do other than it does.<sup>9</sup>

In the above passage Descartes seems unequivocally to endorse an unrestricted version of PAP. But yet again, in the very next line he appears to negate that endorsement. In this case he writes,

For it is always open to 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 IV, 173 / CSMK 245)

From this passage it appears that we have a power for opposites with respect to clear and distinct perceptions only insofar as we can think up reasons to hold back. So while Descartes seems to endorse PAP in the 1645 letter, he then explains PAP by saying that we can always think up reasons to hold back, and this explanation seems to presuppose that clear and distinct are determining in the absence of countervailing motives – that is, it seems to presuppose at least a version of CDD. A similar explanation of our ability to withhold judgment in the face of a clear and distinct perception shows up in an earlier letter to Mesland:

I agree with you when you say that we can suspend our judgment; but I tried to explain in what manner this can be done. For it seems to me certain that “a great light in the intellect is followed by a great inclination in the will”; so that *upon seeing very clearly that a thing is good for us, it is very difficult, and even, as I believe, impossible, while one remains in this thought, to stop the course of our desire.* But the nature of the

---

<sup>9</sup> A careful reader will notice that Descartes does not explicitly state in the above passage that morally speaking the will is unable to hold back in the face of a clear and distinct perception; rather, he says that, morally speaking, the will is *hardly* [vix] able to “move in the contrary direction.” ‘Vix’ can be used in a colloquial way to negate a verb, but it can also be used to indicate that the action expressed by the verb can occur only with difficulty. If the latter use is intended, Descartes would be saying that, in the face of a clear and distinct perception, we are both morally and absolutely able to do other than what we do. I don’t think this reading can be correct. As we have seen, Descartes clearly states elsewhere that there is a sense in which clear and distinct perceptions are determining. Moreover, in the above passage Descartes intends to highlight a contrast between what we are morally able to do and what we are absolutely able to do, but the intended contrast disappears if we take ‘vix’ in the second sense; if ‘vix’ meant ‘only with difficulty’, Descartes would be saying, “although morally speaking we can move in the contrary direction only with difficulty, absolutely speaking we can.” But the latter sentence seems infelicitous. This awkwardness goes away if we take ‘vix’ as negating our ability to move in the opposite direction.

soul is such that it hardly attends for more than a moment to a single thing; hence, as soon as our attention turns from the reasons which show us that the thing is good for us, and we merely keep in our memory the thought that it appeared desirable to us, we can call up before our mind some other reason to make us doubt it, and so suspend our judgment, and perhaps even form a contrary judgment. (my emphasis; AT IV, 115-16 / CSMK 233-34).

Here again, Descartes explains that we can always suspend judgment. But his explanation of how suspension of judgment is possible explicitly invokes CDD. Clear and distinct perceptions determine the will. So if I have a clear and distinct perception that  $p$  is true, I can suspend judgment about  $p$  only if I stop paying attention to the clear and distinct perception that  $p$  is true.

In order to make the clash between PAP and CDD more perspicuous, and to facilitate evaluation of interpretive options, it will help to formulate PAP and CDD a bit more precisely. Suppose S performs a free act of the will  $\phi$  at a time  $t$ . Intuitively, PAP says that the world could have been just as it was at  $t$ , except that S does not perform  $\phi$  at  $t$ .

**PAP:** If S performs  $\phi$  at  $t$ , the world could have been just as it was at  $t$  except that S does not perform  $\phi$  at  $t$ .<sup>10</sup>

This formulation is meant to bring out the possibility of doing other than we do, and it captures a natural understanding of Descartes's claim that we can do or not do the same thing. I will understand CDD as follows

**CDD:** Necessarily, if S clearly and distinctly perceives that  $x$  is good (true) at  $t$ , then S pursues (affirms)  $x$  at  $t$ .

---

<sup>10</sup> There are no doubt alternative ways of formulating PAP. Some may want a weaker or restricted formulation of PAP. I'll address those interpretive options in the next section. I have formulated PAP synchronically, and one might also formulate it diachronically, so that, given the state of the world at  $t$ , one can do or not do the same thing in the next instant. For my purposes nothing hangs on the decision to formulate PAP synchronically, and the following remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to a diachronic formulation.

PAP contradicts CDD. Suppose Lucy clearly and distinctly perceives at  $t$  that she exists, and she freely affirms at  $t$  that she exists. According to PAP, Lucy could have failed to affirm at  $t$  that she exists. But according to CDD, Lucy necessarily affirmed at  $t$  that she exists. So, PAP and CDD contradict each other.

## II. Available Interpretive Options

The same tension between PAP and CDD appears in the *Meditations*, in the *Principles*, and in the correspondence with Mesland. Further, in all three texts, an endorsement of CDD directly follows an endorsement of PAP. It is therefore unlikely that Descartes failed to grasp the implications of his commitments.<sup>11</sup> In this section I review some natural interpretive options for resolving the apparent contradiction between PAP and CDD. The purpose of doing so is not to refute these options (except in one case, which I will argue is a non-starter). The purpose is to establish a set of desiderata for an interpretation of Descartes's theory of free will. I will then argue in section four that interpreting Descartes in light of the scholastic conception of moral possibility satisfies the desiderata.

A natural thought is that for Descartes PAP applies only in cases that do not involve an occurrent clear and distinct perception (Kenny 1972, 23; Lennon 2013, 237-8; Dicker 2013, 195-97). I'll call this the 'restriction reading' of PAP. Textual evidence for the restriction reading comes primarily from two sources. First, there are the passages cited above, in which Descartes claims that in order to withhold judgment in the face of a clear and distinct perception, one must distract oneself or stop paying attention to the clear and distinct perception.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Gilson suggests that Descartes simply contradicts himself (Gilson 1913, 418-421), and Kenny finds incoherence in Descartes's considered view (Kenny 1972, 31). This paper will show that such verdicts might be too hasty.

<sup>12</sup> In some passages Descartes tells us that, in order to withhold judgment in the face of a clear and distinct perception, we must stop paying attention to the clear and distinct perception. In other passages he says we must devise countervailing motivations against affirming or pursuing a good clearly perceived. It is not clear whether these are two sides of the same coin, or whether Descartes changed his mind about what is required psychologically to withhold judgment in the face of a clear and distinct perception. For my purposes this distinction does not matter: the restriction strategy can be paired with either alternative.

Such passages suggest that our power for opposites is operative only when we are not paying attention to a clear and distinct perception.

A second source of evidence for the restriction reading comes from passages in which Descartes explicitly states that we have a power for opposites *in some cases*. In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes tells us, God “has given me the freedom to assent or not assent *in those cases where he did not endow my intellect with a clear and distinct perception*” (my emphasis, AT VII, 61 / CSM II, 42). Similarly, in *Principles* I.39, he claims, “that there is freedom in our will, and that we have power *in many cases* to give or withhold assent at will, is so evident that it must be counted among the first and most common notions that are innate in us” (my emphasis, AT VIII, 19 / CSM I, 205). These texts suggest that Descartes never meant to endorse an unrestricted version of PAP.

Discarding PAP as formulated above, someone attracted to the restriction reading might attribute to Descartes the following version of PAP. Again we take S to be an agent and  $\phi$  a free act of the will, but we need to stipulate that  $\phi$  has an object,  $x$ , of which S can have a clear and distinct perception. We can now formulate an appropriately restricted version of PAP as follows:

**Restricted PAP:** If S performs  $\phi$  toward  $x$  at  $t$ , the world could have been just as it was at  $t$  except that S does not perform  $\phi$  at  $t$ , *provided* that S is not paying attention to a clear and distinct perception of  $x$  at  $t$ .

For example, if I affirm that I exist, I could have done otherwise only if I was not paying attention to a clear and distinct perception that I exist. There are no doubt alternative ways to formulate an appropriately restricted version of PAP. But for our purposes, the above version is sufficient to give one a sense of how the restriction reading can be cashed out. Clearly enough, Restricted PAP and CDD are consistent.

In my view the restriction reading has a great deal of merit. It accounts for Descartes’s repeated endorsement of CDD, it explains why distraction or



inattention is necessary for withholding judgment in the face of a clear and distinct perception, and it accounts for those passages in which Descartes clearly restricts PAP to cases not involving clear and distinct perceptions. These are all desiderata for an interpretation of Descartes's theory of free will.

Where the restriction reading is arguably vulnerable, however, is in accounting for Descartes's apparent endorsements of an *unrestricted* version of PAP. In Meditation IV, Descartes claims that the will *consists in* the ability to do other than we do; in the *Principles*, he contrasts being voluntary with not being able to do otherwise; and in the 1645 letter to Mesland, he explicitly states that we have a power for opposites with respect to *every* action, even those involving clear and distinct perceptions. Of course advocates of the restriction reading will have a story to tell here (see Ragland 2006b). Since my aim is to introduce a new interpretive option, I will not argue that the restriction reading cannot account for those passages in which Descartes appears to endorse an unrestricted version of PAP. In any case, advocates of a restriction reading ought to agree that one desideratum for an interpretation of Descartes's theory of free will is to account for Descartes's apparent endorsement of an unrestricted version of PAP.

Another weakness of the restriction strategy is that it does not even attempt to explain Descartes's distinction between absolute and moral possibility.<sup>13</sup> In at least one passage, Descartes explicitly invokes this distinction, and he thinks it does real work in explaining how things stand psychologically when we are faced with a clear and distinct perception. An adequate interpretation of Descartes's theory of free will ought to explain this distinction and what exactly it is supposed to do for Descartes.

One interpretation that attempts to explain this distinction is what I will call the 'two senses' reading (following Ragland 2006a, 2006b). According to the two senses reading, Descartes has two senses of modality, and the apparent contradiction between PAP and CDD trades on an equivocation on the relevant

---

<sup>13</sup> Of course nothing stops the advocate of the restriction reading from offering an interpretation of the absolute/moral distinction. See for example Dicker 2013, 197-204.

modal terms. This interpretation is suggested by Descartes's claim, in the 1645 letter to Mesland, that in the face of a clear and distinct perception, "morally speaking" we cannot hold back, while "absolutely speaking" we can. This disambiguation resolves the contradiction between PAP and CDD. But of course the hard question remains: what exactly is moral possibility? Descartes doesn't say, and so we are left to speculate.

One tempting suggestion is that the concept of moral possibility is deontic:  $x$  is morally possible just in case  $x$  is morally permissible, and  $x$  is morally necessary just in case  $x$  is morally obligatory (Alanen 2002, 294; 2014, 197; Moyal 1996, 91-3). On the deontic reading of moral possibility, CDD might be understood as follows:

**Deontic CDD:** If S clearly and distinctly perceives that  $x$  is good (true) at  $t$ , then S ought to pursue (affirm)  $x$  at  $t$ .

The deontic reading of moral possibility faces serious difficulties. One problem is that Descartes uses the concept of moral possibility in several other contexts, and many if not all of those other contexts rule out a deontic reading. To demonstrate the difficulty in maintaining the deontic reading, it will be sufficient to review just a sample of those passages in which Descartes uses that concept.

In the *Discourse* Descartes famously says, "it is morally impossible for a machine to have enough different organs to make it act in all the contingencies of life in the way in which our reason makes us act" (AT VI, 57 / CSM I, 140). On the deontic reading, Descartes would be claiming here that it is morally impermissible for a machine to have enough organs to act like humans do. But that is clearly not what Descartes has in mind.

In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes about a certain transfer of motion:

Having ten degrees of movement, one of which is enough to make K move as quickly as H, if that communicates all its ten degrees to these little arcs, and they next communicate it to K, the ball K will go ten times as fast as H went, and H will

stop itself entirely, which morally cannot happen [*ce qui ne peut pas moralement arriver*]. (AT III, 653)

Here Descartes imagines a large ball H instantaneously transferring all of its motion to a small ball K. After the transfer H stops entirely. Descartes thinks this sort of transfer of motion is morally impossible. On the deontic reading of moral possibility, Descartes is here claiming that a certain transfer of motion between two balls is morally impermissible. Obviously, transfers of motion as such are not the sorts of things to which deontic concepts apply. So the concept of moral possibility at issue in this passage cannot be deontic. (For a similar passage, see AT III, 40). The deontic reading comes to grief in other contexts too. Descartes tells Mersenne that it is morally impossible to catch all the mistakes in someone else's manuscript (AT III, 416 / CSMK 187); in a letter to Mersenne he states that it is morally impossible to make a machine that acts like a bird (AT III, 164). The deontic reading of such passages is simply not plausible.

Other interpretations of moral possibility in Descartes are subject to the same criticism. For instance, Ragland (2006a, 386) tentatively suggests that  $\phi$  is morally possible for S if and only if S has a reason to  $\phi$ . Although I think there is some truth to this bi-conditional, the bi-conditional cannot explain Descartes's understanding of moral possibility. Descartes uses moral possibility to describe experiments, transfers for motion, and machines. In none of these cases is it appropriate to conceive of moral possibility as a matter of having reasons.

Proponents of a deontic reading might respond to this problem by saying that Descartes has multiple conceptions of moral possibility.<sup>14</sup> He uses the deontic conception in the 1645 letter to Mesland and some other conception in all the other contexts. In my view this sort of response is *ad hoc* and should be a last resort; it would be preferable to provide a non-disjunctive account of moral possibility that accommodates *all* of Descartes's uses of that concept. Further, even granting that Descartes has two senses of moral possibility, the deontic

---

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Julia Joráti for suggesting this response.

reading still fails to capture the force of those passages in which Descartes endorses CDD. To give just one example from the *Principles*, Descartes writes, “The minds of all of us have been so molded by nature that whenever we perceive something clearly, we spontaneously give our assent to it and are quite unable to doubt its truth” (At VIIIa, 21 / CSM 1, 207). The idea here seems to be that there is a sense in which we really cannot help but pursue a clearly perceived truth. There is no hint of a deontic reading in the offing. Deontic CDD fails to account for the force of this and other such passages.

So here is another desideratum for an interpretation of Descartes’s conception of free will: not only should it explain the distinction between absolute and moral possibility, but it should explain that distinction in a way that accommodates Descartes’s various uses of the concept of moral possibility.

This section leaves us with five desiderata for an adequate interpretation of Descartes’s theory of free will. In addition to resolving the apparent contradiction between PAP and CDD, an adequate interpretation should:

1. Account for Descartes’s apparent endorsement of an unrestricted version of PAP.
2. Account for Descartes’s endorsements of CDD.
3. Account for the claim that we can withhold judgment in the face of a clear and distinct perception only by inattention or distraction.
4. Account for the passages in which Descartes seems to restrict PAP.
5. Account for the distinction between moral and absolute possibility in a way that accommodates all of Descartes’s uses of that distinction.

It is well known that Descartes sometimes borrows scholastic conceptual machinery (for example: substance, mode, real distinction, modal distinction, objective reality, formal reality). It has also been documented independently that the concept of moral possibility is a piece of scholastic conceptual machinery (Knebel, Anfray, Murray). So it is worth pursuing the possibility that the

scholastic understanding of moral possibility is relevant to Descartes's theory of free will.

### III. Scholastics on Moral Possibility

The scholastic literature on moral possibility is vast, rich, and subtle. It cannot be completely treated in one paper, much less one section of one paper. Fortunately, a thorough treatment is not necessary for our purposes. I will establish what appears to have been a mainstream understanding of moral possibility. This will allow us to assess the possibility that Descartes shared the mainstream understanding.

Sixteenth and seventeenth-century scholastics wanted to maintain two apparently contradictory claims.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, they thought that "the just" can always avoid sinning, and they are never determined or necessitated to sin. I'll call this claim 'Freedom':

**Freedom:** The just are able to avoid sinning on any given occasion.

The sense of Freedom is similar to that of PAP: given the state of the world on any occasion, one is able not to sin on that occasion. Any time we sin, we could have done otherwise. Freedom is motivated by concerns about moral responsibility. God punishes us for sins (some of us, at any rate). But it would be unfair for God to punish us for something we cannot avoid doing. As sixteenth-century theologian Andrés de Vega (†1560) puts it, "What tyrant would do that?" (*De iustificatione*, 649b). Freedom is also enshrined in the Council of Trent as a rejection of the allegedly Calvinistic claim that fallen human beings cannot help but sin at every turn (Decree on Justification, Ch. 11).

Freedom suggests that we can live a sinless life if we only try hard enough. But the latter claim amounts to the infamous Pelagian heresy, which was

---

<sup>15</sup> Anfray (2011a) pointed me to the texts discussed in this section.

vigorously rejected by Augustine and every subsequent orthodox theologian. Sixteenth and seventeenth-century scholastics were therefore bound by theological precedent to endorse a claim I call 'Fallen':

**Fallen:** No one can altogether avoid sinning over the course of a lifetime.

Fallen is also enshrined in the canons of the Council of Trent (Decree on Justification, Canon 23).

But Freedom and Fallen seem to contradict each other. This can be seen by way of an argument raised by Luis de Molina, of middle knowledge fame. Suppose "a lifetime" is exactly thirty years, so that, according to Fallen, no one can avoid sinning over the course of thirty years. Let time  $t$  be the last moment in a thirty year lifetime, and suppose I live sinlessly up until (but not including)  $t$ . According to Fallen, it is impossible to live sinlessly through time  $t$ . So my living sinlessly until  $t$  determines that I sin at  $t$ : necessarily, if I do not sin until time  $t$ , then I sin at  $t$ . Yet according to Freedom, I am always able to avoid sinning. So Fallen and Freedom seem inconsistent.<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that the tension between Freedom and Fallen is similar to the tension between PAP and CDD: Freedom and PAP both suggest that we always have a certain power for opposites, while Fallen and CDD both suggest that we sometimes do not have such a power.

Andrés de Vega uses the concept of moral possibility to resolve the tension between Freedom and Fallen. In book 14, chapter 19 of *De iustificatione*, he defends the claim, "the just are able to avoid each and every venial sin at any moment of time" (*De iustificatione*, 649a) – that is, he defends Freedom. In chapter 20, he addresses the question "whether it is in our power to avoid each and every [*singula et omnia*] venial sin, not only for a small period in life, but even for a lifetime" (*De iustificatione*, 651a). The question here is whether Fallen is true. And

---

<sup>16</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, I.20, nn. 1-2, pp. 121-22.

the question arises because Vega has already endorsed Freedom. In response Vega writes,

But the knot of this question requires the explication of a two-fold power or impossibility, which is commonly posited by scholastics. For certain things are morally called possibles or impossibles. Others are logically or metaphysically called possibles or impossibles. And those are morally called possibles which can happen often and without great difficulty. By contrast, those are morally called impossibles which cannot happen except rarely and with great difficulty. And in this way Christ said that it is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And Jerome [*Hierem*] says that it is impossible for those raised badly to do well. (*De iustificatione*, 651a)

Vega goes on to endorse the claim that “it is *morally* impossible for us to avoid every venial sin for a lifetime” (my emphasis, 651a):

I believe it ought to be very well established by everyone that no one, however just (except the virgin mother of God) morally can or could have avoided all [*cuncta*] venial sins for a lifetime...Nothing is so morally impossible than that someone mortal should be free from blame (assuming we are sons of flesh and of this age). (*De iustificatione*, 651b)

According to Vega, *Fallen* should be read in terms of moral possibility. Unfortunately, Vega does not say much about what moral possibility amounts to. The best he does is to say that something is morally impossible just in case it happens only “rarely and with great difficulty.” This is a good start, but one might hope for a bit more in the way of explanation of what sort of difficulty we are dealing with here.

Luis de Molina provides significantly more insight into the nature of moral possibility. In Part I of the *Concordia*, Molina endorses both Freedom and *Fallen*,<sup>17</sup> thereby setting up the objection which is the focus of disputation 20: “Someone will be able to object: the fact that man cannot persevere a long time without a venial sin is in no way consistent with the liberty to avoid any given sin...And so

---

<sup>17</sup> See *Concordia* I.19, esp. m. 3. In m. 4 Molina appears to back away from Freedom, but in a very interesting passage (n. 14, p. 120) he makes it clear that m. 4 serves a political purpose, and any careful reader can tell what his view really is.

my claims from the preceding disputations are in conflict” (*Concordia* I.20, n. 1, p. 121). Molina responds to the objection by distinguishing between two senses of possibility:

Therefore, when the church determines that man by his own natural powers cannot long persevere without mortal sin.... *they aren't talking about mathematical impossibility but physical and moral impossibility*, which is similar to that which is often seen in things subject to chance, as we will shortly show with a very suitable example. (*Concordia* I.20, n. 5, p. 125)<sup>18</sup>

In order to explain away the tension between Freedom and Fallen, Molina must provide an account of moral possibility according to which doing something once (like avoiding a sin) is possible, but doing that same thing repeatedly over a long period of time is not possible. As the above quotation suggests, Molina thinks that the notion of probability does the trick. His explanation of moral possibility is worth quoting at length:

In order to explain this sort of impossibility, we can take a really suitable example from that proverb Aristotle uses in the second book of *de Caelo*, ch. 12. He says, ‘It is difficult to act rightly many times or often, just as it is impossible to throw snake-eyes [*talos Coënses*]<sup>19</sup> a thousand times, but it is easier to do so one or two times.’ In

---

<sup>18</sup> Note the conjunction: physical *and* moral impossibility. This conjunction might suggest that moral possibility *is* physical impossibility. But that suggestion is misleading. Sixteenth and Seventeenth-century scholastics regularly contrast moral possibility with metaphysical and physical possibility. Molina is no exception in this regard. A few paragraphs after the above quotation, Molina writes,

From all this it is clear that the ability to avoid individual sins at any moment in time is consistent with the inability to avoid all sins for a long time, and such an inability is nothing other than an impossibility – *not indeed a physical impossibility, but a moral impossibility* – that things happen in a certain way for a long time and often. (*Concordia* I.20, n. 9, p. 126)

Here he states that Fallen should be read in light of moral impossibility, which he contrasts with physical impossibility. Accordingly, I think Molina’s above assimilation of physical and moral possibility is a typographical mistake. (After all, it is morally impossible to catch every mistake when correcting a manuscript). At any rate, Molina follows Vega in reading Fallen as involving moral possibility. And because Descartes does not explicitly use the notion of physical possibility, I will set that notion aside.

<sup>19</sup> The passage isn’t about dice but tali, knuckle bones used by ancient Greeks as we use dice. Because dice are more familiar to the contemporary reader, and they can do the same philosophical work as tali, I have translated ‘tali’ as dice. See Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, 949.



this passage, Aristotle clearly teaches that from the repetition or increase of individual events which can easily happen, there somehow arises a greater difficulty that those things happen all at once in the same way, and that a certain number of those things can be taken such that it is impossible that they all happen in the same way. To stick with the same example, it is easy to roll a one or two with the throw of one or two dice.... But the more dice are thrown at the same time (or the more often one and the same die is thrown), the more difficult it is to roll the same number with all the dice at once (or with one die thrown a number of times). If a thousand dice are thrown at once (or if one die is thrown a thousand times), it will be entirely impossible to roll the same number with all the dice (or every time). And that's what Aristotle meant.... Indeed, just as it can very well happen that one rolls the same number once or twice, nonetheless the more often one throws the dice, the more difficult it becomes to roll the same number every time. If a die is thrown a thousand times or (lest anyone make a fuss over the number) ten hundred thousand times, it is entirely impossible to roll the same number every time. But there is no certain number of throws  $n$  such that one can roll the same number  $n$  times, but one cannot roll that number  $n+1$  times. Indeed, at whatever number of throws you arrive on which the same number resulted, it is just as easy to roll the same number the next time. And it may even be easier on account of the skill the player has from repeatedly throwing the dice. Things happen in the same way in the case of human action. For a fallen human can very well observe the law in single cases, sufficiently to avoid sin. And the shorter the time, the easier it is for him to obey the law the whole time. But the greater the time, the more difficult it will be. And there can be such a long time that he cannot but freely and spontaneously transgress in some indeterminate part of that time, on account of his weakness. Nonetheless, when he comes to any given part of that time without transgression of the law, he is equally free and able to transgress no law in the rest of the time, as if it were the beginning of the whole time. Indeed, in a way he is more able not to transgress on account of the habit and skill acquired from previous observation of the law. (*Concordia*, I.20, nn. 6-8, pp. 124-6).

Suppose I hand you a die and ask you to roll a six 1000 times in a row. You might reasonably reply, "That's not possible." This would be a reasonable reply even though it is *metaphysically* possible to roll a six 1000 times consecutively. The sense in which one cannot roll a six 1000 times consecutively is the moral sense of possibility.

The above passage suggests what I call the 'probability account' of moral possibility. On the probability account, something is morally impossible just in case its probability is sufficiently low. How low? The probability of rolling a six 1000 times is  $(1/6)^{1000}$ . Later Molina changes the example (lest anyone fuss over the number) to  $(1/6)^{1,000,000}$ . I asked a pure mathematician to help me

get a vivid sense of how low these odds are, and part of his answer is worth quoting:

The reason this number is hard to grasp is because we (humans) aren't generally very good at appreciating exponential growth (or in this case, exponential decay)...If everyone on the planet were to roll a die for eight hours a day,<sup>20</sup> seven days a week, 365 days a year, for a full millennium, then the odds would be against anyone in that time getting 25 sixes in a row. It's probably safe to say that no one has ever rolled 25 sixes in a row, and no one ever will.

It stretches the imagination to think what unfathomably tiny odds there are of getting 30, 35, or 40 sixes in a row, not to mention 1000. Let's just say that if ten hundred thousand earths full of ten billion people each were to do nothing but roll dice, each person rolling a single die over and over, endlessly on and on, from generation to generation, through the steady march of the millennia out into the unthinkable distant future, until the point at which our own earth is engulfed in a red giant sun roughly seven billion years from now and further rolling becomes impossible, even then we would not expect to see anyone on any of those earths in any of those centuries roll 1000 sixes in a row. In fact, the odds aren't even close.<sup>21</sup>

We are dealing with astronomically low probabilities here. Although it is metaphysically possible to roll a six 1,000 times consecutively, there remains a sense in which no one can do that.

We can formulate the probability account of moral modality as follows:

**The probability account:**  $x$  is morally necessary =<sub>df</sub> the probability of  $x$  is astronomically high.

On this account,  $x$  is morally *possible* just in case the probability of  $\neg x$  is not astronomically high; and  $x$  is morally *impossible* just in case the probability of  $x$  is astronomically low (or, alternatively, just in case the probability of  $\neg x$  is astronomically high). So Molina's strategy is to read Freedom in terms of something like broadly logical or metaphysical possibility and to understand Fallen in terms of moral possibility, which he understands in terms of

---

<sup>20</sup> He is assuming it takes five seconds to roll the die one time.

<sup>21</sup> Will Brian, private correspondence.

probability. Making his conception of moral necessity explicit, he understands Fallen as follows:

**Morally Fallen:** The odds of avoiding sin over the course of a lifetime are astronomically low.

Molina was after an account of moral possibility according to which doing something one time might be morally possible, but doing it repeatedly might be morally impossible. With the probability account of moral possibility, he has what he was after. As Molina notes, the probability of rolling a six one time is not astronomically low, so rolling a six one time is not morally impossible. Indeed, it is commonplace. But the probability of rolling a six 1000 times consecutively is astronomically low and therefore morally impossible. Similarly, the probability of not sinning on any given occasion might be middling to high. To be conservative, even if rough, suppose a basically good person has a 99% chance of not sinning during any given minute of the day. Those are pretty good odds. So it is metaphysically and even morally possible not to sin on any given occasion. Suppose one's lifetime is 30 years. The probability of not sinning over the course of 30 years is roughly  $.99^{15,768,000}$ , which is astronomically low. Eventually, you're going to sin. And although it is morally impossible to avoid sinning over a lifetime, it is not metaphysically impossible, just as it is not metaphysically impossible to roll a six 1000 times consecutively.

The concept of moral possibility features in a number of fascinating scholastic debates, some of which probably have connections to "canonical" early modern discussions. Is God morally necessitated to choose the best?<sup>22</sup> This debate very likely influenced Leibniz's optimism that God necessarily chooses the best.<sup>23</sup> Is God morally necessitated to concur with natural causes?<sup>24</sup> Those

---

<sup>22</sup> Ruiz de Montoya, *De voluntate*, d. 9, p. 72; Ribadeniera, *De voluntate*, d. 14, pp. 368ff. [NB pages erroneously numbered in the 1655 edition]; Aldrete, *De mysterio*, d. 1, s. 2, n. 5, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Knebel 1991; Murray 2004, 2014; Anfray 2011b.

who answered this question in the negative prefigure Humean skepticism about efficient causation.<sup>25</sup> Can moral necessity be the basis of knowledge?<sup>26</sup> This question concerns a lottery paradox. And then there were technical debates about the notion of moral possibility itself. For instance, is moral possibility real, or is it a function of how we think about the world?<sup>27</sup>

As is their wont, scholastics also began to distinguish between various kinds of moral possibility. For instance, there was determinate and indeterminate moral possibility. Very roughly, determinate moral possibility applies to a determinate individual; indeterminate moral possibility applies indeterminately to a plurality of individuals.<sup>28</sup> And there was a conception of moral necessity as a strong inclination in the will.<sup>29</sup> Fortunately we can ignore these distinctions, for neither indeterminate moral possibility, nor moral possibility conceived as an inclination of the will can accommodate Descartes's various uses of the concept of moral possibility.

Sven Knebel, who wrote the book on moral necessity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the only such book as far as I know: Knebel, 2000), notes that conceiving of moral possibility in terms of probability became mainstream some time after the first quarter of the seventeenth century (Knebel 2003, 243-4).

---

<sup>24</sup> Marin, *Theologiae tomus primus*, t. 6, d. 6, s. 6, p. 421; Aldrete, *De mysterio*, d. 2, s. 1, nn. 1-5, pp. 18-19.

<sup>25</sup> This is a strikingly Humean passage from Quirós, *Selectae disputationes*, t. 6, d. 6, s. 4, n. 40, p. 39. After arguing that moral necessity is not real but a projection of the mind, he considers why we judge that some events – like rolling a six 1000 times – are morally impossible: “I respond, this is because we have always experienced that free and contingent events do not always happen uniformly. Similarly, the intellect sees that causes always operate in the same way, and it is necessitated to affirm that they will always operate in that way in the future. For example, it affirms that fire applied to something will always heat it, and that God will not deny it concurrence. Yet according to a better theology, God intrinsically has no absolute necessity [to concur with the fire].” Quirós’s point is that we judge things to be necessary due to uniform experience, but in fact there is no such necessity in things.

<sup>26</sup> Quirós, *Selectae disputationes*, t. 6, d. 6, p. 33ff.

<sup>27</sup> Quirós, *Selectae disputationes*, t. 6, d. 6, s. 4, p. 37ff.; Aranda, *In primam partem*, l. 2, s. 3, §1, p. 904; Marin, *Theologiae tomus primus*, t. 6, d. 6, s. 1, p. 416ff.

<sup>28</sup> Ruiz de Montoya, *De Providentia*, d. 8, s. 1, p. 106; Aldrete, *De mysterio*, d. 1, s. 1, n. 7, p. 3; for skepticism about this distinction, see Quirós, *Selectae disputationes*, t. 6, d. 6, s. 4, pp. 37ff.

<sup>29</sup> Ruiz de Montoya, *De scientia*, d. 79, s. 1, n. 1, p. 825; Herrera, *De voluntate*, q. 10, s. 1, nn. 2-3, p. 224; Marin, *Theologiae tomus primus*, t. 6, d. 6, s. 1, n. 5, p. 416.

Knebel's observation seems to be born out by the texts.<sup>30</sup> Admittedly, establishing that some conception is 'mainstream' for scholastics would take a book length study. But whether the probability conception of moral possibility was indeed mainstream or not, it is clear that (a) it was endorsed by at least some scholastics – for example, Molina – and (b) it helps to solve the exegetical puzzle about Descartes's theory of free will.

#### IV. Descartes and the Probability Account

Many sixteenth and seventeenth-century scholastics, including Molina, viewed moral necessity as compatible with PAP.<sup>31</sup> This makes sense given the stated goal of reconciling the moral necessity of sinning with our ability to avoid sinning. If moral necessity on the probability account is compatible with PAP, it is worth pursuing the possibility that it might help to reconcile the necessity of acting in light of a clear and distinct perception with our ability to refrain from doing so. Of course Descartes tells us nothing about his concept of moral possibility, so one can never know with certainty what concept he had. I will not here argue for the claim that Descartes conclusively did share the mainstream scholastic conception of moral possibility. My goal, rather, is to show that attributing the probability account of moral possibility to Descartes helps to solve the exegetical puzzles surrounding his endorsements of PAP and CDD. In particular, it helps us to satisfy the five desiderata for an adequate interpretation of Descartes's various endorsements of PAP and CDD. As argued above, an adequate interpretation should:

---

<sup>30</sup> Herrera, *De voluntate*, q. 10, pp. 223ff.; Marin, *Theologiae tomus primus*, t. 6, d. 6, s. 1, p. 416. While it is clear that later authors commonly thought of moral possibility in terms of probability, it is (arguably) not always obvious that they thought of moral possibility in terms of astronomical probabilities. In view of space limitations, I want to set this potential complication aside and consider the results of reading Descartes in light of the Molinist conception of moral possibility.

<sup>31</sup> See Molina's libertarian account of freedom in *Concordia*, I.2, n. 3, p. 14; Ruiz de Montoya, *De voluntate*, d. 10, s. 3, n. 9, p. 111; Marin, *Theologiae tomus primus*, t. 6, d. 6, s. 3, p. 418.

1. Account for Descartes's apparent endorsement of an unrestricted version of PAP.
2. Account for Descartes's endorsements of CDD.
3. Account for the claim that we can withhold judgment in the face of a clear and distinct perception only by inattention.
4. Account for the passages in which Descartes seems to restrict PAP.
5. Account for the distinction between moral and absolute possibility in a way that accommodates all of Descartes's uses of that distinction.

If attributing to Descartes the probability account of moral possibility can help us to satisfy these desiderata, the probability account would be an advance over currently available interpretations of Descartes's conception of moral possibility.

In the 1645 letter to Mesland, Descartes says, "when a very evident reason moves us in one direction, although morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction, absolutely speaking we can." This quotation suggests that PAP ought to be read in light of absolute possibility, which I will assume is something like broadly logical or metaphysical possibility, and CDD ought to be read in light of moral possibility. The proposal is therefore that Descartes endorses PAP as originally formulated in section two,<sup>32</sup> and he endorses the following version of CDD:

**Moral CDD\*:** Given that S clearly and distinctly perceives at  $t$  that  $x$  is good (true), the probability that S pursues (affirms)  $x$  at  $t$  is astronomically high.

In other words, the probability of pursuing (affirming) a clearly perceived good (truth) is astronomically high, although it is metaphysically possible not to. (The

---

<sup>32</sup> For convenience I reiterate that formulation here:

**PAP:** If S performs  $\phi$  at  $t$ , the world could have been just as it was at  $t$  except that S does not perform  $\phi$  at  $t$ .

'\*' indicates that this formulation is a first pass, subject to modification for reasons discussed below.) Clearly enough, Moral CDD\* is consistent with PAP as formulated in section two. While it is possible to withhold judgment in the face of a clear and distinct perception, the odds are not good.

Before discussing the merits of this interpretation, it is worth noting an apparent disanalogy between Molina's use of moral necessity and the use I am attributing to Descartes.<sup>33</sup> Molina applies moral necessity to aggregates of actions – doing the same thing 1000 times in a row or 1000 times simultaneously – whereas on the proposed reading Descartes applies moral necessity to a single action – assenting to a clearly perceived good or truth. I do not think this disanalogy undermines the proposed reading of Descartes, since there is nothing incoherent about applying the notion of moral possibility to single events rather than to collections of events. Indeed, in the long passage by Molina quoted above, Molina himself assumes that rolling a six one time is morally possible, thus applying the notion of moral possibility to one roll of the die. Similarly, he thinks it is morally possible to avoid sinning on any given occasion. So Molina himself applies the notion of moral possibility to single actions.

The proposed reading makes good on Descartes's apparent endorsements of an unrestricted version of PAP, since it attributes to him an unrestricted version of PAP (1<sup>st</sup> desideratum). It also accounts for Descartes's endorsements of CDD. If the probability of my affirming a clearly and distinctly perceived truth is astronomically high, there is a sense in which I cannot but affirm such a truth, just as there is a sense in which I cannot roll a six 1000 times consecutively (2<sup>nd</sup> desideratum).

At this point someone might object as follows. Descartes seems to endorse something stronger than Moral CDD\*, for in a text quoted above, he says, "whenever we perceive something clearly, we spontaneously give our assent to it and are quite unable to doubt its truth" (AT VIIIa, 21 / CSM I, 207). In light of

---

<sup>33</sup> Thanks to an editor of this journal and to Marleen Rozemond for bringing my attention to this disanalogy.

this text, it appears that we are *unable* to doubt the truth of a clear and distinct perception, not that we are merely unlikely to doubt the truth of a clear and distinct perception.<sup>34</sup>

But this objection simply misses the point of the proposed reading. For on the proposed reading, Descartes has two senses of modality: the moral sense and the absolute sense. When Descartes says that we are unable to withhold judgment in certain cases, we must therefore ask what kind of modality he has in mind. According to the proposal, when Descartes says that we are unable to withhold judgment in certain cases, he means that we are *morally* unable. Simply pointing out that Descartes says we are unable to withhold judgment therefore does not count against the proposed reading.

As we have seen, reading the notion of moral possibility into Descartes's endorsements of CDD allows us to accommodate Descartes's endorsement of both PAP and CDD while resolving the apparent contradiction between PAP and CDD. This interpretation also delivers on the other three desiderata for an interpretation of Descartes's theory of free will. Let us return now to the third desideratum. Many scholars assume that we must stop paying attention to a clear and distinct perception in order to withhold judgment because it is *metaphysically* impossible for us to withhold judgment while paying attention to a clear and distinct perception. But the foregoing suggests an alternative reading: it may be *morally* impossible to withhold judgment while paying attention to a clear and distinct perception. On this reading, if we fail to pay attention to a clear and distinct perception that  $x$  is good, the probability of our pursuing  $x$  decreases significantly, below the (vague) threshold of the astronomical. So while we are metaphysically able to withhold judgment while paying attention to a clear and distinct perception, our odds of doing so are much better if we stop paying attention. In light of this thought, we need to modify Moral CDD\* slightly to account for the importance Descartes places on paying attention:

---

<sup>34</sup> This objection is due to a referee.



**Moral CDD:** Given that *S* is *paying attention* at *t* to a clear and distinct perception that *x* is good (true), the probability that *S* pursues (affirms) *x* at *t* is astronomically high.

Moral CDD suggests that for Descartes it is possible to have a clear and distinct perception without paying attention to that perception. As one reviewer noted, this suggestion is controversial. But Moral CDD is helpful because it is more ecumenical than Moral CDD\*. If Descartes thinks it is impossible to have a clear and distinct perception without paying attention to it, Moral CDD will be equivalent to Moral CDD\*. Otherwise, Moral CDD will be an improvement over Moral CDD\*. In any case, Moral CDD explains why it is necessary to stop paying attention to a clear and distinct perception if one wants to withhold judgment (3<sup>rd</sup> desideratum).

A potential difficulty for the proposed interpretation comes from the fourth desideratum: Descartes sometimes appears to restrict PAP. In the *Meditations* Descartes writes, God “has given me the freedom to assent or not assent *in those cases where he did not endow my intellect with a clear and distinct perception*” (my emphasis, AT VII, 61 / CSM II, 42). And in *Principles* I.38, he claims, “That there is freedom in our will, and that we have power *in many cases* to give or withhold assent at will, is so evident that it must be counted among the first and most common notion that are innate in us” (my emphasis, AT VIII, 19 / CSM I, 205). In the first place, note that these passages merely *suggest* a restricted version of PAP. The claim that we have a power for opposites in such-and-such cases does not entail that we do not have such a power in other cases. And it may well be the case that Descartes is arguing that we have a power for opposites in *some* cases simply because that claim is all he needs for his dialectical purposes, and establishing the stronger claim, which he endorses elsewhere, would be overkill in the dialectical context. If Descartes does intend to endorse a restricted version of PAP in these passages, I concede that that would be a blow to the proposed

interpretation. But things are not hopeless. With two senses of modality on the table, we can read these passages in light of moral possibility. The point would then be the familiar one that, where we do not have a clear and distinct perception, it is morally possible to pursue or avoid, affirm or deny, the same thing. While paying attention to a clear and distinct perception, it is not morally possible to pursue or avoid, affirm or deny, the same thing. (4<sup>th</sup> desideratum).

Finally, the probability account accommodates Descartes's other uses of the concept of moral possibility. A detailed examination of all of the passages in which Descartes uses the concept of moral possibility would make an interesting paper of its own. In light of space limitations, here I limit myself to showing that the probability account accommodates the types of things Descartes wants to say with the concept of moral possibility.

Descartes most often uses the concept of moral possibility to describe various physical goings-on: he deems morally impossible certain experiments, transfers of motion, and machine behavior. As we have seen, such cases are stumbling blocks for interpretations of moral possibility that hinge on the dictates of morality or on someone's having reasons to act. But the probability account can easily handle such cases. On the probability account, Descartes is saying that certain experiments, transfers of motion, and machine behavior are highly unlikely to occur. As we have seen, Descartes tells Mersenne that catching all the mistakes in someone else's manuscript is morally impossible (AT III, 416 / CSMK 187). On the proposed reading, he is making a (perhaps hyperbolic) claim that the probability of catching all the mistakes in someone else's writing is astronomically low. There is nothing incoherent about that sort of claim, even if it is hyperbolic. Finally, in two passages he talks about becoming as well informed as we are morally able (AT IV, 115 / CSMK 233; AT V, 84 / CSMK 325). On the probability account, someone is as well informed as she morally could be just in case becoming any more informed is morally impossible – that is, just in case the probability of becoming any more informed is astronomically low. Of course, more needs to be said about how becoming more informed could

be morally impossible in this sense. But for now my point is merely that the notion of becoming as well informed as one is morally able is not rendered incoherent on the probability account of moral possibility (5<sup>th</sup> desideratum).

So the probability account delivers on all five of the desiderata for an adequate interpretation of Descartes's endorsements of PAP and CDD. It also performs well on something that historically would have been considered a sixth desideratum. Because of his apparent endorsement of PAP, Descartes was often accused of Pelagianism by his contemporaries (Ragland 2006b, fn. 4). But in light of the historical sources of moral possibility, the charge of Pelagianism against Descartes appears misplaced, even ironic. As we saw in section four, counter-reformation scholastics introduce the concept of moral possibility precisely in order to accommodate Fallen, the *anti*-Pelagian claim that no one can live a sinless life. Scholastic theologians thought that this anti-Pelagian claim was compatible with the claim that we can avoid sinning on any particular occasion, a claim close in spirit to PAP. So the concept of moral possibility is introduced precisely to avoid Pelagianism. This shows that the inference from PAP to Pelagianism is a bit hasty. Equipped with the scholastic conception of moral possibility, Descartes can arguably acquit himself of the charge of Pelagianism.

## V. Conclusion

According to the theory of free will that results from the foregoing proposal, we can always do other than what we do, and there are probabilistic correlations between acts of the will and factors external to the will – factors such as perception, attention, and (plausibly) belief and character. This theory has some clear similarities with contemporary developments of libertarianism. It therefore shares some of the benefits and is subject to some of the same objections as those contemporary developments.<sup>35</sup> But the foregoing allows Descartes to endorse a unified theory of free will that makes good on two claims that initially seem at

---

<sup>35</sup> The most prominent objections are the luck objection and the so-called *Mind* objection. Franklin (2011) offers an excellent defense of the relevant kind of libertarianism against both objections.

odds: on the one hand, we can always do other than we do; on the other hand, there is a real sense in which we cannot help but endorse clearly and distinctly perceived truths.

### Works Cited

- Alanen, Lilli. 2014. "The Role of Will in Descartes' Account of Judgment." In *Descartes' Meditations: A Critical Guide*, edited by Karen Detlefsen, 176–99. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alanen, Lilli. 2002. "Descartes on the Will and the Power To Do Otherwise." In *Emotions and Choice from Boethius to Descartes*, edited by Henrik Lagerlund; Mikko Yrjönsuuri, 279–98. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Aldrete, Bernard. 1652. *Commentariorum ac disputationum in tertiam partem S. Thom. de mysterio incarnationis verbi divini tomus prior*. Lyon: Philip Borde, et al.
- Anfray, Jean-Pascal. 2011a. "Entre San Agustín y Pelagio: Molina y la necesidad moral del pecado." *Criticón* 111-112: 167–89.
- Anfray, Jean-Pascal. 2011b. "Leibniz, le choix du meilleur et la nécessité morale." In *Lectures et interprétations des Essais de théodicée de G. W. Leibniz*, edited by Paul Rateau, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Aranda, Philip. 1693. *In primam partem de Deo sciente, praedestinante, et auxiliante*. Caesar-Augusta (Saragossa): Dominicus Gascon.
- Dicker, Georges. 2013. *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction*, Second Edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frankfurt, Harry. 1969. "Moral Responsibility and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities." *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (23): 829-39.
- Franklin, Christopher Evan. 2011. "Farewell to the Luck Argument." *Philosophical Studies* 156 (2): 199-230.
- Gilson, Etienne. 1913. *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie*. Paris: VRIN.

- Herrera, Augustine. 1673. *Tractatus de voluntate Dei*. Complutum (Madrid): Francis Garcia Fernandez.
- Inwagen, Peter van. 2002. "Free Will Remains a Mystery." In *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, edited by Robert Kane, 158–80. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jayasekera, Marie. 2014. "Descartes on Human Freedom." *Philosophy Compass* 9 (8): 527–39.
- Kane, Robert. 2011. "Rethinking Free Will: New Perspectives on an Ancient Problem." In *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, edited by Robert Kane, 381–406. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kenny, Anthony. 1972. "Descartes on the Will." In *Cartesian Studies*, edited by R. J. Butler, 1–31. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Knebel, Sven. 2003. "The Renaissance of Statistical Modalities in Early Modern Scholasticism." In *The Medieval Heritage in Early Modern Metaphysics and Modal Theory, 1400-1700*, edited by Russell L. Friedman; Lauge O. Nielson, 231–51. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Knebel, Sven. 1991. "Necessitas moralis ad optimum. Zum historischen Hintergrund der Wahl der besten aller möglichen Welten." *Studia Leibnitiana* 23: 3–24.
- Knebel, Sven. 2000. *Wille, Würfel und Wahrscheinlichkeit: Das System der moralischen Notwendigkeit in der Jesuitenscholastik, 1550-1700*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.
- Lennon, Thomas M. 2013. "Descartes's Supposed Libertarianism: Letter to Mesland or Memorandum Concerning Petau?" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 51 (2): 222–48.
- Marin, Juan. 1720. *Theologiae speculativae et moralis tomus primus*. Venice: Balleoniana.
- Molina, Luis de. 1953. *Liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praesestinatione et reprobatione concordia (Concordia)*. Oniae: Typis Collegii Maximi Oniensis S. J.

- Moyal, Georges. 1996. "Magicians, Doubters and Perverts (On Doubting the Clear and Distinct)." *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 50 (195): 73–107.
- Murray, Michael J. 2004. "Pre-Leibnizian Moral Necessity." *The Leibniz Review* 14: 1–28.
- Murray, Michael J. 2014. "Vindicatio Dei: Evil as a Result of God's Free Choice of the Best." In *New Essays on Leibniz's Theodicy*, edited by Larry M. Jorgensen; Samuel Newlands, 153–71. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Quirós, Bernaldo de. 1658. *Selectae disputationes theologicae de praedestinatione, trinitate, et angelis*. Lyon: Philip Borde, et al.
- Ragland, C. P. 2006a. "Descartes on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44 (3): 377–94.
- Ragland, C. P. 2006b. "Is Descartes a Libertarian?" *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 3: 57-90.
- Ribadeniera, Gaspar de. 1655. *Tractatus de voluntate Dei*. Madrid: Maria Fernandez.
- Ruiz de Montoya, Diego. 1629. *Commentarii ac disputationes de scientia, de ideis, de veritate, ac de vita Dei*. Paris: Sumptibus Sesbatiani Cramoisy.
- Ruiz de Montoya, Diego. 1630. *Commentaria ac disputationes in primam partem Sancti Thomae de voluntate Dei et propriis actibus eius*. Lyon: Sumptibus Iacobi, Andraea, & Matthaei Prost.
- Ruiz de Montoya, Diego. 1631. *Commentarii ac disputationes ad quaestionem XXII & bonam partem quaestionis XXIII ex prima parte S. Thomae de providentia praedefiniende ac praebente praedestinationis exordium*. Lyon: Sumptibus Iacobi, Andraea, & Matthaei Prost.
- Schroeder, H. J., ed. 1941. *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*. St. Louis: B. Herder.
- Smith, William, ed. 1870. *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Vega, Andrés de. 1572. *De iustificatione doctrina universa libris XV*. Coloniae: Apud Gervinum Calenium & Haeredes Quentelios.

