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Descartes on Human Freedom

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore René Descartes' conception of human freedom. I begin with the key interpretive challenges of Descartes' remarks and then turn to two foundational issues in the secondary literature: the philosophical backdrop of Descartes' remarks and the notions of freedom that commentators have used to characterize Descartes. The remainder of the paper is focused on the main current debate, Descartes' position on the relationship between freedom and determinism.

In early unpublished writings, Descartes describes human freedom as a marvel on the order of creation *ex nihilo* and God becoming man (AT X 218; CSM I 5);¹ in the *Meditations* he claims that because of our will and freedom of choice, we “bear in some way the image and likeness of God” (AT VII 57; CSM II 40); in the *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes calls our acting freely “the supreme perfection of man” (AT VIII A 19; CSM I 205); and in *The Passions of the Soul*, he says the use of our freedom is the single thing that gives us good reason to esteem ourselves (AT XI 445; CSM I 384). Descartes' high opinion of human freedom is undeniable. And yet his views on the nature of that freedom remain unclear.

There is robust debate in the literature about how to interpret Descartes on a host of related issues: determinism, the relationship between free will² and determinism, the implications

¹ I use the following abbreviations in this paper: AT = René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds. (Paris: J. Vrin 1964-78), 11 vols; CSM = René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volumes I-II, J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984-85); and CSMK = *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume III, J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991). All translations are from CSM I, CSM II, and CSMK, unless otherwise specified. Throughout, I provide the standard Adam and Tannery citations (AT) and CSM I, CSM II, and CSMK citations.

² What ‘free will’ means and what the problem of free will consists in are subjects of significant debate in their own right. Although inquiries into Descartes' position on human freedom have been conceived by some commentators as inquiries into Descartes' views on the problem of free will, Descartes' remarks on human freedom diverge from the

of divine providence for human freedom, and so on. There is disagreement about foundational matters as well: who Descartes' influences and interlocutors on the topic are, the very concepts and terms used to characterize Descartes' views, even the identity of one of the central texts of the debates. Despite the wealth of discussion, little consensus has been reached on central issues, and Descartes on human freedom remains a topic of lively discussion.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on why Descartes' position on human freedom is such a contentious matter. In so doing, I also provide a guide to the recent English-language secondary literature on the topic. I begin by discussing the interpretive challenges that Descartes' remarks pose. Next, I discuss two foundational interpretive issues in the secondary literature: the philosophical backdrop of Descartes' remarks and the notions of freedom that commentators have used to characterize his position. I then turn to the main current debate, Descartes' position on the question of the relationship between freedom and determinism. I conclude the paper by mentioning further issues to explore.

1. The Interpretive Challenges

A fundamental challenge in interpreting Descartes on human freedom stems from his not systematically presenting a theory of human freedom; rather, his remarks on the topic are scattered throughout his works and correspondence, situated in widely varied contexts.³ The

contemporary discussion on free will in significant ways. As a result, I will not use the term 'free will' to characterize Descartes' discussions of human freedom. I briefly discuss this issue at the start of section III.

³ The texts in which Descartes explicitly and substantially discusses human freedom are the Fourth Meditation (AT VII 52-62; CSM II 37-43); the Second Replies (AT VII 166; CSM II 117); the Third Replies (AT VII 190-91; CSM II 134); Descartes' exchange with Gassendi in the Fifth Objections (AT VII 316-17; CSM II 219-20) and the Fifth Replies (AT VII 377-78; CSM II 259-60); the Sixth Replies (AT VII 431-32; CSM II 291-92); *The Principles of Philosophy* I. 37 (AT VIII A 18-19; CSM I 205), I. 39-41 (AT VIII A 19-20; CSM I 205-06); the letter to Mesland of 2 May 1644 (AT IV 115-17; CSMK 233-34); the purported letter to Mesland of 9 February 1645 (AT IV 173-75; CSMK 244-46); the letters to Elisabeth of 6 October 1645 (AT IV 314-16; CSMK 272-73), 3 November 1645 (AT IV 332-33; CSMK 277), and January 1646 (AT IV 352-54; CSMK 282); the letter to Christina of 20 November

central discussion of freedom of choice (*arbitrii libertas*)⁴ (AT VII 56-62; CSM II 39-43) is embedded in his Fourth Meditation attempt to show that God is not responsible for our errors in judgment (1641). But in his replies to his objectors (1641), the *Principles* (1644), his correspondence (1644-1647), and the *Passions of the Soul* (1649), he repeats, elaborates upon, and sometimes even seems to significantly modify the claims and notions from that discussion. Because Descartes was reluctant to weigh in on issues with controversial theological implications,⁵ he might have been less than candid, or even deliberately unclear, to assuage his interlocutors.⁶

The content of Descartes' remarks also poses challenges. To start, Descartes' terminology is not identical to that of any particular philosophical tradition. Although at times he seems to draw from his Scholastic predecessors, Descartes also coins his own technical terms, most significantly his notion of "indifference," which resembles but diverges from prior conceptions of indifference. (See Lennon, "Senses of Indifference," on this issue.) Other phrases, like "grade of freedom [*gradus libertatis*]" (AT VII 58; CSM II 40), bear no clear reference whatsoever. Adding to the confusion, Descartes uses terms like "spontaneously" (*sponte*, e.g., at AT VII 59 and AT VIII A 21) and "voluntarily" (*voluntarie*, e.g. at AT VII 166) but he may not share present-day connotations of these words.

Furthermore, Descartes' discussions of human freedom contain numerous ambiguities and obscurities. For example, in the *locus classicus*, the passage in which Descartes seems to

1647 (AT V 85; CSMK 326); and the *Passions of the Soul*, articles 41 (AT XI 343; CSM I 359-60), 146 (AT XI 439; CSM I 380), and 152 (AT XI 445; CSM I 384).

⁴ 'Arbitrii libertas' may also be translated 'freedom of decision' or 'freedom of judgment.'

⁵ One clear expression of this reluctance is in his letter, likely to Mesland, of 2 May 1644: "The only thing which prevented me from speaking of the freedom which we have to follow good or evil was the fact that I wanted to avoid as far as possible all theological controversies and stay within the limits of natural philosophy" (AT IV 117; CSMK 234).

⁶ In the previously mentioned letter of 2 May 1644, Descartes is clearly trying to emphasize commonalities in his conception of freedom with his Jesuit correspondent (AT IV 116; CSMK 233-34). But Lennon, "Memorandum" and "Not a Libertarian" provide a compelling account of how Descartes might have been speaking frankly.

present a definition of freedom, he says that “the will or freedom of choice [*voluntas, sive arbitrii libertas*]”:

[1] simply consists in our ability to do or not to do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid); or rather [*vel potius*], [2] it consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we feel we are determined by no external force. (AT VII 57)⁷

But this definition raises more questions: what Descartes means by the two clauses and how they are supposed to relate to each other.

What is the nature of this “ability to do or not do something” mentioned in the first clause of the definition? Does Descartes mean that the will can “do” something under certain conditions, and not do it under other conditions? Or does he mean that the will can do something or not do it in the very same conditions? Only the latter implies that the will’s activity must be undetermined. In addition, the examples Descartes provides are incongruous with his formulation of the ability: both affirming and denying are forms of “doing something,” not examples of “doing something” and “not doing something.” If he wanted his examples to match his formulation of the ability, Descartes should have said “to affirm or to not affirm.” Why the incongruity between the formulation and the examples?

Adding to the confusion, the second clause states that the will or freedom of choice consists simply in a certain set of conditions: that when our intellect “puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance,” our inclinations are a certain way. But it is not clear what Descartes means. When he says, “our inclinations are such that we feel we are determined by no external force” is he saying that we merely *feel* we are not determined but we

⁷ I present a more literal translation than CSM II 40 (“our inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force [*ita feramur, ut a nulla vi externa nos ad id determinari sentiamus*]”) in order to forestall the mistaken impression that Descartes holds that our freedom consists in a kind of ignorance (“we do not feel”) about our determination.

are in fact determined, or that we are not determined at all? And what is an “external” force? Is the external force Descartes refers to external to the mind in general (Hatfield 193-94) or just external to the will (Ragland, “Fourth Meditation” 399)?

Lastly, given that the two clauses of the definition are not synonymous, what is the relation between them? Descartes tells us that freedom consists in one thing “or rather (*vel potius*)” another thing. Does he mean to retract or correct the first clause with the second (Beyssade 206; Gilson 310), to add to or to clarify the first clause (Carriero 257-58; Ragland, “Fourth Meditation” 390), to suggest that freedom at times consists in each,⁸ or to make an equivalence between the two clauses (Schmaltz 197)?

These questions arise from the definition alone; additional ambiguities surface in other parts of the Fourth Meditation discussion of human freedom and in Descartes’ other relevant works. I will discuss these ambiguities, along with some apparent inconsistencies in Descartes’ remarks taken as a whole, later in this paper.

2. Foundational Interpretive Issues

Because scholars have taken a wide variety of approaches in trying to resolve the interpretive challenges I have discussed, the secondary literature on Descartes’ conception of human freedom is not a unified discourse in which all participants agree on what the significant questions are or even what terminology to use to characterize Descartes’ positions. Instead, it is made up of a cluster of overlapping discussions addressing different but related issues. In this section, I will bring some of these discussions into conversation with one another by conceiving of the

⁸ After raising the first two possibilities I have mentioned, Anthony Kenny posits that by the ‘or rather’ Descartes holds that what is referred to by the second clause is all that is essential to *arbitrii libertatem*, but that often it consists in what is referred to by the first (18).

literature as centered around two foundational issues, the question of Descartes' philosophical backdrop and what terminology should be used to characterize Descartes' views.

2.1. What is Descartes' Philosophical Backdrop?

Given Descartes' location in philosophical history and the unfamiliarity to the present-day ear of some of the language in his discussions of freedom (for example, Descartes speaks of *arbitrii libertas* ("freedom of choice") rather than *voluntatis libertas* ("freedom of the will")), identifying the issues, traditions, and figures that informed Descartes' thinking on the topic or served as his targets could greatly clarify his views. Many scholars have attempted to do just this.

Some proposed issues are closely tied to the context of Descartes' main presentation of human freedom. As I have mentioned, Descartes introduces his views on human freedom in the context of a theodicy: he is concerned in the Fourth Meditation with absolving God of responsibility for our errors in judgment. His solution (and the problems with it) has been widely discussed—we, not God, are responsible for our erroneous judgments because we have the ability to refrain from making them. We make judgments, in general, by using the two "perfect" (AT VII 55; CSM II 38) mental faculties bestowed upon us by God: the intellect,⁹ which provides the content of our judgments, and the will, which affirms, denies, or suspends judgment about that content. When we clearly and distinctly perceive something through the intellect, we cannot help but judge accordingly, and we never err. When we do not clearly and distinctly perceive something, we can and should hold back from making a judgment. But if, instead, we wrongly use our will to affirm or deny what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive, we are responsible for the resulting erroneous judgments.

⁹ According to Descartes, the intellect, as the faculty that provides the content of our judgments, encompasses not only the "pure understanding" but also sense perception and imagination (AT VIII A 18; CSM I 204).

Some scholars single out the theodicy as the key issue. They propose that similarities between Descartes' theodicy and Augustine's (354-430) theodicy of *De libero arbitrio* help to make sense of Descartes' conception of freedom (Gilson (by way of Descartes' Oratorian theologian contemporary Guillaume Gibieuf, 1591-1650); Menn, cf. Matthews; Ragland, "Theodicy"). Others suggest, because of the significance of the mental faculties in Descartes' solution, that Thomas Aquinas's (1225-1274) faculty model of the mind heavily influenced Descartes (Alanen, *Concept of Mind* and "Power to Do Otherwise"; Carriero), and that Descartes' conception of human freedom is illuminated by investigating the similarities and differences between Thomas's two distinct faculties of will (*voluntas*) and free decision (*liberum arbitrium*) and Descartes' single faculty of "will or freedom of choice" (*voluntas, sive arbitrii libertas*).¹⁰

Other candidate issues are drawn from the significant intellectual debates of Descartes' time. Some suggest that the salient backdrop of Descartes' remarks on freedom is the debate between intellectualism and voluntarism—that is, whether the intellect or the will has primary importance in human agency. Both Thomas Aquinas's opponent Duns Scotus (1265/66-1308) and the Spanish Jesuit Francisco Suárez (1548-1617) fall into the voluntarist tradition, and they are both proposed as helpful points of comparison because Descartes' position, it is argued, significantly resembles theirs (Alanen *Concept of Mind* and "Power to Do Otherwise"; and Schmaltz, respectively). Alternatively, Molinism (named after the Jesuit Luis de Molina (1535-1600)), the controversy it generated about how to reconcile human freedom with God's grace and providence, and the Molinist conception of freedom have been proposed as the relevant

¹⁰ See Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca; and Carriero. Anthony Kenny discusses similarities and differences between Descartes and Thomas on this issue for a related but distinct purpose: to set the context for Descartes' theory of judgment (2-5).

backdrop of Descartes' discussion of freedom (Lennon, "Memorandum"; Schmaltz; Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca).

Understanding Descartes' intellectual milieu and the controversies and traditions that might have influenced him is certainly important for putting Descartes' remarks into context. But Descartes is notoriously reticent about his intellectual influences and sources, and he provides few clues to any background issues or concerns he has regarding human freedom.¹¹ Adding to the difficulty, many positions proposed as helpful points of comparison are themselves the subject of interpretive debate. Most problematically, given that Descartes diverges from proposed traditions and positions in fundamental ways (terminology, basic philosophical commitments, etc.), selecting the most relevant backdrop requires first reaching at least a provisional interpretation of Descartes on human freedom.

2.2. *What terminology should be used to characterize Descartes on freedom?*

Identifying the appropriate terminology and concepts for characterizing Descartes' views on freedom is another promising route toward clarifying them. Doing so is not a trivial matter of semantics: as I will show, such decisions have framed the interpretive problem to be solved and shaped the ensuing discussion. It is also not a straightforward matter. The *locus classicus*, I suggested, contains ambiguities and obscurities, and Descartes' divergences from proposed traditions makes language imported from them an imperfect fit. Commentators have used many different terms to characterize Descartes' views of freedom: "the enlightened freedom (*la liberté*

¹¹ By drawing on the sparse references Descartes provides in his correspondence, Lennon, "Memorandum" makes a strong case for possible influences.

eclairée)” (Alquié 286); “liberty (or freedom) of spontaneity;”¹² “the power to determine oneself” (Hatfield 195); “the positive freedom (*la liberté positive*)” (Alquié 289-90); “liberty (or freedom) of indifference”;¹³ “two-way power,” (Alanen *Concept of Mind*, 228 and 237; Alanen, “Power to Do Otherwise” 280; Beyssade 193; Ragland, “Fourth Meditation” and “Principle of Alternative Possibilities”); “bidirectional power” (Carriero 256); “our positive power to do or not to do something” (Naaman-Zauderer 103) and “alternatives” (Campbell 179).

Most commentators take their cues from Descartes’ Fourth Meditation definition of the will or freedom of choice. But, as I have discussed, Descartes’ formulations of the clauses are ambiguous, and the first clause alone allows for two ways of understanding freedom that are inconsistent with one another. Nonetheless, the English-language literature at least has largely settled on the terminology of “liberty (or freedom) of spontaneity” and “liberty (or freedom) of indifference,” introduced by Anthony Kenny (17ff).¹⁴ This terminology, as Kenny explains, is Hume’s: in the *Treatise*, Hume distinguishes between “liberty of spontaneity, as it is call’d in the schools, and the liberty of indifference; betwixt that which is oppos’d to violence, and that which means a negation of necessity and causes.”¹⁵ Using Hume’s terms to discuss Descartes may seem anachronistic, but it is not unreasonable because the terms are arguably drawn from traditions predating Descartes, and Descartes himself uses the terms “indifference” and “spontaneity.” The use of “liberty (or freedom) of spontaneity” and “liberty (or freedom) of indifference,” however,

¹² Commentators who use this term include Alanen, *Concept of Mind*; Beyssade; Campbell; Chappell, in Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca; Christofidou, “Freedom”; Christofidou, *Self, Freedom, and Reason*; Cottingham; Hatfield; Kenny; Menn; Schmaltz *Causation*; Schmaltz, *Malebranche*; and Shapiro.

¹³ Commentators who use this term include Alanen, *Concept of Mind*; Beyssade; Chappell, in Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca (he calls it “indifference in the Jesuits’ sense,” 1210); Cottingham; Hatfield; Kaufman; Kenny; Menn; Schmaltz *Causation*; Schmaltz, *Malebranche*; and Shapiro.

¹⁴ Many of the terms in the preceding paragraph bear affinities to one or the other of these two notions. For instance, “the positive freedom”, “our positive power to do or not to do something,” and Michelle Beyssade and Lilli Alanen’s use of “two-way power” all share liberty of indifference’s incompatibilist implication. In contrast, C. P. Ragland’s use of “two-way power” and Joseph Keim Campbell’s use of “alternatives” do not.

¹⁵ Hume, *Treatise*, 2.3.2.1., 407-8.

introduces additional complexities because Descartes never uses the complete terms himself, and when he does speak of “indifference” in his discussions of freedom, he uses the term in a completely different sense, to refer to a state of the will when it is not impelled one way rather than another (AT VII 58; CSM II 40). Further, it is not clear that by “spontaneity” Descartes means what Hume means by “liberty of spontaneity” and, thus, there is disagreement on what liberty or freedom of spontaneity in Descartes’ sense is supposed to mean.¹⁶ I will set these complexities aside and focus on areas of agreement in the secondary literature.

“Liberty of indifference,” as understood in the secondary literature, entails a power or ability to choose among alternatives given fixed background events and conditions. “Liberty of spontaneity” does not. Kenny and the literature following him hold that liberty of indifference is an apt characterization of the first clause of the *locus classicus*: the will or freedom of choice, Descartes says, “simply consists in our ability to do or not to do something” (AT VII 57). And “liberty of spontaneity,” in whatever sense it is meant, seems to capture to some extent (or is at least consistent with) the second clause: the will or freedom of choice “consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we feel we are determined by no external force [*ita feramur, ut a nulla vi externa nos ad id determinari sentiamus*]” (AT VII 57).¹⁷

¹⁶ Anthony Kenny explains liberty of spontaneity as “liberty defined in terms of wanting” (17); Tad Schmaltz simply as “the absence of coercion” (Schmaltz, *Malebranche* 208); Gary Hatfield says “‘spontaneous’ means self-acting but not necessarily uncaused” (Hatfield 193); and Vere Chappell defines it in the following way: “an action is spontaneous if it is performed by its agent entirely on his own, without being forced or helped or affected by any external factor, or by anything other than its very self” (Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca 1209). In contrast, C. P. Ragland argues that these general conceptions of Cartesian spontaneity are flawed: “Cartesian spontaneity involves *both* acting on an inclination *and* being free from external determination” (Ragland, “Principle of Alternative Possibilities” 381; see also Ragland, “Degrees of Freedom,” for further discussion of Cartesian spontaneity).

¹⁷ There is substantive dispute over whether the Latin verb “*feramur*” should be translated in a passive sense (“we are carried”)—which underlies John Cottingham’s choice of “our inclinations” (CSM II 40), which I reproduce here—or an active sense (“we move or go”). See Beyssade 194. This further complicates the issue of how to understand Cartesian liberty of spontaneity.

Because liberty of spontaneity is consistent with determinism (by internal forces: we are free even if our volitions are determined by our perceptions) and liberty of indifference is not, and because of the widespread adoption of these terms, the literature has largely focused on making sense of Descartes' position on the relationship between determinism and freedom—indeed this remains the central debate.¹⁸

3. The Main Current Debate: Descartes on Determinism and Freedom

One standard present-day formulation of the problem of free will is as a concern about whether causal determinism threatens free will. Causal determinism is the thesis that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions along with the laws of nature, and free will is, roughly, whatever capacity an agent would need to have in order to be morally responsible for her actions or choices.

It is not clear that Descartes would affirm this formulation of the problem.¹⁹ Although he formulates and affirms general theses about causal relationships (for instance, his Third Meditation causal axioms), he is not necessarily using the same conception of causation in all contexts.²⁰ Furthermore, it is not at all obvious that Descartes was thinking about determinism in the context of freedom as a general thesis. If he was, he most likely would not have conceived of determinism as physical determinism, as the standard present-day formulation does, but instead,

¹⁸ See Christofidou 2009 and 2013 for a recent view that argues that this framework is inadequate to capture essential features of Descartes' conception of human freedom.

¹⁹ Vere Chappell says, for some of the reasons I raise in this paragraph, that "an account of Descartes's determinism must of necessity be somewhat speculative" (Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca 1211).

²⁰ Descartes' theory of causation is itself the subject of much discussion and debate. See Schmaltz, *Causation*, for a recent comprehensive study of Descartes' conception of causation in a variety of different contexts and its relation to the Scholastic background.

in terms of the determination of our will by the intellect²¹ or by God.²² Descartes' remarks in the Fourth Meditation raise these two possibilities.

3.1. *Determinism, Compatibilism, and Incompatibilism*

In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes seems to suggest that in cases of clear and distinct perception, the intellect determines us to judge accordingly and this determination does not undermine our freedom but, instead, makes us freer. About his investigation of the *cogito* in the previous meditation, he says:

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

Descartes qualifies the determination of the will by the intellect: though clear and distinct perceptions determine our volitions, perceptions that are not clear and distinct can never do so. This is because in order to be responsible for our erroneous judgments, we must have the ability to withhold judgment whenever error is possible (that is, whenever we do not clearly and distinctly perceive something).²³

Descartes also seems to raise the possibility of God as the source of the determination. He describes our inclining (*propendeo*) because of “a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts” (AT VII 58; CSM II 40), and discusses the hypothetical possibility that “God could easily have brought it about that without losing my freedom, and despite the limitations in my knowledge, I should nonetheless never make a mistake” by “endow[ing] my intellect with a

²¹ See note 10, above, for Descartes' use of 'intellect.'

²² In addition to God and the intellect (he characterizes determinism by the intellect as determinism by “perceptions” (Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca 1212)), Vere Chappell thinks that Descartes is concerned with the determinism of volitions by “the minds whose actions they are” (Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca 1211).

²³ Descartes' exchange with Gassendi in the Fifth Objections (AT VII 316-17; CSM II 219-20) and the Fifth Replies (AT VII 377-78; CSM II 259-60) stresses this point.

clear and distinct perception of everything about which I was ever likely to deliberate” or by “simply...impress[ing] it unforgettably on my memory that I should never make a judgement about anything which I did not clearly and distinctly understand” (AT VII 61; CSM II 42).

There are two things to note about Descartes’ discussions of divine determination in the Fourth Meditation. First, all of Descartes’ examples, actual and hypothetical, show divine determinism to be indirect rather than direct. God seems to determine the will by affecting some other aspect of the mind: by disposing “inmost thoughts [*intima cogitationis*]” (AT VII 58; CSM II 40), by endowing the intellect with clear and distinct perceptions, or by making it so that we never forget how to properly use the will. None of Descartes’ examples of God determining us occurs through God’s direct endowment of particular volitions. This could account for how God’s determination could be consistent with the second clause of the definition—although God might be determining us, we “feel we are determined by no external force” (AT VII 57) because our volitions are produced by something internal to us. Second, consistent with the aims of his theodicy, although Descartes holds that God could determine us to never make a mistake, he never conceives of God determining us to make errors, in either the actual world or his hypothetical scenario.

Some commentators have thought that Descartes’ Fourth Meditation discussions of determination by the intellect and determination by God (along with what he says elsewhere) strongly suggest that Descartes is a compatibilist.²⁴ After all, Descartes affirms that determinism (both by the intellect and by God) and freedom are compatible, at least in some significant subset of cases: we are most free when clear and distinct perception determines us to judge accordingly, and even if we were determined by God to never make a mistake, we would still be free.

²⁴ See, for instance, Campbell; Collins; Cottingham 149-151; Cunniff; Curley 165-166; Hatfield 192-196; Loeb 143-149; Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca 1215. Alternatively, see Newman 349ff., for the argument that the considerations discussed above can be construed along incompatibilist lines.

However, ambiguities in Descartes' language leave room for arguing, on the contrary, that Descartes thinks human freedom and determinism are incompatible. There are ambiguities at three crucial points. First, as mentioned, in the second clause of the definition Descartes says the will or freedom of choice "consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we feel we are determined by no external force" (AT VII 57). If our feeling that we are not determined by an external force accurately reflects reality, Descartes could be expressing the incompatibilist sentiment that human freedom requires that we not be determined by any external force, including God. Second, Descartes' statement that "a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts" is a source of inclination could then be interpreted as consistent with the incompatibilist interpretation, because God's inclining us would not entail that he necessitates us. Lastly, we saw that Descartes characterizes *cogito* case as one in which "a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will" (AT VII 59; CSM II 41). Note the ambiguity here on the issue of determination by the intellect: Descartes does not explicitly claim that the great light in the intellect causes, determines, or necessitates the inclination in the will but holds that belief merely "follows" clear and distinct perception.

While these ambiguities allow for incompatibilist interpretations, later texts seem to encourage them—in particular, passages and considerations from the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644). In the *Principles* (*Principles* I.39, I.43) Descartes largely reiterates his views from the *Meditations* without modification. But in his explanation of why we deserve praise or blame, he introduces new distinctions that he hasn't used in the Fourth Meditation:

It is a supreme perfection in man that he acts by means of the will, that is, freely [*agat per voluntatem, hoc est liber*]; this makes him in a special way the author of his actions and deserving of praise for what he does. We do not praise automatons for accurately producing all the movements they were designed to perform,

because the production of these movements occurs necessarily [*necessario*]. It is the designer who is praised for constructing such carefully-made devices; for in constructing them he acted not out of necessity but freely [*non necessario, sed libere*]. By the same principle, when we embrace the truth, our doing so voluntarily [*voluntarie*] is much more to our credit than would be the case if we could not not embrace it [*quam si non possemus non amplecti*].²⁵ (*Principles* I.37: AT VIII A 18-19)

The beginning of the explanation is of a piece with the *Meditations* view. Descartes reiterates his view that freedom is essential to the will: acting “by means of the will” is equated with acting freely; in the Fourth Meditation Descartes identifies “will” with “freedom of choice.” Furthermore, our acting by means of the will or freely is a “supreme perfection” in human beings; in the Fourth Meditation Descartes says that our power of willing is “perfect of its kind” (AT VII 58; CSM II 40)). But then Descartes adds a distinction he hasn’t before made explicitly: he contrasts freedom with necessity and seems to claim that it is because we don’t act necessarily that we are free—an incompatibilist sentiment.

Descartes’ discussion of divine preordination in the *Principles* also encourages an incompatibilist interpretation. He seems to think that divine preordination is a potential problem for human freedom: “we can easily get ourselves into great difficulties if we attempt to reconcile this divine preordination with the freedom of our will, or attempt to grasp both these things at once” (AT VIII A 20; CSM I 206). Specifically, the difficulty lies in understanding how preordination, human freedom, and the lack of determination of human action are jointly possible: “we cannot get a sufficient grasp of [the power of God by which he not only knew from

²⁵ My translation here diverges on two points from John Cottingham’s in CSM I. First, Cottingham translates “*per voluntatem*” in the first sentence as “voluntarily” (CSM I 205). Second, Cottingham translates the Latin in the last sentence as “our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than would be the case if we could not do otherwise” (CSM I 205). Despite the double negative, I favor the literal translation because it does not use the loaded language of “could not do otherwise.”

eternity whatever is or can be, but also willed and preordained it] to see how it leaves the free actions of men undetermined [*indeterminatas*]" (AT VIII A 20; CSM I 206).²⁶

3.2. *The So-called Letter to Mesland of 9 February 1645*

The most substantial obstacle to defending an incompatibilist interpretation is Descartes' Fourth Meditation view that in cases of clear and distinct perception, although we cannot but judge accordingly, we are still free: this looks like a clear-cut case of the compatibility of human freedom and determination of the will. But what has become known in the literature as the letter to Mesland of 1645 (AT IV 173-75; CSMK 244-46) seems to provide a way of overcoming this obstacle.

In this text, Descartes clarifies his views on freedom in general, and indifference in particular, in relation to the views of an unnamed "Reverend Father" (AT IV 173; CSMK 244). After repeating his conception of indifference as a state of the will from the Fourth Meditation, he says:

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. For it is always open to us to hold back [*Semper enim nobis licet nos revocare*] from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting [*admittenda*] a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will [*libertatem arbitrii*] by so doing. (AT IV 173; CSMK 245)

²⁶ Descartes' introduction of the issue of divine preordination (not only in the *Principles*, but also in his correspondence with Elisabeth) brings in additional complications for interpreting his views on human freedom. As a result, the literature that discusses the issue to any extent treats it as separate from the determinism that Descartes discusses in the Fourth Meditation. See Ragland, "Divine Providence," for a helpful discussion of the complications that divine preordination poses and a clear map of the relevant Scholastic positions. See also Laporte 73-85, and Schmaltz, *Causation* 208-216.

Commentators have homed in on two perplexing features of this passage.²⁷ The first is Descartes' distinction between what we can do "morally speaking (*moraliter loquendo*)" as opposed to "absolutely (*absolute*)" speaking. Descartes hasn't previously used this distinction—what does it mean? The second is Descartes' apparent change from the doctrine he advanced in the Fourth Meditation: in this passage, Descartes seems to state that if we consider it a good thing to demonstrate our freedom, we need not judge or pursue in accordance with clear and distinct perception.

The letter to Mesland of 1645 is significant because *prima facie*, it advances a dramatically different position than the view in the *Meditations*. The text is the subject of substantial and vigorous debate, and the main interpretations of it are inconsistent with one another: commentators have alternatively viewed it as, finally, a clear expression of Descartes' true position on the nature of human freedom; as marking dramatic change in Descartes' conception of freedom (Alquié calls it the "the capital text" (288)); or as a problem text to be reconciled with Descartes' earlier position.

Before turning to these possible options, it is important to call attention to the extremely controversial nature of this text. Although the text has come to be known as the 1645 letter to Mesland, there have been significant and unresolved questions about its identity since its first appearance in 1657, including when it was written, its original language (two versions of the letter, one in French and one in Latin, were found), its intended recipient, and more recently, whether it was a letter at all.²⁸

²⁷The rest of the text also contains confusing features, in particular, Descartes' use of a distinction between freedom considered in the acts of the will either before they are elicited or at the moment they are elicited. See Kenny (cf. Ragland, "Degrees of Freedom") and Lennon, "Memorandum" for dramatically different accounts of that section of the text.

²⁸ See Kenny 24-26, and Lennon, "Memorandum" 226-29, for detailed discussions of editorial difficulties the text poses and Lennon, "Memorandum," more generally for an interesting argument for the possibility that the text was

3.3. *Libertarian, Change in View, or Compatibilist?*

Taken at face value, the letter to Mesland of 1645 provides helpful resources for libertarian interpretations, that is, those that interpret Descartes as holding both that human beings are free and that the freedom we possess is incompatible with determination from any source. The text seems to provide a way around the biggest textual problem a libertarian interpretation faces, Descartes' view of the *Meditations* that we cannot but judge in accordance with clear and distinct perception—that in cases of clear and distinct perception, the intellect compels the assent of the will. Some have argued, in line with what the letter seems to suggest, that even in the *Meditations* Descartes holds that we have the ability to assent or not assent to any perception the intellect provides, even those that are clear and distinct (Alquié 292-93; Alanen, *Concept of Mind* 242ff). Setting textual issues aside, this kind of libertarian interpretation faces challenges from broader considerations about Descartes' project of the *Meditations*. The primary difficulty is the role that the assent-compelling aspect of clear and distinct perception plays in Descartes' epistemological project. Descartes explains that in theoretical matters, we should always withhold assent unless we cannot but judge (because we are faced with clear and distinct perception). But if we always can simply withhold assent, even in the face of clear and distinct perception, then we can never obtain the certainty that Descartes seeks.²⁹

Recently, an alternative libertarian interpretation has gained prominence in the literature. C. P. Ragland has argued that although Descartes consistently holds a libertarian conception of human freedom throughout his works, this does not require attributing to him the ability to withhold assent from clear and distinct perceptions even while we are clearly and distinctly

neither to Mesland nor even a letter at all, but instead, a memorandum Descartes wrote regarding Denis Petau's *De libero arbitrio* (1643).

²⁹ Anthony Kenny raises this problem in the context of discussing Ferdinand Alquié's interpretation and says, "to abandon the theory that clear and distinct perception necessitates the will is to call in question the whole validation of reason in which the *Meditations* culminates" (29).

perceiving them. This is because the “absolute” libertarian two-way power to choose is “derivative” (Ragland, “Libertarian,” 80ff.)—that is, even though a clear and distinct perception determines us to judge accordingly, the will, by an undetermined decision to direct our attention, is responsible for bring about that clear and distinct perception in the first place.³⁰ This interpretation draws on Descartes’ views about our attention from the Fifth Meditation (AT VII 69-70; CSM II 48) and the letter to Mesland of 2 May 1644 (AT IV 115-16; CSMK 233-34) to construct a coherent libertarian interpretation that does not face the undermining problem of the preceding version.

Rather than maintaining that Descartes consistently holds a libertarian position on human freedom, some have argued that Descartes’ thinking on the topic changed over time: he moved from a compatibilist conception of human freedom in the *Meditations* to a libertarian one in later works (Alquié; Beyssade; Gilson; Schmaltz, *Causation*). This position could be motivated from two directions. One could focus on the incompatibilist cast of Descartes’ remarks related to determination by God starting with the *Principles*, as I have discussed, but also in his later correspondence with Elisabeth (letter of November 3, 1645: AT IV 333; CSMK 277)³¹ and Christina (letter of November 20, 1647: CSMK 325-26; AT V 85). Alternatively, one could conceive of Descartes’ position on human freedom, as changing as his focus moves from a search for truth to the pursuit of the good and a corresponding emphasis on our control of our will in free action, starting in the *Principles* and clearly evident in the *Passions of the Soul* (1649) (Schmaltz, *Causation* 199-208). The greatest challenges for interpretations that suggest

³⁰ Laporte emphasizes the role attention plays in perceiving something clearly and distinctly, and Wee, especially 392-398, agrees with C.P. Ragland on the significance of the ability to do otherwise understood in an incompatibilist sense and the importance of the role of attention. See Lennon, “Not a Libertarian” for a thorough critique of Ragland’s interpretation.

³¹ Ambiguities in Descartes’ discussion of our dependence on God in this passage have allowed both incompatibilists and compatibilists to claim this text in support of their positions.

that Descartes changed his mind about human freedom are to provide an adequate explanation for why Descartes would have changed his mind, and to explain how that change does not undermine his epistemological conclusions of the *Meditations* (or, alternatively, to bite the bullet regarding that implication).

Given substantial controversy about the identity of the letter to Mesland of 1645 and the availability of plausible compatibilist understandings of it (Campbell; Lennon, “Memorandum”), a compatibilist interpretation of Descartes on human freedom is still a strong position. But a compatibilist interpretation faces possible challenges of its own, because of the qualifications Descartes makes regarding determinism that I discussed at the start of section III. A compatibilist interpretation either must explain how our determination is consistent with our ability to refrain from judging in cases where there is the possibility of error (cases in which our perceptions are not clear and distinct) (see Campbell for one attempt at this), or maintain that Descartes is a compatibilist for only a subset of cases, those of clear and distinct perception (Kenny).

4. Further Issues

With the emphasis in the literature on identifying Descartes’ stance on the relationship between freedom and determinism, certain distinctive features of Descartes’ conception of human freedom have received far less attention. I conclude this paper by mentioning those features.

In the Fourth Meditation and the Sixth Replies, Descartes explains that freedom is related to states of the faculty of the will—both its inclination and its indifference. According to Descartes, freedom of choice is proportional to the inclination of the will: “the more I incline in one direction...the more freely I choose that way”(AT VII 57-8). And, he says, “the indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade

of freedom” (AT VII 58; CSM II 40). Why should our freedom bear a relation to such states? Why does Descartes characterize freedom as coming in grades, and what does he mean by it?³² Descartes also says that freedom is related to the clarity of intellectual perception. He holds not only that agents are free even when they cannot but judge in accordance with clear and distinct perception, but that they are *freest* in such a case (AT VII 433; CSM II 292). Recall that Descartes asserts of the *cogito*, in the passage that I have repeatedly discussed, that he could not but judge that it was true and yet “the spontaneity and freedom of [his] belief was all the greater in proportion to [his] lack of indifference” (AT VII 58-9; CSM II 41).

These features of freedom seem mysterious if we approach them from the perspective of the relationship between freedom and determinism alone. A better understanding of Descartes’ conception of human freedom requires not only accounting for, but also explaining these distinctive features of Cartesian freedom.³³

³² Andrea Christofidou focuses her account around this issue. See her “Freedom” and *Self, Freedom, and Reason*. Christopher Gilbert also focuses on this issue and argues that Descartes presents a rationalist adaptation of Augustine’s theory of free choice (Gilbert).

³³ Special thanks to Scott Ragland, who provided very helpful comments throughout. Thanks also to Vanessa Carbonell and Mihira Jayasekera for their editorial suggestions.

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