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Cartesian Generosity

1. Introduction

In a.153 of the *Passions of the Soul*,[1] Descartes specifies what he means by generosity. According to him,

> true generosity, which makes a man esteem himself as highly as he may legitimately esteem himself, consists only in: partly that he [the generous person] knows that there is nothing that truly belongs to him but this free disposition of his volitions, nor any reason why he ought to be praised or blamed except that he uses it well or badly; and partly in that he feels within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well, that is to say, never to lack the will to undertake and execute all the things which he judges to be the best. (PS a.153; AT XI 445–446.)

It should be clear from the definition alone that Descartes is here using the term 'generosity' in a somewhat peculiar way. He certainly seems to intend something very different from what we mean today. And it is also odd that he counts this piece of knowledge — namely, that we are free — as a *passion*, although he also considers it a virtue. My aim here is to elucidate just what Cartesian generosity is.

I will begin by asking a question of the first part of generosity: How does one come to understand that one has free disposition of one's volitions? Once I have answered this question, I will then consider how the first part of generosity is related to the second part — that is, how understanding our freedom is related to a good use of the will and a resolve to use the will well. In order to explicate this relationship, I will draw on the Fourth Meditation and the method for avoiding error the meditator arrives at therein. With the whole concept of generosity in view we will be in a position to understand just how generosity is 'that which makes a man esteem himself as highly as he may legitimately esteem himself'.

Before proceeding with this investigation, however, I would like to make some general remarks. First, it is surprising that so few commentors have remarked upon, let alone tried to understand Cartesian generosity, given its clear philosophical import.[2] For one, it is puzzling that Descartes counts our

Tuomo Aho and Mikko Yrjönsuuri (eds.): Norms and Modes of Thinking in Descartes (Acta Philosophica Fennica 64), 249–275.

understanding that we are free as a *passion* as well as a virtue. Sorting out this puzzle might well help us to understand the status of Cartesian passions. In addition, explicating this notion is critical to understanding Descartes' ethics insofar as, for him, the generous person is "entirely master of his passions" (PS a.156, AT XI 448) and generosity is "the key to all the other virtues" (PS a.161, AT XI 454). And of course, insofar as generosity is just legitimate self-esteem, it is explicitly tied to a notion of what it is to be a good or virtuous person. Moreover, as we shall see, understanding Descartes' sense of 'generosity' can help us to understand his conception of free will and to get clear on the way he conceives the relation between the true and the good. (In the *Meditations* he pairs these two together, but yet he denies having said anything about the good there. Perhaps for this reason, as well as because of the so-called provisional morality of the Third Part of the *Discourse*, any concern Descartes has with the good has been presumed to be a sort of ugly appendage to his metaphysics and epistemology. As a result of this investigation into generosity, we will be able to see that this is not the only way to situate Descartes' ethics — but I will not be able to say much more than this here.)

The second remark I want to make concerns the sense of Descartes' 'generosity'. The standard methods for clarifying the usage of a term fail us here, for there is little to gain from investigating the history of this term's usage. In the sixteenth century, generosity referred simply to a nobility of birth, and while Cartesian generosity seems to contain this 16th century notion, that is certainly not all it consists in. Similarly, though Cartesian generosity also results in the liberality of giving with which *we* identify generosity, and indeed which has been identified with the term since the late seventeenth century, Cartesian generosity cannot be reduced to this either. There is at least one figure who does speak of generosity in the same way: Descartes' relative contemporary, Pierre Corneille.[3] So to help focus this investigation into Cartesian generosity I want to first consider how generosity figures in Corneille's tragedy *Cinna*.[4] According to Corneille's prefatory letter, the play is just about "this generosity which composes the better part of your soul and reigns over the other, and which can be rightly termed the soul of your soul, since it is the driving force of all its powers;" for it is this quality that the play's patron, Monsieur de Montauron, shares with its hero Augustus.[5]

2. Corneillean Generosity

At the close of *Cinna*, the king Augustus abruptly decides to pardon the traitors who, he has discovered, have plotted to kill him. To do so, Augustus must overcome first his despair at the isolation of ruling (Cinna's treason is the third in a series of failed coup attempts), and then, the 'righteous wrath' which consumes him upon discovering that almost everyone he holds dear — Cinna, his trusted confidant, his other confidant Maximus, and his adopted daughter Emilia — have conspired against him (only his wife Livia has remained faithful). In granting these co-conspirators clemency, Augustus exhibits his generosity, as Emilia makes explicit immediately after the pardon is given.

Augustus' generosity, however, does not consist simply in the gift he gives to Cinna, Maximus and Emilia of their lives, for at the crucial moment Augustus does not *first* decide to grant them clemency. Rather that decision comes out of a moment of self-recognition, in which Augustus declares: "I'm master of myself as of the world; I am so, I will to be so."[6] Augustus' clemency is thus premised on two things: first, his recognition that he has the power to determine himself and so his own thoughts and actions — because of this power of self-determination he does not need to give in to his rage, nor must he execute these traitors as he has those who came before them; and second, his resolve to realize this power of self determination. Until Augustus achieves this recognition and this resolve he is fully committed to executing the culprits; once he is in possession of himself in this way, he is able to do what previously seemed ridiculous — when Livia suggests such a course earlier in the play, Augustus simply dismisses it as mere 'woman's counsel'.[7] Thus, Augustus' generosity, I take it, comprises not only the clemency he bestows but also the recognition of his power on which that act is premised.

From this short synopsis, it is evident that the Corneillean notion of generosity bears a striking resemblance to the generosity Descartes introduces in the *Passions*. Cartesian generosity, just like Corneille's, is the knowledge that we have a free will paired with the resolve to use that will well. Moreover, just as Cartesian generosity is that which makes us master of our passions, and is, in particular, the best remedy to be found for its [anger's] excesses" (PS a.203; AT XI 481), so does Augustus' generosity enable him to overcome his rage. Thus, Corneille's character of Augustus can help us to recognize the salient features of Cartesian generosity.

But Augustus can also help us in articulating the problems of understanding Descartes' notion. As I have already noted, Augustus' decision not

to execute the traitors but to grant them clemency comes quite abruptly. At the end of one scene he is vowing to demonstrate his power by executing the lovers, Cinna and Emilia. In the next scene he learns of a further betrayal, that of Maximus, avows his mastery of himself, and then immediately, triumphs over his righteous wrath and says to Cinna "let us be friends." Just as are the traitors, the audience must be stunned. What on earth has happened? First, how has he come to recognize that he has self-mastery? And second, how has this recognition led Augustus to see things so differently, in a way which not only allows him to see what is the right thing to do, and so to avert what promises to be a horrible tragedy for all, but also leads to his resolve to do what is right? So, the questions raised by Corneille's play mirror those we are asking of Cartesian generosity: How does one come to understand that one does have free disposition of one's volitions? What is it to use the will well? How is the first part of generosity related to the second part? How does knowing that one has a free will lead us to resolve to use that will well? And so it will prove useful to keep the character of Augustus in mind through this investigation of Cartesian generosity.

3. The acquisition of generosity: understanding that one has a free will

According to Descartes, one "may excite in oneself the passion and then acquire the virtue of generosity" just by frequently considering "what free will is and how great the advantages are that come from a firm resolution to use it well" (PS a.161). So perhaps the place to start in understanding how one comes to recognize that one has "free disposition of one's volitions" is just by following Descartes' advice and considering his notion of free will.

a. Metaphysical specifications of the will

According to Descartes, the will is that by virtue of which we can understand ourselves "to bear in some way the image and likeness of God" (AT VII 57; CSM II 40). It consists in "our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid)" (AT VII 57; CSM II 40), and in this sense it can "be called infinite, since we observe without exception that its scope extends to anything that can possibly be an object of any other will — even the immeasurable will of God" (Pr. I, 35; AT VIIIA 18): it is "by nature

free in such a way that it can never be constrained" (PS a.41; AT XI 359).

Now, when Descartes says that our will cannot be constrained, he is not claiming that we can simply do or think whatever we like: there are limits on our powers, for example, as we shall soon see, to feel whatever passion we wish. Still, the unbounded freedom of our will does lie in a freedom of thought. This freedom has two dimensions. First, we can direct our attention towards any idea we choose. So, in the case of judgement, the will can be directed towards a confused and obscure idea just as much as a clear and distinct one.[8] And secondly, once we do give them our attention, we have complete liberty in our affirmation, denial, pursuit and avoidance of these ideas; there is nothing outside of thought which determines how we act upon them.[9] It is in this way that our will has no limits.

Insofar as our free will lies in this power we have over our thoughts, it makes sense that having a free will figures in the regulation of the passions. Through our passions, we find ourselves with impressions of the way in which things are important to us, and feel compelled to act in an appropriate way. When we are enraged, for example, we see the source of our rage as having done us an egregious harm, and we seek revenge. Our evaluations of these things, however, may not conform to the objects' true worth, and we can recognize this fact. Mere recognition of our misapprehension, however, is not enough to change the way we are affected; we cannot simply will ourselves to feel otherwise.

> Our passions cannot be so directly excited or displaced by the action of our will, but they can be indirectly, by the representation of things which are customarily joined with the passions we will to have and opposed to ones we will to reject. Thus, in order to excite boldness and displace fear in oneself, it is not sufficient to have the volition to do so, but one must apply oneself to consider reasons, objects, or precedents that persuade [one] that the peril is not great, that there is always more security in defense than in flight ... (PS a.45; AT XI 362–363.) (See also PS aa.46ff, 211.)

In order to change the way we feel, we need to see that things may in fact be quite otherwise than the way they appear when we are in the grips of the passion.[10] Our freedom allows us the possibility of directing our attention so that we have different thoughts and act differently. When faced with the thought that we have been wronged, we can, by virtue of being free, consider 'reasons, objects and precedents' which argue against this judgement and our charted course of action. Perhaps we are the ones who have acted badly, and our enemies are justified in their actions. Or perhaps we have misjudged things: perhaps, the act is only harmful to us if we allow it

to be so; if we ignore the act, it does not affect us at all, or, if we react to it differently, the action can actually prove to be to our benefit.

How is it though that each of us *understands* that she is free? Couldn't it be the case that I know all this about the will, and yet still feel that I have no choice but to see things in a certain way, and to act accordingly? When we are consumed by a passion, it seems as if that impression paints things as they are and so that we must act in the way we are drawn to act. In his rage, it certainly seems undeniable to Augustus that he has been done an unforgivable wrong that must be revenged. Livia presents him with reasons and precedents which might lead him to think otherwise, but he dismisses these as ridiculous; he hears them, but they do not seem like real options to him. Surely, Augustus knows in principle that he has a free will; one might well presume that in his role as king he has a *very* clear idea of what it is to have a free will. But still, to feel anything besides angry towards Cinna's treachery is initially not a real possibility for him. It thus does not seem that knowing in what free will consists is enough to allow us to redirect our thoughts in the way needed to regulate the passions.

b. Experience of free will

The will, for Descartes, is not, however, simply a matter for metaphysical speculation, though certainly his assessment of its infinitude can only be characterized as metaphysical. These metaphysical conclusions are grounded in our sensibility of ourselves: we simply feel ourselves to be free. That we have a free will, and that its freedom is what it is — that is, as great as it is — is just something we *experience*. Descartes repeatedly characterizes our knowledge of our own freedom in this way — the French consistently reads *'experimenter'*, the Latin *'experior'*. In the Fourth Meditation he writes, "I experience that it [the will] is not restricted in any way .... It is only the will or freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp" (AT VII 57; AT IX 45). This language is repeated in *Principles* I, 6: "we nonetheless experience within us the kind of freedom ...." (AT VIIIA 7; CSM I 194)[11], and in a letter to Elisabeth of 3 November 1645: "The independence which we experience and feel in ourselves..." (AT IV 332; CSMK 277). Descartes makes a similar point in his response to Gassendi in the Fifth Replies:

> Concerning your denial that the indifference of the will is in itself very manifest, I do not here want to undertake proving this fact to you. For this is the sort of thing that each of us ought to feel and experience within himself, rather than persuading himself of it by reason, and certainly it is no marvel if in the role you are playing, seeing the natural disproportion between the flesh and the soul, it seems that you do not look out for nor take notice of the manner in which the soul acts within oneself. So do not be free, if it seems that way to you; for myself, I enjoy my liberty not only since I feel it within myself but also I see that, you, having a plan to contest my freedom, instead of opposing it with good and solid reasons, content yourself simply by denying it. (AT VII 377.)

Now, I want to focus on this last passage to try to draw out what Descartes means by 'experience' here. Once we understand the character of this experience, we will then be in a better position to see the sense in which we are meant, in being generous, to understand that we have a free will.

On the face of it Descartes seems here to be conceding that Gassendi is not free. He seems to be saying that our freedom is something which we just experience as being within us, and so, since Gassendi himself denies being able to have such an experience, he may in fact not be free. But Gassendi has not denied that there is such a thing as free will. Rather, he has taken issue with Descartes' characterization of the will. He has, in particular, denied that the will is infinite and of greater scope than the intellect, and that the indifference of the will consists in being pulled in opposite directions. Thus, Descartes' remarks suggest not that Gassendi does not have a will, but rather that he is failing to *experience* the will in the proper way.

Indeed, Descartes' tone here is thoroughly ironic. For in allowing Gassendi to maintain that he is not free, Descartes not only presumes that Gassendi *does* have a free will,[12] he also points up just how Gassendi, in maintaining that he is not free, demonstrates that in fact he is. Descartes does not assert that Gassendi is not free; rather he suggests that Gassendi might not consider himself free if he so *chooses*, perverse as that might be.[13] And he concludes by remarking that Gassendi has not given Descartes reason to change his position: all Gassendi has done is deny Descartes' conception of the freedom of the will. But, of course, denying is, according to Descartes, a paradigmatic act of will.

Denying is also, however, a paradigmatic instance of our *experience* of the will. This view is implicit in the *Meditations*. There the meditator first describes himself as willing in the Second Meditation, only after he has exercised his will in "pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary" (AT VII 22; CSM II 15). A similar idea, that we experience our own free will once we have exercised self-restraint, for instance in suspending judgement, is also articulated in the *Principles* where, in the passage to which I just alluded (Pr. I, 6), Descartes claims that "we nonetheless experience within us the kind of freedom which enables us

always to refrain from believing things which are not completely certain and thoroughly examined." In denying the Cartesian conception of the freedom of will, then, Gassendi ought to have had the proper sort of experience of his will. Why then does he not seem to have had this experience?

Descartes diagnoses Gassendi's problem to be that he does not take proper notice of the way the soul acts within him, and so suggests that Gassendi has a certain blindness to his own freedom. Still, Descartes holds out some hope for Gassendi just because he thinks that Gassendi can *come to* experience himself as a freely willing being in the proper way. We might thus think of Gassendi as a sort of philosophical analog to Augustus. Just as Augustus has everything at his disposal to see that he is 'master of himself' and so *can*, if he so chooses, grant Cinna clemency, so does Gassendi have everything at his disposal to experience properly the freedom of the will. And just as Augustus initially fails to fully understand his freedom, so does Gassendi. What then are both of them missing?

Perhaps they have not exercised their freedom in the proper way. In both the *Meditations* and the *Principles*, the exercise of our free will through which we properly experience our freedom is not an act of simple denial, it is one of radical doubt. Does this mean that in order to experience our free will, we need to call *everything* into question? Gassendi certainly does not do that, and indeed he persistently denies that Descartes is entitled to that supposition. But then again, Augustus *does* manage to experience his freedom — if that is what generosity involves — without performing the metaphysical acrobatics of radical doubt.

There is good reason to think that Descartes, like Corneille, does not think we need go so far as radical doubt to experience our own freedom. We find another account of our experience of freedom in Descartes' reply to 'Hyperaspistes'. In this letter, Descartes explicates his belief that even infants in their mothers' wombs are thinking things:

> This does not mean, however, that I believe that the mind of an infant meditates in its mother's womb; not at all. *We know by experience that our minds are so closely joined to our bodies as to be almost always acted upon by them and although when thriving in an adult and healthy body the mind enjoys some liberty [liberté] to think of other things than those presented by the senses, we know there is not the same liberty in those who are sick or asleep or very young; and the younger they are the less liberty they have.* So if one may conjecture on such an unexplored topic, it seems most reasonable to think that a mind newly united to an infant's body is wholly occupied in perceiving in a confused way, or feeling the ideas of pain, pleasure, heat, cold and other similar ideas which arise from its union and, as it were, intermingling with the body. (To 'Hyperaspistes' August 1641, AT III 423–424, CSM III 189–190, emphasis added.)[14]

Descartes here maintains that we come to exercise our will actively and so to experience our freedom 'by thinking of other things than those presented by the senses'. While this may be hard to do, it does not require the extreme measures of radical doubt. The difficulty of thinking of things other than those presented by the senses arises, for one, out of the natural use of the passions, at least insofar as they have reference to the body. In this respect, the passions "incite the soul to consent and contribute to actions which can serve to preserve the body or render it more perfect in some way" (PS a.137; AT XI 430). Thus, what our bodies tell us disposes us towards precisely that which will keep us alive and well. It is for this reason that infants and invalids have more limited freedom; perhaps because their lives hang in the balance, they are left trusting in their bodies to discern what can benefit and harm them. Trusting in our bodies, moreover, is something we are naturally inclined to do. The passions in the general sense — external sensations, internal sensations and the passions in the specific sense — come to us independently of our will, and, as the meditator remarks in the Third Meditation with regard to sensations, this adventitious character grounds our uncritical acceptance of what they tell us. Thus, in order to think of something other than what our bodies present to us, we must either wonder whether our bodies are reliably directing us towards actions that are in our interest, or we must question whether things must in fact be as they appear. That is, we must reflect critically upon what we find ourselves thinking. Such critical reflection essentially involves considering that things might be otherwise, and hence entertaining the idea of denying what appears to be the case. To do this, we need not think of *everything* differently; we need only reconceive matters pertaining to the situation at hand.[15]

This kind of critical reflection involves taking a certain risk: it involves denying that which seems to be undeniable. But certainly once this risk is taken, and particularly if it comes out successfully, one is confronted with the discovery that one need not think, or act, as one feels impelled to. This feeling must be quite exhilarating (though one might have to suspend one's cynicism to admit it). Imagine the feeling of the person with dropsy, who, when he follows the doctor's order to stop taking a drink when he feels thirsty, finds himself feeling better. Or perhaps, the feeling of the person who leaves a chiropractor, refreshed after having his vertebrae cracked. Who would have thought?[16]

The first step in acquiring generosity is to *recognize* that we are freely

willing, and I have been suggesting that this recognition comes principally with a critical reflection on what we find ourselves taking for granted. For it is precisely with this reflection, which essentially involves turning our thoughts away from those to which we are predisposed, that we exercise our freedom. The primordial exercise of our free will occurs when we do something other than what our senses dispose us to do. Doing this involves taking a risk, but this risk is also accompanied by a feeling towards one's own power in that undertaking. It is this *feeling* that constitutes our *experience* of our free will, and so it is this feeling that completes our understanding that we have a free will.[17] So, we can see that Augustus' proclamation that he is his own master must be a reflection of his *feeling* of his own freedom, and it is through the effects of this feeling that he is able to combat his rage. Gassendi, on the other hand, fails to understand fully that he has a free will, just because he fails to notice what he is feeling even as he demonstrates that he is free.

4. Generosity as a *passion*

If I am right that understanding that one has a free will, for Descartes, involves experiencing one's freedom, and so having this feeling, then we are afforded new insight into why he considers generosity a passion. Much of the way Descartes characterizes generosity makes it seem to be more of a virtue, something which we *actively* cultivate within ourselves in order to regulate our behavior, than a passion, something we feel without the involvement of the will. And indeed, as we have seen, Descartes does speak of acquiring the virtue as well as the passion of generosity. But still, even here, Descartes maintains that generosity is also a *passion*. Now, as we have seen, the first part of generosity consists in our understanding that we have a free will, and so the *passion* of generosity, on the reading I am offering here, must then consist, at least in part, in the *feeling* we have in this understanding — our experience of our freedom. And indeed the feeling associated with this experience conforms to the way generosity, as a passion, fits into the taxonomy of the *Passions*.

Generosity, recall, is that "which makes a man esteem himself as highly as he can legitimately esteem himself," and so is a species of esteem. Now, according to Descartes, esteem, insofar as it is a passion, is "only [a] species of wonder" (PS a.150; AT XI 444), and wonder, in turn, is "a sudden surprise of the soul which brings it to consider with attention objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary" (PS a.70; AT XI 380). Wonder thus

consists in the feeling we have when we discover something new. In esteem, what appears rare and extraordinary is a thing's worth, or greatness, and so in generosity we see our own worth as something rare and extraordinary. So, then, in understanding that we have a free will, in experiencing the free disposition we have of our volitions by doing something like denying what appears undeniable, we feel as if we are seeing ourselves as worthy for the first time.[18] Generosity is just a wonder at our own power.

Our power over our thoughts may be a good thing, and indeed may be that through which we derive a sense of ourselves, but is it really something worth wondering at? It would seem that amongst humans having a free will is nothing rare or extraordinary at all. It is something we each can experience for ourselves, and our wondering at our power can seem like hubris; just having a free will does not necessarily involve doing anything particularly estimable with it, after all. It can seem that what we ought to wonder at and esteem is not our faculty of willing but rather our *having willed well*.

The text of the *Passions of the Soul* is not wholly unsympathetic to this thought. Descartes does claim that in having the understanding and the feeling constitutive of generosity we are "easily convinced that every other man can also have them about himself" (PS a.154; AT XI 446), and so effectively recognizes other humans are equally endowed with free will. In addition, part of one's being generous consists in understanding that there is "no reason why he ought to be praised or blamed except that he uses it well or badly" (PS a.153; AT XI 446). Article 152 seems to make the point even more clearly:

> I remark in us only a single thing which could give us just reason [*raison*] to esteem ourselves, namely the use of our free will [*libre arbitre*] and the dominion [*empire*] we have over our volitions. For it is only the actions which depend on this free will for which we can reasonably [*avec raison*] be praised or blamed; and it renders us in some way like God in making us masters of ourselves, provided that we do not lose the rights it gives us by cowardice [*lacheté*]. (AT XI 445.)[19]

Here it would seem that what we esteem in ourselves is not simply that we *have* a free will, but more that we have the mastery over ourselves to which that freedom entitles us. And it would seem here that we only have this mastery when we take courage and act in a praiseworthy way. On this reading then, it is from our *good actions* that we derive our self-esteem and not merely from our ability to act.

There certainly does seem to be something right about this reading. Not

only does it just make sense as an account of the way we value ourselves, it also explains the way in which praise and blame figure in Descartes' discussion of self-esteem and generosity. Such a reading, however, also leaves us with a pressing question. Generosity essentially involves understanding that one has 'free control of his volitions', and it would seem that this understanding is somehow tied to the good use of this freedom, for in being generous, understanding that one has a free will is paired with a recognition that there is 'no reason why one ought to be praised or blamed, except that one uses it well or badly'. And moreover, knowing that one is free and that one ought to use one's will well is tied, in the second part of generosity, to a commitment to the good use of our will. What is it, though, according to Descartes, to use the will well? And how does our understanding ourselves to be our own masters connect with both our using our will well and the resolution to govern ourselves wisely or well?

5. Using one's will well and the resolution to do so

I want to approach these questions by drawing on the fact that generosity is a species of wonder. Wonder does not consist simply in the surprise we feel when we notice something remarkable; having this feeling makes our soul "let itself go [*se porter*] to consider attentively" the object of its wonder. In doing so, wonder "makes us learn and retain in our memory the things of which we have previously been ignorant" (PS a.75; AT XI 384) and also "disposes us to the acquisition of the sciences," (PS a.76; AT XI 385) so leading us to learn more about what we initially wonder at. Now in generosity, we wonder at the freedom of our will, and so, we then must be disposed to consider attentively just that freedom and to remember what we learn in doing so. I will argue that with this attention to our will we first come to see just what a good use of the will consists in and then, with this insight, resolve to use that will well. In doing so, I will effectively be explicating the connection between the two parts of generosity — our understanding that we have a free will and our using that will well.

a. Attending to one's free will and using the will well

So what happens when we attend to our will? The most obvious place to look for an answer to this question is the Fourth Meditation, for it is there, more than anywhere else in his writing, that Descartes, through the personage of the meditator, attends to the freedom of the will. Moreover,

the conclusions of the Fourth Meditation closely parallel the definition of generosity. For through this attention the meditator sees how to use his will well, and at the end of the meditation he resolves to act in the way he has discovered he ought to.

Towards the end of the Fourth Meditation, as a result of his drawing his attention to the way in which he makes judgements about the truth and falsity of things and in particular to the role of the will in those judgements, the meditator discovers that the will spontaneously assents to those things which we perceive clearly and distinctly. He then recognizes that we fall into error just because we assent to things which we do not perceive in that way. When we have a clear and distinct idea, "a great light in the intellect [is] followed by a great inclination of the will" (AT VII 59; CSM II 41), and so we are compelled in the direction of truth. On the other hand, in having a confused and obscure idea, while we do still perceive something, our perception does not *determine* our affirmation. Instead, we feel what Descartes terms indifferent:

> What is more this indifference does not merely apply to cases where the intellect cognizes nothing at all, but extends in general to every case where the intellect has not cognized perspicuously enough at the time when the will deliberates. For although probable conjecture may pull me in one direction, the mere knowledge that they are simply conjectures, and not certain and indubitable reasons, is itself quite enough to push my assent the other way. (AT VII 59; CSM II 41.)[20]

It is this deficiency in the inclination of our will which opens the possibility for error, for leaning decisively in one direction or the other would be not so much arbitrary as inconclusive. Should we commit to one alternative, we might very well find grounds for doubting that position and so regret this commitment. Thus, it is the meditator's attention to his will, and the way in which it is disposed to respond to the ideas he has, which leads him to affirm the method for avoiding error: "Thus, if I simply abstain [*abstineam*] from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I act correctly and am not mistaken. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly" (AT VII 59–60; CSM II 41). The method is thus an affirmation by the meditator of the nature of the will.[21] And so, in attending to his will, the meditator sees what it is to use the will well.

Seeing what it is to use the will well is not enough, however, to resolve to do so. The meditator must come to terms with his own nature as a finite being with a free will. In situating the nature of free will within his *own* nature, he comes to better understand the importance for him in avoiding

error and arriving at the truth. Once he has recognized and come to terms with his own limitations, the meditator can conclude the Fourth Meditation by resolving to keep in mind the lessons he has learned about avoiding error and reaching the truth:

> So today I have learned not only what precautions to take to avoid ever going wrong, but also what to do to arrive at the truth. For I shall unquestionably reach the truth, if only I give sufficient attention to all the things which I perfectly understand, and separate these from all the other cases where my apprehension is more confused and obscure. And this is just what I shall diligently [*diligenter*] do from now on. (AT VII 62; CSM II 43.)

The meditator resolves not only to "simply abstain [*abstineam*] from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness" (AT VII 59; CSM II 41) but also to take care to distinguish his clear and distinct perceptions from those which are more confused and obscure, so that he might both apply the method for avoiding error well and arrive at the truth. So, evidenced in the meditator's resolution is a greater awareness of his own limitations as a finite, willing thing. He may perceive some things clearly and distinctly, but other things he perceives confusedly and obscurely, and in his resolution he recognizes that using his will well involves taking the care to distinguish those things he grasps from those he does not.

I have been suggesting that the meditator's understanding of what it is to use his will well comes out of his understanding and attention to his nature as a finite willing thing. Once he sees that the will is just the sort of thing that spontaneously affirms clear and distinct ideas, he is able to judge that either affirming or denying something one does not perceive in this manner is misusing the will — doing something deliberately which ought to be done spontaneously — in matters regarding truth and falsity. His resolution to use his will well, taking care to distinguish those ideas he perceives clearly from those he does not, is thus a commitment to be true to his own nature as a finite thing, one who does not perceive everything clearly, who uses his will in forming judgements.

Can we understand the regulation of the passions on this model? I want to suggest that in generosity understanding that one is freely willing also engenders both an understanding of what it is to use the will well and a resolution to do so. For if I am right that in understanding our own freedom we feel wonder, then that wonder should lead us to attend to the will in a way analogous to the attention the meditator devotes to the will in the Fourth Meditation. And in turn, that attention should lead, also in an analogous way, first to an understanding of what constitutes using the will well, and then to a resolve to use the will well.

There appears, however, to be a critical point of difference between the account of the Fourth Meditation and that of the *Passions*. The meditator's self-determination in the Fourth Meditation seems to be much stronger than that of the *Passions*; for in the former the meditator recognizes that "I shall unquestionably reach the truth, if only I give sufficient attention to all the things which I *perfectly* understand" (AT VII 62; CSM II 43; emphasis added), while in the latter Descartes claims that one will be perfectly virtuous if only one is resolute in executing those things 'judged to be the best.' Although the perfect understanding of the Fourth Meditation would seem to preclude error, we can certainly be wrong about what we judge to be the best. Does this difference prevent us from drawing the analogy between the attention of the Fourth Meditation and that to which we are disposed in generosity? I do not think so.

The problem with the passions, and indeed with any reason we might have for taking action, is that we can only have a confused and obscure idea of them; we cannot come to a definitive conclusion about whether our judgements about what will benefit or harm us are good ones, because there will always be limits on what we can know in forming those judgements. We just won't, for example, be able to predict that highwaymen will have staked out the road on which we plan to travel, the road widely acknowledged to be the safest (see PS a.146). Because of the limits on our practical knowledge, we cannot hope to arrive at a method for avoiding error there, as Descartes thinks we can in matters of truth and falsity. Even simply abstaining from actions whose outcomes we cannot foretell will not do, for we find ourselves involved in these practical deliberations just because there is something that needs to be done — benefits to pursue and harms to avoid. But still we can make a judgement about what is best, that is, we can judge well what is important to us. And I will argue that this method for judging what is best *is* analogous to the meditator's method for avoiding error as he articulates it in his resolution at the conclusion of the Fourth Meditation.

b. Perceiving clearly and distinctly and judging to be the best

Recall the difference between the first statement of the method for avoiding error and its ultimate articulation in the meditator's concluding resolution. In the latter, insofar as the meditator recognizes that he must take care to

distinguish what he perceives clearly and distinctly from what remains confused and obscure, integrated into the method is the meditator's own knowledge of himself as a finite willing thing.

I will argue that discerning what we perceive clearly and distinctly, so that we might affirm these ideas, is analogous to judging a course of action to be the best. Not only do both involve the same deliberative process, but also, in the same way that judging well in matters of truth and falsity requires us to recognize our intellectual limitations so too does judging what is best require us to recognize the limits of our power. Furthermore, just as in resolving to affirm only his clear and distinct ideas the meditator is demonstrating his commitment to be true to himself, so does the generous person, in resolving to do what she judges to be best, affirm her nature as a willing finite thing.

Let me begin by considering the deliberative process of having a clear and distinct perception.[22] Remarks like Descartes' to Burman that "whether our perceptions are clear or not, this is something we know perfectly well from our own inner awareness" (AT V 160; CSMK 344), might certainly suggest that clear perception is a simple matter, but the fact is that the meditator does not immediately perceive clearly and distinctly what he ultimately perceives that way.[23] Rather, in order to perceive an idea clearly and distinctly he must first put himself in the proper position. While, with hindsight, the meditator can recognize that he must have had an idea of his own existence as a thinking thing in order to have even had the corrigible beliefs that provoked the *Meditations* themselves, it is clear that he did not perceive this idea clearly and distinctly *until* he had engaged in the hyperbolic doubts of the First Meditation and gone, early in the Second, on a search after something he could claim to be true without any hesitation. Similarly, it would hardly seem that the meditator starts out perceiving the idea of God clearly and distinctly, for he only arrives at the essential characterization of God, as his non-deceiving creator and preserver, at the end of the Third Meditation, *after* a somewhat arduous argument.

There is more evidence for this picture than the movements within the *Meditations* themselves. Descartes' objectors often demanded an account of how we are to know when our perceptions are truly clear and distinct and not just apparently so.[24] And while in his typically cagey fashion Descartes provides few or no details in reply, he does claim to Gassendi (in the Fifth Replies) that he has provided a *method* for distinguishing clear and distinct ideas:

> As for the method enabling us to distinguish between things that we really perceive clearly and distinctly and those that we merely think we perceive clearly, I believe, as I have already said, that I have been reasonably careful to supply such a method. (AT VII 379; CSM II 260.)[25]

He makes a similar point in the sixth 'postulate' of the geometrical exposition of the *Meditations* he offers in the Second Replies; there he asks his readers to study the examples of the variously charactered perceptions in that work in order to "accustom themselves to distinguishing what is clearly known from what is obscure" (AT VII 164; CSM II 116). He punctuates this 'request' with the comment that distinguishing the clear from the obscure "is easier to learn by examples than by rules, and I think that in the *Meditations* I explained, or at least touched on, all the relevant examples." Presumably, then, his examples contain within them the method to which he alluded to Gassendi, and his explanations of them serve to explicate that method.

We have glanced at the examples. What exactly are these explanations? They are certainly less than obvious to most readers, as they were opaque to his objectors. It is remarkable that outside the *Meditations* Descartes does not rehearse these explanations. The definitions of 'clear' and 'distinct' he provides in the *Principles*[26] do not help us very much in recognizing a clear and distinct perception when we see one. And while Descartes says to Bourdin (in the Seventh Replies) that "it requires some care to make a proper distinction between what is clearly and distinctly perceived and what merely seems or appears to be," he does not at this point detail what this care involves. A similar vagueness characterizes the 'summary of the rules to be observed in order to philosophize correctly' in *Principles*, I, 75. There, after outlining the first step in the search for truth as the setting aside of all preconceived opinions, he says:

> Next, we must give our attention in an orderly way to the notions that we have within us, and we must judge to be true all and only those whose truth we clearly and distinctly recognize when we attend to them in this way. (AT VIIIA 38; CSM I 221.)

'Give our attention in an orderly way' does not tell us much, but it does provide some sense of the kind of care involved in perceiving clearly. What we now have to consider is the kind of order involved in this attention.

There is one place where Descartes does provide us with some detail, and that is further on in the Seventh Replies. Bourdin accuses Descartes in the Second Meditation of claiming to arrive at a clear and distinct idea of himself as a thinking thing prior to defining the standard to which he is

holding himself in his perceptions. Descartes then replies:

> I turn first to the suggestion that I claimed to possess a clear and distinct concept of myself before providing a sufficient explanation of how I had acquired it, and at a time when 'just a few steps back' I had been asking what I was, as he puts it. This complaint is quite unjustified. For in between asking the question and answering it I went through all the properties of a thinking thing, namely understanding, willing, imagining, remembering, having sensory perceptions, etc.; and I also listed all the other commonly accepted properties which do not belong to it, in order to distinguish the latter from the former — a task we could not hope to perform until our preconceived opinions had been removed. (AT VII 518; CSM II 352.)

The suggestion, both in this passage and within the *Meditations* themselves, is that we come to perceive clearly and distinctly by interrogating the object of the idea we have. The process begins with a question about something — in the case Descartes discusses here it is: what is this 'I' which now necessarily exists? Then, in answering that question, we survey the object of inquiry, considering the kind of thing it might be. In the course of this examination, we consider the reasons we have for thinking the thing has the properties we think it does. Sometimes we will find those reasons convincing, other times we will have to probe further, inquiring into our reasons for holding those reasons. It is in this way that we come to see which properties do in fact belong to the object as well as which ones do not.[27] It is only at this point, once we have methodically (re)considered our idea, that we are in the position to perceive its object clearly and distinctly.[28]

On this reading, then, the measure of clarity and distinctness and that of confusion and obscurity are on the same spectrum.[29] At the same time we are in the position to perceive things clearly and distinctly, we are also in the position to see just what remains confused and obscure to our minds. For there will be some things of which, in our investigation, we will be able to determine only that we are uncertain about them. As we reflect on what it is we are thinking about, there will inevitably be some questions which we find we cannot (yet) answer.

We can now see the method for avoiding error in a slightly different light. In advocating this method, Descartes is not simply insisting on our assuming the appropriate attitudes towards the ideas we have. He is also pointing to the way we come to have those ideas, and hence to the investigation of the object of those ideas. In order to employ the method, we need to distinguish between those things we perceive clearly and distinctly and those about which we remain confused. On the interpretation I have been offering, drawing this distinction requires two things: first, we need to take

care to discern which questions we can answer as well as those we cannot, and second, we need to withstand the temptation to offer a less than definitive answer to those questions which remain open. To meet these requirements we need to reflect on our investigation itself, both on the way our interrogation has proceeded — to see whether we have left out any questions that we might well have asked — and on the purpose of that investigation — in searching after truth we cannot in good faith feign that we have answers to questions which remain open. And doing this involves our having a proper conception of ourselves — of what we do know, are still striving to know, and also of what we are able and unable to know.

With this insight into the method for avoiding error, we are now in a position to see how the way in which we form judgements about what is best is analogous to this method. For in forming judgements about what is best, we not only reflect on how we find ourselves affected in a similar way to that through which we arrive at clear and distinct ideas; we also must reflect on ourselves and our natural limitations if our deliberation is to come to a conclusion. Descartes does not detail these good judgements in much detail — we do not even get the examples that he offers of clear and distinct perception in the *Meditations* — but we can find some suggestion of what he intends. I begin pulling together these suggestions by looking at Descartes' discussion of irresolution.

The value of irresolution, according to Descartes, lies in "keeping the soul balanced, as it were, between several actions open to it" (PS a.170; AT XI 459). While we feel unresolved we are likely to refrain from any course of action available to us, and consider things a bit more: "irresolution causes it [the soul] not to perform any of them, and thus gives it time to choose before determining itself" (PS a.170; AT XI 459). From this we can extract a sketch of how we judge what is best. We perhaps have an initial inclination about what to do in a given situation, but at the same time we can think of other possibilities. The fact that we are not determined about what to do leads us to deliberate.

But how do we deliberate? Whereas in trying to reach the truth, we need to get clear on the object we perceive, in judging what is the best, according to Descartes, we need to

> distinguish ... the things that depend entirely on us from those that do not at all depend on us. For as to those that depend only on us — that is, on our free will — we need only know that they are good; then we cannot desire them too ardently, because to do good things that depend on us is to follow virtue, and it is certain that one cannot have too ardent a desire for virtue. (PS a.144; AT XI 436-437.)

The outcomes of most situations we are faced with "do not depend entirely on us or entirely on others," and so "we should distinguish with exactitude within [these things] that which depends only on us, in order to extend our desire only to that alone" (PS a.146; AT XI 439). That is, the object we need to get clear on when we are deciding how to act is nothing other than ourselves and our relation to the world in which we find ourselves.

Judging well what is best thus has two dimensions. First, in deciding what to do we might ask ourselves these sorts of questions to determine just what we are capable of doing: What will my going ahead and doing it result in? Are my reasons for doing this sound? What has happened when I have acted this way in the past? Are those past occasions really comparable to this one? What other sorts of things might I do instead? Why should I do this rather than those? Or are the other actions more desirable? While the sorts of questions we ask with regard to deciding our actions might be quite different from those we ask of objects in trying to determine the truth about them, the way in which we go about asking the questions is the same. We try to look at things from all sides, surveying the possibilities until we come up with some conclusive answers.

Judging what is best has another dimension, also analogous to judging well in matters of truth and falsity. As we have seen, to avoid error we must take care to discern those things we perceive clearly and distinctly, and this involves being clear about what we know and are capable of knowing. In judging what is best, we also need to be clear about just what our limitations are with respect to our judgements themselves. And it is with this judgement about our judgements that differences between clear and distinct perception and judging to be best emerge. In judging what is best it seems the questions could go on forever, for we just cannot know everything we would need to know to be able to reach a definitive conclusion. It can thus seem that it is just not within our power to come to a responsible decision about what is best, and so that adhering to the method of judging what is best must result in our abstaining from action. However, Descartes, quite sensibly, contends that irresolution can go too far: "when it lasts longer than necessary, and makes us spend deliberating the time which is needed for acting, it is extremely bad" (PS a.170; AT XI 459). This "excess of irresolution" arises "from too great a desire to do well, and from a weakness of the understanding, which has no clear and distinct notions [regarding such matters] but only a lot of confused ones" (PS a.170; AT XI 460). We remain unresolved by second-guessing ourselves too much, trying to determine just what is the best course of action. When we are engaged in a search after

truth, remaining unresolved may be entirely appropriate: we do not want to reach an over-hasty conclusion about the way things really are. And indeed there is no need to reach a conclusion if one is not warranted. If we do not arrive at the truth today, nothing is lost; we can afford to push on with our inquiry and hope that the truth emerges. To apply such a standard to our practical engagements would be foolish, however. We may not want to act until we are absolutely certain we are doing the right thing, but we must recognize we can never achieve this perfect certainty: wanting to do well that badly would simply result in our doing nothing at all, and that would be self-defeating. So, Descartes says, in order to remedy such excess of irresolution, and so to force ourselves to come to act in a timely way, we need to "accustom ourselves to forming certain and decisive judgements about whatever presents itself, and to believe that we always discharge our duty when we do what we judge to be the best, even though perhaps we judge very poorly" (PS a.170; AT XI 460).

Thus, while the outcome of practical deliberation does seem to leave us very far from the certainty required in the sciences,[30] it still shares something with scientific method. Just as we are always to assent to those ideas we perceive clearly and distinctly, so are we here always to act in accordance with what we see to be the best when it comes time to make a decision. And just as assenting only to clear and distinct ideas requires us to discern just what we perceive clearly, and so to recognize that we do not perceive everything that way, so too, in acting on what we judge to be the best, we need to discern just what is in our power. Doing this involves not only figuring out what we are capable of doing, but also coming to terms with our limited ability to achieve certainty. While we may never reach a definitive judgement about the best course of action, there comes a time when we must make a decision. Once we have made that decision, we then need to live with it. And we can do that, because in having judged things to be the best, we have considered things as comprehensively as we could, and so judged the best we can.

5. Cartesian generosity

So then what is Cartesian generosity? At the core of Cartesian generosity is a feeling of wonder at ourselves, that is at the freedom we have with regard to our own thought. For it is with this feeling, I have argued, that we come to truly understand that we have a "free disposition of our volitions." And equally it is with this feeling that we are moved to use our will — that

freedom — well. In wondering at our will, we are disposed to attend to it, and to see that it naturally assents spontaneously to those ideas we perceive clearly and distinctly. While we do not perceive our passions clearly and distinctly, and indeed never can, we can still make good decisions regarding our actions, by *trying* to get clear about practical matters. However, because our deliberations concern not the truth but the way in which we need to conduct ourselves in order to continue with our lives, we will need to come to a decision with only moral certainty. If we do just what we have judged to be the best when the time for action comes, then we have used our will as well as we can, for we have undertaken and executed that which we have judged to be the best.

A person who is generous, then, will be prone to reflect upon the inclinations with which she finds herself. Because she understands that she has a free will, she recognizes that she has power over her own thoughts, and so that she can come to feel other than she does. That she can does not, of course, mean that she ought to do so. Instead, she must reflect upon the reasons she might have for feeling as she does and the reasons she might have for feeling otherwise. It is in promoting this disposition to reflection upon one's inclinations that generosity figures most frequently in the regulation of the passions. For if the passions do lead us into error it is not usually because we are so much in the grips of a passion as we cannot see straight. Rather the most common error of the passions lies in the way in which they exaggerate or under-value the importance of things. Reflection on the reasons for these evaluations can help to remedy these misjudgments. Of course, generosity also has a role to play when we do find ourselves in the grips of a passion, as we have seen with Augustus. But in those cases, what we need to do is to remember that we are free. We need to re-discover, in effect, that we *do* have a free will, and so, that we can feel other than we are feeling. And perhaps, the best thing to do in these cases is simply to feel and do the opposite of that to which we are inclined, as does Augustus. For if nothing else, in actually doing otherwise, we have proven our own power both to ourselves and to others.

A generous person will, in having formed this habit of reflecting on her judgements, also reflect on the way in which she forms those judgements. And so along with this sense of her own power, she will also have a sense of her own limitations. She will understand that there are things she can know, as well as those she cannot. She will also understand that there are things she might have been able to adduce had time permitted, but that since she had to make a choice she could only do her best. And that she has done in making a reasoned choice at all. Insofar as she has this proper sense of self, insofar as she recognizes both that she is a rational being and the limits of her reason, she esteems herself as highly as she legitimately can.

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Notes

[1] All quotations from the *Passions of the Soul* will be cited internally as 'PS' followed by the article number, and the volume and page number from the Adam and Tannery (AT) edition of Descartes' works. The translations are my own, but I have benefitted from those of Stephen Voss, (Hackett, 1989), and Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (CSM I). Citations from other works are abbreviated as follows:

AT *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Adam and Tannery (eds.), followed by volume and page numbers.
CSM *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol I and II*, Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (trs.), followed by volume and page numbers.
CSMK *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. III*, Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch and Kenny (trs.), followed by page numbers.
PS *The Passions of the Soul*, followed by article numbers.
Pr. *Principles of Philosophy*, followed by part and article numbers.

[2] There have been a few: see J.L. Marion, "Generosity and Phenomenology" in Stephen Voss (ed.), *Essays on the Philosophy and Science of René Descartes*, Oxford UP, 1993; also Charles Taylor touches on generosity in his *Sources of the Self*, and Susan James, in her very interesting "Internal and External in the work of Descartes," (in James Tully (ed.), *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, Cambridge UP, 1994) problematizes Taylor's assignment to Descartes of a radical internal-external dichotomy by appeal to the notion of generosity.

[3] Corneille's heroes, in particular Augustus in *Cinna* (see §2 below) and Rodrigo in *El Cid*, are expressly identified as *généreux*. There is no evidence, however, either that Descartes saw or read Corneille or that Corneille read Descartes. Both Gustave Lanson, ("Le héros Cornelien et les 'généreux' selon Descartes," *Revue d'histoire litteraire de la France*, 1, 1896) and Cassirer (*Descartes, Corneille, Christine de Suede*, Francis and Schrecker (trs.), Vrin, 1954) have remarked on the affinities between Corneille's and Descartes' treatments of the passions. Neither commentor has, however, detailed the parallel in Descartes' and Corneille's accounts of generosity.

[4] Pierre Corneille, *The Cid, Cinna, The Theatrical Illusion*, tr. John Cairncross, New York, Penguin Classics, 1975. (Cited below as Corneille.) Pierre Corneille, *Cinna*, ed. M. Barral, Paris, Bordas, 1984. (Cited below as Cinna.)

[5] Corneille, p. 122; Cinna, p. 28.

[6] *Cinna* V, iii, 1696f. "Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers; Je le suis, je veux l'être."

[7] *Cinna*, IV, iii, 1245.

[8] The human will does differ from the Divine will in that it must be presented with objects on which to act. In the case of God, there is no distinction between intellect and will. See Pr. I, 23: "A single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything."

[9] Certainly, we will be determined to one or the other of these stances by reason, by the content of these ideas; we spontaneously assent to clear and distinct ideas, after all. But Descartes is at pains to insist that this spontaneous assent is part of our nature, and hence an *internal* constraint. See Pr. I, 43: "Our mind is so moulded by nature that whenever we perceive something clearly, we spontaneously give our assent to it, and are quite unable to doubt its truth." See also a letter to Regius, 24 May 1640, "Our mind is of such a nature that it cannot help assenting to what it clearly understands." (AT III 64.)

Even "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," if only to demonstrate our free will in those extraordinary circumstances in which such a demonstration at the expense of reason is a good thing. In only slightly less extraordinary circumstances the meditator "went so far as to make the supposition of some supremely powerful author of our being who was attempting to deceive us in every possible way," and so ended up doubting what he later discovered was "as self-evident and as transparently clear as anything can be [i.e., that God exists and is not a deceiver]" (Pr. I, 39).

[10] It is thus perhaps instructive that the inspiration for Corneille's *Cinna* comes from a Montaigne essay titled "Various outcomes of the same plan."

[11] It is by virtue of this experience of our freedom that the fact that we have a free will "must be counted among the first and most common notions that are innate in us" (Pr. I, 39; AT VIIIA 19). Indeed, "there is nothing we can grasp more evidently and perfectly" than this freedom, just because of the "close awareness" we have of it. (Pr. I, 41.)

[12] And in doing so, he need not be begging the question. Rather he is simply expressing his own *generosity:* he understands his own freedom, and in so doing he is convinced that others, including Gassendi, must also be free and be able to understand their freedom. (See PS a.154.) Indeed, Descartes' own position does not permit him to debate the matter with Gassendi. To do so he would need to doubt that he is free. But for Descartes not only does doubting constitute an exercise of the will, but from his position in the Replies he knows that it does. It thus becomes incoherent to entertain Gassendi's contention. And in fact, from Descartes' position there is nothing much to say to Gassendi to convince him otherwise. As Descartes sees things, just by suggesting that we are not free, Gassendi has exercised his will. That Gassendi denies his own freedom can only be due to a certain blindness on his part. And such is Descartes' diagnosis.

[13] My translation mirrors the imperative in the French: "Ne soyez donc pas libre, si bon vous semble." The passage reads as if Descartes were saying 'Be that way, if you like', and so points to the choice that Gassendi has undertaken in holding his position.

Descartes' attitude towards Gassendi recalls the former's remarks in a letter to [Mesland] of 9 February 1645: "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" (AT IV 173), if only to demonstrate our free will in those extraordinary circumstances in which such a demonstration at the expense of reason is a good thing. Gassendi's problem is that he has picked the wrong instance in which to sacrifice reason.

[14] See also the letter to Elisabeth of 1 September 1645:

> I spoke of a happiness which depends entirely on our free will, which all men can acquire without external assistance. You observe very truly that there are diseases which take away the power of reasoning and with it the power of enjoying the satisfaction proper to a rational mind. This shows me that what I said in general about every person should be taken to apply only to those who have the free use of their reason, and in addition know the way that must be followed to reach such happiness. (AT IV 282; CSMK 262f.)

[15] If we want to ask the next question — How is it that we undertake this first act of will? — the answer must be: we just do. Having a free will is just part of our nature, and at some point this part of our nature manifests itself. There may be certain situations in which this is more likely to happen, for instance, when we make a mistake, or face some kind of hardship or pain.

[16] Indeed this feeling might even lead us to extend the practice: once we have recognized that we need not always believe what our eyes and ears tell us, we might well begin to speculate about other things, for instance, what our teachers have taught us. The premise of the *Meditations* is certainly consistent with this idea.

[17] Once we come to this realization, we can, of course, understand that we have a free will more dispassionately. We will, once we have acquired the passion of generosity, be able to appeal to that occasion as a precedent as we weigh what we are feeling. Presumably, we come to have the virtue of generosity when we come to be in the habit of reflecting on what we feel more generally. This is not to say that the generous person will be constantly second-guessing himself. Time and circumstance will dictate which beliefs we will call into question; generosity is just the openness to reflect critically on just those things we assume undeniable.

[18] This feeling of confidence is reflected in the way we comport ourselves: "the movement of the spirits which causes them is so obvious that it even alters the countenance, the gestures, the walk, and in general all the actions of those who contrive a better or worse opinion of themselves." (PS a. 151; AT XI 445.)

[19] Voss translates '*lacheté*' by 'laziness' while noting that 'cowardice' is available. In the rest of the *Passions* '*lacheté*' *clearly* refers to cowardice, and I have opted for consistency. I have also deviated from the Voss translation in a way which elicits the resonances in the French text, especially around '*raison*'.

[20] See also to [Mesland] 2 May 1644, AT IV 115.

[21] That the institution of the method for avoiding error results from a consideration of the will is also clear from the language of the passage. It is widely assumed that considerations of truth grounds the rule the will chooses to follow in its quest for knowledge. Interestingly, however, neither truth nor the quest for it is invoked by the meditator in his institution of the method for avoiding error. What *is* invoked is the will itself insofar as the meditator attends to his *actions*. What is more, these actions are perceived *clearly:* "it is *clear* [*clarum*] that I act correctly ..." And 'clear' or 'clara' for Descartes is a technical term, reserved for the quality of perception which compels the will's spontaneous affirmation. Thus, in adhering to the method for avoiding error the meditator is spontaneously affirming, that is, willing, nothing other than his actions, his willing. The institution of the method is thus truly

reflective. In this way, the will seems to contain within itself its own standard of good use.

[22] The account of clear and distinct perception I offer here will be essentially incomplete. It is beyond the scope of this investigation to provide a full defense; all I intend is to offer a plausible reading of Descartes' views on this matter.

[23] I am excluding from my discussion those truths which are declared to be known by the light of nature, such as the causal principle. While I do think I similar accounts can be provided for them, they are much less on the surface of the text, and I can not undertake an excavation of them here.

[24] See not only the conversation with Burman but also the Fifth and Seventh Objections (of Gassendi and Bourdin, respectively).

[25] See also AT VII 362; CSM II 250.

[26] In Pr. I, 45, Descartes defines these terms as follows: "I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind — just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear." (AT VIIIA 22; CSM I 207-208.)

[27] And perhaps even those about which we remain uncertain. While the meditator does claim to know that his essence as a thinking thing does not include body, he is less clear about the status of sensing and imagining.

[28] Interestingly, to perceive something clearly and distinctly is not, for Descartes, necessarily to see everything about it. While clear and distinct perception does require that we attend to our idea and survey its every dimension, this survey need not exhaust what can be understood. Even though the meditator can rightly claim to have a clear and distinct idea of himself as a thinking thing in the Second Meditation, through the rest of the meditations he comes to learn more about himself, that he is dependent on God, the nature of his judgements, the nature of imagination and sensation, that he is joined with a body and a part of nature. While all of these aspects of himself are in play in the Second Meditation, they are explicated in what follows. Similarly, the characterization of God does not end with the Third Meditation: in the Fourth Meditation the notion that it is not a deceiver is elaborated a bit, and we are given the comparison of God with a master craftsman; in the Fifth Meditation we have a whole new proof of the existence of God; and in the Sixth Meditation we learn more about the relation of God to our nature as embodied thinking things. This further investigation does not re-call these thoughts into doubt. We can continue, it would seem, to learn more and more about them, but in doing so we are not extending our knowledge to new and different dimensions, rather we are delving deeper into those aspects we have already identified.

[29] They differ not in whether or not they carry on them a certain mark, but rather in where we stand in our own process of reflecting on what we hope to acquire knowledge of.

[30] The difference between matters of the true and matters of the good is the amount of time we can afford to spend reaching our decision. Because we can continue to function without having reached the truth, we do best to suspend judgement on matters about which we are still not clear. If we were to abstain from making judgements until we were completely clear on matters involving the good, however, we would find ourselves paralyzed by irresolution. Thus, what one judges to be the best might very well change with the circumstances, and in particular with the time that one has available to deliberate. How much time properly spent deliberating will depend on the circumstances. We may spend years deciding what to do with our lives, but need to decide immediately how to best defend the fort. In the latter case, we cannot hold ourselves to a standard that the exigencies of the circumstances did not permit. As Descartes writes to Elisabeth:

> I think also that there is nothing to repent of when we have done what we judged to be best at the time when had to decide to act, even though later, thinking it over at our leisure, we judge that we made a mistake. There would be more ground for repentance if we had acted against our conscience, even if we realized afterwards that we had done better than we thought. For we are responsible only for our thoughts, and it does not belong to human nature to be omniscient, or always to judge as well on the spur of the moment as when there is plenty of time to deliberate. (To Elisabeth, 6 October 1645, AT IV 307; CSMK 269.)

Even though we must tailor our deliberations to the time available to us, we still must deliberate.