

# A Companion to Descartes

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## Chapter 26

### Descartes's Ethics

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Descartes is not widely recognized for his ethical thought. Indeed, some might be surprised to learn that Descartes had *any* thoughts at all about moral philosophy. While Descartes's writings do not include any systematic and definitive presentation of this area of philosophy, his writings *are* permeated with a concern for the conduct of life, and they do include some developed pieces that can guide us as we try to figure out just in what Descartes's moral philosophy consists. In this chapter, I draw on both these elements of Descartes's writings to show he is best understood as a kind of virtue ethicist. A virtue ethics takes the good to consist in virtue; virtue consists in a disposition to act in the right ways for the right reasons in any given set of circumstances. By contrast, a deontological ethics takes the good to consist in a set of rules or duties; a eudaimonist ethics holds that the good is just happiness; and a consequentialist ethics holds that the good consists in performing actions with the best outcomes.

I begin my discussion by considering how to relate Descartes's more general concern with the conduct of life to the metaphysics and epistemology in the foreground of his philosophical project. I then turn to the texts in which Descartes offers his developed ethical thought and present the case for Descartes as a virtue ethicist. My argument emerges from seeing that Descartes's conception of virtue and the good owes much to Stoic ethics, a school of thought which saw a significant revival in the seventeenth century. It does, however, deviate from classical Stoicism in critical ways. Towards the end of my discussion, I return to the question of the relation between Descartes's ethics and his metaphysics and epistemology, and I suggest that the *Discourse on the Method for Rightly Conducting Reason* and the *Meditations on First Philosophy* are invested with the virtue ethical considerations of moral education and the regulation of the passions, respectively.

#### Cartesian Philosophy and the Conduct of Life

Though several scholars have remarked upon the ethical dimension of Descartes's work in recent years, it is fair to say that Descartes is widely viewed as principally a metaphysician and epistemologist, and it is for his contribution to these areas of philosophy that Descartes holds the place he does in the history of philosophy. We turn to

Descartes to see the development of a substance-mode ontology, and the canonical form of dualism; to see perhaps the first modern well-worked out view of the natural world divested of all but efficient causes; and to see an account of knowledge and certainty which aims to answer the skeptic by showing that there are some claims which are immune to doubt (perhaps because the skeptic himself must rely on them) and on which the rest of our knowledge can be founded. Both historians of philosophy, who are interested in working through the details of these positions, and contemporary philosophers, who find it useful to advert to "Cartesian" positions (usually as a foil) to articulate their own views, tend to treat the central tenets of Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology abstracted from the rest of Descartes's philosophy. However, more often than not, within Descartes's writings these issues are not treated in abstraction from a question of how to lead one's life. The issue is how to understand the relation between Descartes's concern with this question and his metaphysics and epistemology.

In the Preface to the French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes explicitly frames his attention to questions in metaphysics, epistemology, and natural philosophy with a concern for improving the conduct of life:

The word 'philosophy' means the study of wisdom, by 'wisdom' is meant not only prudence in our everyday affairs but also a perfect knowledge of things that mankind is capable of knowing, both for the conduct of life, and for the preservation of health and the discovery of all manner of skills. But in order for this knowledge to be perfect it must be deduced from first causes; thus, in order to set about acquiring it – and it is this activity to which the term 'to philosophize' strictly refers – we must start with the search for first causes or principles. (1:179; AT 9B:2)

While metaphysics and epistemology might well be the subject of philosophy properly speaking, the search for first principles serves the practical end of achieving wisdom, which Descartes here clearly thinks of as practical rather than theoretical. This attention to the practical import of first philosophy is present from very early on in his writings. In the first rule adumbrated in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes advises those who "seriously want to investigate the truth of things" to "consider simply how to increase the natural light of his reason . . . in order that his intellect should show his will what decision it ought to make in each of life's contingencies" (1:10; AT 10:361). In the *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes recounts that his purpose in pursuing philosophy was "to learn to distinguish the true from the false in order to see clearly into my own actions and proceed with confidence in this life" (1:115; AT 6:10). Indeed, Descartes begins the *Optics* – one of the three essays accompanying the *Discourse* and a work principally about the properties and behavior of light – by defending its importance for the conduct of life (see 1:152; AT 6:81). A similar point is made in the public letter to Voetius of May 1643, where Descartes defends his philosophical program against Voetius's attacks by asserting the benefits of his way of doing philosophy for life (3:220–1; AT 8B:26).

It is hard to know what Descartes intends in subordinating his philosophical interests to a larger concern with the conduct of life. He might simply be adverting to the pragmatics of daily life, hoping that his philosophical insights would pave the way for technologies that would make the tasks of daily life less of a chore. There need be

nothing ethical about this sort of concern. If we focus on Descartes's medical writings, and those involving what we would term the applied sciences, it is reasonable to take Descartes as simply wanting to make life easier, without attention to whether that life is led well or badly. In addition, some remarks Descartes makes in the context of the *Meditations* seem to support this sort of reading. There, Descartes suggests that practical philosophy is distinct from first philosophy. This could easily imply that the conduct of life is distinct from the pursuit of truth. (See, for instance, the Synopsis of the Fourth Meditation (2:11; AT 7:15), the Replies to the Second Objections (2:106; AT 7:149), and the Reply to the Fourth Objections (2:172; AT 7:248). See also the replies to Gassendi (2:243; AT 7:351) and to Bourdin (2:320; AT 7:475).)

However, a remark Descartes makes in the Preface to the French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy* suggests another way of thinking about the relation between his concern with the conduct of life and his metaphysics and epistemology. There he writes:

The whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals. By 'morals' I understand the highest and most perfect moral system which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom. (1:186; AT 9B:14)

The metaphor of the tree of philosophy outlines a relation between moral philosophy and the rest of philosophy whereby ethics grows out of the trunk of physics and is rooted in metaphysics. It is not merely grafted on to a fully developed tree. If we take the concern with the conduct of life as equivalent to an ethical concern with the question of how one should live, we can understand the metaphor along the following lines. To improve the conduct of life, or to best answer the question of how one should live, we need to understand ourselves and the world we live in, that is, we need scientific knowledge or physics. And we require a proper metaphysics to arrive at scientific knowledge. In this way, then, the study of metaphysics and epistemology is motivated by the overarching ethical concern, just as much as metaphysics informs our ethics. Ethics and metaphysics and epistemology, on this view, are tightly knit.

Thus, in thinking about Descartes's remarks about the conduct of life, we are faced with a question. Is his concern with the conduct of life merely pragmatic and so not essentially related to his metaphysics and epistemology? Or is his concern with the conduct of life ethical and so essentially related to his metaphysics and epistemology? In what follows I make the case that Descartes's ethics and his metaphysics are tightly knit. In light of this, I am strongly inclined to take Descartes's concern with the conduct of life as ethical, but my argument for this is indirect.

There are two additional elements to draw attention to here, both associated with the metaphor of the tree of philosophy. I will explore each in greater detail in my discussion of Descartes's developed ethics. First, note that Descartes introduces the idea of a "perfect moral system" in his metaphor. I will return to this idea after a brief initial presentation of the key texts for understanding Descartes's ethics. Second, note that the position of "morals" or ethics on the tree is equivocal. On the one hand, "morals" is presented as a branch on a par with the other two. On the other hand, it is singled out

as the only branch providing "the ultimate level of wisdom." In discussing the Cartesian notion of generosity, I will make some sense of this equivocation.

### Putting the Pieces of Descartes's Ethical Writings Together: Cartesian Virtue Ethics

My focus now turns to Descartes's developed ethical writings, found in the *Discourse on the Method*, correspondence with Princess Elizabeth, and the *Passions of the Soul*. After briefly presenting the texts, I consider how to make sense of the relation between the "perfect moral system" we just saw alluded to in the Preface to the *Principles* and the *morale par provision* we will soon see Descartes presents in the *Discourse on the Method*. (*Morale par provision* is usually translated as "provisional moral code." So as to not prejudge interpretive issues, I leave the French untranslated.) I move on to make the case that Descartes was a virtue ethicist and to clarify his particular brand of virtue ethics. Lastly, I return to consider how we can connect Descartes's developed ethics with his general concern with the "conduct of life" by examining how moral education and the regulation of the passions figure in the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*, respectively.

#### Key Texts

There are three places where we find some developed ethical thought in Descartes's writings. First, in Part Three of the *Discourse*, first published in 1637, Descartes puts forward what he terms a *morale par provision*, "consisting of just three or four maxims" (1:122; AT 6:22). The first maxim is "to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions – the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live" (1:122; AT 6:23). The second maxim is "to be as firm and decisive in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain" (1:123; AT 6:24). The third maxim is "to try always to master myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than the order of the world" (1:123; AT 6:25). And the fourth maxim is to choose as his life's occupation "to devote my whole life to cultivating my reason and advancing as far as I could in the knowledge of the truth, following the method I had prescribed for myself" (1:124; AT 6:27). Two general interpretive issues arise from this *morale*. First, we need to understand this expression *par provision*, or in what sense the moral code is provisional. Second, of course, we need to better understand the ethics put forward in these maxims. The discussion below addresses both these issues.

Second, Descartes's correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia of 1645–7 incorporates a discussion of moral philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Of particular interest is the correspondence of 1645, which begins from a consideration of the regulation of the passions, but, motivated by a reading of Seneca's *De Vita Beata*, moves quickly to the question of

the supreme good (Descartes sometimes also terms it "the sovereign good"), and includes a discussion of the nature of virtue along with its relation to happiness. In his brief exchange with Queen Christina of Sweden in 1647, Descartes distills some of this earlier exchange with Elizabeth, and offers a summary of his views on the supreme good. In the discussion below, I will focus on the account of Cartesian virtue to explicate what sort of virtue ethics Descartes espouses.

Finally, in his last work, *The Passions of the Soul*, published in 1649, Descartes punctuates his systematic natural philosophical treatment of the passions with a continuation of his discussion of virtue. In this work we also find a more detailed account of the regulation of the passions. Most importantly, the notion of generosity, first fully explicated in this work, offers important insight into Cartesian ethics. For Descartes, generosity is both a passion and a virtue, and indeed is "the key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for all the disorders of the passions" (Descartes 1989: 109; AT 11:454). For him, "generosity" refers to an understanding that one has a free will and a resolve to use that will well; the liberality of giving we associate with the term is an effect of generosity. Understanding Cartesian ethics involves understanding this peculiar sense of "generosity," its role in regulating the passions, and how it is "the key to all the other virtues."

### The "Perfect Moral System" and the *Morale Par Provision*

Recall that in his metaphor of the tree of philosophy Descartes introduces an idea of a "perfect moral system." I want to begin to bring the different elements of Descartes's developed ethics together by considering just what he means by a perfect moral system and how to understand the *morale par provision* in relation to it. Standard readings take the *Discourse's morale* to be provisional in the sense of temporary – a stop *en route* to the true morality. Attending to the Stoic influences on Descartes's ethics affords us a very different way of understanding these maxims. I suggest that we read the maxims as akin to Stoic unconditional obligations. As such they comprise in part a perfect moral system; they provide the frame, or set of constraints, for the other part of that perfect moral system, a set of rules governing particular actions, akin to Stoic circumstantial obligations. Understood in this way, we can see the maxims as provisional in a juridical sense.

Recent commentators on Descartes's ethics have assumed that for him a moral system must be constituted by a set of rules regulating daily life. That is, they assume that Descartes's ethics is a species of a deontological ethical theory, defining the good as a set of rules we have a duty to follow. On this view, the more perfect the moral system, the more actions the rules constituting the system govern. A perfect moral system would thus provide a complete set of rules, governing all our actions. This assumption, along with a focus on Descartes's skeptical method, sets up two competing understandings of the *morale par provision* of the *Discourse*. On the first reading, the set of moral maxims that Descartes offers there is taken to be a stop-gap measure to carry one through a period of skeptical doubt. Though the search for truth is meant to be removed from the practical context (2:15; AT 7:22), one will still have to cope with the basics of daily life while engaged in it. These maxims are, on this view, meant to ensure

that the philosophically minded do not land themselves in too much trouble in the course of their efforts to discover the first principles. The *morale* is meant to be provisional because there is no good reason to think that the maxims will be retained once the skeptic is answered and first principles are firmly established. The *Discourse's morale* thus does not constitute a moral theory, but rather consists in a set of pragmatic measures undertaken in service of first philosophy. On the second reading, the *morale par provision* does have pragmatic value, but it is far from merely pragmatic. Rather, it consists in a basic, if revisable, set of rules meant to guide right action, and so constitutes a proper moral theory, if but a fledgling one. On this view, the *morale* of the *Discourse* is taken as provisional insofar as the maxims there laid out are a first approximation of what will be, once the skeptic has been fully answered at some undefined point in the future, the perfect moral system. (See Marshall 1998 for an exemplary version of this interpretation.)

There is also a third possibility for understanding the sense in which the *morale* of the *Discourse* is *par provision*. Michèle LeDoeuff has suggested that both English-language and French commentators have misunderstood the expression *par provision*. Rather than meaning "provisional" in the sense of "temporary," *par provision* "is a juridical term meaning 'what a judgment awards in advance to a party' . . . The provision is not liable to be put in question by the final judgment" (LeDoeuff 1989: 62). There is good reason to prefer this third reading of *par provision*.

To see this, let us first consider the Stoic influences in Descartes's ethics. While the standard readings of the *morale par provision* are certainly right in seeing the influence of ancient skepticism on Descartes's philosophy, there are a number of reasons to look to other influences, and in particular that of Stoicism. First, the standard readings also assume Descartes is a deontological ethicist, and this view would seem to undermine a reading of Descartes as a virtue ethicist. An ethics focused on virtue, after all, is one that focuses dispositions to do the right thing for the right reasons, and acting well in this way is not understood simply as adhering to a set of rules. However, a virtue ethics need not be incompatible with a set of rules governing actions. Stoic ethics was both a virtue ethics and one concerned to lay out a comprehensive set of rules for action, and so might help us in reconciling different aspects of Cartesian ethics. Indeed, the maxims in the *Discourse* seem more interested in virtues like resoluteness and self-mastery than in setting out rules for action.

Second, the historical context in which Descartes was writing gives us good reason to believe that he was influenced by Stoic writings. The seventeenth century saw a revival of Stoic philosophy owing largely to the recovery of Stoic texts and the work of Justus Lipsius in laying out Stoic philosophy from its physics to its ethics. While to date little work has been done in tracing the influence of Stoic physics on philosophers and scientists of the early modern period, more has been done in bringing to light the influence of the revival of Stoicism on early modern ethical theories. (See Levi 1964; Rutherford 2004.) The revival of Stoic ethics and political thought impacted the work of Hugo Grotius, in *The Laws of War and Peace*, and Stoic ethics was popularized in France through the works of moralists such as Pierre Charron and Guillaume DuVair (Charron was also influenced by the revival of skepticism). There is good reason to read Descartes as figuring in this Stoic revival. There are clear echoes of Stoic thought in the

maxims Descartes offers us in the *Discourse*. The Stoic sage was characterized by his success at self-mastery, that is, aligning his desires with the order of nature, and this is precisely what the third maxim of the *morale* demands. Equally, just as the second maxim calls for resoluteness in action, so too must the Stoic sage be guided solely by his proper understanding and not turned by external influences. The affinity between Descartes's maxims and Stoic ethics certainly suggests a line of influence. Equally, Descartes's selection of Seneca to read with Princess Elizabeth is evidence of an interest in Stoic thought, and his commentary shows him to be drawing on and appropriating Seneca's Stoic ethics to his own ends (Rutherford 2004 works through some of the details). Looking more closely at Stoic ethics might well help us to better understand Descartes's *morale par provision* and its relation to his notion of a perfect moral system.

Some strands of Stoicism worked towards articulating a complete set of *kathékonta*, translated as "duties" or "obligations" but also as "proper functions" and "befitting actions," which aimed to set out just how the sage would act in every imaginable situation. That is, the *kathékonta* were meant to be an extensive array of rules governing every action of daily life. Within this set of rules, some were conceived as general or "unconditional obligations"; they were rules a sage would adhere to in his actions in all circumstances. They included, for example, prescriptions to tend to one's health and one's sense organs. Insofar as these rules are to guide us unconditionally, they set out constraints on all our other decisions, and so frame the way we are to live our lives. The Stoics also set out highly particular rules, or "circumstantial obligations." These rules set out how the virtuous person, or sage, would act in very specific circumstances. They might, for instance, demand that we give away all our possessions if we find ourselves to be one of the very few with possessions among many without any.

From the vantage point of the intellectual historical context, it is natural to read the maxims of the *morale par provision* as a set of unconditional duties. For one, as we have already seen, the content of several of these maxims bears a striking affinity to some basic principles of Stoic ethics. Moreover, a closer look at the maxims of the *morale par provision* shows them to be framed as general rules, applicable in all circumstances. Being firm and decisive in one's actions, aiming to master oneself rather than fortune, and cultivating one's reason are clearly not principles of conduct tailored to a particular set of circumstances. And while it might seem that following local customs and abiding by the least extreme opinions is circumstance-specific, the maxim is presented as a general rule to apply no matter by which customs and opinions one finds oneself surrounded. The first maxim is simply meant to provide us with a secure starting point from which to follow the method of reasoning that will lead us to knowledge. All four maxims thus serve as overarching principles that guide one's approach to one's life; they serve to frame the context in which one will make particular decisions. In this way they are themselves not dependent on the conditions in which those particular decisions will be made. They are similar both in kind and in function to Stoic unconditional duties.

Following this line, we are afforded further insight into what Descartes intends in invoking a "perfect moral system." Just as the complete Stoic moral system includes both unconditional and circumstantial duties, insofar as Descartes's ethics is influenced

by Stoic ethics, we should expect Descartes's perfect moral system to include not only a set of unconditional duties which frame our general approach to life, but also a complete set of rules governing the particular decisions we make in the course of life, that is, a complete set of circumstantial duties. Thus, the Cartesian perfect moral system would include not only the maxims of the *morale par provision* but also rules for action we would arrive at were we to have a comprehensive understanding of the world – that is, a complete physics.

If I am correct about how to understand the *morale par provision* and the Cartesian perfect moral system, we can see that the standard approaches miss the mark. The maxims of the *morale* are not to be understood as pragmatic stop-gap measures put in place until we arrive at the true and perfect moral system. Nor are they to be understood as approximations for the rules for action arrived at with perfect knowledge. With perfect knowledge, we will arrive at new rules for action, but these rules are not meant to supersede the maxims of the *morale*. Rather, the *morale* provides us with the unconditional duties that frame our approach to the conduct of life. Once we have complete knowledge we will be able to supplement those general rules with a set of particular rules meant to govern our actions in all the circumstances of life. This set of circumstantial duties does not preclude but rather presupposes the validity of the unconditional duties.

While the interpretation sits well in a number of ways, a question still looms: Why is the *morale* of the *Discourse* a *morale par provision*? If the maxims are meant to be a set of unconditional duties, in what sense are they *par provision*?

It is useful to note that Descartes does not at all seem to take the maxims of the *Discourse* as provisional in the same way the standard readings do. Tracing the trail of the second maxim through Descartes's writings drives home this point. At the same time it will help prepare us for considering Cartesian virtue. Recall that the second maxim is "to be as firm and decisive in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain." This same principle emerges early on in Descartes's correspondence of 1645 with Princess Elizabeth, where we find his most developed ethical thought. There, in commenting on what he thinks Seneca ought to have said in his *De Vita Beata*, Descartes sets out explicitly just in what he takes virtue to consist: "a firm and constant resolution to carry out whatever reason recommends" (letter to Elizabeth, August 4, 1645, AT 4:265). The similarity between this definition of virtue and the second maxim is evident, and Descartes himself appeals to the *Discourse* in setting out this account to Elizabeth.

It is also clear that Descartes is firmly committed to this account of virtue. He reiterates this point numerous times in correspondence with Elizabeth. In his letter to her of August 18, 1645 he writes: "In order to achieve a contentment which is solid, we need to pursue virtue – that is to say, to maintain a firm and constant will to bring about everything we judge to be the best, and to use all the power of the intellect in judging well" (3:262; AT 4:277). And the same point is made in his letter to Elizabeth of September 1, 1645: "We can never practice any virtue – that is to say, do what our reason says we should do – without receiving satisfaction and pleasure from doing so" (3:263; AT 4:284). Descartes also makes the same claim about the nature of virtue to Queen Christina in his letter of November 20, 1647:

I do not see that it is possible to dispose it [the will] better than by a firm and constant resolution to carry out to the letter all the things which one judges to be the best, and to employ all the power of one's mind in finding out what these are. This by itself constitutes all the virtues; this alone, finally, produces the greatest and most solid contentment in life. So I concluded that it is this which constitutes the supreme good. (3:325; AT 5:83)

Moreover, this same account of virtue is carried forward into the *Passions*, where in article 148 he writes:

For anyone who has lived in such a way that his conscience cannot reproach him for ever having failed to do anything he judged to be the best (which is what I call following virtue here) derives a satisfaction with such power to make him happy that the most vigorous assaults of the passions never have enough power to disturb the tranquility of his soul. (Descartes 1989: 101; AT 11:442)

It is also contained in the definition of generosity, as we shall see below. (See also *Passions*, article 144; Descartes 1989: 97; AT 11:437.) Descartes's clear commitment to this second maxim argues against the view that the *morale* maxims are merely provisional. It is worth noting that Descartes also reaffirms the first and third maxims of the *morale* in correspondence with Elizabeth, as well as in the *Passions of the Soul*, further arguing against the standard readings. (See 3:257ff.; AT 4: 265ff.; 3:263ff.; AT 4:284ff.; 3:267; AT 4 294ff.; as well as *Passions* articles 144–6; Descartes 1989: 97–100; AT 11:436ff.)

By contrast, the account I have been developing of the relation between the perfect moral system and the *morale* by drawing on Stoic ethics fits very well with the juridical sense of *par provision* suggested by LeDoeuff. Legal provisions, recall, are not to be called into question in the final judgment, and indeed constrain and so frame the judgment. I have suggested that we think of the *morale*'s maxims as a set of unconditional duties. The maxims, as unconditional duties, are not to be called into question as we arrive at the perfect moral system, and indeed they frame the circumstantial duties we will arrive at with complete knowledge. That is, the Cartesian perfect moral system will consist in a comprehensive guide for action that includes all circumstantial duties as well as the framing unconditional duties or maxims.

### Cartesian Virtue

I have been arguing that at the center of Descartes's ethics is a set of rules, some unconditional and some circumstantial. However, I have also been maintaining that Descartes is a virtue ethicist. Though it might seem that these claims are incompatible with one another, there are, as I noted earlier, virtue ethics which are also concerned with articulating a set of rules for action: Stoic ethics is such a virtue ethics. The difference between the two ethics lies in their conception of the good. On a deontological moral theory, the good consists in adherence to the rules constituting the ethical system and act badly insofar as we fail to do so. A virtue ethics holds that the good consists in virtue, where virtue is not identical to adhering to a set of rules. Tracing the trail of the second

maxim has shown that Descartes holds that virtue is our supreme good. This commitment marks Descartes as a virtue ethicist. In this section I examine Descartes's account of virtue as our supreme good in more detail. After providing further evidence that Descartes does take virtue to be our supreme good, I examine a peculiarity of his account of virtue as resolving to act in accord with our best judgments. Our best judgments can still be wrong, after all, and so Descartes needs to distinguish better from worse moral judgments. I show how a proper metaphysics, along with his notion of generosity, addresses this issue.

In the early part of his 1645 correspondence with Elizabeth, Descartes is not completely clear that virtue is our supreme good. In his remarks on Seneca that begin the discussion, he focuses on the contentment of mind that constitutes true happiness (*béatitude*). While he does not go so far as to assert that this true happiness is the supreme good, he is principally concerned to articulate the causes of this happiness and how we might achieve it. Insofar as this true happiness is conceived as the end toward which we should be striving, it can certainly seem as if Descartes thinks that our good consists in this contentment, and so has a eudaimonist ethics. In his next letter, of August 18, 1645, Descartes sets out to clarify his position, distinguishing between happiness, the supreme good, and the end or goal of our actions. Here he is quite clear:

I note, first, that there is a difference between true happiness, the sovereign good and the final end or goal to which our actions ought to tend. True happiness is not the sovereign good; but it presupposes it, and it is the contentment or satisfaction of the mind that comes from possessing it. But, by the end of our actions, we can understand either the one or the other. For the sovereign good is without doubt the thing which we ought to put forward to ourselves as the goal of all our actions, and the contentment of mind that comes from it is also rightly called our end, as it is what attracts us and so makes us seek the sovereign good. (AT 4:275)

In the end, for Descartes, happiness or contentment is not itself our supreme good. He thus does not espouse a eudaimonist ethics. Rather, we achieve happiness as a consequence of our achieving the good. In our actions, we ought to strive towards our supreme good rather than happiness. However, insofar as our achieving that good is both necessary and sufficient for achieving happiness, we can also think of ourselves as aiming for happiness in our actions. Descartes illustrates this point through an analogy with an archery competition:

But just as when there is a prize for hitting a bull's eye, one makes people want to hit the bull's eye by showing them this prize, still they cannot win the prize if they do not see the bull's eye. And those who see the bull's eye cannot for that reason be induced to aim for it, if they do not know that there is a prize to win. In this way, virtue, which is the bull's eye, does not come to be strongly desired when it is seen on its own; contentment, which is the prize, cannot be acquired, unless it is pursued. (AT 4:277)

Even if an archer entered a competition to win the prize, this motivation alone would not lead him to success. In order to win the prize, he must actually shoot well and hit the bull's eye. Yet a good archer might not be motivated by his talent alone to enter

the competition: a prize might motivate him to enter it. In a similar way, aiming for happiness will not guarantee we act well and achieve virtue; yet knowing how we should act might not always motivate us to action. The happiness that comes from acting well can provide motivation. For Descartes, our supreme good consists in virtue and only virtue, and our achieving this supreme good cannot but make us truly happy. In our actions, we ought to aim for virtue, and we are motivated to do so because of the happiness that results.

Descartes's virtue ethics is somewhat peculiar. It is striking that, for him, virtue does not require that our best judgments be correct ones. On Descartes's account, virtue consists in resolutely acting in accord with what we judge to be the best. But of course our best judgments can be mistaken. For instance, we often act in ways we judge to be beneficial to a person, perhaps even to ourselves, when in fact those actions are not in his, or our, interest and are harmful. Descartes is clear that we can still be virtuous even in these cases. He writes, "it seems to me . . . that one has no reason at all to repent when one has done what one judges to be the best at the time that one had to be resolved to act, even if, afterwards, in rethinking the matter with more leisure, one judges that one was wrong" (to Elizabeth, October 6, 1645; AT 4:307). Indeed, he continues, "we are responsible only for our thoughts, and human nature is such that we do not know everything nor always judge so well off the cuff as when we have a lot of time to deliberate" (*ibid.*). Elizabeth had expressed concern that Descartes's account of virtue was psychologically implausible. When we misjudged the best course of action, she objected, the falsity of the judgment would undermine our resolve to follow our best judgments in the future. It would thus undermine our virtue and compromise our contentment. Descartes's account of virtue, she claimed, demands "an infinite science" so that we would never err in judging the best course of action (see letter of Elizabeth to Descartes, September 13, 1645; AT 4:289). Descartes's reply here reflects his view that even when we do misjudge things, we can remain both virtuous and content. We need only remain confident that our judgments were the best we could have made under the circumstances. This confidence affirms our resolve, prevents us from feeling remorse, and allows us to rest content and be truly happy.

Descartes's account of virtue both resonates with and diverges from an aspect of an Aristotelian account of virtue. Aristotle distinguishes the virtuous person from the continent one. Both individuals perform good actions. The continent person acts well by happenstance, and not from an understanding of the good. The virtuous person, on the other hand, acts well for the right reasons, that is, from an understanding of the good. For Descartes, too, virtuous action requires acting from an understanding of the good. We are virtuous, for him, because we have aimed to judge well and to act in accordance with that judgment.<sup>2</sup> However, Descartes's account of virtue differs from Aristotle's in an important respect. On the Aristotelian account, virtue requires the world cooperate with our intentions. We fail to achieve virtue fully if our actions do not succeed in their aim. If we mean well, but do harm, we have morally failed. For Descartes, as we have seen, good intentions are sufficient for virtue.

Descartes's account also differs importantly from Stoic accounts of virtue in this regard. As noted above, Stoic ethics is a virtue ethics. Stoic *kathékonta*, both unconditional and conditional obligations, are grounded in facts about human nature and are meant to articulate not only the implications of virtue, but also the details of just what

is required to achieve the Stoic ideal of "living in agreement with nature." Virtue or living in agreement with nature is a matter of having a proper understanding of the world. Furthermore, on the Stoic line, virtue is an all-or-nothing affair. One either lives wholly in agreement with nature, or one is vicious. There are no degrees of virtue. Thus, to be virtuous, all one's judgments must be true, and one must have a complete understanding of the world. While Descartes's account of virtue clearly draws on the Stoic account, his account of virtue is much less demanding. For him, to be virtuous does not require true judgments; it does require that we strive to judge well and to act on our best judgments. Elizabeth's objection noted above might well be read as pushing Descartes towards a more consistent neo-Stoicism. (Her objections in later letters, however, reflect a skepticism regarding our knowledge of the true value of things, and ultimately a rejection of a demanding Stoicism. See Elizabeth to Descartes, September 30, 1645; AT 4:303.)

Because Descartes's virtue does not require true judgments, his virtuous person can seem somewhat given to smug self-satisfaction, always confident he has judged the best he could, even if he turns out to have been wrong. In the *Passions*, however, Descartes warns against an unvirtuous self-satisfaction, full of "pride and impertinent arrogance," while allowing for a virtuous self-satisfaction that leads to the "tranquility and repose of conscience" proper to true happiness (*Passions* a.190; Descartes 1989: 121–2; AT 11:471–2). What distinguishes virtuous self-esteem from unvirtuous self-satisfaction is simply whether an agent's judgments really were the best she could have made. But how are we to distinguish better from worse judgments if not on the basis of their truth or falsity?

Descartes does not lay out a set of criteria whereby we can rank judgments or test to make sure we are judging the best we can. However, his remarks suggest that what is important is our method in making judgments. Descartes writes to Elizabeth that the right use of reason prevents virtue from being false, and it does so in that, "by making us recognize the condition of our nature, it sets bounds to our desires" (to Elizabeth, August 4, 1645; AT 4:267). The right use of reason certainly includes "knowledge of the truth." However, "because nobody except God knows everything perfectly, we have to content ourselves with knowing the truths most useful to us" (to Elizabeth, September 15, 1645; AT 4:291).

The truths Descartes enumerates as "most useful" in the letter of September 15, 1645 are just the set of basic principles of his metaphysics:

Among these [truths most useful to know], the first and the principal one is that there is a God on whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immense, and whose decrees are infallible. . . . The second thing it is necessary to know is the nature of our mind, insofar as it subsists without the body and is much more noble than it and capable of enjoying an infinite number of contentments which are not found at all in this life. . . . In this regard, what can also serve greatly is to judge in a dignified way the works of God, and to have an idea of the vast extent of the universe, as I have tried to present in the third book of my *Principles*. (AT 4:291–2)

This list helps us in better understanding the place of morals in the metaphor of the tree of philosophy from the Preface to the *Principles*. If by "morals" we are to understand

virtue – to be resolved to act in accordance with our best judgments – we need to grasp the roots of philosophy, the existence of God, the natures and real distinction of mind and body, but we also need to understand something of physics in order to appreciate the vastness of the universe and so be able to understand our proper place in it. However, for Descartes, we need to understand ourselves not only with respect to the physical world but also with respect to other persons, whose interests might well be different from our own, but upon whom we also depend. Our moral judgments, for him, turn upon our understanding of our proper place in the world, our relations to other things and agents. As Descartes writes in that same letter to Elizabeth:

even though each of us is a person separate from others and, by consequence, with interests that are in some manner distinct from those of the rest of the world, one must, all the same, think that one does not know how to subsist alone and that one is, in effect, one part of the universe and, more particularly even, one part of this earth, one part of this state, and this society, and this family, to which one is joined by his home, by his oath, by his birth. (AT 4:293)

We cannot “discern the best course in all actions of life” (AT 4:291) without understanding our place in a social and natural whole, and our moral judgments will be better or worse in proportion to our understanding of the relations we stand in.

While having the correct metaphysics might well be essential for correct moral judgment, it cannot be sufficient for determining whether a given moral judgment is better or worse. For while we might be able to attain certainty about metaphysical matters, we are by our very nature as finite beings unable to attain certainty about the infinite natural world and so of our place in it, let alone of our place in the social world. Elizabeth raises similar concerns in her letters to Descartes of September 30, 1645 (AT 4:303) and October 28, 1645 (AT 4:324). According to Descartes, given this natural handicap, to regulate our conduct we should strive to distinguish those things that depend only on us from those which do not depend on us. As Descartes writes in article 144 of the *Passions of the Soul*, “the error most commonly committed in connection with desires is to fail to distinguish sufficiently the things that depend entirely on us from those that do not depend on us” (Descartes 1989: 97; AT 11:436). In most cases, however, things depend on us but in part. Here, “because most of our desires extend to things which do not depend entirely on us or entirely on others, we should distinguish carefully within [those things] that which depends only on us, in order to limit our desire to that alone” (*Passions* a.146; Descartes 1989: 99; AT 11:439). That is, for Descartes, the measure that is to guide our relations to things, under conditions of imperfect knowledge, is that of the degree to which things depend on us, or are in our power. (We can read Descartes, in his discussion here, as fleshing out the third maxim of the *morale* in the *Discourse*.)

This aspect of Cartesian virtue provides a method for regulating the passions insofar as the passions dispose us to action. In reasoning about what we should do in situations where we have incomplete knowledge – that is, in all situations – a virtuous person aims to understand her proper place in the scheme of things; she also aims to distinguish what depends on her from what does not. Drawing this distinction properly, for Descartes, results in her ceasing to desire those things that she has no power to bring about. In regulating these “vain desires” the virtuous person effectively regulates her

passions: she does not hope for what she herself cannot help bring about; she does not fear approaching danger, as she is assured she will do all that she is able to do to avoid it and has accepted what she cannot control; and she does not regret her past actions for she cannot bring back the past, she is satisfied she did what she thought best, and she learns from her mistakes. In this way, she finds herself content or truly happy. Obviously, getting one's desires and one's passions in order in this way is no easy task. It is the rare person who is able to quell his fears and avoid regretting actions that, though well-intentioned, did not turn out as planned. Nonetheless, for Descartes, we are all virtuous insofar as we approach this ideal, that is, insofar as we strive to distinguish what depends on us from what does not.

The key to Cartesian virtue then is having a proper sense of what depends on us. This sense serves as the measure of our relation to other things and so of our place in the world. Descartes does recognize that this sense can be distorted just as much as it can be true. We have already seen this a bit in his treatment of self-satisfaction. What Descartes terms "generosity" is by its very definition proper self-esteem, and so constitutes the proper sense of self that affords us a true sense of what depends on us. For Descartes,

true generosity, which makes a man esteem himself as highly as he can legitimately esteem himself, consists only in this: partly in his understanding that there is nothing which truly belongs to him but the free control of his volitions, and no reason why he ought to be praised or blamed except that he uses it well or badly; and partly in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well, that is, never to lack the volition to undertake and execute all the things he judges to be best – which is to follow virtue perfectly. (*Passions* a.153; Descartes 1989: 104; AT 11:445–6)

Within this definition of generosity, the pieces of Descartes's account of virtue come together. Cartesian virtue consists in a resolution to act in accord with our best judgments. While even our best judgments might be mistaken, we judge well insofar as we have the proper metaphysics and distinguish properly what depends on us from what does not. For Descartes, what properly depends only on us is just our free will. In order to be virtuous, then, we must understand this fact about our nature. Doing so allows us to distinguish what depends on us from what does not, and so allows us to understand our proper place in the world. This understanding in turn informs our practical judgments and allows us to use our will well. Moreover, this understanding of ourselves as freely willing moves us to use our will on itself – that is, to resolve to use our free will well. As we have seen, this resolve is the defining feature of Cartesian virtue. It should not be surprising then that Descartes deems generosity "the key to all the virtues" (*ibid.*). (For a detailed discussion of generosity, see Shapiro 1999.)

There are two additional elements of Descartes's account of generosity worth noting, for they help to complete this account of Descartes as a virtue ethicist. First, generosity is associated with a set of attitudes and character traits. A generous person is "easily convinced" that other people too understand they have a free will and are resolved to use their will well, and so she treats others with respect and does not scorn them (*Passions* a.154; Descartes 1989: 104; AT 11:446–7). This respectfulness accompanies a "virtuous humility" that "causes us not to prefer ourselves to anyone" (*Passions* a.155; Descartes 1989: 105; AT 11:447). Equally, "[t]hose who are generous are naturally

inclined to do great things, and yet to undertake nothing they do not feel themselves capable of. . . [T]hey are always perfectly courteous, affable and of service to everyone" and "entirely masters of their passions" (*Passions* a.156; Descartes 1989: 105; AT 11:447–8). Generosity is thus "the key to all the virtues" not only insofar as it is essential to Cartesian virtue, but also insofar as it leads to develop the character traits commonly called virtues – respect for others, humility, courage, kindness, affability, helpfulness, and the like – as well as the temperance that comes with the regulation of the passions. Second, while he does admit virtue might come naturally to some, Descartes acknowledges the importance of moral education. He writes:

Although there is no virtue to which good birth seems to contribute so much as that which makes one esteem oneself only at his true worth, and although it is easy to believe that all the souls God puts in our bodies are not equally noble and strong . . . it is certain nevertheless that good education is very useful for correcting deficiencies of birth. (*Passions* a.161; Descartes 1989: 109; AT 11:453)

Through a proper education we can come to understand that we have a free will and what it is to use that will well. Most will suffer the "deficiencies of birth" that occlude from view the fact of our freedom. We can nonetheless achieve the understanding requisite to virtue through a proper upbringing. A virtue ethics is typically concerned with both virtuous character traits and moral education and upbringing. Descartes's attention to these elements in the *Passions* helps to complete his own brand of virtue ethics.

### Descartes's Virtue Ethics and His Metaphysics and Epistemology, Revisited

At the outset of my discussion, I suggested that we do better to read Descartes's metaphysics and epistemology and his ethics as tightly knit, and so to read his concern with the conduct of life as an ethical one. The examination of Descartes's virtue ethics has shown how his metaphysical and epistemological project serve to ground Cartesian ethics, but it also helps us to understand how his ethics drives his metaphysics and epistemology. Our understanding that we have a free will and our resolve to use it well, or generosity, is at the center of Descartes's account of virtue, but this same knowledge provides the key to Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology as evidenced by the method for avoiding error presented in the Fourth Meditation. There, recall, the meditator resolves to use his will well by only making judgments about what is perceived clearly and distinctly. One might well think that just as having the proper metaphysics contributes to virtue, so too might being virtuous contribute to our arriving at the proper metaphysics. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis (1987) has suggested as much in arguing that we should think of Cartesian generosity as the fruit of the tree of philosophy. For her, generosity is a seed-bearing fruit, and that seed, if properly cultivated, will grow into the tree of philosophy. In this way, morals is not simply one branch among the three branches of philosophy, but provides the "ultimate level of wisdom" by leading us to be virtuous and ensuring the tree of philosophy continues to thrive.

I want to conclude here by fleshing out Rodis-Lewis's metaphor a little bit. Generosity, recall, is the key to virtue by promoting virtuous character traits, but it is also key through the way it figures in our moral education and in the regulation of the passions. If generosity and virtue do contribute to our arriving at the proper metaphysics, we might well expect that Descartes's metaphysical works contain virtue ethical elements. In this section I show that the *Discourse* contains an element of moral education, and the *Meditations* involves the regulation of the passions.

Descartes's presentation in the *Discourse* of his metaphysics, epistemology, and scientific project begins, in Part One, from a concern with moral education. There, we find a selective autobiography of the author. While the details Descartes provides here have served his biographers, Descartes himself uses his own life story to frame the work. He writes:

My present aim, then, is not to teach the method which everyone must follow in order to direct his reason correctly, but only to reveal how I have tried to direct my own. One who presumes to give precepts must think himself more skilful than those to whom he gives them; and if he makes the slightest mistake, he may be blamed. But I am presenting this work only as a history or, if you prefer, a fable in which, among certain examples worthy of imitation, you will perhaps also find many others that it would be right not to follow. (1:112; AT 6:4)

Descartes here implicitly contrasts two pedagogical methods. The first, the one he is rejecting, involves handing down a set of rules of reasoning – presumably, the formal syllogisms proper to Aristotelian logic – which are deemed authoritative without question. A good student, to reason well, is then to apply those rules appropriately. One who applies those rules well is to be praised, one who does not is to be blamed. Descartes's own preferred way of teaching how to reason well is one associated with moral education. We learn how to behave properly, on this method, by following the example of others. Perhaps we might come to critically evaluate common practices, but we learn them first, even learning from example how to evaluate critically. In a similar way, Descartes holds himself and his own reasoning up as an exemplar. We are to follow him in his way of thinking, and assess for ourselves whether his method is a viable one, that is, whether it is worthy of its exemplary status. Descartes effectively asks us to either blame or praise him in proportion to the degree to which his method gets us to the truth, not insofar as he follows rules.

In Part One of the *Discourse*, then, we get insight into how Descartes conceives of a good education. The model of a good education has all the qualities of the sort of moral education associated with a virtue ethics, and as we have seen, Descartes does think that a good education promotes virtue. Here, however, we see that that same education will also lead us to the proper method for conducting our reason, and so, for Descartes, to a true metaphysics and success in acquiring scientific knowledge.

In the *Meditations*, too, Descartes's metaphysical and epistemological effort is intertwined with virtue ethical considerations, and in particular the regulation of the passions. The meditator's passions surface throughout the work. Famously, the work begins with a desire "to establish something firm and lasting in the sciences" that leads

to the skeptical arguments. Often overlooked, however, the conclusions of those arguments lead the meditator to feel "like a prisoner who has *enjoyed* an imaginary freedom while asleep; as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he *fears* being woken up and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can" (AT 7:23). We are thus initially presented with a meditator of timid character, full of doubts, hesitation, and fear. By the end of the work, the meditator exudes a temperate confidence. He has answered the arguments that had initially caused so much anxiety. His fear has been transformed into a laughter at the ridiculousness of his previous doubts (see AT 7: 89). Moreover, the work is punctuated by expressions of the passions, each of which seems to mark a moment in the meditator's development. For instance, once the meditator has better understood the nature of sensation in the Second Meditation, this fear shifts to an amazement that he is so inclined to slip into his old habits, and a shame at "having doubts based on the forms of speech that the common people have invented" (7:32). And at the crucial point of the work, at the end of the Third Meditation when the meditator recognizes that God exists and is the cause of his nature, the meditator pauses "to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light [the nature of God], so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it" (7:52). (For discussion of this point in more detail, see Shapiro 2005.) It does seem that over the course of the *Meditations* the meditator changes how he feels about things and regulates his passions.

Interestingly, the meditator's regulation of his passions runs in parallel with his growing understanding. The turning point seems to come at the end of the Third Meditation and in the Fourth Meditation. At the end of the Third Meditation, the meditator comes to understand properly his own nature as a finite being created and sustained by an infinite God, and yet potentially stamped with the "mark of the craftsman" (2:35; AT 7:51). In the Fourth Meditation, he comes to understand not only that he has a free will, but also how to use that will well in making judgments. This new self-understanding results in the method for avoiding error – to affirm only those ideas perceived clearly and distinctly – and a resolve to follow that method. The similarities to the *Passions'* notion of generosity are striking, and just as the generous person is master of his passions, so too does the meditator's new self-understanding lead him to regulate the passions that affected him early on. Equally, of course, this self-understanding propels the meditator forward to the resolution of his metaphysical and epistemological project. With his discovery of and commitment to method for avoiding error, he moves to ascertain the nature of material things, the real distinction between mind and body and the existence of the material world. He even has the confidence at the end of the Sixth Meditation to take some of his sensory experience as epistemically valuable. Again, Descartes's metaphysical and epistemological projects are tightly knit with a concern with our moral development.

### Conclusion

Contrary to common wisdom, Descartes does have substantive views on ethics. Descartes's writings on ethics reveal him to be strongly influenced by the revival of Stoicism in the seventeenth century. Like the Stoics, Descartes sees a complete ethics,

or "perfect moral system," as comprised of a set of rules governing all the actions of life. Some of these rules are highly particular, dependent on the particular circumstances of action. Others are general rules forming a set of fundamental principles guiding all our actions unconditionally. The maxims presented in the third part of the *Discourse* are best understood as these fundamental principles. The totality of rules for action, however, is not, as such, constitutive of his conception of the good. Rather, Descartes is a virtue ethicist; for him, virtue is our supreme good. For him, virtue is simply "a firm and constant resolution to carry out what reason recommends." His is a peculiar account of virtue, in that it seems that merely having good intentions is sufficient for virtue. Nonetheless, it is an account that, unlike Stoic ethics, makes virtue achievable for all who strive to reason well. Reasoning well, for him, is a matter not only of having the proper metaphysics but also in having a proper sense of self. This proper self-esteem consists in generosity – the knowledge that one has a free will and the resolve to use that will well. In keeping with his being a virtue ethicist, Descartes shows some concern with the development of virtuous character traits, the regulation of the passions and moral education. I have further suggested that Descartes's ethics – his concern with the conduct of life – is intertwined with the metaphysics and epistemology at the fore of his philosophical writings. This interconnection is revealed not only by the metaphor of the tree of philosophy in the Preface to the French edition of the *Principles*, but also in the way virtue ethical concerns figure in the *Discourse on the Method* and the *Meditations*.

### Notes

- 1 Though Elizabeth requested her side of the correspondence remain private, Descartes clearly shared his side: his letters to Elizabeth were published by Clerselier in his three-volume edition of Descartes's correspondence published shortly after Descartes's death. Descartes also shared Elizabeth's side of the correspondence with Queen Christina, without Elizabeth's permission.
- 2 In the *Meditations* Descartes seems to draw a distinction between the epistemically virtuous and the epistemically continent in his account of judgment in the Fourth Meditation. He writes: "If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly. If I go for the alternative which is false, then obviously I shall be in error; if I take the other side, then it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth, and I shall still be at fault since it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will." It is not enough that our judgments are true. We must have arrived at the truth in the right way, for the right reasons.

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