

## Chapter 2

# Descartes on Human Nature and the Human Good

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It might well seem that Descartes has little to say about the human good. After all, he did not author a work devoted to ethics, and his scattered remarks in his published works—the *Discourse on Method*, the *Passions of the Soul*, and the preface to the French translation of the *Principles of Philosophy*—are not particularly systematic; and in the *Passions*, where we might expect a developed moral theory, Descartes expressly disavows the approach of the moralist to adopt that of a *physicien*, that is, of a natural philosopher.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, I do think that we can reconstruct Descartes's ethics from these scattered remarks and the more sustained treatment of moral philosophy in his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and the letters to Queen Christina of Sweden.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that Descartes subscribes to a virtue ethics, and one heavily influenced by Stoicism.<sup>3</sup> I do not want to rehearse that discussion here. However, I do want to consider a question that emerges from that interpretation. While different varieties of virtue ethics conceive of the human good differently, all seem to share a basic structural feature: they tie the human good to human nature. I call this feature *structural eudaimonism*. I want to consider whether Descartes, in his virtue ethics, is also a structural eudaimonist. I begin by setting out just what I mean by "structural eudaimonism", how it is to be understood as distinct from eudaimonism, and why it is worth considering whether Descartes subscribes to it. I then explore the view suggested by the *Meditations*, that the human good consists in the good of the human mind, the pursuit of knowledge. This view is complicated, however, by the fact that, for Descartes, a human being is not simply a

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<sup>1</sup>In his contribution to this volume, Roger Ariew provides historical contextual evidence in support of this view.

<sup>2</sup>See letters to Elisabeth of 4 August 1645 (4:236ff; 3:256ff), 18 August 1645 (4:271ff; 3:259ff), 1 September 1645 (4:281ff; 3:262ff), 15 September 1645 (4:290ff; 3:265ff), 6 October 1645 (4:304ff; 3:268ff), 3 November 1645 (4:330ff; 3:276ff), January 1646 (4:351ff; 3:281ff), and to Christina of 20 November 1647 (5:81ff; 3:324). For Elisabeth's side of the exchange see my (2007). Translations from this edition will be cited internally as "CED," followed by the page number.

<sup>3</sup>See my (2008).

mind, but a union of mind and body. To this end, it would seem that the human body ought to contribute something to our proper function or good. In Section 2.3, I consider what sense we can make of any role the body might play in the human good, and in Section 2.4 I suggest that Descartes is best read as appropriating the Stoic notion of *oikeiosis*. However, it is not clear how a purely mental good can be reconciled with this sort of account. I conclude that despite his virtue ethics, Descartes is best not read as subscribing to any kind of eudaimonism, not even a very weak structural eudaimonism.

## 2.1 Eudaimonism and Structural Eudaimonism

In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7 Aristotle claims that eudaimonia is the highest good, and that which is “always desirable in itself and never because of something else” (NE 1097a35–b1). While virtue is necessary for eudaimonia, it is not identical with eudaimonia itself. The Greek “eudaimonia” is often translated as “happiness”, and though there has been much discussion about just how to understand the sense of “happiness” here, we do not need to resolve this issue. However, if we focus simply on the core of the position—that happiness is the highest good—it is hard to claim that Descartes is a eudaimonist. In correspondence with Elisabeth he writes, unequivocally: “true happiness is not the sovereign good; but it presupposes it, and it is the contentment or satisfaction of the mind which comes from possessing it” (18 August 1645; 4:275; CED 103). This view is reaffirmed in his brief exchange with Queen Christina, and there is no suggestion that he modifies it in the *Passions*. While Descartes agrees with the Aristotelian position that virtue is necessary for happiness and not identical with it, for him, *virtue*, not contentment or happiness, is the highest good. As Descartes defines it, virtue is “a firm and constant resolution to carry out to the letter all the things one judges to be the best, and to employ all the powers of one’s mind in finding out what these are” (To Christina, 20 November 1647; 5:83; 3:325).<sup>4</sup> That Descartes puts his position the way he does makes it seem that he is simply rejecting eudaimonism altogether. Indeed, he writes to Elisabeth that Aristotle’s account of the highest good is “not useful to us” (18 August 1645; 4:276; CED 104). The account is “not useful” simply because it concerns “the most accomplished of all men.” Descartes’s rejection of eudaimonism, then, seems tied to its focus (or at least Descartes’s view of its focus) on the extraordinary human being, the one who has realized “all the perfections of which human nature is capable” (18 August 1645; 4:276; CED 104). How then ought we to make sense of Descartes as a virtue ethicist?

We can address this question by considering another central element of the Aristotelian eudaimonism, contained in what is often called the Function Argument.<sup>5</sup> According to this argument, each thing has a natural end or function,

<sup>4</sup>See also letter to Elisabeth 4, August 1645; 4:265; CED 97ff and PA a.153.

<sup>5</sup>The Function Argument is to be found at NE 1097b22–1098a20.

1, it would seem that the human body action or good. In Section 2.3, I consider how the body might play in the human good, and the best read as appropriating the Stoic view that a purely mental good can be recognized despite his virtue ethics, Descartes' structural eudaimonism, not even a very weak

## eudaimonism

What eudaimonia is the highest good, and why it is never because of something else" for eudaimonia, it is not identical with the good often translated as "happiness", and the question is just how to understand the sense of this issue. However, if we focus simply on the highest good—it is hard to find correspondence with Elisabeth he writes, "the good is not a sign good; but it presupposes it, and the good which comes from possessing it" is reaffirmed in his brief exchange with her in that he modifies it in the *Passions*. In his position that virtue is necessary for the human good, not contentment or happiness, is clear. He is "a firm and constant resolution to be the best, and to employ all the means that are" (To Christina, 20 November 1645). In this position the way he does makes it seem clear. Indeed, he writes to Elisabeth "the good is not useful to us" (18 August 1645; 1098a20). Simply because it concerns "the most important of eudaimonism, then, seems tied (in focus) on the extraordinary human functions of which human nature is capable. Then ought we to make sense of

bringing another central element of what is often called the Function Argument. Something has a natural end or function,

and the excellence—or highest good—of a thing is measured by how well it fulfills its function. The function of a knife is to cut, and so a knife is a good knife insofar as it cuts well. Similarly, human beings are good insofar as we fulfill the function of a human being; and we are excellent, that is we achieve our highest good, just insofar as we fully fulfill that function. For Aristotle, what is distinctively human is reason and so "the human function is the soul's activity that expresses reason" (NE 1098a6). Achieving the human good involves expressing reason well. In this paper, I am not concerned with the substance of the eudaimonist account, but rather with this particular structural feature of it. For Aristotle, the highest human good is tied to human nature. I refer to this feature as structural eudaimonism.

I will consider whether Descartes's ethics shares this structural eudaimonism, whether, for him, the human good is tied to human nature, and our fulfillment of that nature. While it might seem that a consideration of this point would consider whether Cartesian virtue derives from his account of human nature, this will not be my direct line of approach. Rather, my focus is on whether and how a notion of the human good can derive from the Cartesian account of human nature as a union of mind and body. In my concluding remarks, I will have something to say about Descartes's rejection of the perfectionism he takes as intrinsic to Aristotelian eudaimonism.

Let me make two preliminary points. First, it ought not be taken for granted that an early modern philosopher would be a eudaimonist in even this structural sense. We need only look at Descartes's contemporary and the author of the Third Objections, Thomas Hobbes, to see that this is so. Hobbesian human beings hold a natural right to self-preservation, but there is no human good tied to this natural right. As a consequence, its exercise leads naturally to a world where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."<sup>6</sup> Morality, which Hobbes casts as "right and wrong, justice and injustice" has "no place" in the state of nature. It is not tied to human nature or a distinctive human good, but rather emerges with the establishment of a social order.<sup>7</sup> If Descartes, who rejects some basic tenets of Aristotelian metaphysics, were to retain this structural feature of Aristotelian ethics it would be interesting just as a point of fact.

It would also be interesting in its substance. Within the Aristotelian framework, the structural eudaimonism on which I am focused is cast in functional terms. That is, it is grounded on there being an end, a final cause, proper to the human being, and this end is grounded in the form of the human being. But Descartes, in a direct rejection of Aristotelianism, denies that there are formal causes and final causes. To say that the human being has a proper function would seem to make no sense for Descartes. In considering whether Descartes subscribes to a form of structural eudaimonism, I do not want to go so far as to claim that there is a formal cause of the

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.13.9

<sup>7</sup>See Hobbes, *Leviathan*: "Justice and injustice are none of the faculties, neither of the body nor mind. If they were, they might be in a man that were alone in the world, as well as his senses and passions. They are qualities that relate to men in society, not in solitude" (I.13.13).

<sup>1</sup>97ff and PA a.153.  
1098a20.



Cartesian human being. I do, however, want to explore to just what extent a notion of an end or proper function can be found in Descartes's philosophical commitments.

## 2.2 The Meditations: The Nature of the Human Mind and the Human Good

From a consideration of the position Descartes articulates in the *Meditations*, it can certainly seem as if Descartes does subscribe to structural eudaimonism, and, in fact, not unlike Aristotle, takes the human good to consist in the good of the human mind. Aristotle, as we have seen, identifies the highest human good with the happiness that comes from excellence of rational activity, and expressly brackets the virtues of those capacities we share with plants and animals (nutrition and growth, and with animals alone, self-motion) as having "no part" in distinctively human virtue, and so no part in eudaimonia. This position seems consistent with Descartes's account of human nature in many respects. For Descartes, just as for Aristotle, the capacity for reason distinguishes humans from other animals. We have minds. Moreover, it is natural to slide from the meditator's claim in the context of radical doubt that "I am a thing that thinks," a thing whose essence is thinking, to one about human nature: human beings are just things that think, things whose essence is thinking. If this move is warranted, then a Cartesian structural eudaimonism is easily articulated.

Recall that the core of what I am calling structural eudaimonism is a function argument. And a function argument hinges on the thing at issue having a proper function, or a proper end that defines it as the thing it is. In the Aristotelian system, the function of a thing is given by its form, and though within the Cartesian framework it does not make sense to claim that the mind is a form in the Aristotelian sense, it still seems that Descartes takes the mind to contain its own end. The argument of the *Meditations* is meant to demonstrate that a thinking thing in itself not only strives for knowledge but also contains in itself the standard of truth and falsity. Defending this claim fully is well beyond the scope of this paper, but let me very briefly defend its plausibility. It should be clear that the *Meditations* itself is premised on the desire for knowledge. Not only does the meditator motivate his initial skeptical arguments from his desire to "establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last," but this same desire propels him forward from the desperation of that skepticism, to continue to search "for something certain, or if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty" (7:24; 2:16). The drive for knowledge is intrinsic to the meditator and not foisted upon him from outside. His reflection on this drive for knowledge reveals it to entail the recognition that "I am a thinking thing." Equally, further reflection on what it is to be a thinking thing yields the criterion of certainty and knowledge. I take this to be the upshot of the Fourth Meditation. That meditation yields a method for avoiding error in our judgments of truth and falsity. That method, however, is premised on features of our nature as thinking things: that we have an idea of God and from that fact are able to assure ourselves that God is not a deceiver; and that we are able to perceive

clearly and distinctly and are determined to affirm what we so perceive. Together these features of our nature entail that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true. So long as we properly attend to our nature, and to our thoughts, we can avoid error by affirming only those ideas we perceive clearly and distinctly. A close reading of the end of the Fourth Meditation shows that it is very much a point about our nature as thinking things. That nature yields in itself a measure of truth and falsity. The mind then contains its own end—knowledge—that drives its activity. It thus makes sense to say that the mind has a function, the fulfillment of which defines the excellence of the mind.

If human nature is identified with the nature of mind, as the stylistic features of the *Meditations* can suggest, then it would seem that we are entitled to attribute a structural eudaimonism to Descartes. We only would need to spell out in more detail how what Descartes writes about the nature of mind in the *Meditations* translates into his account of virtue as the highest human good. This project does not seem to be particularly daunting, as there are resonances between Descartes's definition of virtue, as resolving to do what we judge to be the best, and the centrality of using our will well to the method for avoiding error.<sup>8</sup>

Even though this sort of reading is tempting, I do not think it can be Descartes's considered view. Given Descartes's dualist commitments, if our good derived from the good of the mind, then Descartes would need to treat the body's condition as merely an accidental good: though it might well contribute to our ability to be virtuous, it would not be necessary for it. However, it does not seem that Descartes takes bodily health in this way. When pressed by Elisabeth in correspondence,<sup>9</sup> Descartes concedes that a certain level of bodily health is essential to the well-functioning of our rational faculties. He writes:

when I spoke of a true happiness which depends entirely on our free will and which all men can acquire without any assistance from elsewhere, you note quite rightly that there are illnesses which, taking away the power of reasoning, also take away that of enjoying the satisfaction of a rational mind. This shows me that what I have said generally about all men should only be extended to those who have free use of their reason and with that know the path necessary to take to reach this true happiness. (1 September 1645; 4:281f; CED 106f)

Descartes here suggests that our "power of reasoning" depends on our bodily health. Insofar as virtue requires a firm resolution to do what we judge to be the best, it depends on this power of reasoning. Thus, virtue, for Descartes, our highest good, depends on our bodily health. Moreover, it is notable that the passion of generosity is the "key to all the virtues" for Descartes. This claim is not surprising given Descartes's definition of generosity as the knowledge that one has a free

<sup>8</sup>For some discussion of this parallel, see my (1999).

<sup>9</sup>Elisabeth writes: "There are diseases that destroy altogether the power of reasoning and by consequence that of enjoying a satisfaction of reason. There are others that diminish the force of reason and prevent one from following the maxims that good sense would have forged and that make the most moderate man allow himself to be carried away by his passions and less capable of disentangling himself from the accidents of fortune requiring a prompt resolution" (4:269; CED 100).

will and the resolution to use that will well. The definition reflects his definition of virtue. What is surprising is that Descartes counts generosity as a passion, and as such dependent on a bodily state. Again the suggestion is that virtue is tied to the body in an essential way.

Nonetheless, that the human body should figure in Descartes's account of virtue ought not be startling. For despite the rhetorical devices of the *Meditations*, Descartes does not think the essence of the human being consists simply in the human mind. A human being for Descartes is a *union* of mind and body, after all. If Descartes does hold a structural eudaimonist view then the nature of the union, both mind and body, ought to figure in the account of his human good. The question is what role there is for the body to play in any account of the human good for Descartes.

### 2.3 A Bodily Contribution to the Human Good?

In the Sixth Meditation Descartes takes pains to distinguish two senses of nature. One, the proper sense, refers to the way in which bodies in motion are governed by the laws of nature. The other, an "extraneous label", imports a purpose extrinsic to the particular body at issue. The mechanism of a clock cannot but follow the laws of nature, no matter what time it tells. Claiming that the clock is not working properly—that it is not a good clock—involves introducing the extrinsic purpose of keeping time. The point applies generally to all bodies, and since the human body is simply another body, for Descartes, there should be nothing about the mechanism of the human body that can ground any good proper to it. No matter what, the body follows the laws of nature. To identify a function or end proper to it, it would seem we must appeal to some purpose extrinsic to it. The obvious candidate here would be some purpose the soul has: a body would thus be functioning well or not relative to the degree to which its condition serves the soul's ends. It thus seems that the human body, in and of itself, can offer nothing to any account of the human good.

Despite the caution of the Sixth Meditation, I do think that Descartes avails himself of a notion of an end intrinsic to the body itself. Through this intrinsic end it makes sense to talk of bodily well-functioning. I will call this a notion of the bodily good. To begin to see that Descartes ought to have such a notion of bodily good, consider how the soul, an entity really distinct from body, could arrive at a set of purposes for which it might put the body to use independently of a set of facts about how the body works. It does not seem that it could. Rather, it would seem that facts about the workings of the body provide constraints on the soul's aims insofar as it is embodied. Descartes's remark to Elisabeth that

what makes it the case that, for example, we do not at all desire to have more arms, or better, to have more tongues, than we have, but that we do desire to be in better health or to have more riches, is only that we imagine that these latter things can be acquired by our conduct, or even that they are due to our nature, and that the same is not true of the others (4 August 1645; 4:266; CED 98)



seems to suggest as much. His point is that our desires and our purposes are shaped by certain natural facts about our bodies—the number of arms and tongues that we have—and we would do well to shape our other desires similarly, as constrained by facts about nature rather than as up to us. The workings of the body would thus not be good or bad relative to the soul's purposes, but rather a precondition of the soul's forming the goals it does.

In addition, Descartes does claim repeatedly that bodies function better or worse insofar as they are able to preserve themselves. This is implicit in his account of the difference between a living and a dead body:

And let us judge that the body of a living man differs from that of a dead man as much as a watch or other automaton (that is, other self-moving machine) when it is wound and contains the bodily principle of the movements for which it is constructed, along with everything required for its action, differs from the same watch or other machine when it is broken and the principle of its movement ceases to act (PA a.6; 11:330–31)

Descartes here highlights an aspect of mechanism left in the background of his discussion in the Sixth Meditation. Machines like watches or clocks are self-moving; their design enables them to preserve themselves in motion. A properly constructed watch will, when wound, keep ticking. This self-preserving ability is a necessary condition for the machine's serving its purpose, and indeed any purpose at all. A watch that explodes when its hands point to twelve is not much of a time keeper, and it's not clear what it would be good for, except maybe a gag gift. What is true of a watch is true of the human body. The human body too is a self-moving mechanism. It has a bodily principle of movement, one that is *intrinsic* to the construction of the body, and this internal bodily principle allows the human body to be self-preserving. It keeps the workings of the body intact and ticking along, just as the mechanism of a watch keeps it intact and ticking away. This internal stability is essential to the soul's forming of embodied desires.

I want to claim that this internal stability, this tendency to self-preservation, is the bodily good. Consider an important disanalogy between the clock and the human body. The clock is an artifact whose internal principle of motion is given to it by the craftsman who made it and its user. While Descartes does draw an analogy between God and a craftsman in the Third Meditation, there God is crafting a mind with an idea of God. The human body is a natural object, and while Descartes does take God to introduce motion into nature, he does not take it that God animates each particular body individually with the touch of his finger. God provides the natural world as a whole with an initial push. Natural bodies come to have *their* mechanical composition simply by the movement of the parts of matter in accord with the laws of nature. The principle of movement driving our bodies is thus not dependent on any immediate external intervention, nor on any purposes driving their construction; there are no purposes driving their construction. The bodily principle allowing the human body to preserve itself is intrinsic; it is simply a function of its composition. It is worth noting that Descartes applies this idea to animals as well as to human bodies. He writes, "animals that lack all reason direct their lives entirely by bodily movements" (PA a.138, 11:431). Those bodily movements are internal principles of

motion serving to preserve the body, to keep it intact. Since animals do not have souls for Descartes, we cannot say that their ability to preserve themselves serves a soul's purpose.

But why should we count this intrinsic capacity for self-preservation a good? Descartes claims that a body which preserves itself in this way is "more perfect" than one that does not. I suspect that perfect here is just a measure of the ability to remain in existence. A body continues in existence as the same body just insofar as it can preserve itself. Its organization or mechanical composition allows for this. If it loses its mechanical composition—or decomposes—it loses its ability to preserve itself and goes out of existence as that particular piece of organized matter—that body. In this way, it makes sense to speak of a bodily good. A bodily good for Descartes is just this intrinsic mechanical ability of a body to preserve itself and so remain in existence.

Even if we allow Descartes this notion of a bodily good, understood as an ability of self-preservation, we still find ourselves with a pressing question: How can this bodily ability figure in Descartes's account of the human good, and in particular in his claim that the highest human good is the firm and constant resolution to do what we judge to be the best?

## 2.4 Stoic *Oikeiosis* and Descartes's Account of the Human Good

To answer this question, I suggest that we look to the Stoic notion of *oikeiosis*. There are good historical reasons for taking Descartes to be influenced by Stoic ideals. First, it is clear that Descartes had some familiarity with Seneca, as he and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia corresponded extensively regarding *De Vita beata*. Seneca's letters were certainly available, and he might well have consulted them. In addition, editions of Stobaeus's anthology of remarks (which contains the Hierocles passage) were published in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. One appears in 1575, and then there are others in 1609 and 1625. Judging from the number of extant copies in libraries, the work seems to have been in wide circulation. Also, an edition of other of Stobaeus' writings by Hugo Grotius was published in 1623. Grotius was a proponent of Stoicism and appropriated Stoic thought in the development of his political philosophy. There is thus good reason to think Stoic writings were widely available and much discussed. There are also textual parallels between Descartes's writings and those of the Stoics that make the case for influence quite compelling. However, after a consideration of the Stoic account we will be in a better position to see them and to understand the import of the Stoic influence for understanding Descartes's account of the human good I thus turn now to the Stoics.

The ground of Stoic ethics is widely recognized to lie in the notion of *oikeiosis*. There is much debate among classicists and scholars of ancient philosophy about just how to understand this notion, but to see how it can facilitate an understanding Descartes's notion of the human good, we need only have a general sense of the concept without settling on finer points of interpretation. And, though I will argue



that it is very likely that Descartes was familiar with and influenced by this aspect of Stoic thought, it is less likely that his understanding was particularly refined.

*Oikeiosis* has been variously translated as “appropriation”, “affinity”, and “familiarization”. All these translations share the connotation of “belonging to”, and there is broad consensus that *oikeiosis* is a process through which individuals makes something their own—it is a process of appropriating something—of literally making it proper to oneself—or equally, of developing an affinity for things. (The standard Latin translation of the Greek is “*conciliatio*” which has a similar connotation.)

For the Stoics this process essentially involves a developmental story. Seneca’s Letter 121 (to Lucilius) nicely expresses this commitment:

There is a constitution for every stage of life, one for a baby, and another for a boy, another for a teenager, another for the old man. Everyone is attached [*conciliatur*] to the constitution he is in. A baby has no teeth—it is attached to this constitution, which is its own [*huic constitutioni suae conciliatur*]. Teeth emerge—it is attached to this constitution. (Seneca 2007, Letter 121.15)

The idea here is that human life is characterized by different stages, and at different stages of life, different things are appropriate to a human being.

We can use this passage from Seneca as a starting point for further understanding the Stoic notion of appropriation. Seneca identifies what is *oikeion* (or *conciliata*) as our bodily constitution, and there seems to be agreement among the Stoics that the first thing that is *oikeion* is our own body and its constitution. It is key to note that claiming that our bodily constitution is *oikeion* is not simply a matter of claiming that we *have* a body with a certain sort of constitution. Being *oikeion*, or appropriate, is something more active. To claim that our body is *oikeion* is to say that *we take* our body to belong to us and so to be constitutive of the individual we are. Identifying ourselves in this way in turn shapes our motivations to act, or what the Stoics term impulses. This brings out a third point about *oikeiosis*. Taking something to belong to us involves our caring about that thing. It is this connotation of caring that warrants translating *oikeiosis* as “affinity”. This aspect of concern explains how our impulses are affected by what is *oikeion*, for the care through which we take something as our own is what moves us to act. The Latin translation of *oikeion* brings this point out. *Conciliatio* not only connotes a bringing together, but also suggests a uniting of interests and the causing of good will, and so implies a shift in inclinations to act. Tad Brennan sums up this point: “what it means to take something to be *oikeion* is that one treats it as an object of concern. In particular, when you think of something as *oikeion*, you think of its welfare as giving you reasons to act” (Brennan 2005, 158). So, insofar as we first take our bodies to belong to us, our first motivations or impulses are just to preserve our bodily constitution, to preserve ourselves. The centrality of self-preservation is laid out by Diogenes Laertius, who attributes it to Chrysippus:

An animal has self-preservation as the object of its first impulse, since nature from the beginning appropriates it. . . The first thing appropriate to every animal, he [Chrysippus] says, is its own constitution and the consciousness of this. . . in constituting the animal, nature

appropriated it to itself. This is why the animal rejects what is harmful and accepts what is appropriate. (Diogenes Laertius 7.85-6 [SVF 3.178], Long and Sedley 1987, 346)

This passage highlights a basic element of the account, and at the same time it sets up a further move. The impulse to self-preservation is not something unique to human beings; we share this interest in self-preservation with animals, and indeed it is part of our nature to be animals. Moreover, animals develop just as do human beings. As we (and animals) mature, what we take to be our own—what we take ourselves to be—changes. We saw this position articulated in Seneca.

However, for the Stoics, human beings differ from other animals in having a rational faculty. As we develop this rational faculty, what is appropriate to us changes along another dimension as well. It is not that we cease to take our body as appropriate, but that the scope of what we appropriate or attach ourselves to enlarges. In the course of our development, we come to see ourselves as parts of successively larger and larger wholes. A passage from Hierocles, found in Stobaeus's anthology of remarks of ancient philosophers, summarizes the developmental story:

Each one of us is as it were entirely encompassed by many circles, some smaller, others larger, the latter enclosing the former on the basis of their different and unequal dispositions relative to each other. The first and closest circle is the one which a person has drawn as though around a centre, his own mind. This circle encloses the body and anything taken for the sake of the body. For it is virtually the smallest circle, and almost touches the centre itself. Next, the second one further removed from the centre but enclosing the first circle; this contains parents, siblings, wife, and children. The third one has in it uncles and aunts, grandparents, nephews, nieces, and cousins. The next circle includes the other relatives, and this is followed by the circle of local residents, then the circle of fellow tribesmen, next that of fellow-citizens, and then in same way the circle of people from neighbouring towns, and the circle of fellow-countrymen. The outermost and largest circle, which encompasses all the rest, is that of the whole human race. Once these have all been surveyed, it is the task of a well tempered man, in his proper treatment of each group, to draw the circles together somehow towards the centre, and to keep zealously transferring those from the enclosing circles into the enclosed ones. ... (Hierocles [Stobaeus 4.671, 1-673, 11], Long and Sedley 1987, 349)

According to Hierocles, initially we are concerned with our body, but as rational agents, we soon come to understand ourselves as also minded. These concerns form the centre of our sense of ourselves as individuals, and so lead us to act in such a way as to preserve our bodies. As we continue to develop, we come to situate ourselves as parts of successively larger wholes. Situating ourselves as parts of these wholes in turn shapes our motivations and reasons for actions: our sphere of concern enlarges successively, and we are moved to act for the sake of our family, our town, and the society of which we are a part. The task of a fully rational agent is to recognize the proper relation of part to whole. Recognizing her relation to other persons and things in the world in turn affects her motivations to act. She will see how her own individual interests are a function of the interests of the larger whole.

It should be clear that, for the Stoics, human nature contains the human good. The Stoics have a function argument. The function of a human being is just to live in accord with nature. We do this by striving to preserve ourselves. Human efforts



of self-preservation are rational. They involve a conscious understanding of ourselves in relation to others. Living in accord with nature involves having a complete understanding—we fulfill our nature as human beings by properly cognizing how we fit into the world.

While there is much more to be said about the Stoic account of *oikeiosis* and right action, this is enough for us to examine textual parallels between Descartes and the Stoics. In the next section I will consider the how this Stoic influence can help us in thinking about Descartes's conception of the human good.

It should be clear from the earlier discussion of Cartesian bodily good that there is a parallel between Descartes's and the Stoics' concern with self-preservation. It should be noted too that neither Descartes nor the Stoics explain the tendency to self-preservation by the action of a formal cause. For both, self-preservation is a matter of the organization of matter. But there are other textual similarities as well. Compare this remark Descartes makes to Elisabeth in correspondence to Hierocles's remark about the circles of concern:

even though each of us is a person separate from others and, by consequence, whose interests 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. It is always necessary to prefer the interests of the whole, of which one is a part, to those of one's person in particular, though with measure and discretion. (15 September 1645; 4:293, CED 112.)

The resonances between the two are easy to hear. Like Hierocles, Descartes takes us to first consider ourselves as individuals. Moreover, for both, our development consists in our taking ourselves to be parts of successively larger wholes, and our understanding of ourselves as parts of those wholes shapes our reasons to act.

But with the Stoic background in mind, other passages also stand out as having a neo-Stoic cast to them. Towards the beginning of the Sixth Meditation, in reviewing all his previous sensory beliefs, the meditator singles out one in particular: "my belief that this body, more than any other, belonged to me had some justification" (7:76; 2:52). The language of "belonging" here resonates with that of *oikeiosis*. And the way this notion of belonging is spelled out does as well. Our bodies are properly our own, for Descartes, in that we experience their pains and pleasures, and not those of others. This fact, moreover, gives us impulses to avoid or pursue those pains and pleasures. Descartes's account of the mind-body union is meant to explain these facts in more detail. While the explanation offered in the Sixth Meditation is not particularly telling with respect to potential Stoic influence, a discussion in the *Passions* aa.107–111 of our first passions, those we felt when the soul "was originally joined to our body," is more so. There Descartes writes:

For it seems to me that our soul's first passions, when it was originally joined to our body, must have been due to the blood, or other juice entering the heart, sometimes being a more suitable nourishment than the usual for maintaining the heat in it which is the principle of life. That caused the soul to join this nourishment to itself in volition, that is, to love it. . . (PA a.107, 11:407)



According to this somewhat bizarre natural history, the soul in effect appropriates the body. It takes the body as its own—joins it to itself in volition—and in doing so comes to care about the state of the body. We get a similar story about the soul's disaffection with the body's constitution in its first feeling of hate. Similar stories of the soul's attitude towards the body's constitution explain joy, sadness and desire. The discussion is remarkably odd, but begins to make some sense from the point of view of the Stoic account of *oikeiosis*. Indeed, while Descartes does not advert to the Stoics here, I cannot imagine that he did not have the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiosis* in mind, for precisely what is detailed is the attachment of the soul to our bodily constitution. The soul, upon being joined with the body, takes it as belonging to it, and has concern for it, and this concern plays a causal role in the thoughts—the passions it feels—and its dispositions to act. I do think the sum of the textual coincidences are enough to lend plausibility to the idea that Descartes's account of human nature was informed by that of the Stoics.

## 2.5 Descartes, Human Nature, and the Human Good

We can now consider how this Stoic aspect of Descartes's account of human nature contributes to our consideration of Descartes's structural eudaimonism, that is, of the role our bodily nature might play in his account of the human good, and of whether he is afforded an account of the human good as tied to our nature as a *union* of mind and body. In this regard, there is a crucial difference between Descartes's philosophical position and that of the Stoics. For the Stoics, the development of our rational faculties is part of our natural biological development. There are many questions about how this story is supposed to go, but it is clear that the Stoics are materialists through and through. For Descartes, the mind is really distinct from the body, even while the two are joined together. Insofar as Descartes takes mind as really distinct from body, it does not seem that he can claim that our rational faculties emerge from the motions of those bodies making up our body. So, even if we do take Descartes as espousing an *oikeiosis*-like doctrine about our bodily good, that does not help us to understand how his conception of the human good is tied to his conception of human nature. That is, it does not help us to understand how he might subscribe to a form of structural eudaimonism. While we might be able to make sense of a part of the human good that is tied to the nature of mind and another part that is tied to the nature of body, we are not yet afforded an account of how these two parts fit together. How are we to integrate these two aspects of the human good?

In part to answer this question, but also to tie things up, let me consider how Descartes's claim that *virtue* is the sovereign good fits into this account. Recall that virtue, for Descartes, is simply having a firm and constant resolution to do that which we judge to be the best. As we have seen, it can be tempting to take this account of virtue as emerging from Descartes's account of the nature of mind. His definition of virtue lends primacy to the will, through its firm resolution, and on the faculty

of judgment. Both are squarely situated in the mental for Descartes. Nonetheless, I have argued that for Descartes, the human good is also squarely rooted in our bodily constitution. How does the role of our bodily constitution in the account of the human good get us Cartesian virtue as the highest human good?

Let me first note a peculiarity of Descartes's account of virtue. For Descartes, virtue requires only that we are resolved to do what we judge to be the best. This seems quite weak as an account of virtue. After all, what we judge to be the best may not, in fact, be the best course of action. Our practical judgments are often wrong. The account can be strengthened a bit by remarking that in judging a course of action to be the best not just any judgment will do. Rather, Descartes might well insist, and it seems he does, that virtue consists in resolving to act on our *best* judgments about what is best. But even this is a weak account of virtue, for even our best judgments can be wrong. Thus, according to Descartes we can be both virtuous and mistaken in choosing our course of action.

Here Descartes clearly parts with the Stoic account, as for the Stoics virtue is an all or nothing affair. In fact, it is usually nothing. Since only the truly extraordinary sage will manage to arrive at virtue, where all her judgments are correct, most of us are left in a state of viciousness, trying but failing to get things completely right. For Descartes, the standard is not so high. We can all be virtuous if we try.

I want to suggest that Descartes's tempered account of virtue is actually grounded in his recognition that human beings are not simply minds, but minds united with bodies. The telling point here is the difference between the method for avoiding error and virtue. Like virtue, the method for avoiding error involves a resolution to judge the best we can. In that case, however, we are to judge the best we can regarding truth or falsity. Here, there is no room for error. We judge poorly when we get things wrong, when we mistake the false for the true and vice versa. Our best judgments must be correct in order for us to achieve our epistemic ends. Our moral judgments, however, need not meet this threshold. Why not? Descartes's account of human nature acknowledges that we are not supernatural creatures, but rather very much a part of nature, through our bodies. We thus find ourselves in the midst of a very complex world. Though we are constantly striving to understand our proper place in this world, we find ourselves without what Elisabeth terms "an infinite science."<sup>10</sup> Descartes's account of virtue recognizes that taking action requires making timely decisions based on incomplete information, and living with those decisions. His considered view is that we can achieve this by developing good habits of judgment. A quick glance at titles of his works—the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, *Discourse on the Method of Right Reason*—and even the method for avoiding error of the Fourth Meditation, shows Descartes to be very much concerned with the *process* of judging, perhaps more so than he is with the outcomes. It is hard to know just what judging well involves, but for our purposes here, we need only note that following the proper process is sufficient for virtue. Given that we are embodied,

<sup>10</sup>See letter to Descartes, 13 September 1645; 4:289; CED 110.



and so are subject to the constraints of time and imperfect knowledge, we can only judge the best the best we can.

While we can integrate the bodily and the mental aspects of the human good in this way, it is not clear to me whether we should hold out a hope of integrating them any further, to demonstrate that Descartes does subscribe to a coherent structural eudaimonism. As I have shown, there are strands of a structural eudaimonist position in Descartes's philosophy. Within the *Meditations*, we find a notion of a good of the mind, and in his ethical writings we can find an account similar to Stoic *oikeiosis*, suggestive of a bodily good. However, it is not clear that, given Descartes's dualism, these two accounts can be brought together. But even if we do manage to find a way of attributing to him a coherent structural eudaimonism, it does not seem that outside of the epistemic context Descartes espouses the sort of perfectionism we take to be essential to eudaimonism. Cartesian virtue does involve using our natural faculty of judgment well, and even excellently, but for him in the practical context even our best possible judgments seem likely to fall short simply given the fact that we are finite beings, with a limited amount of time to make decisions with imperfect knowledge. And though we do fall short, for Descartes, these errors of practical judgment do not preclude virtue. Given that Descartes does not think that virtue—the realization of the highest human good—requires our perfecting our nature, he does not need to see our good as tied to our nature. That is, insofar as he rejects the perfectionism characteristic of eudaimonism, he has no need for the structural eudaimonism from which eudaimonist accounts are derived.

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