Descartes’s Virtue Theory

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Abstract

What is the function of Cartesian virtue within the motivational and cognitive economy of the soul? In this paper I show that Cartesian virtue is a higher-order motivational disposition. Central to the interpretation I defend is Descartes’s view that the will can govern an individual’s attention. An exercise of this capacity, I argue, is a higher-order operation. Because Cartesian virtue is a resolution to focus attention on what reason deems worthy of consideration, it should therefore be understood as a higher-order disposition. To lay the groundwork for this interpretation, I examine Descartes’s theory of motivation. An examination of the sources of Cartesian motivation yields two important points for my reading: (1) that the will is not completely unconstrained in its operations and (2) that there are three sources of motivation: intellectual clarity, the will, and the passions. I show that virtue strengthens the will’s natural disposition toward intellectual clarity, thereby enabling the will to withstand the occasionally harmful sway of the passions. By strengthening the will’s disposition toward clarity, virtue at the same time safeguards the will’s freedom, enables an individual to will what seems best, and, as a result, ensures the individual’s happiness. It carries this out, I contend, insofar as it is a higher-order motivational disposition, a disposition exercised by the person of generosity.

1. Introduction

What is the function of Cartesian virtue within the motivational and cognitive economy of the soul? In this paper I show that Cartesian virtue is a higher-order motivational disposition. Central to the interpretation I defend is Descartes’s view that the will can govern an individual’s attention. An exercise of this capacity, I argue, is a higher-order operation. Because Cartesian virtue is a resolution to focus attention on what reason deems worthy of consideration, it should therefore be understood as a higher-order disposition.1
To lay the groundwork for this interpretation, I examine Descartes’s theory of motivation. An examination of the sources of Cartesian motivation yields two important points for my reading: (1) that the will is not completely unconstrained in its operations and (2) that there are three sources of motivation: intellectual clarity, the will, and the passions. I show that virtue strengthens the will’s natural disposition toward intellectual clarity, thereby enabling the will to withstand the occasionally harmful sway of the passions. By strengthening the will’s disposition toward clarity, virtue at the same time safeguards the will’s freedom, enables an individual to will what seems best, and, as a result, ensures the individual’s happiness. It carries this out, I contend, insofar as it is a higher-order motivational disposition, a disposition exercised by the person of generosity.

2. The Sources of Cartesian Motivation

In the Fourth Meditation Descartes explains that the will “consists in our ability to do or not to do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid)” (AT VII 57, CSM 2 40). Affirmation, denial, pursuit, and avoidance are operations of the will. Affirmation and denial are operations that lead to belief. Pursuit and avoidance are operations that result in action or the omission of action. Apart from the will’s operations, Descartes holds that “all that the intellect does is to enable me to perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgments” (AT VII 56, CSM 2 39). Perception is the intellect’s operation. The intellect perceives ideas and objects, and the apprehended objects of thought are paraded before the will. The will, in turn, accepts (i.e., affirms or pursues) or rejects (i.e., denies or avoids) the contents of the intellect.

But the will cannot arbitrarily accept or reject anything whatsoever. This is so for two reasons. First, the will is naturally oriented toward truth and goodness. In Descartes’s view this implies that the will cannot affirm a falsehood qua falsehood. Nor can it pursue an evil qua evil (16 April 1648, AT V 159). The will can accept something only under a semblance of truth or goodness; reject only under a semblance of falsehood or evil (AT VII 432, CSM 2 292; cf. AT XI 464, CSM 1 392). Second, clarity of the intellect exerts a powerful influence on the will. So long as the intellect clearly apprehends something, the will cannot help but affirm or deny, or pursue or avoid, what is perceived. In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes says, “I could not but judge that something which I understood so clearly was true; but this was not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will . . .” (AT VII 58, CSM 2 41). For Descartes, a perception’s clarity evokes an inclination in the will. It is part of the nature of the will to affirm or pursue what is clearly perceived. “The will of a thinking thing,” according to Descartes, “is drawn voluntarily and freely (for this is the
essence of the will), but nevertheless inevitably, towards a clearly known good” (AT VII 166, CSM 2 117 (emphasis added); cf. 24 May 1640, AT III 64). An individual cannot refrain from affirming or pursuing what he clearly perceives, at least so long as he attends to the same clearly perceived object. An individual can refrain from accepting an item perceived in this way only by turning his attention away from it (2 May 1644, AT IV 116).

Because it evokes an inclination in the will, intellectual clarity is one source of motivation. Yet, for Descartes, the will is not completely passive in relation to the intellect. For better or worse, the will need not wait for the intellect to be perfectly clear before it accepts or rejects something. It is in this sense that the “scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect” (AT VII 58, CSM 2 40). Unlike clear perceptions, confused ones do not evoke a “great inclination” in the will. As a consequence, they leave the will indifferent (AT VII 58, CSM 2 41; cf. AT IV 173, CSMK 245). 5 Indifference does not prevent the will from being able to accept or reject what is confusedly perceived. To be sure, acceptance or rejection in the absence of clear perception—when one’s purpose is to apprehend the nature of things—is a misuse of the will as it can lead to error. It can nevertheless be misused in this way. Without a pre-existing, powerful inclination, it can affirm or pursue something that is not clearly understood. 6 Thus in this respect the will is a source of motivation.

Although the will is a source of motivation insofar as it is able to accept or reject what is confusedly understood, there is a more fundamental way in which the Cartesian will is a source of motivation, a way crucial for understanding Cartesian virtue. In addition to being able to accept or reject what is confusedly understood, the will can govern an individual’s attention. In Article 18 of the *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes says,

> Our volitions, in turn, are of two sorts. One consists of the actions of the soul which terminate in the soul itself, as when we will to love God or, generally speaking, to apply our mind to some object which is not material. The other consists of actions which terminate in our body, as when our merely willing to walk has the consequence that our legs move and we walk. (AT XI 343, CSM 1 335, emphasis added).

Volitions are divided into two types. The first concerns the will’s capacity to govern an individual’s attention. A volition to fix one’s attention on something—“to apply our mind to some object which is not material”—is an *action of the soul which terminates in the soul itself*. But no matter whether it is a volition to pay attention to an immaterial object or to a material object, the volition’s action terminates in the soul because attention terminates in the soul; attention has to do with the direction and focus of the intellect. Though attention

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involves the intellect, the intellect does not have the power to govern what it focuses on. The will has this power. In Article 75 of the *Passions*, he says, “But when something previously unknown to us comes before our intellect or our senses for the first time, this does not make us retain it in our memory unless our idea of it is strengthened in our brain by some passion, or perhaps also *by an application of our intellect as fixed by our will in a special state of attention and reflection*” (AT XI 384, CSM 1 355, emphasis added; cf. AT XI 361, CSM 1 344, AT XI 385, CSM 1 355, AT XI 386, CSM 1 355-356). Regardless of whether the object of attention is immaterial, material, or an intermingling of the two, the volition to apply the intellect to something is a volition that terminates in the soul. It is an exercise of the will’s power to govern the intellect.

Note that the will’s power to govern attention does not conflict with its orientation toward truth and goodness. As with all its operations, the will can direct attention only under a semblance of truth or goodness (AT IV 173, CSMK 245). Under that constraint, the will has some power to determine what the intellect is applied to.

The will is not the only thing that has this kind of influence however. Passions also govern attention. In fact, Descartes holds that this is what makes the passions useful:

> From what has been said it is easy to recognize that the utility of all the passions consists simply in the fact that they strengthen and prolong thoughts in the soul which it is good for the soul to preserve and which otherwise might easily be erased from it. Likewise the harm they may cause consists entirely in their strengthening and preserving these thoughts beyond what is required, or in their strengthening and preserving others on which it is not good to dwell. (AT XI 383, CSM 1 354)

Like the will, a passion can direct the focus of the intellect. A passion has this type of influence in the sense that it can “strengthen and prolong thoughts in the soul.” The fact that a passion can govern attention is often to our advantage as mind-body unions; it can help us remain focused on the union-friendly and union-unfriendly phenomena in our environment. Of course it is not always advantageous to have one’s attention occupied in this way. An intense passion, as everyone knows, can be detrimental to an individual’s well-being when it turns into an obsession.

Because passions can govern an individual’s attention, they are a source of motivation. And just as the will is a source of motivation in two different ways, so too are the passions. The will can motivate via acceptance or rejection of something confusedly perceived, and it can also motivate at a deeper level by governing the focus of the intellect. A passion, as we have
seen, can motivate in the latter sense. It can also motivate by inclining us favorably toward or unfavorably away from an object. “The function of all the passions,” Descartes explains, “consists solely in this, that they dispose our soul to want the things which nature deems useful for us, and to persist in this volition; and the same agitation of the spirits which normally causes the passions also disposes the body to make movements which help us to attain these things” (AT XI 372, CSM 1 349). As with the will, a passion can incline an individual to pursue or avoid an object. A passion inclines one to pursue things that seem beneficial or to avoid things that seem harmful, depending on the specific passion. Love, for instance, inclines an individual to pursue beneficial objects; hatred incites an individual to avoid harmful objects (AT XI 387, CSM 1 356). In addition to their power to govern the focus of the intellect, passions have motivational power in virtue of inclining us to pursue or avoid particular things.

Like intellectual clarity, then, a passion evokes an inclination in the will. But passions evoke and sustain union-preserving inclinations, whereas intellectual clarity evokes what we might call truth-preserving inclinations. Passions make salient those phenomena that are related to the good of the mind-body union while clear perceptions disclose the nature and existence of things.

The bodily cause of passions in the soul Descartes calls animal spirits (AT XI 332, CSM 1 330). Animal spirits are tiny physical particles that fill the body’s tube-like nerves (AT XI 335, CSM 1 331-332). All sensory, appetitive, and passionate mental states result from animal spirits colliding with the brain’s pineal gland, to which the soul is conjoined. It is the causal activity of the animal spirits on the soul by means of the pineal gland that produces a passion in the soul and thereby evokes an inclination in the will. So the animal spirits are an essential part of the causal history of a passion (AT XI 349, CSM 1 338-339).

To produce bodily movement, it is not necessary for the animal spirits to cause any changes in the soul. The motions and collisions of animal spirits prepare the body for movement and can spur it into action “without any contribution from the soul” (AT XI 358, CSM 1 342-343). The resulting behavior, given its causal independence from the soul and ipso facto the will, is involuntary. Descartes says,

Thus every movement we make without any contribution from our will—as often happens when we breathe, walk, eat and, indeed, when we perform any action which is common to us and the beasts—depends solely on the arrangement of our limbs and on the route which the spirits, produced by the heat of the heart, follow naturally in the brain, nerves and muscles. This occurs in the same way as the movement of a
watch is produced merely by the strength of its spring and configuration of its wheels (AT XI 341-342, CSM 1 335).

Animal spirits can produce bodily movement without causing a passion in the soul and, therefore, without evoking an inclination in the will. Insofar as the animal spirits have such mechanical effects, they are a source of bodily movement but not a source of motivation. Animal spirits are a source of motivation only insofar as they are a source of inclination—evoking changes (i.e., passions) in the soul. Since they are not themselves motivational states but part of the causal history of one species of such states, animal spirits do not strictly speaking constitute a separate source of motivation apart from the passions.

Descartes thus subscribes to a tripartite division of motivation. Intellectual clarity evokes an inclination in the will, an inclination so powerful it can be resisted only by the individual’s attention being redirected elsewhere. Although the will cannot resist a clear perception, it is not a completely passive faculty. It can accept or reject something that is confusedly perceived, and it can govern and redirect the focus of the intellect so long as the redirection is performed under a semblance of truth or goodness. For these reasons the will is a source of motivation. Passions are the third source of motivation. Like the will, they can incline an individual to pursue or avoid something as well as govern the focus of the intellect. These motivational effects make the passions potentially useful as well as dangerous. Useful when they motivate us toward beneficial objects and away from harmful ones; dangerous when they interfere with our obtaining benefits and avoiding harms.

3. Motivation and Virtue

There is an apparent tension between Descartes’s theory of motivation and his account of virtue. The supreme virtue, “the key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for every disorder of the passions” (AT XI 454, CSM 1 388), Descartes calls generosity. Generosity has two components (AT XI 446, CSM 1 384). One is the knowledge that the freedom to exercise the will is the only thing that is really up to us and that we deserve praise or blame only for how we use this freedom. The second component is what Descartes describes as a resolution to do what we judge to be best. However, in light of his theory of motivation and the constraints on the will’s operations, the actual function and purpose of resolution is unclear. Because the will can affirm a proposition or pursue an object only under a semblance of truth and goodness, a resolution to do what we judge to be best appears to have no work to do in the motivational and cognitive economy of the soul. If an individual cannot fail to affirm what seems true and pursue what seems good, what role is there to play for a resolution to do what seems true and good?
A solution to this puzzle emerges, I believe, from an analysis of Descartes’s account of how passions can render the will unfree. The will, as we have seen, is inclined by the clarity of the intellect. In the case of perfect clarity and distinctness, a will is irresistibly impelled to affirm or pursue what is perceived. Being determined by the intellect’s maximum level of clarity and distinctness is the highest grade of freedom of the will (AT VII 58-59, CSM 2 40-41; AT VII 166, CSM 2 117; AT VII 432, CSM 2 292). It is the highest grade because, as Descartes believes he has demonstrated in the Third Meditation, clarity and distinctness of the intellect in allibly tracks the truth of things. Willing in conformity with perfect clarity and distinctness is equivalent to willing in conformity with the way things really are. An individual’s will is maximally free, therefore, when it is maximally rational.

For Descartes, there are two grades of rationality corresponding to two epistemic domains (AT VII 149, CSM 2 106; August 1641, AT III 422; AT XI 435, CSM 1 378). On the one hand, when a meditator is engaged in the theoretical endeavor of contemplating the truth and apprehending the nature of things, he is rational and free if and only if his will is determined by absolutely clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect. In this theoretical, or speculative, context, irrationality is a matter of affirming or denying ideas composed of the confused deliverances of the senses. By contrast, when an individual is engaged in the conduct of life, he is rational and free if and only if he chooses in conformity with what seems most probable, or chooses in conformity with what in the Passions Descartes describes as “firm and determinate judgments bearing upon the knowledge of good and evil” (AT XI 367, CSM 1 347). Ideally a firm and determinate judgment is a practical judgment that has withstood the test of critical reflection. Yet mention is also made that a false judgment derived from a past passion can qualify as a firm and determinate judgment or, at the very least, can qualify as one of the soul’s “proper weapons” against the passions. The problem with the latter sort of judgment however is that, beside being false, in following such a judgment an agent is not assured of avoiding regret or repentance (AT XI 368, CSM 1 347). Even so, an agent is better off being resolved to follow false judgments than not being resolved to follow any judgments concerning good and evil at all since, at least in the former case, the agent possesses strength of will.

With respect to the conduct of life, it is not the case that an agent is irrational if he pursues or avoids things on the basis of false practical judgments (4 August 1645, AT IV 266). Rather, an irrational and unfree agent is someone who unreflectively pursues or avoids whatever the passions make salient (May 1646, AT IV 411; AT XI 367, CSM 1 347; AT XI 450, CSM 1 386). An irrational agent, in other words, is a slave of the passions. Such an individual suffers from “abjectness” or “humility as a vice,” which is the opposite of the virtue of generosity. Descartes explains, “Abjectness, or humility as a vice, consists chiefly
in a feeling of weakness or irresolution, together with an incapacity to refrain from actions which we know we shall regret later on, as if we lacked the full use of our free will” (AT XI 450, CSM 1 386). An abject agent’s will is not merely indifferent in the sense of lacking any clear reasons for committing or omitting a particular action. The will of an abject agent is in an important sense no longer the agent’s own since it has been usurped by a strong passion and is constantly being usurped by the passion of the moment. Even though an abject agent commits deeds he knows he shall regret later on and can therefore be described as seeing the better but pursuing the worse, the actions of an abject agent are, strictly speaking, not the agent’s.

Descartes says it is “as if” an abject agent lacks the use of his free will. By this he seems to mean that an abject agent’s will is enslaved by the passions, but that it would not be too difficult for him to gain control over the passions. Descartes is optimistic that, by undergoing the proper training, even the weakest soul can gain absolute control over the passions (AT XI 368, CSM 1 348). A corollary is that even an abject agent is morally responsible for what he does because it is relatively easy to prevent one’s will from being usurped by passions. Ultimately an agent is answerable for his character.

The sort of training and control over the passions Descartes counsels involves conditioning or reprogramming (AT XI 369, CSM 1 348). Human beings have control over the passions in the sense that we are able to condition ourselves to experience a certain passion, or no emotion or desire at all, in the presence of certain stimuli. Just as a hunting dog can be trained to stand motionless at the sight of the quarry, a human being can be trained, or can train him- or herself, to have different emotional and behavioral reactions from those that an individual developed naturally and unreflectively (AT XI 369, CSM 1 348). A person naturally but unreflectively develops a certain configuration of connections between his pineal gland and his soul. An external stimulus can cause in a person a particular stimulation of the pineal gland, which in turn will give rise to a particular thought, or passion, in the soul. The connections between pineal-gland stimulation and thoughts in the soul start getting formed in an individual even prior to his or her birth while in the womb (May 1646, AT IV 408; 1 February 1647, AT IV 605). These connections, when left unchecked, remain fixed. But we are able to reprogram ourselves, to change the connections so that a particular stimulation of the pineal gland will no longer give rise to the same thought in the soul.

In the conduct of life, then, an agent is rational and free insofar as he chooses in conformity with the strongest reasons and most probable judgments available (15 September 1645, AT IV 295; AT XI 435, CSM 1 378; AT XI 440, CSM 1 381; AT VII 149, CSM 2 106). To
ensure making such choices, an agent must possess the virtue of generosity: an agent must have some understanding of what is truly up to himself and be resolved to follow reason’s dictates. Without resolution, a passion usurps the will without difficulty.

A passion usurps the will by obscuring the intellect. A passion exaggerates and thereby distorts the value or disvalue of an object or end. When this occurs, an individual’s attention is directed toward particular things and away from others (1 September 1645, AT IV 285; 15 September 1645, AT IV 295; AT XI 383, CSM 1 354; AT XI 431, CSM 1 377). Fear, for example, tends to represent things as more harmful than they really are, which disposes an agent to focus on the evil of the danger that he is exposed to instead of on the honor that can be won by bravely facing danger (AT XI 367, CSM 1 347; AT XI 487, CSM 1 404). Anger, to take another example, tends to lead an individual to thoughts of vengeance and imagining that more pleasure will be derived from getting revenge than in fact will be derived from it (1 September 1645, AT IV 285). The will’s capacity to govern attention is impaired when the passions cloud an agent’s intellect by distorting the values of things. Without the proper training and habituation—resolution—the passions rob an agent’s will of its freedom.13

A conflict between the will and the passions is therefore a struggle to govern an individual’s attention. But it is inaccurate to regard the will’s capacity to govern attention as something over and above the will’s capacities to affirm or deny and to pursue or avoid. Instead, the Cartesian will should be viewed as hierarchical, involving higher and lower orders of affirmation, denial, pursuit, and avoidance.14 The will’s capacity to direct attention, in other words, consists of second-order affirmations and denials, and second-order pursuits and avoidances.

The capacity to govern attention consists of second-order operations not only because what a person chooses to pay attention to is psychologically prior to what he does with the object of attention (e.g., affirm, deny, etc.), but also because what someone chooses to pay attention to determines which first-order choices appear desirable or undesirable, reasonable or unreasonable.15 For example, a person might make the second-order choice to focus on his idea of God, and if the person’s idea of God is clear and distinct, he will not be able to resist making the first-order affirmation that God exists. In order to avoid making this first-order affirmation, he must make a second-order choice to focus on something other than the idea of God. Similarly, an agent assailed by fear and prepared to make the first-order choice of fleeing is nevertheless able, if he is not abject, to focus instead on “reasons why there is much more security and honor in resistance than in flight” (AT XI 487, CSM 1 404). It is not the case that in every new situation the non-abject needs to make a new choice to focus his attention on reasons why there is, say, more security and honor in resistance than in
flight. Rather, the person of generosity simply carries out his ingrained resolution to focus on such firm and determinate judgments. My main point, however, is that the choice an individual makes to focus on certain reasons for or against committing or omitting an instance of a type of action is a choice about which particular choice, or what type of first-order choice, he thinks that he ought to make. Thus the will’s capacity to govern attention involves a choice (i.e., an affirmation, denial, pursuit, avoidance) about choice (i.e., affirmation, denial, pursuit, avoidance), which is what makes it a second-order operation.

If this is correct, Cartesian generosity involves strength of will, which turns out to be a second-order operation. A generous person possesses a strong resolution to be guided by intellectual clarity or, short of that, by firm and determinate judgments concerning good and evil. In a letter to Elizabeth, Descartes writes:

> I said above that besides knowledge of the truth, practice also is required if one is to be always disposed to judge well. We cannot continually pay attention to the same thing; and so, however clear and distinct the reasons may have been that convinced us of some truth in the past, we can later be turned away from believing it by some false appearances unless we have so imprinted it on our mind by long and frequent meditation that it has become a settled disposition with us. In this sense the scholastics are right when they say that virtues are habits; for in fact our failings are rarely due to lack of theoretical knowledge of what we should do, but to lack of practical knowledge – that is, lack of a firm habit of belief (15 September 1645, AT IV 295, CSMK 267).

The sort of resolution that constitutes one aspect of Cartesian generosity is what he refers to in this letter as a “firm habit of belief.” This firm habit of belief, he tells Elizabeth, is a settled disposition. It provides an agent with the strength to focus his attention on clear and evident reasons instead of remaining vulnerable to the compelling but sometimes misleading appearances that accompany the passions.

A generous person’s first-order volitions thus reliably accord with reason, where “reason” encompasses clear perceptions as well as the firm and determinate judgments concerning good and evil. Having acquired the proper resolve, a generous person’s attention conforms to the guidance of reason not only when he is assailed by intense passions, but also when he is not assailed by any passions whatsoever. Descartes says,

> But more often we wonder too much rather than too little, as when we are astonished in looking at things which merit little or no consideration. This may entirely prevent
or pervert the use of reason. Therefore, although it is good to be born with some inclination to wonder, since it makes us disposed to acquire scientific knowledge, yet after acquiring such knowledge we must attempt to free ourselves from this inclination as much as possible. For we may easily make good its absence through that special state of reflection and attention which our will can always impose upon our understanding when we judge the matter before us to be worth serious consideration. But there is no remedy for excessive wonder except to acquire the knowledge of many things and to practice examining all those which may seem most unusual and strange. (AT XI 385, CSM 1 355, emphasis added)

The “special state of reflection and attention” is what the generous person exercises. The generous person focuses his attention on things that are worth serious consideration. What enables him to do so is the appropriate resolution, or habit of belief. Thus the sort of resolution involved in Cartesian generosity is a motivational disposition enabling a person to fix his attention on what reason deems worthy of consideration.

Given that the will is inclined by what is clearly perceived, virtuous resolution enables a person to affirm or pursue what seems to be really worth affirming or pursuing. Second-order strength of will is therefore sufficient to enable a person to make and stick with at least seemingly correct first-order affirmations, denials, pursuits, and avoidances. And sticking with seemingly correct first-order choices is sufficient for happiness (18 August 1645, AT IV 277). Being generous does not guarantee that in every instance one does the right thing. Only omniscience can guarantee that. Nonetheless, Cartesian virtue guarantees happiness insofar as the generous person does not give himself any legitimate grounds for regretting the wrongs he commits out of ignorance or error (AT XI 460, CSM 1 390; AT XI 464, CSM 1 393; 4 August 1645, AT IV 266; 1 September 1645, AT IV 277; 20 November 1647, AT V 83).

4. Conclusion

In Descartes’s view the will of a human being is constrained in its operations in two ways, namely, (1) the will is naturally oriented toward truth and goodness, and (2) insofar as the intellect’s clarity evokes an inclination in the will. Although it operates under such constraints, the will is not a completely passive faculty. The will can direct an individual’s attention and, without a pre-existing, irresistible inclination, can accept or reject what is confusedly perceived. The passions are also sources of motivation in these two ways: they can govern an individual’s attention and they can incline an individual to pursue or avoid particular things.
Within this theory of motivation, the sort of resolution essential to Cartesian generosity is best understood as a higher-order motivational disposition to devote one’s attention to what reason deems worthy of consideration. The virtue of generosity is the supreme virtue and the key to all the other virtues because it safeguards the will’s freedom, enables an agent to do at least what appears to be the best thing to do, and, as a result, leads to contentment of mind. Generosity safeguards the will’s freedom by placing the will securely under the guidance of reason, where “reason” includes the clear perceptions of the intellect as well as firm and determinate judgments concerning good and evil. Passions occasionally misrepresent the value of particular things and ends. Without second-order resolution, the will lacks any defense against the passions on those occasions when they misrepresent the values of things. Moreover, freedom of the will is secured so long as the will is allied with reason. Stronger resolution ensures greater freedom, and someone whose will is securely placed under the guidance of reason achieves true happiness. A generous person will not have any good reason to feel regret about even those actions that turn out badly since, by following reason, he does the best anyone can be reasonably expected to do. Thus Cartesian virtue leads to freedom and happiness.¹⁷

¹ The interpretation I defend in this paper differs from the interpretation Lisa Shapiro defends in her illuminating article, “Cartesian Generosity.” On Shapiro’s interpretation, resolution is not, as I shall argue, a motivational disposition but, rather, a vow to use the will well. It is a vow that a person makes to him- or herself. Although Shapiro’s reading fits with ordinary usage of “resolution,” the framework of Descartes’s moral psychology, I believe, favors a reading on which Descartes departs from that usage. See Shapiro, “Cartesian Generosity,” Acta Philosophica Fennica, 64, 1999, pp. 261-263, pp. 267-269.

² By “passions” here and throughout this paper I am referring to all emotions, desires, and appetites, including what Descartes calls an “intellectual” passion (CSMK 306, CSM I 360) and “internal emotions of the soul” (CSM 1 381).

³ In this paper all quotations from Descartes’s writings are from The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volumes I (1985) and II (1984), translated by Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch (Cambridge University Press), and from The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume III (1991), translated by Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, and Kenny (Cambridge University Press).


⁵ In a well-known letter (9 February 1645, AT IV 173), Descartes distinguishes two senses of indifference and suggests that the will can be said to possess both. Indifference in the first sense is a state of the will “when it is not impelled one way rather than another by any perception of truth or goodness” (CSMK 245). In contrast,
indifference can also be taken in the sense of a “positive faculty of determining oneself to one or other of two contraries, that is to say, to pursue or avoid, to affirm or deny” (CSMK 245). This second sense of indifference has been the subject of much debate among commentators; for it might seem that, in attributing indifference in the latter sense to the will, Descartes believes that freedom requires the libertarian’s power to choose otherwise. A full discussion of this issue is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. The interpretation I am defending in this paper is agnostic on this issue. My interpretation relies only on the idea that, for Descartes, the will is indifferent when there is no reason for doing something and also when there is a balance of reasons for doing something. For discussion of the question of Descartes’s libertarianism, the following are just a few of the important contributions to that debate: Anthony Kenny’s “Descartes on the Will,” in Descartes, ed. Cottingham (Oxford University Press, 1998); Michelle Beyssade’s “Descartes’s Doctrine of Freedom: Differences between the French and Latin Texts of the Fourth Meditation,” in Reason, Will, and Sensation, ed. Cottingham (Clarendon Press, 1994); Vere Chappell’s “Descartes’s Compatibilism,” in Reason, Will, and Sensation, ed. Cottingham (Clarendon Press, 1994); Lilli Alanen’s Descartes’s Concept of Mind (Harvard University Press, 2003); C. P. Ragland’s “Descartes on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities,” in the Journal of the History of Philosophy, volume XLIV, July 2006, number 3.

6 In a discussion of Descartes’s account of indifference, C. P. Ragland distinguishes between indifference in the sense of being equally motivated to affirm and not to affirm a proposition, on the one hand, versus being in a state of not perceiving any reasons to affirm or not to affirm a proposition, on the other. Ragland argues that the divine will is indifferent in the latter sense, but the human will cannot be. The human will, Ragland maintains, can be indifferent only in the former balance-of-reasons sense and therefore “cannot choose from a state of non-motivation.” Insofar as a necessary condition for volition is that the object of volition is presented under a semblance of truth or goodness, I agree that, for Descartes, the human will cannot choose from a state of absolute non-motivation. But aside from the object’s presentation under a semblance of truth or goodness, a confused perception, on my reading of Descartes, need not evoke an inclination in the will, whereas a clear perception always evokes an inclination. The will is oriented toward truth and goodness, but it is clarity that invariably evokes an inclination. See Ragland’s “Descartes on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities,” in the Journal of the History of Philosophy, volume XLIV, July 2006, number 3, p. 382.

7 In “The Structure of The Passions of the Soul and the Soul-Body Union,” Lisa Shapiro shows that, for Descartes, the connections between passions in the soul and states of the pineal gland are not purely accidental effects of nature or God but, rather, are intelligibly related to our good as unions of mind and body. See Shapiro in Passion and Virtue in Descartes, eds. Williston and Gombay ( Humanity Books, 2003), pp. 50-52.

8 Although the passions evoke union-preserving inclinations, the same is not true of what Descartes calls “internal emotions of the soul” (AT XI 440, CSM 1 381). The reason is that the internal emotions are “produced in the soul only by the soul itself” and, as a result, do not register changes in the body. The passions register such changes since, unlike the internal emotions, they are produced by the body’s animal spirits. Descartes holds that our well-being importantly depends on the internal emotions because they are less dependent on external factors (i.e., animal spirits) and they are felt more intimately than the passions (AT XI 440-442, CSM 1 381-382).

9 In this paper I deal with only the resolution component of generosity because it this aspect of generosity that appears to be in tension with Descartes’s theory of motivation. Note that, for Descartes, there is also a sense in
which generosity is an item of knowledge and a passion (AT XI 451-454, CSM 1 386-388). For an illuminating discussion of generosity as knowledge and passion, see Lisa Shapiro’s “Cartesian Generosity,” *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 64, 1999.


11 I do not mean to suggest that, for Descartes, the passions are inherently harmful and should be eradicated. The opposite, in fact, is nearer to the truth. As he tells a correspondent: “For the rest, you seem to conclude from the fact that I have studied the passions that I must no longer have any. But let me tell you, on the contrary, that in examining the passions I have found almost all of them to be good, and to be so useful in this life that our soul would have no reason to wish to remain joined to its body for even one minute if it could not feel them” (1 November 1616, AT IV 538; cf. AT XI 488, CSM 1 404). His view is that for the most part the passions are good and helpful, but we need to use reason and experience to determine whether the things the passions represent as good or evil really are as good or evil as they are represented (AT XI 377, CSM 1 377).


13 This is expressed in the letter to Hyperaspistes where Descartes says, “We know by experience that our minds are so closely joined to our bodies as to be almost always acted upon by them; and although when thriving in an adult and healthy body the mind enjoys some liberty to think of other things than those presented by the senses, we know there is not the same liberty in those who are sick or asleep or very young; and the younger they are, the less liberty they have” (August 1641, AT III 424). For Descartes, the will of a healthy adult possesses more freedom than the will of a child and the will of a sickly adult because a healthy adult possesses more power to govern his attention.

14 John Marshall has argued that the second maxim of the provisional moral code of the *Discourse* is a second-order practical principle. Descartes formulates the second maxim as follows: “My second maxim was 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” (AT VI 24, CSM 1 123). Marshall suggests that this maxim is a second-order rule that has application in the practical domain whenever an individual is not absolutely certain about which path to choose. This nicely coheres with my suggestion that virtuous resolution, for Descartes, is a higher-order motivational disposition. See Marshall’s *Descartes’s Moral Theory* (Cornell, 1998), pp. 34-47.

15 In “Freedom and Strength of Will: Descartes and Albritton,” Paul Hoffman distinguishes two forms of strength of will and, correspondingly, two forms of weakness of will, and he employs this distinction to elucidate Descartes’s account of the will and its freedom. Hoffman distinguishes strength of will on the “output side of the will” from strength of will on the “input side of the will.” What he means by the “output side of the will” is the bodily action that results from an efficacious act of will. By the “input side of the will” Hoffman refers to the practical deliberation and proposal to do something that precedes an act of will. Therefore, strength of will on the output side is a matter of having an efficacious will, a will that does not fail to produce the results that are willed. Strength of will on the input side, on the other hand, is
a matter of controlling the course of practical deliberation and having it be the case that what an agent proposes to do is truly up to the agent. If what an agent proposes to do is not really up to the agent (e.g., the agent’s proposal was induced by a strong desire), he suffers from weakness of will on the input side of the will. Although I find Hoffman’s distinction helpful, it does not seem to capture the sense in which Cartesian generosity involves a motivational disposition aligned with firm and determinate judgments concerning good and evil, not merely occurrent (i.e., episodic) acts of will that accord with such judgments. On the interpretation I am defending, in order for an agent to ensure that his first-order acts of will are in accordance with firm and determinate judgments, he must possess the second-order motivational disposition adhering to reason. It is this second-order disposition that ensures what an agent proposes to do is really up to himself, thereby safeguarding the will’s freedom. See Hoffman, “Freedom and Strength of Will: Descartes and Albritton,” *Philosophical Studies* (77: 241-260, 1995), p. 242; and more recently in Hoffman’s “The Passions and Freedom of Will,” in *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*, eds. Williston and Gombay (Humanity Books, 2003), p. 281.

16 Byron Williston has argued that in Descartes’s view virtue is a second-order good, in contrast with the first-order good of self-perfection. On the reading I am defending, virtue is indeed a second-order good. But I take it that virtue is a second-order *good* because it is constitutive of self-perfection. It perfects an individual’s will and, as a consequence, leaves no possibility for regret and remorse, thus ensuring happiness. See Williston’s “The Cartesian Sage and the Problem of Evil” in *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*, eds. Williston and Gombay (Humanity Books, 2003), p. 314.

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