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Descartes and the Danger of Irresolution¹

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Abstract

Descartes's approach to practical judgments about what is beneficial or harmful, or what to pursue or avoid, is almost exactly the opposite of his approach to theoretical judgments about the true nature of things. Instead of the cautious skepticism for which Descartes is known, throughout his ethical writings he recommends developing the habit of making firm judgments and resolutely carrying them out, no matter how doubtful and uncertain they may be. Descartes, strikingly, takes irresolution to be the source of remorse and repentance, of vice, and of a weak soul. In order to explain its dangerousness, this essay offers an analysis of irresolution as a failure of the will to determine itself to follow a judgment in the face of ignorance or uncertainty. This analysis connects irresolution to weakness of will and explains why Descartes regards resolution as an essential component of virtue.

I. Introduction

Descartes's approach to practical judgments (i.e. judgments about what is beneficial or harmful, or what to pursue or avoid) is almost exactly the opposite of his approach to theoretical judgments (i.e. judgments about the true nature of things).² In the *Meditations*, Descartes advises agents to withhold judgment whenever they are not absolutely certain, claiming that to assent to what is not clearly and distinctly perceived is a misuse of free will, and the source of error and sin.³ With respect to practical judgments, however, he roundly condemns indecisiveness. Instead of the cautious skepticism for which Descartes is known, throughout his ethical writings he recommends developing the habit of making firm judgments and resolutely carrying them out, no matter how doubtful and uncertain they may be. For instance, in the *Discourse on Method* Descartes says,

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Even when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some; and having done so we must then regard them not as doubtful, from a practical point of view, but as most true and certain....By following this maxim I could free myself from all the repentance and remorse which usually troubles the consciences of those weak and faltering spirits who allow themselves to set out on some supposedly good course of action which later, in their inconstancy, they judge to be bad.⁴

In his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, Descartes advises,

Even if we cannot have certain demonstrations of everything, we ought nevertheless to take a side and embrace the opinions which seem to us the most true, concerning all those things which come into play, in order that, when there is a question of action, we will never be irresolute. For it is irresolution alone that causes regret and repentance.⁵

To Queen Christina of Sweden, Descartes writes, “Just as all vices arise simply from the uncertainty and weakness that come from ignorance and lead to repentance, so virtue consists only in the resolution and vigor with which we are inclined to do the things we think good.”⁶ In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes urges that in order to avoid excess irresolution we ought to “accustom ourselves to form certain and decisive [*determinez*] judgments about whatever is presented, and to believe that we always discharge our duty when we do what we judge to be best, *even though perhaps we judge very poorly*”.⁷ In these passages Descartes takes uncertainty to be the source of *vice*, associates irresolution with having a *weak soul*, and claims that irresolution is the *sole cause* of remorse and repentance.⁸

Descartes’s incautious attitude toward practical judgments is partly explained by the acknowledgment that in everyday life there is a limited amount of time for deliberation, and with respect to practical matters certainty is almost never possible.⁹ While this helps us understand Descartes’s endorsing the propriety of acting on uncertain beliefs, it does not yet explain why it is so *central* to Descartes’s moral philosophy that we *never* be irresolute. After all, while most would agree that indecisiveness is a weakness, it hardly seems to be a morally central one, and indeed it seems no worse than its opposite, which we might call overconfidence. Even a casual acquaintance with the rest of Descartes’s philosophy shows it to be unlikely that Descartes has simply overlooked the virtue of pausing for careful thought and deliberation before forming a judgment. Thus, a closer analysis of the dangerousness of irresolution is in order, both to illuminate Descartes’s ethical theory and to satisfactorily

explain why the man famous for endorsing the method of doubt should regard this manifestation of uncertainty as the source of vice.¹⁰

Another interpretive puzzle is that in his account of virtue as a firm and constant resolution, or a firm and constant will, to do what we judge best,¹¹ and it seems as though Descartes understands by “resolution” something like *strength of will*. Correspondingly, Descartes often associates irresolution with weakness of will.¹² It is hard to reconcile this account of irresolution, however, with Descartes’s principal definition of irresolution, in *Passions* article 170, as a kind of *indecisiveness* (quoted below). It is not immediately clear why avoiding indecisiveness should be especially central to strength of will – prima facie they seem to be mostly unrelated phenomena.

In what follows I offer an analysis of irresolution as a failure of the will to determine itself to follow a judgment in the face of ignorance or uncertainty. I argue that this analysis explains why Descartes equates indecisiveness with weakness of will and shows that Descartes attaches such central importance to avoiding irresolution because it is incompatible with virtuous action.

II. What Irresolution is

Descartes’s most complete description of irresolution is offered in *Passions* article 170:

Article 170. About Irresolution.

Irresolution is also a species of Apprehension, which, keeping the soul balanced as it were among many actions it is able to do, causes it to execute none of them, and thus to have time for choosing before deciding [*se determiner*]. In this, truly, it has some beneficial use. But when it lasts longer than necessary and causes the time needed for acting to be spent deliberating, it is extremely bad. Now I say it is a species of Apprehension, in spite of the fact that it may happen, when someone has a choice of many things whose goodness appears quite equal, that he remains uncertain and irresolute without on that account having any Apprehension. For this latter sort of irresolution arises only from the subject presented and not from any excitation of the spirits; that is why it is not a Passion unless one’s Apprehension about choosing badly increases the uncertainty. But this Apprehension is so common and so strong in some that often, even though they do not have to choose, and see only a single thing to take or leave, it holds them back and makes them pause uselessly to look for others. And then it is an excess of Irresolution, arising from too great a desire to do well, and from a weakness of the understanding, which only has a lot of confused

notions and none that are clear and distinct. That is why the remedy for this excess is to accustom ourselves to form certain and decisive [*determinez*] judgments about whatever is presented, and to believe that we always discharge our duty when we do what we judge to be best, even though perhaps we judge very poorly.¹³

In this definition, irresolution appears to be roughly the condition of indecisiveness. When there is more than one possible action we can take and we are uncertain which is best, we may find that our uncertainty suspends us between possible actions so that we do not will any one of them, allowing time for deliberation or to seek advice.¹⁴ Irresolution is considered a passion by Descartes when our uncertainty is strengthened or prolonged by the motions of the animal spirits. When it is a passion, Descartes says that irresolution is a kind of anxiety, or apprehension (which is itself a species of desire) about choosing badly that tends to increase our uncertainty about the goodness of a course of action.

Irresolution seems to have three main elements: (1) uncertainty or ignorance, i.e., lack of clear and distinct perception and the absence of any certain and determinate judgments about the goodness or badness of an action or outcome that depends on us; (2) an apprehension of choosing badly that has the effect of increasing our uncertainty about what to do; and (3) an indifference of the will that may cause hesitation or prevent us from acting.

The second element, the passion of apprehension or anxiety, is fundamental to the *passion* of irresolution, but Descartes tells us that irresolution is not always a passion. It may arise from the equality of the choices we are considering without causing us any apprehension.

Although the third element, hesitation of the will, appears fundamental to irresolution in article 170, when we look at *Passions* article 60, “About Remorse,” it appears not to be. In that article Descartes indicates that it *is* possible to will an action while in a state of irresolution, saying, “And if one has decided [*s’est déterminé*] upon some action before Irresolution has been displaced, that gives rise to Remorse of conscience.”¹⁵ According to this explanation of remorse, it appears that Descartes must not think that irresolution completely incapacitates the will, since it is possible to decide on an action while remaining irresolute.

My interpretation of article 60 is that while we experience hesitation, if we focus our attention on the perceived goodness or the desire for only one alternative, then we may be sufficiently motivated to overcome our irresolution long enough to act. Nevertheless, the irresolution will return as soon as we turn our attention to the reasons or desires for the other alternative, leading us to feel remorse. Since Descartes tells us the remedy for excessive

irresolution is to develop the habit of making certain and determinate judgments,¹⁶ we can infer that decisions that proceed from certain and determinate judgments *do* displace irresolution and are not the decisions referred to article 60.

If the above interpretation of irresolution is correct, then it is the first element of irresolution, the lack of a clear and distinct perception or a firm and determinate judgment about our actions that is the essential element of irresolution. In order to understand this it will be helpful to consider in more detail how the will is influenced to pursue or avoid something. When we have a clear and distinct perception of the good Descartes thinks that our will is impelled to assent to that perception and to pursue that good, at least for so long as our attention is focused on that perception. The more clearly we perceive a good, the easier it is to will to pursue it. When we do not perceive the good clearly or when there is a balance of reasons for and against doing a certain action, then our will is indifferent, and both our judgments and our volitions to pursue or avoid are more difficult.¹⁷

Descartes thinks that most of our perceptions of things as good or evil are not very clear and distinct, and, as a result, in our ordinary daily decisions our will is likely to be indifferent to some degree.¹⁸ If our will is indifferent it may be influenced to act by competing perceptions of the good presented to it, it may be influenced to act by the passions, or it may be suspended and unable to decide. When we are in this condition of uncertainty about how to act, and so long as we have made no certain and determinate judgment that impels the will, we are irresolute. The indifference of the will while we are irresolute both makes us vulnerable to hesitation and makes us liable to having our actions directed by momentary passions. Making a firm and determinate judgment will displace irresolution by impelling the will so that it is less indifferent and can act more easily and in accordance with a judgment.¹⁹

Irresolution, then, is, at its core, a failure of the will, in the face of uncertainty, to determine itself in accordance with a firm and determinate *judgment*.²⁰ Irresolution implies a degree of indifference of the will, which means that acting will be more difficult, but it does not necessarily mean that the will is incapable of action. While we are irresolute our will may allow itself to be inclined by a passion, or to follow a perception without being firmly committed to it by a judgment. Irresolution is also fundamentally a failure to *decide*, that is, to *form* a guiding judgment about how to act, as opposed to a failure of the will to execute a judgment it has already decided to follow. Descartes labels the latter failing Descartes calls cowardice.²¹ The remedy for irresolution is to make firm and determinate judgments in spite of our uncertainty because the firmer we make our judgment the easier it is for the will to determine itself to follow that judgment. Furthermore, when we make a determinate

judgment about the good, we represent the good to ourselves and that arouses passions that support our judgment by maintaining that thought and inclining the soul to will in accordance with that judgment.²²

Part of the remedy for irresolution is also understanding that we do our duty when we do what we judge to be best.²³ This principle plays an interesting role because it gives us a means of strengthening what would otherwise be weak and uncertain judgments. Even though we may be very doubtful that action *a* is the right course of action, we can nevertheless be very certain that *a* is the best idea we can think of given our limited information and time for deliberation, and we can be very certain that following *a*, given that it is our best judgment, is the thing we ought to do. Thus, remembering that what matters is not choosing the best outcome, but just using our will well and following our best judgment, helps make the transition from an uncertain opinion that *a* will bring the best outcome to the firm and certain judgment that we are doing our duty if we do *a*. That firm and certain judgment is one that the will can much more easily determine itself to follow. Thus understanding that we do our duty when we do what we judge to be best is a remedy for irresolution because it helps the will determine itself in accordance with a judgment.

If irresolution is constituted by a failure of the will to determine itself in accordance with a judgment, then resolution is its opposite. Resolution, depending on the context, can be understood as: (i) a particular decision constituted by the will's determining itself in accordance with a judgment in the face of uncertainty; or (ii) a *character trait* constituted by a *disposition* of the will to determine itself in accordance with a judgment in the face of uncertainty.²⁴ Descartes frequently talks of resolutions to perform future actions, and in that case, a firm and constant resolution must be an ongoing *disposition* of the will to act in accordance with a judgment. That a resolution is not merely a belief or judgment about what one ought to do is evidenced by the instances where Descartes talks of the resolution to execute or follow our best judgment.²⁵

It is difficult to determine whether Descartes regards a resolution as a kind of second-order volition, that is, a volition to will to pursue or avoid. Hoffman may have something like that in mind when he hypothesizes that a resolution is an additional act of will (the volition to follow a judgment) in between a judgment and a volition to pursue or avoid, i.e. a decision to act that precedes the action.²⁶ While this is a natural reading of the texts, if we suppose that the will *needs* a separate volition in order to determine itself to act according to a judgment, then we risk saddling Descartes with an uncomfortable regress. An alternative reading of texts where a resolution seems to be an individual decision about how to act is to

regard a resolution as just a particular *kind* of volition to pursue or avoid, one that results from making a firm and determinate guiding judgment.²⁷

In contexts where a resolution implies a decision regarding *future* actions, I think we should understand a resolution as a disposition to will rather than an actual second-order volition. This is because, for Descartes, a volition effects a bodily action by acting on the pineal gland,²⁸ but the motions of the pineal gland are constantly changing while a decision regarding future action must be endure over time. By understanding resolution as a disposition of the will rather than as an actual volition, I think we can avoid the necessity of a regress and make slightly better sense of the mechanism involved.²⁹

III. What the connection is between irresolution and weakness of will

Now we are in a better position to see why Descartes associates irresolution with weakness of will.³⁰ Strong souls, according to *Passions* articles 48 and 49, are souls in whom the will can easily conquer unwanted passions and the accompanying motions of the animal spirits. The soul can only do this, however, if it has formed some decisive judgments about what is good. Although indecisiveness might not seem to directly undermine strength of will, it is in fact a kind weakness because decisions based on judgments are, according to Descartes, the “proper weapons” that the will can use to combat unwanted passions.³¹ Without such judgments with which to guide itself, the will is liable to follow its present passions, nor has it given itself any reason to resist them. Thus the chronically irresolute are the weakest souls of all because they are without any weapons against unwanted passions.³²

It may be objected that it is simply a mistake or a confusion to classify what is wrong with these weakest souls as *irresolution*, which Descartes has described as indecisiveness arising from uncertainty and a keen desire to do well. Hoffman suggests that this weakest type of soul “is more aptly described as lazy”.³³ It would seem that this lazy type of soul is indeed morally contemptible, but not because she is irresolute, since she does not deliberate at all and suffers no anxiety about choosing badly. Moreover, someone who does not give a thought to the goodness of her actions would seem not to be susceptible to remorse. While the morally lazy soul is indeed incapable of virtue and worthy of our contempt, we might think that the indecisive soul Descartes confuses with it, is guilty of what is by comparison only a petty weakness.

Although I agree that there is a distinction here, I think Descartes would maintain that the difference is not a sharp one. Several considerations will help us see why even the morally lazy person should be called irresolute and why both types of irresolution impede virtue.

First, we need to keep in mind that apprehension of choosing badly is characteristic of the *passion* of irresolution, but it is not a necessary component of all irresolution. One can be indecisive without suffering any anxiety over the decision. Thus, the morally lazy person is indecisive in the strict sense of not having made up her mind about what it would be good to do, even though she does not suffer anxiety over the decision.

Second, it would be a mistake to assume that the irresolute soul is always someone who is stuck in deliberation. Irresolution is not itself a state of deliberation, it is a state of uncertainty that *allows time for* deliberation. Since we are supposing she does not deliberate, we might want to say that the person who is morally lazy suffers from something more like ignorance than uncertainty. Nevertheless, like the indecisive person, she has no very clear and distinct perception of her good and forms no certain and decisive judgments about her good. Although one of the dangers of irresolution is that it may lead us to waste in deliberation the time necessary for action, we have seen that another danger, for Descartes, is acting without reaching a decision about the best thing to do. The morally lazy person commits this second kind of error, and allows herself to be moved by her passions instead of a judgment.

Third, we should notice that even though the morally lazy soul may not immediately suffer remorse or repentance for her actions, since she does not consider their goodness or badness, she is nevertheless always vulnerable to suffering repentance or remorse at a later time. She is potentially subject to remorse because she can always represent her actions as bad or possibly bad, at a later time, and then she will recognize that she is to blame for not using her rational judgment. The point is that if we do not form firm and determinate judgments and resolve to follow them then we are subject to hesitation, vacillation, and emotional decision making, and this is true regardless of whether the cause of our irresolution is anxiety, a balance of reasons, or moral and intellectual laziness.

IV. Irresolution, while it persists, is incompatible with acting virtuously

It should be clear by now why Descartes takes irresolution to be so dangerous. In order to be virtuous we must always have the will to act in accordance with judgments about what is best and not be swayed from them from by our passions. Irresolution is a failure to determine the will to follow our judgments. Therefore, it constitutes the worst kind of weakness of will, and while it persists it is incompatible with virtuous action. Irresolution is dangerous because it makes us vulnerable to being ruled by the passions, which are inconstant, and unreliable as guides to the good.³⁴ It also leads to unhappiness because when we act without being certain that we have acted well, we feel remorse. If later, we

come to believe that we have acted badly, we feel bitter repentance because we bear the blame for not using our will well.³⁵

It may be objected that in defining resoluteness as a disposition of the will to determine itself in accordance with rational judgments, and by saying that a person whose will does not determine itself according to judgments is not virtuous, I am overlooking the role of the virtuous passions for Descartes. Descartes holds that many of our passions are virtuous. Indeed, the passion of generosity, which Descartes regards as the central virtue, partly *consists* in feeling within oneself a firm and constant resolution to use our free will well.³⁶ Surely such a passion can motivate resolute action. Thus it seems clear that a person can be resolute even though his will is following a passion, at least so long as the passion is a virtuous one.

To clarify my position, I do not want to deny that the passions play an important motivating role in virtuous and resolute action for Descartes. Thus I do not want to claim that resoluteness requires following our judgments *instead of* our passions. I want to claim that resoluteness requires following our judgments, *and* following our passions when they are in accord with our judgments. Thus, sometimes a certain and determinate judgment impels the will and a volition directly follows, but sometimes a judgment impels the will and also arouses passions which strengthen and continue that inclination. Even though the passions help incline the will, the action is resolute because judgment is playing a guiding role. Thus Descartes says to Princess Elisabeth,

[T]he difference between the greatest souls and the base and vulgar souls consists principally in that the vulgar souls give themselves over to their passions and are happy or sad only according to whether those things that happen to them are agreeable or unpleasant; whereas others [i.e., the great souls] have reasoning so strong and so powerful that, even though they too have passions, and often even more violent ones than most do, their reason nevertheless remains mistress and makes it such that even afflictions serve them and contribute to the perfect felicity which they can enjoy already in this life.³⁷

Descartes thinks that the way to be both virtuous and happy is for rational judgments to guide our actions and for our passions to serve and support our judgments under the constant guidance of reason.³⁸

Descartes's emphasis on acting resolutely and avoiding irresolution might lead one to think that Descartes overlooks the dangers of the opposite vice, a deficiency of irresolution. After

all, taking time to deliberate is important, and making a decision too quickly seems just as likely to lead to repentance as failing to make a firm decision. The failure to deliberate due to a deficiency of irresolution opens us up to reproaching ourselves that we *should have realized, should have double checked*, etc. Choosing wrongly due to insufficient information is forgivable, but when we simply did not take time to consider the information available we also have not used our freedom well. Thus it seems as though a moderate amount of irresolution is necessary for acting virtuously and avoiding remorse. Despite Descartes's zeal for eliminating irresolution, however, he does not overlook the importance of taking time to make an informed decision. Descartes acknowledges that irresolution is beneficial because it gives us time to deliberate before deciding.³⁹ Furthermore, he frequently says that the correct use of our free will requires making an effort to gain knowledge of the good.⁴⁰ For instance, he says to Queen Christina, "And I do not see that it is possible to dispose [the will] better than by a firm and constant resolution to carry out... all the things which one judges to be best, *and to employ all the powers of one's mind in finding out what these are*," and also that the "vigour with which we are inclined to do the things we think good ... must not stem from stubbornness, but from the knowledge that we have examined the matter as well as we are morally able".⁴¹ Descartes acknowledges that virtue without knowledge of the good is a kind of false virtue,⁴² and in article 49 of *The Passions* he says that we always have regret or repentance when we discover that we have acted on a resolution that was based on a false opinion.⁴³

Even though Descartes thinks careful deliberation is important, I believe that one main reason that he does not overly concern himself about the dangers of a *deficiency* of irresolution is because the informed decision-making that he has in mind does not require spending very much time being irresolute while we deliberate. It involves gathering information and forming judgments in *advance* and making a habit of believing them, so that when the moment for action arises we do not *need* to deliberate in order to decide what to do.⁴⁴ By forming judgments prior to the time that action is required we do not risk missing our opportunity because of excessive deliberation or inconstancy, we arm ourselves against the inevitable sway of the passions with resolutions to act according to our best judgment, and we avoid feelings of remorse and regret.

V. Conclusion

When we see that Descartes regards irresolution as a failure to determine the will in accordance with a judgment, it is easier to appreciate why he sees it as such a danger to virtue and happiness. Irresolution effectively renders our actions *irrational*. The irresolute person is vulnerable not only to missed opportunities but she is also at the mercy of

unguided passions. Because she is at the mercy of her passions, the irresolute person is liable to be misled and disappointed since the passions exaggerate the goodness or badness of things, and she is liable to undo or abandon her previous projects since the passions are inconstant. When she fails to accomplish a goal, or wastes her effort pursuing a false one, she is liable to experience remorse and repentance, and she cannot take consolation in the thought that she did what she judged best, because she did not act on her judgments. When understood in this way, it is no wonder that Descartes cautions us to confine our doubt to the armchair!^{45,46}

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¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Descartes Day, Syracuse University, March 6, 2010, and at the Central APA, Chicago, February 18, 2012.

² I have in mind something like the distinction Descartes makes in the Sixth Meditation where he distinguishes that the purpose of sensory perceptions is to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful rather than to inform it of the essential natures of bodies (CSM II 57-58, 61; AT VII 83-84, 89). Similarly in the letter to [Mesland], 2 May 1644, Descartes distinguishes between what is affirmed only as a rule for practical action and what is affirmed as a truth of physics (CSMK III 233; AT IV 115). I do not have in mind the distinction Descartes makes between theoretical and practical knowledge in the letter to Princess Elisabeth, 15 September 1645, where he distinguishes theoretical knowledge of what to do from the habit of believing it (Shapiro 113; AT IV 296).

³ CSM II 41; AT VII 58-59.

⁴ CSM I 123; AT VI: 24-25; translation altered

⁵ 15 September 1645: Shapiro 113; AT IV 295.

⁶ 20 November 1647, CSMK III 325, translation altered; AT V 83-84.

⁷ *Passions* a. 170: Voss 112; AT XI: 459-460, emphasis added.

⁸ Similarly, in the *Discourse*, Descartes says that he forms his provisional moral code, "lest I should remain indecisive [*irresolu*] in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgements" (CSM I 122; AT VI 22).

⁹ See, for instance, the letter to Princess Elisabeth, 6 October 1645 (Shapiro 117; AT IV: 307). Kimberly Blessing brings out this point nicely (2008).

¹⁰ It has been suggested to me by Sydney Penner that Descartes's concern with irresolution as well as his position on the roles of the intellect and will in moral decision-making may be illuminated by situating his view within the casuist and probabilist traditions of Catholic moral philosophy. I agree that there are relevant comparisons to be made, although I am unable to explore them here. A useful overview of the casuist tradition is Jonsen and Toulmin's *The Abuse of Casuistry*.

¹¹ Letters to Princess Elisabeth of 4 August 1645 and 18 August 1645 (Shapiro 98, 105; AT IV: 265, 278). See also, Discourse on Method (CSM I 123; AT VI 24), dedicatory letter to Principles (CSM I 191; AT VIIIa 2-3), Letter to Queen Christina, 20 November 1647 (CSMK III 324-325; AT V: 82-84), and Passions articles 148, 153 (Voss 101, 104; AT XI 442, 445-446).

¹² In *Passions* article 48, Descartes says,

For there is no doubt that those in whom the will can naturally conquer the passions most easily and stop the accompanying movements of the body have the strongest souls. However, there are some who cannot test their strength, because they never make their will do battle with its proper weapons, but only with the ones which some passions supply it in order to resist other [passions]. What I call its proper weapons are firm and decisive [*determinez*] judgments concerning the knowledge of good and evil, which it has resolved to follow in conducting the actions of its life. And the weakest souls of all are those whose will does not decide [*se determine*] in this way to follow certain judgments, but continually allows itself to be carried away by present passions..." (Voss 46; AT XI 366-367)

Then in article 49, he says, "there are very few men so weak and irresolute that they will nothing but what their passion dictates to them. The greater part have decisive [*determinez*] judgments which they follow in regulating a part of their actions" (Voss 47; AT XI 368).

¹³ Voss 112, translation altered; AT XI: 459-460.

¹⁴ See also *Passions* article 59 (Voss 54; AT XI 376).

¹⁵ Voss 54; AT XI 376. Remorse is a species of sadness that we feel when we are uncertain whether something we are doing or have done is bad (*Passions* a. 177: Voss 116; AT XI 464). When we will an action without dispelling our uncertainty about the goodness of that action, we tend to feel remorse about our action.

¹⁶ Voss 112; AT XI: 459-460.

¹⁷ For Descartes's account of freedom of the will and the manner in which perceptions of reason incline the will see the Fourth Meditation (CSM II 40-43; AT VII 57-62), the Sixth Set of Replies (CSM II 292; AT VII 432-433), and the letters to [Mesland], 2 May 1644 and 9 February 1645 (CSMK III 233-234, 244-246; AT IV 115-118, 173-175).

¹⁸ See for instance the letters to Elizabeth, 15 September 1645 (CSMK III: 265) and 6 October 1645 (CSMK III: 269).

¹⁹ For Descartes's account of how the passions incline the will see especially *Passions* articles 36, 40, 47-49, 52, 60, 137, 144, and 170 (Voss 39, 40-41, 44-47, 51-52, 54, 92, 97, 112-113; AT XI 357, 359, 364-368, 372, 376, 430, 436, 459-460). My understanding of the way that clear and distinct perceptions, judgments, and passions influence the will is heavily indebted to Paul Hoffman (2003). Also relevant on this subject is Christopher Gilbert (1998) and Hoffman (1995).

²⁰ In *The Passions* Descartes uses the verb “*se determiner*” rather than “*décider*” to describe the will’s deciding on an action (aa. 48, 51, 60, 170, 200: Voss 46, 51, 54, 113, 126; AT XI 367, 371, 459, 479). Similarly, in article 18, he uses the verb “*se terminer*” to distinguish volitions that terminate in actions of the soul from volitions that terminate in actions of the body (*Passions*, Voss 28; AT XI 343). In light of article 18, I interpret Descartes’s use of “*se determiner*” as meaning that when we decide what to do the will determines itself, or causes its own action, by selecting for itself an end, or terminating action.

²¹ See *Passions* aa. 59, 174: Voss 54, 114-115; AT XI 375-376, 462.

²² See the letter to Elisabeth, 6 October 1645 (Shapiro 119-120; AT IV 312-313) and *Passions* articles 74, 161 (Voss 59, 108-109; AT XI 383, 453-454). For a longer account of how judgments give rise to passions that support and maintain the motivation to act on them, see Brassfield 465.

²³ a. 170: Voss 112; AT XI: 460.

²⁴ For instance, we should understand resolution as a decision in the following passages where Descartes speaks of resolving or making a resolution to do something:

“I thought, in place of the large number of rules that make up logic, I would find the following four to be sufficient, provided that I made a strong and unswerving resolution never to fail to observe them” (*Discourse* pt. II: CSM I: 120; AT VI: 18).

“Those who are by nature somewhat backward intellectually should make a firm and faithful resolution [*voluntatem, resolution*] to do their utmost to acquire knowledge of what is right...” (*Principles*, Dedicatory Letter: CSM I 191; AT VIIIa 3, IXb 22).

“[O]ne has no reason to repent when one has done what one judges to be the best at the time that one had to be resolved to act...” (Letter to Princess Elisabeth, Egmond, 6 October 1645: Shapiro 117; AT IV: 307).

“What I call its proper weapons are firm and decisive judgments concerning the knowledge of good and evil, which it has resolved to follow in conducting the actions of its life” (*Passions* a. 48: Voss 46; AT XI: 366-367).

“But there is still a great difference between resolutions that proceed from some false opinion and those that rest on knowledge of the truth alone...” (*Passions* a. 49: Voss 47; AT XI: 367-368).

“[T]hose who contain themselves and decide to exact a greater vengeance grow sad from thinking themselves bound to do so by the action that angers them, and sometimes too they are apprehensive about the evils which may follow upon the resolution they have made...” (*Passions* a. 200: Voss 126-127; AT XI: 479).

We should understand resolution as a virtuous character trait in the following passages where Descartes talks of being resolute or having resolution, rather than of making a resolution to do something:

“My second maxim was to be as firm and resolute in my actions as I could” (*Discourse* Pt. III: CSM I 123, translation altered; AT VI 24-25).

“I said that one must be resolute in one’s actions” (Letter to Reneri for Pollot, April or May 1638: CSMK III 97, translation altered; AT II: 34-35)

“I was forced to speak of firmness and resolution in action ...Altogether it seems to me that I could not have been more careful to set resolution, since it is a virtue, between its two contrary vices, indecision and obstinacy” (Letter to Reneri for Pollot, April or May 1638, CSMK III 97, translation altered; AT II: 34-35).

“This is why I am persuaded that resolution and promptness are virtues very necessary for matters already begun” (Shapiro 138; AT IV: 414).

“[S]o virtue consists only in the resolution and vigour with which we are inclined to do the things we think good” (Letter to Queen Christina, 20 November 1647, CSMK III: 325; AT V: 83-84).

“As for Servility... it consists mainly in feeling weak or not very resolute...” (a. 159, Voss 106; AT XI: 450).

²⁵ See the letters to Princess Elisabeth, 4 August 1645 and 18 August 1645 (Shapiro 98-99, 105; AT IV: 265-267, 278); the letter to Queen Christina, 20 November 1647 (CSMK III: 325; AT V: 83-84); and *Passions* a. 48 (Voss 46; AT XI 366-367).

²⁶ 2003, 283.

²⁷ I have in mind a text such as the letter to Princess Elisabeth, Egmond, 6 October 1645: “[O]ne has no reason to repent when one has done what one judges to be the best at the time that one had to be resolved to act...” (Shapiro 117; AT IV: 307).

²⁸ See *Passions* aa. 31, 44 (Voss 36, 42-23; AT IV 351-352, 361-362).

²⁹ Nevertheless, this reading leaves unanswered the question of what mechanism, if any, is involved in a disposition of the will! I take this to be one instance of a larger question about the nature and existence of unconscious or non-actual mental states for Descartes.

³⁰ Most clearly at *Discourse* pt. III (CSM I: 123; AT VI 25), Letter to Queen Christina, 20 November 1647 (CSMK III: 325; AT V: 83-84), and *Passions* articles 49, 159, 191 (Voss 47, 106, 122; AT XI: 367-368, 450, 472-473), but see also the letter to Mersenne, end of May 1637 (CSMK III: 56; AT I: 366), and *Passions* article 164 (Voss 110; AT XI: 455).

³¹ *Passions* a. 48 (Voss 47; AT XI 368).

³² Ibid.

³³ 2003, 284.

³⁴ For a full defense of the claim that Descartes thinks we should not be guided by the passions, see Brassfield, “Never Let the Passions Be Your Guide” (2010).

³⁵ See *Passions* a. 191 (Voss 122; AT IV 472)). Blessing has a good discussion of the connection between

irresolution and remorse or repentance (2008).

³⁶ See *Passions* a. 161 (Voss 108-109; AT IV 453-454).

³⁷ 18 May 1645: Shapiro 87; AT IV 202.

³⁸ See also the letter to Princess Elisabeth, 1 September 1645 (Shapiro 109; AT IV 287) Descartes's distinction between two senses of "excessive" passions in the letter to Elisabeth of 3 November 1645 (Shapiro 125; AT IV: 331-332). See Brassfield (2010) for a defense of the view that Descartes thinks the passions should play a motivating but not a guiding role in order to achieve a happy life.

³⁹ See *Passions* a. 170 (Voss 112-113; AT XI: 459).

⁴⁰ Blessing also emphasizes the importance for Descartes of backing up our firm resolutions with knowledge the good (2008).

⁴¹ 20 November 1647 (CSMK III 325; AT V 83-84), emphasis added. Also, in the letter to Princess Elisabeth, 4 August 1645, Descartes writes that "the first [rule of conduct] is that he always try to make use of his mind as well as he can, in order to know what must be done, or not done, in all the events of life" (Shapiro 98; AT IV: 265), and in his letter of 15 September 1645 he writes: "it seems to me that only two things are required in order to be always disposed to judge well: one is the knowledge of the truth, and the other is the habit of remembering and acquiescing to this knowledge every time the occasion requires" (Shapiro 111; AT IV: 291).

⁴² See the letters to Princess Elisabeth, 18 August 1645 and 4 August 1645 (Shapiro 105, 99; AT IV 278, 266-267).

⁴³ Voss 47; AT XI: 367-368. It is puzzling why Descartes says this when in other places, such as in the letter to Princess Elisabeth, 6 October 1645 (Shapiro 117; AT IV: 307), he says that to avoid repentance it is not necessary to be free from mistakes of reason. In order to understand Descartes's comment in article 49 it should be noted that in this passage the mistaken opinions Descartes has in mind are judgments "founded on the passions by which the will has previously allowed itself to be conquered or seduced" (a. 49: Voss 47; AT XI 368). When the falsehood of such unreliable judgments is discovered, Descartes may think that the person in question will repent of not having used his faculties to discover the truth, which is also a failure to use our freedom well, or he may repent having allowed himself to be seduced by those passions in the first place, which Descartes thinks can be controlled through training and by cultivating generosity (See for instance, *Passions* aa. 50, 191: Voss 47-48, 108-109; AT XI: 368-370, 453-454). On this reading, the repentance is in fact a repentance of not having used one's will well.

⁴⁴ See the *Discourse on Method* (Pt. III: CSM I: 123; AT VI: 25) and the letters to Princess Elisabeth of 1 September 1645, 15 September 1645, May 1646 [A] and May 1646 [B] (Shapiro 109, 113, 137, 138; AT IV: 286-287, 295-296, 411, 414).

⁴⁵ That is, he cautions us to confine indecisiveness to our (theoretical) judgments and not to let it affect our actions. See the passages cited in the first paragraph of this essay. Also, in the First Meditation, before he

begins on his method of doubt, Descartes tells the reader that he first postponed this task until he was mature enough and then that, “I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself [etc.]” (CSM II 17; AT VII 18). He seems to regard doubting as a dangerous thing to do unless one is mature and has cleared a space and a stretch of time where no pressing actions or practical decisions will be required.

⁴⁶ I am grateful for helpful suggestions, corrections, and feedback on this paper from Kimberly Blessing, Barrett Brassfield, Garrick Byers, Sean Greenberg, Benjamin Hill, Marie Jayasekera, Sydney Penner, Lisa Shapiro, and the audiences at Syracuse University and at the Central APA in Chicago, 2012.