Descartes and Pelagianism

Thomas Lennon

Published online: 27 July 2013
© Thomas Lennon 2013

Abstract

Both in his time, and still now, the name of Descartes has been linked with Pelagianism. Upon close investigation, however, the allegations of Pelagianism and the evidence for them offer very slim pickings. Whether Descartes was a Pelagian is a theological question; the argument here will be that a consideration of Descartes’s claims cited as Pelagian nonetheless promises a better philosophical understanding of his views on the will and other, related matters.

After an introduction to Pelagianism (sec.1), the most prominent source nowadays for its connection with Descartes is seen to be Arnauld, the master critic of the period, who as a Jansenist was especially sensitive to any sign of Pelagianism (sec.2). Historically, however, the more important source was the Dutch theologian Revius, whose allegation of it against Descartes ignited a long and widespread controversy (sec.3). Just as Pelagianism might be seen as a “topos in which the Dutch anti-Cartesian literature was concentrated,”1 so a topos for the Pelagian controversy itself might be the biblical text alluded to by Descartes in the fourth Meditation, according to which man is created in the image and likeness of God, most so, according to Descartes, with respect to the will (sec.4). Another way to frame the issue, of particular philosophical interest, then, is the infinity of the Cartesian will, explored more recently by Grimaldi (sec.5). Another recent publication, by Scribano, sets out its origins in a way that shows how complex the Dutch debate really was both in terms of partisanship and philosophical relevance (sec.6). The issues raised by the connection of Descartes to Pelagianism tend to be orthogonal, breeding confusion; so, at the end below, a brief catalogue of the theological views relevant to Descartes’s claims will be given, based on the results of this investigation (sec.7).
1. Introduction

The connection with Pelagianism is one that Descartes himself disavowed in no uncertain terms. In an important, carefully considered letter to Mersenne, written just before the publication of his *Discourse on the Method*, he says that he cannot be accused of Pelagianism. Although he discusses doing good, he says, he does so only in the sense of moral or natural philosophy, “where no account is taken of grace,” which enters the question only in a theological sense—as in the question of Pelagianism. Adhering to the policy urged upon him by Mersenne himself, Descartes eschews theology generally, but especially theological controversy. In short, he does not espouse Pelagianism because it does not, and cannot arise in his work.

By itself, Descartes’s disavowal of Pelagianism counts for very little. No one in the seventeenth would have consciously, openly, and explicitly espoused a view condemned by the fifth-century Council of Carthage (418 AD) as a heresy. As with many other such heresies, however, exactly what was condemned, and exactly what was meant, were sometimes matters of continuing controversy. Typically, the Church simply condemned statements extracted more or less verbatim from works taken to be problematic. The fifth canon of this Council’s decree gives the gist of what was referred to as Pelagianism: it is the view that “the grace of justification is given to us such that we are able to fulfill through grace what we are commanded to do by free will [per liberum arbitrium], just as if the grace were not given it would not be easy but nonetheless possible for us to fulfill divine commands.” As a basis for its position, the Council cites John’s citation of Christ 15:5: “without me you can do nothing.”

Given the controversy it generated, the most important seventeenth-century text on the will is the *Augustinus* (1640), the posthumous publication of the Bishop of Ypres, Cornelius Jansen(ius). This huge text was not the first or even the most original effort in the period to deal with a perceived recrudescence of Pelagianism. But it raised the stakes by clearly attacking Molinism in these terms with a wealth of Augustinian scholarship. (More on Molinism immediately below.) Its reading of such texts as John 15:5 was obvious: God does all, at least with respect to salvation, for which grace is necessary and sufficient. Not incidentally, five propositions from the *Augustinus* bearing on the issue of grace were famously condemned as heretical, for apparently asserting the opposite heresy of denying free will altogether. (The condemnations began in 1653 with the Bull *Cum occasione*, and were repeated into the next century in response to Jansenist resistance.)
After an opening history of the Pelagian heresy, Jansenius begins the *Augustinus* by identifying the Pelagian view of human free will *[arbitrii libertate]*, “which sets man above all other living things, as lying in the indifference of choosing good or evil.” The first clause does not by itself distinguish the Pelagian from any Christian view. That is, the clause is a non-restrictive one. The second clause is where the action lies. Indifference is a multiply ambiguous term in the period. Here it is used in the sense that under the same conditions at least two incompatible actions are possible. This was a view with a relevant pedigree back at least to Ockham, but which in the period came to be associated with the Jesuit Luis de Molina (1535-1600), and indeed with his whole Society, although not all Jesuits subscribed to the view.

Pelagianism is no trivial issue, or some dry technical issue on the periphery of a woebegone period. On the contrary, it is of a piece with a closely related family of heresies condemned under various aliases from the earliest days of the Church into the seventeenth century and beyond: from Arianism, to Socinianism, Unitarianism, and beyond. Obviously at stake are free will, responsibility, the nature of evil, and other philosophical concepts, but also such related theological concepts as grace, original sin, and Revelation. Also implicated is the role of the Church and its sacraments, and even the divinity of Christ, the Incarnation, and the Redemption. If man can save himself, however that is understood, then the account of salvation from transmitted sin by a divine redeemer becomes otiose.

To depict the obvious snares of Pelagianism is not to say, however, that Descartes (even with his expressed avoidance of theology) did not unwittingly, or clandestinely, or implicitly support some Pelagian doctrine or other. That is, the seventeenth-century allegation of Pelagianism against Descartes is rather like certain attributions in recent times— for example, the skepticism *malgré lui* advanced by Richard Popkin, or the between-the-lines atheistic materialism claimed by Hiram Caton, or even the humanist deism suggested by the late Pope. These allegations might be taken as models for understanding what arose in the period with respect to Pelagianism.

### 2. Natural love of God

Nowadays, the best known allegation of Pelagianism against Descartes in the period came from Arnauld. A letter of 18 October 1669 to an unknown recipient deals with a letter forwarded to him written by the Cartesian Robert Desgabets. The forwarded letter deals with a Cartesian ontological account of the Eucharist, one which Arnauld finds problematic. Changing the topic, but not the Cartesian context, he adds: “I also find it very strange that this cleric takes Descartes for a man very enlightened in matters of religion, whereas his
letters are full of Pelagianism, and aside from what his philosophy had persuaded him of, such as the existence of God and the soul’s immortality, all that can be said to his advantage is that he always appeared to submit to the Church.” 7 This is the whole of the allegation. Arnauld cites no particular letter, and gives no argument or explanation. The comment has no context beyond that indicated here.8 Moreover, there is a question of how much credence should be given Arnauld on this topic.

The first major controversy in France over the Augustinus erupted between Arnauld and Isaac Habert, a theologian at the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, who, beginning at the end of 1642 and extending into 1643, preached three sermons against the work. Arnauld replied, at length, with an Apologie for Jansenius (1644), followed by a Seconde Apologie (1645), which rebutted Habert’s rejoinder, the Defense de la foy de l’Eglise (1644). Nor was that the end of it. Indeed, it might be said that this dispute has never ended. At its core was the issue of Pelagianism, which had been the core of the Augustinus.

Habert concluded that in Arnauld’s view practically everyone, including the Council of Trent (1545-63), was a Pelagian. For he acted as if adding the phrase, “if one wills it,” to the claim that men are justified by Christ, makes it Pelagian. That is, according to Arnauld on Habert’s reading of him, if salvation is conditional upon our willing it, then we in effect save ourselves. The phrase was famously used in the fourth canon of the Council of Trent: “the soul moved by grace can resist that grace, if it wills to do so [si velit].” So famously, it seems, that Habert does not explicitly cite Trent. Instead, he cites such luminaries as Basil, Gregory, Chrysostom, and even Augustine as saying the same thing (or at least its contrapositive: men “can be saved if they will it.”)9 One reason he does not cite Trent is that the concern at this Council was not with Pelagianism, but with its exact opposite, namely the strict predestination expounded by Calvin and Luther, which was read as an outright denial of free will altogether and the elimination of any role whatsoever for man in his salvation. In the Council condemnation of Calvin and Luther, the fine boundaries of Pelagianism, which were not under discussion in any case, would have been only a distraction. (Even with the Council’s narrow focus, of course, Jansenism loomed, appearing a century later).

The text of Arnauld’s that alleged Descartes’s Pelagianism was first brought to light by Jean Laporte, who thought that it was “likely” a letter to Chanut that Arnauld had in mind.10 It seems that this French ambassador to Sweden had passed along from Queen Christina certain questions about Descartes’s views on love, among other topics. Here the question, as reported by Descartes, was “whether the natural light by itself teaches us to love God, and whether one can love him by the power of that light alone.”11 Descartes begins his reply
with “two strong reasons” for doubt, both based on the difficulty in naturally knowing God and therefore of loving him. He is not surprised, he continues, that some philosophers have argued just this case, and have identified the Incarnation as the only basis for such love. “They say too that those who have a passion for some divinity without knowing about the mystery of the Incarnation have not loved the true God, but only some idols to which they gave his name.” Even so, he concludes, “I have no doubt at all that we can truly love God by the sole power of our nature. I do not assert that this love is meritorious without grace—I leave it to the theologians to unravel that—but I make bold to say that with regard to the present life it is the most delightful and useful passion possible.”

Laporte himself was unimpressed by Descartes’s restriction of his claim to non-meritorious love. He points out that the issue between Augustine and his Jansenist followers on the one hand, and their Pelagian-leaning opponents on the other, was not just whether such love was meritorious (that is, capable of bringing about salvation), but even whether it was possible at all.12

Now, this statement to Chanut is not an aberration or even an innovation on Descartes’s part. Rather, it follows from positions prominently espoused by him at crucial junctures of his philosophy. The idea of God is for him a clear and distinct innate idea, not so that we comprehend him, but sufficient for us to know him. It is an idea that is perfect, such that nothing can be added to subtracted from it without thereby making it the idea of something else. In a text that resonates in the letter to Chanut, Descartes strenuously distinguished his position from that of Gassendi, who thought that the idea was constructed piecemeal from experience. “This is how the ideas of Pandora and of all false Gods are formed by those who do not have a correct conception of the true God.” 13 Moreover, to know the good is to love the good. Just as proper perception of the true constrains assent to it, so proper perception of the good constrains us to pursue it. Thus he says in the Discourse that “since our will tends to pursue or avoid only what our intellect represents as good or bad, we need only to judge well in order to act well.”14 In the letter to Mersenne cited at the outset above, Descartes defends this claim by appeal to the “common scholastic doctrine ...that ‘the will does not tend towards evil except in so far as it is presented to it by the intellect under some aspect of goodness’.” 15 The upshot should be, and is, that we are naturally in a position to love God. This is the view expressed in the third Meditation, as a comment on the first of his passages that alludes to Genesis 1: 28-29, that he is created in the image and likeness of God, insofar as He has left His mark upon him. Self-reflection shows me to be incomplete and dependent, he says, yet aspiring to something greater, by which I see that there is someone on whom I depend and who contains what I aspire to, “not just indefinitely and potentially [as I do], but actually and infinitely.” 16
Another text that Arnauld might have had in mind is the so-called letter to Mesland of 9 February 1645. This text has been interpreted as a commitment on Descartes’s part to a libertarian view of freedom, and to that extent, at least, it represents a Pelagian inclination. Whether this is a correct interpretation is the subject of a very extensive, on-going literature involving questions whose complexity is beyond the resources permitted to an investigation of just the Pelagian question. Suffice it here that a focus of the question has been the following sentence, in which Descartes has been read as saying that even in clear and distinct perception of the truth, we can exercise a libertarian freedom of indifference and withhold assent: “For it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from holding a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing.” One wonders why, if Descartes holds a libertarian view of freedom, any such proviso was tacked on. This observation does not settle the matter, but might sufficiently redress the burden of proof for present purposes.

With the controversy immediately ignited by the publication of the *Augustinus*, it is not surprising that Descartes’s attention should be drawn to Pelagianism, nor that the occasion should be allegations of his sharing that view. Partially surviving correspondence indicates that Mersenne urged upon him consideration of Augustine’s commentary on the fourteenth Psalm, made famous by Anselm: “Only the fool hath said in heart there is no God,” but which continues in anti-Pelagian fashion: “They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.” Descartes expresses surprise that those intending to slander him would resort to such an unlikely pretext, but he then proceeds to enter the realm of grace in order to detail his differences from Pelagius. He dismisses Pelagius’s claim that “it is possible without grace to do good works and merit eternal life,” pointing out that this was condemned by the Church. Second, while God’s existence can be known of by reason alone, as all theologians have attested, serving as a preparation for faith, this knowledge does not merit salvation. For that, thirdly, belief such as that in Christ is necessary, which can only come from grace. The correspondence, then, does not support the charge of Pelagianism; on the contrary.

3. The Leiden controversy

The charge of Pelagianism against Descartes did not have to await publication of his correspondence. It arose a decade earlier, in Holland, and was directed against the fourth Meditation. On the face of it, that charge is improbable. Arnauld was a close reader of the *Meditations*; after all, he was one of the Objectors. Moreover, he was in the thick of his dispute with Habert, and undoubtedly sensitized to this very issue. Yet nowhere in the fourth Meditation, or anywhere else in the work, did Arnauld, who probed Descartes’s
views on the natures of God and man, their relation of dependence, and other issues of relevance to the Pelagian question, ending with “points that might cause difficulty to theologians,” nowhere did he find the least ground to enter an objection on grounds of Pelagianism. On the contrary, Arnauld identifies the starting point of Descartes’s philosophy, namely his own existence, as “exactly the same principle as that laid down by St. Augustine.” Instead, it is the ontological problem of the Eucharist that poses the danger.

Descartes had fled to Holland, spending the greater part of his adult life there in order to avoid just this sort of controversy in France. He was involved, first, in a more or less known crisis, at the University of Utrecht, but where the philosophical interest to us is largely limited to having provided him with a motive, or at least an occasion for publishing his Principles of Philosophy. It was never definitively resolved, but was petering out when another emerged at the University of Leiden, where Descartes had matriculated as a student much earlier, and where at this point he had significant friends and supporters, but also opponents. As in Utrecht, the details, while colorful, are of limited philosophical interest.

The picture of the opposition sketched by Descartes’s hagiographer Baillet, from Descartes’s correspondence (on which Baillet, alas, largely bases his account) is of a desperate coterie of moss-backed reactionaries resorting to calumny and intrigue in an effort to resist the arrival of the new philosophy represented by Descartes. He felt that not only his views, but also his person were under threat; but he wished to avoid the appearance of attacking the university itself that would be conveyed by publishing a rebuttal. So he wrote a lengthy letter to the curators of the university complaining of misrepresentation. The instance of misrepresentation to which he objected at greatest length, and which is indicative of the interpretive ability of his critics, was that in the Meditations he had portrayed God as deceiver.

The crucial fact in the episode is that a series of “disputations” had been conducted wherein his philosophy came under attack. In particular, Jacob(us) Revius, a Regent of the Statencollege, a faculty of theology and philosophy, and Jacob(us) Trigland(us), a Professor of Theology there, attacked him on his method of doubt, the nature of God, and the human will. Revius (1586-1658) was a counter-Remonstrant, who, as an opponent of Arminian (roughly Molinist) doctrines, would have been antecedently no less opposed than Arnauld to Pelagianism, and no less on the qui vive for it. He accused Descartes of Pelagianism on the basis of a passage from the fourth Meditation, which follows the claim that his understanding is “extremely weak and very finite,” whence he forms “an idea of a
supremely great and infinite” understanding belonging to God. Here is the passage, as presented in Theo Verbeek’s *Descartes and the Dutch*:

For the same reason, if I examine the faculties of memory or of imagination or some other one, clearly none is not small and limited, whereas the same is in God immeasurable. *There is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I perceive to be so great, that I am not aware of an idea of something greater [nullius maioris]. Therefore, it is mainly the will, in virtue of which I understand that I may conceive of myself as an image and likeness of God.*25

The issue initially turned on the phrase *nullius maioris*, and the comparison class with respect to which Descartes says of his idea of the will that there is none greater: the will as greater than what? Descartes reports that this question arose in the disputation.26 For Revius seems to have understood the comparison class to be unrestricted: nothing was greater. That is, Revius took Descartes to mean that he was aware of nothing greater than his idea of the will. Given what Descartes says about the will, Verbeek thinks “it is difficult not to be of Revius’s opinion [that Descartes espoused Pelagianism].”27 For “...the heart and core of Pelagianism was, [Revius] said, that it attributes to man an excessive freedom, which is exactly what Descartes does. All faculties are, according to Descartes, *circumspecta*, or limited, except human freedom, which is *immense* and *incircumspecta*, that is, infinite and unlimited. Consequently, human freedom is as great as that of God.”28

Indeed, with the syntax ascribed to Descartes by Revius, it hard to see why Descartes is not claiming, absurdly, that human freedom itself is as great as God Himself. Any such disastrous reading is blocked, however, by the sequel to the passage from the *Meditations* quoted above. Descartes says that his will is no less great than God’s when considered “in the essential and strict sense.” But God’s will is “incomparably greater than [his], both in virtue of the power that accompany it and make it more firm and efficacious, and also in virtue of its object, in that it ranges over a greater number of items.”29

So what, then, is the comparison class for Descartes’s *nullius maioris* claim? Both syntactically and philosophically, the only possible referent, or substantival to which the adjective applies, would be the other faculties with which Descartes had been contrasting the will, namely the understanding, the memory, and the imagination. And this is just what Descartes himself tells the university curators, thereby exploding Revius’s argument.30 Indeed, it would have been inexplicable for Descartes to have had any greater referent in mind. The context for his claim about the will is an explanation of the possibility of error, which requires only that it be of greater extent in what it can affirm than is the intellect in
what it clearly and distinctly presents for affirmation, not that it be greater than anything else, in any other respect.\footnote{31}

Revius at least implicitly acknowledged a mistake on his part. For he said that he entered what he described as a correction in a later text, which his most recent editor takes to be obviously the \textit{Methodi cartesianae consideratio theologica} of 1648.\footnote{32} Here is what Revius had said in the 23\textsuperscript{rd} Disputation of the previous year: “It is false that we have an idea of our free will, and that taken precisely and formally it is greater than the image and likeness of God, as he says. This exceeds all Pelagianism, and, with God expelled, sets free will in His place.” \footnote{33} In the later text, he quotes the fourth Meditation as follows:

\begin{quote}
It is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp; so much so that it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God. For although God’s will is incomparably greater than mine, both in virtue of the knowledge and power that accompany it and make it more firm and efficacious, and also in virtue of its object, in that it ranges over a greater number of items, nevertheless it does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the essential and strict sense [\textit{in se formaliter & praecise spectata}].\footnote{34}
\end{quote}

He then comments: “It is false and more than Pelagian that the idea of freedom, and the freedom itself, which in God in virtue of knowledge and object is greater than ours, is however, considered in the strict sense, not greater than ours.”\footnote{35} This correction is twofold. No longer is Descartes said to regard something of ours as greater than something about God. Secondly, the citation from the fourth Meditation acknowledges Descartes’s qualification of the resemblance he asserts between us and God. But the reference problem remains unaddressed.

It is in the latest work that he finally addresses the reference problem, as follows:

\begin{quote}
Let the following be noted: the faculties of knowing, remembering, etc., are circumscribed in us, but freedom of the will is \textit{uncircumscribed, immense}, etc., such that \textit{none is greater}, not even in God, if it is regarded in the essential and strict sense, for he does not deny that it is greater in God in virtue of greater knowledge, power, and object. But these are nothing other than accidents of freedom, not freedom itself. He places this equality of our freedom with the divine in this, that neither is determined by an external force. Each of them is therefore mistress of her
\end{quote}
own actions, and independent of all external influence. This is the very heart and soul of Pelagianism....

With the rectification of the crucial reference, however, the prima facie case for Descartes Pelagianism begins to evaporate. No longer is it simply the infinitude of the human will, or the even the idea of it, that makes the human will too much like God’s, but some further consideration, viz. the lack of determination by any external force. Now, to be sure, Descartes here and elsewhere appeals to this feature in his characterization of the human will. But nowhere in the fourth Meditation, or anywhere else, does he speak of the divine will in such terms. For God’s will consists not in such independence, as Revius calls it, but in pure indifference. Such indifference in God is His pure power, which according to Descartes, we certainly do not possess.

4. The image and likeness of God

What is to be made of this feeble attack? Descartes seems to have made more of it, perhaps because of well-founded concern for his personal safety, than did his adversaries. Seeking redress, he wrote with his complaints not once, but three times to the University curators, to William II of Orange, to the French Ambassador, and to various others, thus extending the dispute by providing occasions for further attacks. With Revius, the concern with Descartes was initially negligible and expanded only in response to defenses of Descartes, perhaps in the letters, but certainly in works by Adriaan Heereboord and Johannes Clauberg. At no stage, moreover, was the concern with his alleged Pelagianism paramount. Far more problematic was Descartes’s conception of an idea as an image, particularly if the idea of God is taken to be an image. Any image of God would violate the second commandment and introduce idolatry, the bane of Catholicism according to the Calvinist Reform. But even here, the concern rested on interpretive mistakes. For Revius ignored Descartes’s qualification that ideas are only like images (tanquam imagines), and the distinction he drew between what can be imagined such as the difference between a triangle and a rectangle and the unimaginable difference between a chiliagon and a myriagon. But even a fixation on the threat of idolatry does not explain how Revius could have ignored the obvious reference to Genesis 1:28-29 in Descartes’s claim of having been made in the image and likeness of God. With its failure to address it, Revius’s attack was bound to be lame.

Nonetheless, references to the biblical text were far from uncommon in the period, and had a long and sophisticated history of exegesis. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux, whose authority for orthodoxy in the seventeenth century was second only to that of Augustine, drew a distinction between the senses of image and likeness, from which he teases out a
theology of the will. Man is the image of God insofar as he has freedom from necessity; he is the resemblance of God insofar as he has freedom from sin and misery, but this freedom was lost with Adam’s sin. Gilson points out that Descartes differed from Aquinas and the Jesuits of Coimbra in taking the ground for man’s likeness to lie in the will. The most prominent source for this divergence is identified by Gilson as Bernard, with whom Descartes might have been familiar through Mersenne, perhaps from his *Quaestiones celeberimae in Genesim*, the ninth of whose comments sets out the view, explicitly referring to Bernard. Not incidentally, Bernard also held that free will is a binary notion, such that it is possessed entirely or not at all. (Of this, more below.) This indivisibility of the will is to be found in Aquinas, but sets Bernard, and Descartes, at odds with the Augustinian tradition, which regards the will as varying in degree.

Nor were Descartes and Bernard alone in grounding the likeness primarily in the will. Denis Petau, the Jesuit theologian whose work on the will Mesland urged on Descartes, traced its history back to the Church fathers. Petau raises the rarified question of whether it is just God or the Trinity to which man bears the relation, which leads him to a discussion of the view, held by Caesarius, Chrysostom, John Damascene, and Gregory of Nyssene, that it is the will of man, “a power of dominion,” that grounds the relation on his side.

That he is made in the image and likeness of God, then, is not a mere embellishment insinuated by Descartes, a pious veneer applied to soothe the doctors of theology at the Sorbonne. For the relation grounds important doctrines of his. The contrast that he draws in the fourth Meditation between his great will and his intellect, “which is extremely slight and very finite,” enables him to explain the nature of error, crucial to his theodicy, and thus to the Meditations as a whole. Unless God can be insulated from responsibility for our errors, there can be no hope ever of achieving certainty about truth. In addition, unless he is made by God in His image and likeness, which, as he argued in the third Mediation, includes creating in him an idea of Him, there can be no proof of the existence of God, and thus no general ground for certainly about truth.

It was in response to objections from Gassendi that Descartes elucidated the nature of the sort of likeness asserted in the third Mediation, far more than he ever had occasion to do for the sort asserted in the fourth Meditation. We bear the likeness of God, he said in the third Meditation, as the work bears the stamp of the craftsman. But this analogy leads Descartes to weaken the resemblance relation (and thus to undermine any basis for a charge of Pelagianism). In response to Mersenne he says that he uses the analogy precisely because “the absolute immensity, simplicity and unity of God...has no copy [exemplum] in us....In virtue of this we recognize that, of all the attributes which...we assign to God... none belong
to God and to ourselves in the same sense.”

In response to Gassendi’s objection that a house does not resemble its builder, Descartes explains that the mark of Apelles lies in the inimitable technique [artificium] found in his work, not in any exact likeness. Indeed, Alexander need not be made of paint and wood in order for him to resemble his portrait. “It is not in the nature of an image to be identical in all respects with the thing of which it is an image, but merely to imitate it in some respects.” The deeper issue between Gassendi and Descartes is the very issue that later most exercised Revius, the nature of ideas and of representation, and whether we have an idea of God and of what kind. What is not at issue, at least not between Gassendi and Descartes, is a connection between resemblance to the divine and Pelagianism.

Grimaldi teases out some interesting things to say on that nature of this resemblance in his study “Sur l’infinité de la volonté et la ressemblance de l’homme avec Dieu.” We are in the image of God, he proposes, in the way that time is the image of eternity, or the way that a trace is in the image of the mould, viz. by its lack or absence. (One might think of a figure as constituted by its absence in the ground.) The image of God is not so much a “representation” as an “e-vocation” of Him. In these terms, he continues, “the soul is [for Descartes] the image of God in the sense that the indefinitely perfectible is in the image of the infinitely perfect.”

Far from grounding a charge of Pelagianism, the drift in Grimaldi’s account of resemblance here is toward a refutation of it. Recall, however, Verbeek’s remark that it is hard not to be of Revius’s opinion that insofar as Descartes takes the will to be infinite, he attributes to man an excessive freedom, which is the heart and core of Pelagianism. Aside from what has been discussed above, Verbeek gives no argument for this conclusion. Instead, he offers two references; one of them is to Grimaldi’s study.

5. The infinite will

Although the term ‘Pelagianism’ occurs nowhere in his study, Grimaldi does offer the same (mistaken) reading of the fourth Meditation passage found in Revius’s critique; they both fail to see the comparison class for Descartes’s expression nullius idea. Moreover, he interprets the will as conceived by Descartes to be infinite in such terms as to offer strong support to the charge of Pelagianism. He realizes that nowhere in the Meditations does Descartes call the will infinite, nor anywhere else (except in a letter to Mersenne, to be discussed below) unless he qualifies it with an expression such as “to some extent [quommodo].” Nonetheless, he begins by saying that “almost all commentators agree that Descartes attributed to man an infinite will, and seemingly no one denies it,” and he ends by
placing himself among these commentators.\textsuperscript{52} He asks rhetorically how could Descartes say what he does, “unless indeed our will were infinite.”\textsuperscript{53} What does Descartes say that yields this conclusion? Of the statements that Grimaldi cites here, the one that most suggests Pelagianism is in a letter to Christina, where in arguing that what produces the greatest and most solid contentment in life” is the good use of free will, Descartes has this to say: “Now free will is in itself the noblest thing we can have, since it makes us in a way \textit{en quelque façon} equal to God and seems \textit{semble} to exempt us from being his subjects.”\textsuperscript{54} Once again, Descartes qualifies the resemblance to God, as well as the exemption from his dominion. His point seems to be not to establish our independence from God, but to establish our status that we share with God as moral agents, to which our happiness is bound.

Such is also the point of a text in the \textit{Passions of the Soul}, which includes an image-and-likeness allusion.\textsuperscript{55} Here Descartes discusses the one good reason we might have for self-esteem, “namely, the exercise of our free will and the control \textit{l’empire} we have over our volitions. For we can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend upon this free will. It renders us in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves, provided that, through timidity, we do not lose the rights it gives us.”\textsuperscript{56} That by our freedom we should be master of our actions is precisely what Revius had objected to as Pelagian in the third Meditation. But here, as in the letter to Christina, the claim is not that we have divine freedom, which would, among other things, make us omnipotent, but only that like God we are moral agents. None of this argues Pelagianism.

Grimaldi claims a novel argument for his interpretation of the infinity of the will, based on the one text in which Descartes does not qualify the term. It occurs in a letter to Mersenne of 25 December 1639; here is the whole of the text:

\begin{quote}
The desire that everyone has to possess every perfection he can conceive of, and consequently all the perfections which we believe to be in God, is due to the fact that God has given us a will which has no limits. It is principally because of this infinite will within us that we can say that we are created in his image.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Says Grimaldi: “Between what is ‘without limits’ and what is ‘infinite,’ the Cartesian vocabulary thus appears to make so little difference that he uses one or the other expression as synonyms. If this text authorizes us to establish a semantic equivalence between them, it is the infinity of our will that we then find affirmed in the \textit{Meditations}, when Descartes ‘experiences it so vague and extended that it is not contained within any limits’.”\textsuperscript{58} But if the terms are equivalent in this way, they can be extended not just to the \textit{Meditations}, with
respect to the will, but elsewhere, with respect to extension, numbers, and other things. And if the infinity is enough to ascribe divinity to a thing, or ontological equivalence to that thing, then Descartes is faced with something like Spinozistic pantheism. Now, perhaps Descartes’s philosophy implies such a view (historically, that was one of its drifts, after all), but a stronger case will be required than what he says about the will. Descartes himself had a block against a drift toward such pantheism in his hardly unremarked distinction between the \textit{infinite}, a positive notion that applies only to God, and the \textit{indefinite}, a negative notion applied to things perceived to be without limits.\textsuperscript{59}

Henri Gouhier was a great exception to the perceived agreement that Descartes took the will to be infinite. He took the pantheistic implications of that interpretation to be a \textit{reductio ad absurdum} of it. “If the word \textit{infinite} applied to the will slips into the place of the word \textit{indefinite} applied to what we experience in desire and pursuit, we would introduce within us a perfection whose presence would lead to that of all others; I would no longer be the image of God, but God Himself.”\textsuperscript{60} This is why, according to Gouhier, Descartes in every other text qualifies the likeness that he asserts between the human will and the divine. But why accept Gouhier’s reading rather than Grimaldi’s? Because it does not rest, not even in part, on an outright misreading of the fourth Meditation; it has independent texts in favor of it; and it avoids attributing a heretical view to Descartes—not just of Pelagianism, but worse, of pantheism.\textsuperscript{61}

Even granting the biblical warrant, why, then, should Descartes assert the likeness relation at all? One respect in which the human will is like the divine is that it is absolute. One has it all or not at all. It is, as he says, metaphorically, \textit{indivisible}. This is why there can be no grounds for complaint “that God gave me a will which extends more widely than my intellect. For since the will consists simply of one thing which is, as it were, indivisible, it seems that its nature rules out the possibility of anything being taken away from it.”\textsuperscript{62} To put it another way, willing is a Rylean \textit{success} or \textit{achievement} term. (One never wins a race or finds a needle well or badly, but only with complete success; unlike the \textit{tasks} of running a race or looking for a needle.\textsuperscript{63}) There are, however, degrees of freedom, with the lowest degree being perfect indifference, when one is pulled by grace or evidence equally in opposite directions, and the highest, when one is pulled irresistibly in only one direction. Yet will and freedom are, for Descartes, one and the same; to have a will is to be free, and conversely. To avoid the obvious difficulty, degrees of freedom must be degrees of obstacle to the operation of the will, with evidence or grace inversely varying in this respect with the effect of passion, imagination and the senses, which ultimately must be overcome as obstacles to our pursuit of the true and the good. Degrees in clarity and distinctness, on the other hand, indicate degrees of success in perceiving, which is thus a Rylean \textit{task} term (even...
if for Ryle himself perception is a success term, a status that, curiously, he tried to exploit against Descartes’s theory of perception. It makes sense to say that we see now through a glass darkly, but there is no parallel claim with respect to the will. It makes no sense to say that we will only partially. Strength of will, which varies in degree, refers to the ability to will at all, its frequency for example, or to the endurance of the willing itself, which occurs entirely or not at all.64

6. The deep issue

Scribano is Verbeek’s second reference for his agreement with Revius on Descartes’s alleged Pelagianism. This one is altogether more relevant. The charge of Pelagianism not only appears explicitly in her magisterial work on teologia razionale nel Seicento, but it also does so in the first act, center stage.65 Leading the charge against Descartes, or at least beginning it, is Revius, the interpretation of whose position here rests on no elementary misinterpretation of Descartes. (The correctness of Revius’s interpretation of Descartes on the deepest, most crucial point remains a question, as will be seen.) Moreover, her discussion provides an enormous amount of context, in terms of the debate over free will and also of the divine will, Socinianism, and the drift toward deism.

Her picture of Revius and the debate he launched is far more balanced than Baillet’s derogatory sketch; here, Revius is “a frequent and acute critic of the Cartesian philosophy.”66 Still, the immediate impression is that the debate was less between critics of Descartes and Descartes himself with his supporters, than between orthodox Calvinists and their Remonstrant opponents. That is, the issue is not the interpretation of Descartes’s philosophy, still less the truth of it, but the Synod of Dort itself. The brouhaha over Descartes’s theory of ideas was not of the philosophical sort marking the dispute between Malebranche and Arnauld, for example, which was occasioned by the theological question of grace, but rather that theological question itself. For Revius, Descartes was the homo Jesuista,67 i.e. a Molinist, i.e. Pelagian, i.e. an Arminian (Remonstrant).

Clearly, what distresses Revius is Descartes’s claim, explicitly asserted in the fourth Meditation, that, viewed in itself formally and precisely, God’s will appears no greater than his own. For this amounts to something more extreme than Pelagianism. Descartes gives no argument for the claim, so Revius constructs what he must take to be Descartes’s implicit argument, and then criticizes it as fallacious on Descartes’s own grounds. Here is the argument: if two terms of comparison consist in the power of pursuing or fleeing the same thing, the one is not greater than the other; but human freedom and divine freedom consist in just this; therefore neither is greater than the other. To show the non-sequitur, Revius
offers a reductio ad absurdum by pointing to two inferences, having the “same logic,” which Descartes rejects, or would certainly reject: if two terms consisted in the power of knowing the true and the false, the one would not be greater than the other; but the human intellect and the divine intellect consist in just this; therefore....Similarly, if two terms consisted in the power of operating outside themselves, one would not be greater than the other; but human power and divine power, etc. Now, Descartes clearly rejects the equivalence of human intellect and power with divine power and intellect, and does so in the very next sentence of the fourth Meditation where he asserts the essential equivalence of the divine and human wills. (Revius’s recognition of this rejection is a clear advance over his earlier treatment of Descartes.) Therefore, according to Revius, he has no basis for asserting that essential equivalence of wills.

In fact, Revius asserts that since the assertion of the latter two equivalences is false, the former equivalence must be false as well—which involves him in a fallacious inference himself. For all that follows is that there is no basis for asserting the equivalence of the divine and human wills, not that the assertion of it is false. But no matter. The failure of Descartes’s supposed inference is sufficient for Revius’s purpose, viz. the overthrow of Descartes’s perceived Pelagianism, and in any case, Revius has an additional argument against the view, also based on what he takes to be an explicit inconsistency in Descartes. Here Revius cites Descartes’s explication of the vel potius clause, the clause that Descartes attaches to his first definition of the will “or free choice,” cited above, as the power to pursue or flee. The clause has drawn a great deal of attention in the literature concerned with these issues, with various, radically different interpretations of it.

Suffice it here to say that a prima facie plausible way of interpreting it is as an explanation, or a better way of stating (vel potius) what he has just said. The clause would then be asserting that what is meant by the power to pursue or flee is that when something is proposed by the intellect as something to pursue or flee, we do not feel determined by anything external in doing so. Revius ignores this clause; but again, no matter. For the explication that Descartes then offers of it, which is cited by Revius, gives the gist: in order to be free, I need not be indifferent in choosing one or the other; rather the greater my inclination in one direction or the other, because of perception of the true or the good, or because of God’s operation in me, the more free is my choice.68

With the second argument it becomes clear that the perceived inconsistency in Descartes is between the initial definition of the will and the clarification offered by the vel potius clause—which is why some commentators have taken the clause to be not a clarification, but a retraction of the first definition. Both the inconsistency and Revius’s objection to
Descartes are resolved, however, if the first definition is read in the determinist terms suggested by the *vel potius* clause.

Scribano reports that for orthodox Dutch Calvinists, such as Revius was, the will is *blind*, (presumably needing to be led by the divine hand,) as opposed to the view taken by Socinians and Cartesian Remonstrants, who attribute power to sighted man at the expense of God (whose hand is no longer needed).\(^69\) This is curious, because those such as Locke who argued for sighted agency in man held that the will is determined precisely by what is seen. Taking Descartes to be a compatibilist in this sense yields the following complex situation. Descartes can be read in a way that avoids the charge of Pelagianism and thus that supports not only the Calvinist position, but also, despite the misgivings of Arnauld over Descartes’s correspondence, the Jansenist position as well.

7. Conclusion

The investigation above enables a distinction among views that are relevant to theological criticism of Descartes’s treatment of the will. Partly because they are intended to capture how they were understood only in the period, the characterizations are perforce contentious (which is why they are presented here, rather than at the beginning above), but they should nonetheless be useful in any discussion of Descartes’s views on the will and their historical context.

1. *Pelagianism* is the view that we are able to save ourselves by natural means, without any grace at all. As such, it is not a doctrine about the nature of the will. Conceivably, we could be constrained to save ourselves by entirely natural causes, without the help of grace; but the natural reading of Pelagianism is with an ancillary view of the will and its freedom in libertarian terms. Certainly, it was read in this way by those in the seventeenth century who were most sensitive to its perceived recrudescence, particularly in Molinism as perceived by the Jansenists.

2. In this context, *Calvinism* and *Lutheranism* were views on grace according to which grace is necessary and sufficient for salvation, involving some form of strict predestination that according to their Catholic opponents, eliminated free will, at least with respect to actions relevant to salvation.

3. *Jansenism*, too, made grace necessary and sufficient, but in way that, according to its Catholic proponents, does not eliminate freedom. Indeed, they spoke of freedom as compatible with a kind of necessity of action generated by grace.
4. Molinism has come to be known primarily as a view about knowledge of future conditionals. God has “middle knowledge” of man’s future free actions, between necessary truths independent of His will and of contingent truths dependent on His will. But the problem generating the view as a solution stems from a libertarian view of human freedom, according to which different acts are possible under the same conditions, with no constraint whatsoever on which one of them gets done. At this point we have **indifference**, the essence of freedom. This is not to say, however, that there are absolutely no constraints, which would amount to omnipotence; our unconstrained choices are limited. One limiting constraint is grace, without which we cannot do what must be done in order for us to be saved, but which, however, is given to all, including to those who under the same circumstances do no make use of it. Thus did its opponents try to connect it with Pelagianism: we make the difference that makes the difference between salvation and damnation, and so we effectively save ourselves.

5. Finally, Descartes’s view, according to which indifference occurs not when we are unconstrained as between alternative possibilities, but when we fully and equally **constrained** as between them. Constraints might be the passions, the senses, the imagination, clear and distinct perception of the truth, but also grace. The perceived danger of Pelagianism came from those who excessively empowered the will by making its freedom consist in **unconstrained** indifference. Descartes’s account of indifference blocks that threat.

In the so-called letter to Mesland, Descartes says that, “‘indifference’ in this context seems to me strictly to mean that state of the will when it is not impelled one way rather than another by any perception of truth or goodness.”70 This is not to say, however, that one is not impelled at all. On the contrary, in the context of the first Meditation, which is an important backdrop to this text, he produces “powerful and well thought-out reasons” to **counterbalance** his unfounded former opinions.71 This sense of indifference is the only one that Descartes ever employs.72

A text that brings together important strands of Descartes’s view of the will is found in the sixth Replies; the strands spring from the core of his metaphysics. Not incidentally, this text also explodes the connection with Pelagianism based on the image-and-likeness topos. The objection to which Descartes is replying is that by removing indifference (in the Molinist sense) from human freedom, he has destroyed divine freedom of indifference, for the essence of freedom, being indivisible, must be the same in both. Descartes replies: “As for freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different [*longe alia*] from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not
indifferent from eternity with respect to everything that has happened or will ever happen.”

Descartes then proceeds to expound his creation-of-truth doctrine, remarking that “the supreme indifference found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence. Hence the indifference which belongs to human freedom is very different from that which belongs to divine freedom.”

Descartes responds to the objection’s charge by denying that God and man share the same essence of freedom. To be sure, will and freedom both in man and in God are identical. But freedom in God entails absolute omnipotence, whereas there is no such entailment from human freedom. What then is the basis for claim that it is “above all in virtue of the will” that he understands himself to bear “the image and likeness of God...[when God’s will is] considered as will in the essential and strict sense”? He gives the answer in the very next sentence: “This is because the will simply consists in our ability to do or not to do something.” This generic, binary notion of the will (which, not incidentally, Descartes immediately clarifies in an apparently anti-Pelagian fashion) is the mark of the divine workman sufficient for His work to be His image and likeness.

---

1 Scribano, Maria Emanuele, Da Descartes a Spinoza: Percorsi della teologia razionale nel Seicento (Franco Angeli: Milan, 1988) p. 16.

2 May 1637, AT I,366; CSMK, 56. José Maia Neto, who has revealed Pierre Charron as an important source for Descartes, points out that he too responded to charges of Pelagianism by insulating his work from it as having a different subject matter. “Charron’s Epoché and Descartes’ Cogito: The Sceptical Base of Descartes’ Refutation of Scepticism,” in, G. Paganini, The Return of Scepticism: From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003) esp.p.86--88. Much is at stake on the Descartes—Pelagianism connection, yet it has drawn very little attention in the modern literature. Sebba’s Bibliographia Cartesiana (1964) notices but a single contribution: Laporte, to be discussed below. Since Sebba, there have been only Scribano, Maia Neto, and Verbeek, to be discussed below. See also Goudriaan’s introduction to his edition of Revius, below. Richard Davies discusses the connection but only in an attempt to show why Descartes was not accused of Pelagianism. Descartes: Belief, Skepticism and Virtue (London: Routledge, 2001) pp.135-43.

3 E.g., To Mersenne, 27 May 1630; AT I, 148; to Mesland, 2 May 1644, AT IV, 117; CSMK 234.

4 Denzinger, Henricus, Enchiridion Symbolorum (Barcelona: Herder: 32nd ed, 1963) p.84. The condemned proposition is not from the holy and self-sacrificing Pelagius himself, it seems, but from his follower, Caelestius. Unless other wise indicated, all translations throughout are my own.

5 Jansenius, Cornelius, Augustinus seu doctrina sancti Augustini de humanae naturae sanitate, aegritudine, Medicina adversus Pelagianos & Malsilenses (originally published, 1640; Rouen : 1643) vol.1, ch.2, p.42.

6 See, e.g., the letter of 2 May 1644; AT IV, 117; CSMK, 234.

7 Oeuvres (Paris: 1775-87) I, 671.
Further reducing the import of the Pelagian charge, Stephen Menn reads Arnauld’s concern to be Descartes’s failure to be Augustinian, not his Pelagianism as such. *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 70, n.46.

Augustine, *Enchiridion*, ch. 95; *City of God*. He also cites the Council of Orange, that all those baptized and aided by grace can do everything relevant to salvation if they will to work faithfully toward it. Obviously, the phrase needs significant commentary in order to adjudicate the Pelagian dispute. Habert, *Defense*, pp.135-36.


AT IV, 607; CSMK 308. At this point, Christina had not yet converted to Catholicism.

Laporte cites Pascal: “Charity is of another, supernatural order.” Pp. 446-47. He also draws attention to Augustine, on *Grace and Free Will*, ch. 18, where he speaks of love, without restriction: “Whence comes this love of God and neighbor in man, if not from God Himself? For if it does not come from God, then it is the Pelagians who have prevailed; but if it comes from God, then we have prevailed over the Pelagians.” Augustine then cites 1 John 4:7: “For love is from God,” and concludes, in his own voice: “Charity is not of ourselves, but of God.” Whether John was speaking of all love, however, seems obviously an open question. If he was, then Augustine is right in viewing just about everyone as Pelagian. In addition, Pelagianism is a doctrine about salvation, not about love as such, even if there is a necessary connection between the two. Augustine, *The Teacher, The Free Choice of the Will, Grace and Free Will*, trans. R.P. Russell (Washington; Catholic University of America Press. 1968) pp.292-93.

AT VII, 371; CSM II, 256.

AT VI, 28; CSM I, 125.

AT I, 366; CSMK, 56. Descartes also cites Ovid: “I see and praise the better, but I follow the worse.” On the face of it, this suggests a Pelagian-like control over the will, independent of grace’s constraint. To dispel this appearance, see [self-reference].

AT VII, 51; CSM II, 35.

For an argument against the libertarian reading, see my “Descartes’s Supposed Libertarianism: Letter to Mesland or Memorandum concerning Petau?,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, to appear, which also argues that it is not a letter to Mesland at all.

AT IV, 173; CSMK, 245.

To Mersenne, March 1642; AT III, 544; CSMK 211.

AT VII, 199; CSM II, 139.

AT VII, 217-18; CSM II, 152-53.
22 Theo Verbeek is most responsible for what we know about this nonetheless fascinating controversy. *La Querelle d’Utrecht* (Paris: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 1988).


24 AT V: 7-9; CSMK 316-17. His rebuttal is that, in his view, deception is incompatible with the nature of God, which is why he attributed it not to God, but to the demon deceiver, a distinction unfortunately ignored, it might be noted, even by many modern commentators. The response of the University officials was to put an end to the controversy by banning all further discussion, which was an attempt to end to the calumny, as Descartes saw it.

25 AT VII, 57. To avoid begging any questions, I cite the translation of Verbeek, p. 45, adding only the bracketed material.

26 AT V, 4.


28 Verbeek, p. 45.

29 AT VII, 57; CSM II, 40. But for this, another, no less innocent referent might be any faculty of will that he can conceive of himself as having.

30 AT V, 4. Thus do CSM get it right: “It is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp.” CSM II, 40.

31 Lex Newman proposes an even more minimalist account: “I take this reference to the will’s infinity, along with the divine will, to refer only to the will’s scope, not its nature. The point of the passage is to clarify not that our wills possess unlimited power—as if comparable to the divine will in this regard—but that we’re able to assent to more propositions than we’re able to clearly perceive. Limitation in our intellects explains the possibility of judgment error; misuse of our free will explains its actuality.” “Descartes on the Will in Judgment,” in ed. J. Broughton, J. Carriero, *A Companion to Descartes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008) p. 339. An interesting speculative question is why Descartes does not leave it that the will is “greater in extent” than the intellect; why also “without bounds”? Of this, more below.

32 Revius, p. 25, n.76.

33 Revius, p. 86.

34 Revius, p. 166. AT VII, 57; CSM II, 40.

35 Revius, p. 170.

36 Revius, cited p.24, n.75.

37 Among many texts, see especially Replies VI, 6; AT VII, 431-33; CSM II, 291-92.
Though this is not to say that Pelagianism was of no interest to Revius. In his *Suarez repurgatus* (1643), Revius tried to purge Suarez’s metaphysics of, among other errors, “the pus and poison of Pelagianism,” as he put it. Verbeek, 44-45.

Revius, p.84. See also Goudriaan’s comments, p. 54 In the *Consideratio*, however, Revius came to see that Descartes did not mean by *idea* only an image. See Goudriaan’s summary, Revius, pp. 38-39.

Gabaude, Jean-Marc, *Liberté et raison: La liberté cartésienne et sa réfraction chez Spinoza et chez Leibniz* (Toulouse : Association des publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Toulouse, 1970) vol.1, p. 328, n. 40. For a great deal more, see M. Staendaert, « La Doctrine de l’image chez Saint Bernard, » *Ephemerides theologiae Lovanienses*, pp. 70-129. The distinction between image and likeness was drawn by still another authority for the seventeenth century, François de Sales. Likeness involves a correspondence, even if the correspondence is in one case perfect (Christ as the image of God, not different from Him); resemblance involves perceived similarity, and it is under this that human and divine freedom fall. Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles lxxx-lxxxi, in *Œuvres mystiques*, trans, A. Béguin (Pais : Editions du Seuil, 1953) pp.815 ff., 825 ff.


Even if faultily; v. Gilson, n.1, pp. 242-43.

*De veritate*, 24, 3, ad Resp.

Gilson, loc. cit.

*De libero arbitrio* (Paris, 1643) bk. 2, ch. 4; pp. 235-37. Petau himself, however, did not share the view. “It seems to me that the whole man is, or is made in, the image of God, and certainly not, as many say, only his rational soul.” Ibid. p. 234.

AT VII, 51; CSM II, 35.

AT VII, 137; CSM II, 98.

AT VII, 372-73; CSM II, 256-57.

Plato had referred to a moving image, which further reduces the likeness. *Timaeus*, 11A.


Of the will he says that “this is a faculty that we experience in ourselves as so infinite that it cannot be greater in God than in us: ‘it is only the will [...] which I experience in within me to be so great that I do not conceive the idea of any other more ample or more extended.’ [Grimaldi cites AT VII, 54; but gives Luynes’s translation.] Now, what is this *idea nullius majoris*, that of which we can conceive nothing greater, if not precisely [sic] the absolutely infinite?” Grimaldi, p. 40.


Grimaldi, pp. 25, 41.
54 20 November 1647; AT V, 85; CSMK 326.

55 Published in Holland, but in the year following Revius’s Consideratio.

56 AT XI, 445; CSM I, 384, slightly modified. At Principles, I, 37, Descartes makes a similar claim for the preeminence of the human will, but without likening it to the divine. AT VIII A, 18-19; CSM I, 205.

57 AT II, 628; CSMK 141-42.

58 Grimaldi, p. 39. The citation is of AT, IX-1, 45 [CSM II, 39]. The sequel makes clear that Grimaldi takes the antecedent of the conditional to be satisfied.

59 Principles I, 24-27; AT VIII A, 14-15; CSM I, 201-202. Also, among other texts, to More, 5 February 1649, AT V, 274-75; CSMK 364. Grimaldi also claims, apparently on the basis of the Christmas letter to Mersenne, that “it is one and the same thing, as Descartes explains, to have an infinite will and to will the infinite.” Grimaldi, p.37. But Descartes says no such thing, at least not in that letter, nor should he say such a thing, because to know the infinite, we need not have an infinite intellect. More generally, the infinity of an object having formal existence outside the mind does not entail the infinity of the mind apprehending it as having objective existence in the mind. The apprehension gets its reality from the (finite) mind of which is a mode. There is no reason for intellect and will to differ in this, and obvious reasons why they should not.


61 Ironically, Gouhier takes the letter to Mersenne to be pivotal, as “summarizing [Descartes’s] entire thought on the will.” Incidentally, what Grimaldi says about perfectability as the pursuit of the perfect by the imperfect (pp.38-39) is not far from Gouhier’s account, pp.194-204.

62 AT VII, 60; CSM II, 42.


64 Thus Descartes’s generic, binary definition of the will as “...our ability to do or not to do something....” AT VII, 57; CSM II, 40.

65 Scribano, Maria Emanuele, loc. cit., sec. 1, ch. 1.

66 Scribano, p. 17.

67 Scribano, p. 16.

68 AT VII, 57-58; CSM II, 40; Scribano, 17-18.

69 Scribano, p. 18.

70 AT IV, 174; CSMK, 245.

71 AT VII; CSM I, 15.
For more on this sense, and the contrasting senses in the period that Descartes does not employ, see Thomas M. Lennon, “Descartes and the Seven Senses of Indifference in Early modern Philosophy,” *Dialogue: Journal of the Canadian Philosophical Association*, 50 Special Issue 3 (September, 2011) pp. 577-602.

AT VII, 431-32; CSM II, 291.

AT VII, 57; CSM II, 40.