Descartes on Degrees of Freedom: A Close Look at a Key Text

C.P. Ragland

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Abstract

In an influential article, Anthony Kenny charged that (a) the view of freedom in Descartes’ “1645 letter to Mesland” is incoherent, and (b) that this incoherence was present in Descartes’ thought from the beginning. Against (b), I argue that such incoherence would rather support Gilson’s suspicions that the 1645 letter is dishonest. Against (a), I offer a close reading of the letter, showing that Kenny’s objection seems plausible only if we misconstrue a key ambiguity in the text. I close by defending Descartes against some related worries of my own about the degrees of Cartesian freedom. I conclude that there is really no good reason to deny that Descartes’ view in the 1645 letter is both internally coherent and a genuine explication of the Meditations’ account of freedom.

One of Descartes’ most extended and important ruminations on freedom occurs in a rather mysterious text. Adam and Tannery, the editors of the standard edition of Descartes’ works, classify this text as a part of his 9 February 1645 letter to the Jesuit Denis Mesland. However, they admit that this is just an educated guess about its date and intended recipient. Despite the editorial uncertainties about this text, we can be sure that Descartes wrote it sometime after the Meditations, because the text quotes, and purports to explain, some of the Fourth Meditation’s remarks about freedom. While I acknowledge that it is probably in error, in this essay I will use Adam and Tannery’s name for the text, and—putting editorial problems aside—I will focus on two questions that scholars have asked about the view of freedom Descartes puts forth there: (1) is it consistent with the account of freedom in the earlier Meditations, and (2) is it consistent with itself (internally coherent)?

At first glance, the answer to the first question seems obvious: the 1645 letter seems to say things that contradict the Meditations. Because of this, some scholars think that it advances
a new and different doctrine of freedom. If so, then the 1645 letter is dishonest, for it *purports* to elucidate the *Meditations*: Descartes leads his reader to believe that the new view had really been his intention all along.\(^5\)

Regarding the second question, in a classic and influential article Anthony Kenny assesses the internal consistency of the 1645 letter and finds it wanting. Descartes claims there (as he also did in the *Meditations*) that freedom comes in degrees, that some actions are freer than others. He talks, furthermore, as if there is a single scale for measuring the degrees of freedom. But according to Kenny, Descartes invokes *two inconsistent scales* in the letter. Kenny, who sees the 1645 letter as consistent with Descartes’ earlier view of freedom, takes it to reveal an incoherence that had been present in Descartes’ thought from the beginning.

From a philosophical point of view, Kenny’s accusation is the more damning of the two, and the primary goal of this essay is to defend Descartes against it. I will offer a careful reading of the entire letter, showing that Kenny finds an incoherence there only because he misinterprets the text. My secondary goal is to show that the two scholarly questions about this text are connected in a way that has not yet been appreciated: if Kenny’s charge of incoherence were correct, then we would have significantly more reason to suspect Descartes’ honesty in the 1645 letter. But in fact, there is really no good reason to deny that Descartes’ view there is both internally coherent and a genuine explication of the *Meditations*’ account of freedom.

My procedure will be to work through the letter from beginning to end, labeling some sections for reference, and providing commentary to help explain Descartes’ meaning. Part I focuses on explicating Descartes’ distinction between two senses of “indifference”: two-way power over choice vs. motivational equilibrium. Part II focuses on his claim that two-way power necessary for freedom; this claim seems to conflict with his earlier views about freedom, and so can be used to raise questions about Descartes’ honesty. Part III investigates Descartes’ notion of “spontaneity” and his claim that it is inversely proportional to motivational equilibrium. Part IV lays out Kenny’s charge that Descartes’ view is internally incoherent, showing that Kenny’s position seems plausible only if we misconstrue a crucial ambiguity in the text. Part V defends Descartes against some worries of my own (closely related to Kenny’s objection).

I.

The letter opens with a distinction between two senses of “indifference”:  

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As for freedom of the will, I entirely agree with what the Reverend Father here wrote. Let me explain my opinion more fully. I would like you to notice 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. This is the sense in which I took it when I said that the lowest degree of freedom is that by which we determine ourselves to things to which we are indifferent. But perhaps others mean by ‘indifference’ a positive faculty of determining oneself to one or other of two contraries, that is to say, to pursue or avoid, to affirm or deny. (AT 4:173 / CSMK 244-5)

As Lennon has recently argued, the “Reverend Father” here is probably the Jesuit Denis Petau, whose views of freedom Descartes mentions in his 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland (AT 4:115 / CSMK 233). Petau drew a very similar distinction between two different senses of “indifference.” In the first sense— the one Descartes claims as his own—indifference denotes a motivational state. In the second sense— the one commonly employed by scholastic philosophers—it denotes a metaphysical power.

Descartes explains that for him, indifference is the state of not being “impelled one way rather than another by any perception of truth or goodness.” He then refers to his mention of this motivational state in the Fourth Meditation: “. . . the indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom” (AT 7:58 / CSM:2 40). Now, there are two ways in which a person might not be pushed one way rather than another.

First, one might not be motivated at all in either direction. For example, a person not even thinking about raising her hand would be indifferent about whether or not to raise her hand, because she is not aware of any reasons that bear on this question. In the Sixth Replies, Descartes insists that God is indifferent to God’s actions in just this way: “. . . it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so” (AT 7:432 / CSM:2 291). Therefore, God is not subject to motivation one way or the other: “It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen . . . ” (AT 7:431-32 / CSM:2 291). However, things are different with the human will: “as for man, since he finds that the nature of all goodness and truth is already determined by God, and his will cannot tend towards anything else . . . [h]e is never indifferent except when he does not know which of the two alternatives is the better or truer . . .” (AT 7:432 / CSM:2 292). Humans
cannot choose to do something (or believe something) unless their intellect first represents that option as somehow good (or at least possibly true).  

Because the 1645 letter is discussing the relation of indifference to human action, Descartes refers there to the *second* way that one can be indifferent: by being *equally* motivated in two opposing directions. For example, one might be just as motivated to raise one’s hand as to keep it down. So in our text, when Descartes says that an indifferent agent “is not impelled one way rather than another by any perception of truth or goodness,” he means *not* that she has *no reasons* at all on either side, but that she has no reasons which can tip the balance of reason one way rather than the other. Such an agent is perfectly or completely indifferent. However, as Descartes will indicate later in the letter, motivational indifference—like freedom—comes in degrees. If we have twice as much motivation to raise our hand as to leave it down, we are still indifferent, though not *as* indifferent as we would be if our motivations were perfectly balanced. We cease to be indifferent *at all* only when we are motivated exclusively in one direction.

II.

Descartes elaborates on the second sense of “indifference,” the metaphysical power, as follows:

> But perhaps others mean by ‘indifference’ a positive faculty of determining oneself to one or other of two contraries, that is to say, to pursue or avoid, to affirm or deny. I do not deny that the will has this positive faculty. Indeed, I think it has it not only with respect to those actions to which it is not pushed by any evident reasons on one side rather than on the other, but also with respect to all other actions; so that when a very evident reason moves us in one direction, although morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction, absolutely speaking we can. For it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing. (AT 4:173 / CSMK 245)

This second indifference is a “two-way” power, what Descartes described in the Fourth Meditation as the “ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid)” (AT 7:57 / CSM 2:40). Descartes insists here that the will *always* enjoys this two-way power—not only when the reasons are perfectly balanced for and against a course of action (creating perfect motivational indifference), but also when the reasons are *all on one side.*
This last claim appears to conflict with what Descartes says in the Fourth Meditation. There, he seems to imply that people enjoy two-way power to choose either way only when they are motivated (to some extent) in both ways. For example, he says that unclear perception of a proposition makes one motivationally indifferent to it:

\[\ldots\text{indifference does not merely apply to cases where the intellect is wholly ignorant, but extends in general to every case where the intellect does not have sufficiently clear knowledge at the time when the will deliberates. For although probable conjectures may pull me in one direction, the mere knowledge that they are simply conjectures, and not certain and indubitable reasons, is itself quite enough to push my assent the other way (AT 7:59 / CSM 2:41).}\]

In such cases of motivational ambivalence, Descartes is able to either assent or not assent. As he says: “God \ldots has given me the freedom to assent or not to assent in those cases where he did not endow my intellect with a clear and distinct perception” (AT 7:61 / CSM 2:42).\(^8\) However, things are different when he clearly and distinctly perceives the truth of a proposition. About his own existence, he says the following:

\[\ldots\text{I was not able not to judge [non potui \ldots non judicare] true something which I understood so clearly; not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will, and thus I have believed this more spontaneously and freely as I have been less indifferent to it. (AT 7:58-9 / CSM 2:41; my translation and italics)}\]

In this case, clear and distinct perception in the intellect produces a “great inclination” in the will: there is no ambivalence, only one-way inclination. And in this case, Descartes says that he is not able not to judge the clearly perceived proposition true; he lacks two-way power. This idea that clear and distinct perceptions determine the will to assent is not limited to this one passage, but recurs frequently.\(^9\) So while Descartes’ earlier writings say that the will lacks two-way power in cases of clear and distinct perception, the 1645 letter maintains that the will never lacks two-way power. The earlier writings suggest that two-way power is limited to cases of motivational indifference, but the 1645 letter suggests it is not so limited, that it is present in every free choice.

Of course, the letter provides a way to resolve this apparent conflict. For it admits that it is “morally speaking” not possible to act against a “very evident reason.” This probably means that clear and distinct perceptions determine the will “morally”—whatever that means.\(^{10}\)
but not “absolutely.” So the picture in the earlier writings of a limited two-way power holds true, if we assume that Descartes was speaking “morally” in those writings. And that is consistent with two-way power being unlimited (present in every choice) “absolutely” speaking. The 1645 letter presents itself as a lens through which we can better understand Descartes’ earlier remarks about freedom. If we read them through that lens, the problem goes away.11

On the other hand, it may be naïve to simply take the 1645 letter at face value. As Etienne Gilson pointed out over a century ago, there is some reason to suspect Descartes’ honesty in that text. Despite the editorial problems surrounding it, the text is almost certainly part of a discussion between Descartes and one or more members of the Jesuit order.12 The “Reverend Father” is probably the Jesuit Petau, and the text, whether written to Mesland or not, is probably connected to Descartes’ 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, also a Jesuit. Descartes was particularly interested in befriending Jesuits at this phase of his career, because he was hoping to have his 1644 Principles of Philosophy adopted as a textbook in Jesuit schools.13 For example, in the 9 February 1645 letter to Charlet—a Jesuit and one of his former teachers at La Flèche—Descartes says this about the Jesuits:

. . . in publishing a new philosophy I have followed a path which makes it possible for me to derive so much benefit from their goodwill or, on the other hand, so much disadvantage from their lack of interest, that anyone who knows that I am not completely lacking in sense would, I think, be sure that I will do everything in my power to make myself worthy of their favor. (AT 4:157 / CSMK 240)

Descartes was so eager for the Jesuits’ goodwill that he was willing to misrepresent his views in order to get it. For in that same letter, he continues: “I venture to hope that [the Jesuits] will find many things in [my philosophy] which they will think true . . . and serve effectively to explain the truths of the faith without, moreover, contradicting the writings of Aristotle” (my emphasis; AT 4:157 / CSMK 240). Descartes here conceals from Charlet his real views about the relation of his philosophy to that of Aristotle, as revealed in his 28 January 1641 letter to Mersenne:

I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle. (my emphasis; AT 3:297-98 / CSMK 173).
At this point in history, Jesuits were the embattled defenders of Molina’s famous definition of freedom, which identified freedom with the ability to do or not do given “all the requisites” for action.\(^\text{14}\) If he wanted to get their support, it was prudent for Descartes to make the Jesuits feel the he was on their side in disputes about freedom. It is no surprise, then, that in the 1644 letter to Mesland, Descartes emphasizes that his views are “not . . . very different” from Mesland’s, because both regard freedom as “a real and positive power to determine oneself” (AT 4:115-16 / CSMK 233-34). The 1645 letter further emphasizes this agreement with the Jesuit view by clarifying that the positive power of self-determination is a two-way power. Descartes there presents himself as having agreed with the Jesuits all along, and smooths over apparent inconsistencies with his moral/absolute distinction.

However, we have seen that Descartes had a motive to dissemble, and had done so before. So we must take seriously Gilson’s suggestion that the 1645 letter is probably a clever attempt to cover up what had been a real past disagreement with the Jesuits. Gilson suggests the following picture. In his earlier writings, Descartes said that in cases of clear perception, one could assent to a proposition freely, without being able to do otherwise; two-way power was not essential to freedom. Descartes’ also insisted that “indifference does not belong to the essence of human freedom, since not only are we free when ignorance . . . makes us indifferent, but we are also free—indeed at our freest—when a clear perception impels us to pursue some object” (AT 7:433 / CSM2 292). Gilson concludes that Descartes originally used “indifference” in the traditional scholastic way, to refer to the two-way power, and claimed that such power is not essential to freedom. He thus originally disagreed with the Jesuits (and agreed with Gillaume Gibieuf, whose *De libertate dei et creaturae* was an attack on the Jesuit conception of freedom).\(^\text{15}\) Later, feeling pressure to (appear to) agree with the Jesuits, Descartes reversed his position and claimed that two-way power is essential to freedom. To cover his tracks, he first distinguished between motivational and metaphysical indifference; this allowed him to claim that he had only ever intended to dissociate freedom from motivational indifference. Similarly, the distinction between moral and absolute two-way power allowed him to maintain both that clear perceptions determine the will, and that some kind of two-way power is essential to the will. So eager was Descartes to please the Jesuits, that he misrepresented the original meaning of his earlier remarks in the *Meditations*, so as to appear to have accepted a Jesuit notion of free will all along.\(^\text{16}\)

Gilson’s picture hangs largely on his interpretation of the Fourth Meditation, and in particular on his claim that in that earlier work, Descartes did not consider two-way power essential to freedom. That claim has been disputed.\(^\text{17}\) Nevertheless, it cannot be *conclusively*
ruled out, because the term “indifference” is ineradicably ambiguous. We simply can’t know for sure what Descartes meant by “indifference” when he wrote the *Meditations*. He may have meant—as Gilson suggests—a metaphysical two-way power; in that case, when the Fourth Meditation says that indifference is not necessary for freedom, it means that two-way power is not necessary for freedom. But Descartes may also have meant “indifference” to refer simply to two-way motivation—as the 1645 letter suggests; in that case, when the Fourth Meditation says that indifference is not necessary for freedom, it does not imply that we can be free without having two-way power. In what follows, I will suggest that we can also assess Gilson’s suspicious reading in another way: by looking at issues that arise in the latter half of the 1645 letter.

III.

For ease of exposition, it will be best to present the rest of the letter all at once, broken into marked sections to which the subsequent commentary will refer. This way, readers can see how all the parts are related before we begin to look at each one in detail.

[A] It must be noted also that freedom can be considered in the acts of the will either before they are elicited, or after they are elicited. Considered with respect to the time before they are elicited, it entails indifference in the second sense but not in the first.

[B] Although, when we contrast our own judgment with the commandments of others, we say that we are freer to do those things which have not been prescribed to us by others and in which we are allowed to follow our own judgment than to do what we are prohibited from doing, yet we cannot similarly make a contrast within the field of our own judgments or our own cognitions and say that we are freer to do those things which seem to us to be neither good nor evil, or in which we recognize many reasons pro but as many reasons contra, than to do those things in which we perceive much more good than evil.

[C] For a greater freedom consists either in a greater facility in determining oneself or in a greater use of the positive power which we have of following the worse although we see the better. If we follow the course which appears to have the most reasons in its favor, we determine ourselves more easily; but if we follow the opposite, we make more use of that positive power; and thus we can always act more freely in those cases in which we see much more good than evil than in those cases which are called *αδιαφορα* or indifferent.
[D] In this sense too the things which others command us to do, and which we would not otherwise do spontaneously, we do less freely than the things which we are not ordered to do; because the judgment that these things are difficult to do is opposed to the judgment that it is good to do what is commanded; and the more equally these two judgments move us, the more indifference, taken in the first sense, they confer on us.

[E] But freedom considered in the acts of the will at the moment when they are elicited does not entail any indifference taken in either the first or the second sense; for what is done cannot remain undone as long as it is being done. It consists simply in ease of operation; and at that point freedom, spontaneity, and voluntariness are the same thing. It was in this sense that I wrote that I moved towards something all the more freely when there were more reasons driving me towards it; for it is certain that in that case our will moves itself with greater facility and force. (AT 4:173-74 / CSMK 245-46)

Descartes’ expresses the main point of the rest of the letter in the closing line of section [A] and the opening line of section [E]: before an act of will is elicited, freedom entails metaphysical indifference (two-way power), but not motivational indifference; after an act of will is elicited, freedom entails neither form of indifference. The other sections all develop and support this basic point. Before we turn to them, however, a couple of details in section [A] need further clarification.

A scholastic technical term, “elicited” evokes a set of background assumptions about action that should be kept in mind. For scholastics, the faculty of will is a human being’s metaphysically basic power to cause certain events, such as choices or bodily movements. A person ‘elicits’—that is, directly causes—“acts of will” such as choices or (in Descartes’ view) judgments. A person ‘commands’ or indirectly causes bodily actions under the will’s control. So for example, an agent causes her choice to raise her hand, which in turn causes her hand to rise; she “elicits” her choice, and “commands” the rising of her hand.

Section [A] reveals that Descartes’ focus in the second half of the letter will be on “freedom . . . in the acts of the will”: he will consider freedom understood as a property of volitions (elicited acts). This immediately raises a puzzle: Descartes goes on to say that this freedom can be considered “with respect to the time before they are elicited,” but that seems impossible—how can an act of will be free before it even exists? To interpret Descartes charitably here, we must suppose that when he says, “Considered with respect to the time before they are elicited, it [freedom in an act of will] entails indifference in the second
sense,” he means the following: a volition possesses the property of freedom only if before eliciting that volition, the agent was able to elicit it, or not. Volitions’ freedom “with respect to the time before they are elicited” depends on their agents’ freedom at that time.

Sections [B] and [D] are interrelated; they help explain why a volition’s freedom does not entail that the agent was motivationally indifferent about her choice prior to eliciting it. Section [B] explains that the commands of an external authority affect our freedom differently from the commands of our own reason. Descartes considers four cases, the first two involving external authority:

1. External authority (e.g., political law) neither commands nor prohibits my doing some action A; as far as the authority is concerned, my Aing is neither good nor evil, but indifferent.

2. External authority prohibits my doing A, considering it evil.

In ordinary parlance, we would say that I am “free to A” in case (1), but not in case (2). So with respect to Aing, I am freer when the external authority is indifferent than when it judges my Aing to be evil. Section [D] reveals that external commands have the same effect as external prohibitions: “the things which others command us to do, and which we would not otherwise do spontaneously, we do less freely than the things which we are not ordered to do.” Therefore, we do A more freely when external authority is indifferent to our Aing than when it judges Aing either good or evil (either commands or prohibits it).

The next two cases concern the internal authority of our reason:

3. Reason is indifferent to Aing (reasons for and against it are balanced)

4. Reason sees many more reasons to A than not (or many more reasons not to A than to do so).

Here, unlike in the cases involving external authority, we are not freer in the case of indifference (case (3)). As section [D] reveals, the more equally our own reasons are opposed to one another, the more indifferent we are, so perfect balance is the greatest degree of indifference.21 But, as Descartes said in the opening of the letter (quoting the Fourth Meditation), this greatest degree of indifference is the lowest degree of freedom.
Sections [B] through [D] teach that freedom and motivational indifference are inversely proportional to one another: the more indifference, the less freedom, and vice versa. Descartes asserted this as well in the Fourth Meditation when he said that the “spontaneity and freedom” of his assent to the cogito argument “was all the greater in proportion to my lack of indifference” (AT 7:59 / CSM 2:41). Therefore, we are “at our freest . . . when a clear perception impels us to pursue some object” (AT 7:433 / CSM2: 292).

This claim about the degrees of freedom might appear to clash with Descartes’ earlier remarks about the essence of freedom. Two-way power is a non-scalar property: it does not admit of degrees. Therefore, it might be thought that if Descartes identifies freedom with two-way power, he cannot coherently claim that freedom comes in degrees.

However, this objection rests on a misunderstanding of Descartes’ view. He never strictly identifies freedom with the possession of alternatives. He says that two-way power is an essential feature of freedom, but not that it is the only essential feature. In fact, Descartes thinks that every free action has at least one other essential property: “spontaneity” or “ease of operation,” as he calls it later in the letter. Because it is a kind of “ease,” spontaneity comes in degrees (some actions are easier to execute than others), and the overall freedom of a volition correlates to its degree of spontaneity. Whether a volition is free depends on whether the agent who elicited it could have done otherwise, but how free the volition is depends on how spontaneous it is.

This, at least, is how things work when the freedom of a volition is considered with respect to the time at which it is elicited. As section [C] reveals, the situation is a bit more complicated, and potentially problematic, when degrees of freedom are considered with respect to the time before the volition is elicited. But before turning to that issue, it is important to get a better grasp of what Descartes’ means by “spontaneity.”

He offers his official definition of spontaneity in the Fourth Meditation when he says that freedom consists “simply in this: that we are carried in such a way toward what the intellect proposes for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, that we feel ourselves determined [determinari] to it by no external force (my translation; AT 7:57 / CSM 2:40). Though the word “spontaneous” does not occur here, shortly afterwards, Descartes says that he could not but judge the cogito true “not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will, and thus the spontaneity and freedom of my belief was all the greater in proportion to my lack of indifference” (my emphasis; AT 7:59 / CSM 2:41). This passage makes clear that the earlier definition was talking about spontaneity.
The Fourth Meditation makes clear that spontaneity has to do with being “carried” or motivated in a certain way, but it defines the notion negatively, as the absence of external determination. The corresponding positive notion would seem to be “being determined from within,” or having one’s action originate within oneself. One acts spontaneously to the extent that one identifies with the sources of one’s action. This positive characterization is confirmed by how Descartes describes spontaneity in the 1645 letter, calling it “facility in determining oneself” (section [C]) and “ease of operation” (section [E]). This facility or ease increases as there is greater unity “within the field of our own judgments” (section [B]), so that one identifies wholeheartedly with the motives for one’s action. Spontaneity is at an ebb when the reasons for and against a course of action are perfectly balanced; in this case, one identifies with both sides (and so cannot identify wholeheartedly with either), inevitably acting against some of one’s own motives. Such internal motivational conflict decreases ease of operation in the will.

Descartes talks about spontaneity in two different ways. At the very end of the letter (section [E]), he speaks in terms of what I will call “absolute spontaneity,” while earlier in the letter he focuses on “relative spontaneity.” The absolute spontaneity of an act of will correlates with the sum of all the reasons that support it; when computing absolute spontaneity, reasons that oppose the act of will are not relevant. Relative spontaneity correlates to how many more reasons favor the act of will than oppose it; in computing this, reasons both for and against the action must be taken into account. For example, suppose an agent is deliberating between two mutually exclusive options for action, X and Y. Each of her reasons is of equal weight, and she has three reasons to do X, but only one reason to do Y. In this case, if she wills to X, this volition will have an absolute spontaneity of three (because supported by three reasons) but a relative spontaneity of two (three reasons in favor minus one reason against). If she wills to Y, acting against the weight of reason, this volition will have an absolute spontaneity of one (because supported by one reason), and a relative spontaneity of negative two (one reason in favor minus three against). The following charts summarizes these results:

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In section [E], which describes freedom in volitions “at the moment when they are elicited,” Descartes focuses on absolute spontaneity. When he says “It was in this sense that I wrote that I was moved towards something all the more freely when there were more reasons driving me towards it,” Descartes seems to be focused solely on the reasons supporting the actual choice: the more such reasons there are, the more spontaneously we act. Because the choice is already made, reasons not to make it are no longer relevant. This interpretation of Descartes’ language is confirmed by the fact that he considers every volition to possess this sort of spontaneity to some extent. But as section [C] makes clear, some of our volitions are opposed by the overall weight of reason, and others are elicited from a state of perfect motivational indifference; neither of these sorts of volition could have any positive degree of relative spontaneity. However, they would have absolute spontaneity, for Descartes holds that it is impossible to act unless one sees the act as good in some respect.28 Every act, even acts that oppose the weight of reason, are motivated by some reason, which yields some degree of absolute spontaneity.

However, earlier in the letter (sections [B]-[D]), when Descartes is considering the freedom of the volition with respect to the reasons at play just before it was elicited, when choices pro and contra were both merely potential, he speaks of relative spontaneity. For he says that we are always more free in an imbalanced situation than in a situation of perfect rational equilibrium. But this would not always be true if he were talking about to absolute spontaneity. There could be situations of rational balance in which an agent’s absolute spontaneity would exceed that of the relevant unbalanced situation. For example:

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This illustrates a general truth: for any unbalanced situation, there could be a perfectly balanced situation involving more weight on both sides than is present in the unbalanced situation. So Descartes’ claim (that we are always more free in an imbalanced situation) is...
false concerning absolute spontaneity. But it would always be true with respect to relative spontaneity, because the relative spontaneity in any situation of perfect balance will be zero, and so will be less spontaneous than any situation of imbalance to which it might be compared.

IV.

With a good grasp of spontaneity, we are ready to consider the central problem of this paper, provoked by the opening line of section [C]: “For a greater freedom consists either in a greater facility in determining oneself or in a greater use of the positive power which we have of following the worse although we see the better.” This remark introduces a novel complication into how Descartes describes degrees of freedom. Whereas in his earlier writings, he always depicted the scalar component of free will simply as spontaneity, here Descartes says that the scalar component can be either the degree of spontaneity, or what Anthony Kenny calls the degree of “perversity”—the extent to which one’s action is a “greater use” of the will’s power to act on the lesser array of reasons. The addition of perversity raises questions about both the coherence of Descartes’ view of freedom (as set forth in the 1645 letter), and its consistency with his earlier views.

Kenny begins to worry about the coherence of Descartes’ view in the following passage:

There is something very dubious about Descartes’ argument here to show that indifference of balance is the lowest degree of liberty. He argues that a man enjoys least liberty when the reasons are balanced, because he then enjoys less liberty of spontaneity than when he acts in accord with the greater array of reasons, and less liberty of perversity than when he acts in accord with the lesser array of reasons. He could just as well have argued that a man was most at liberty when the reasons were balanced, since he then enjoys more liberty of perversity than when the reasons are on his side, and more liberty of spontaneity than when the majority of reasons are against him.

Kenny assumes that on Descartes’ picture, every action has both a degree of spontaneity and a degree of perversity, and these are mirror images of one another: a positively perverse action has a corresponding degree of negative spontaneity, and a positively spontaneous action has a corresponding degree of negative perversity. This “mirror-image framework” can be illustrated as follows:
According to Kenny, Descartes compares the balanced situations (on the right) with the positive values in the unbalanced situations (on the left), so that balance appears to be the nadir of freedom. But Descartes could have compared the balanced situations with the negative values in the unbalanced situations, in which case balance would appear to be the apex of freedom.

Kenny takes this possibility to betray a fundamental incoherence in Descartes’ account of freedom. He continues:

In fact, having once distinguished liberty of spontaneity from liberty of perversity, Descartes should have said that in the one sense of liberty [perversity], action in indifferent matters was freer than action upon clear reasons, and in another sense [spontaneity] it was less free. But then he could not have said, what he also wanted to say, that there was a single scale of freedom on which the liberty of indifference occupied the lowest place. This shows that Descartes’ theory of freedom will not do as a philosophical account; but it is an incoherence which was present in the theory from the beginning.  

According to Kenny, Descartes’ account of freedom was always flawed.

On the contrary, if it works, Kenny’s objection does not show that Descartes’ earlier account of freedom (in the Meditations) was flawed. Rather, it provides us with a strong reason to suspect the honesty of the letter, as Gilson did. For though Descartes had maintained much earlier that we are able to “follow the worse while seeing the better” (AT 1:366 / CSMK 56), this is the only text where he says unequivocally that doing so is a kind of freedom. By identifying perversity and freedom in this way, Descartes emphasizes for the second time in the letter his agreement with the Jesuit view of freedom as a positive two-
way power for opposites. In aligning himself with the Jesuits in this way, Descartes introduces a new element into his view—perversity as a kind of liberty. If Kenny’s objection is right, then this new element does not cohere with the ones already present. That failure of fit in turn strongly suggests that the new element is an *ad hoc* addition designed to appeal to the Jesuits. The incoherence Kenny claims to spot—if it really exists—gives considerable support to Gilson’s hypothesis: the 1645 letter misrepresents Descartes’ earlier position; Descartes wanted to make it *appear* that he had always agreed with the Jesuits, and in doing so introduced an incoherence that had not been present before.34

However, I do not think that Kenny’s objection really works, for his mirror-image framework is a false assumption. The best way to see this is to consider why the text might *seem* to imply the mirror-image framework—i.e., how we might reason to it as interpreters from the text. This reasoning, while initially plausible, makes two mistakes: it misconstrues Descartes’ meaning and it rests on a false assumption. To reconstruct this reasoning, we must begin by noting an ambiguity in Descartes’ remarks.

When Descartes says “If we follow the course which appears to have the most reasons in its favor, we determine ourselves more easily,” we must ask: “more easily than what?” Descartes could mean either (or perhaps both) of the following:

(1) more easily than we would determine ourselves to the same action if reasons were balanced, or
(2) more easily than we would determine ourselves if we performed the opposite action in the current circumstances.

There is a similar ambiguity in Descartes’ remark that “if we follow the opposite, we make more use of that positive power [to follow the worse].”

Now suppose that Descartes intends only the second comparison. In that case, he is saying something like this: “If we act *with* the weight of reason, we act more spontaneously than we would if we acted against it (in that same situation),” and “If we act *against* the weight of reason, we act more perversely than we would if we acted with it (in that same situation).” If this is what Descartes means, the following two statements would also be true: “If we act *with* the weight of reason, we act less perversely than we would if we acted against it (in that same situation),” and “If we act *against* the weight of reason, we act less spontaneously than we would if we acted with it (in that same situation).” In other words, the more spontaneous option is thereby also less perverse than the option to which it is compared, and the more perverse option is thereby less spontaneous. If we assume further
that “more” means “having a positive value” and “less” means “having a negative value,”
then we reach the mirror-image framework: when an action is more perverse (i.e. has a
positive degree of perversity), it is less spontaneous (i.e. has negative spontaneity), and
when it is more spontaneous (i.e. has positive spontaneity), it is thereby less perverse (i.e.
has a negative degree of perversity).

Kenny does not address the ambiguity I have noted, but he seems implicitly to read passage
[C] as if it is making the second comparison. However, a careful look at the passage reveals
that Descartes is making the first, not the second, comparison. He says:

If we follow the course which appears to have the most reasons in its favor, we
determine ourselves more easily; but if we follow the opposite, we make more use of
that positive power; and thus we can always act more freely in those cases in which
we see much more good than evil than in those cases which are called αδιαϕορα or
indifferent. (my italics; AT 4:174 / CSMK 245-46)

The “thus” here indicates a logical connection between the second half of this quotation and
the first. So the latter half is a clue to what Descartes means when he says “determine
ourselves more easily.” Now, the latter part is clearly comparing cases of rational balance
with cases of rational imbalance. So Descartes is not comparing a choice of the lesser good
(in some unbalanced situation) with a choice of the greater good (in that same situation).
Rather, he is comparing the same type of choice undertaken in two different motivational
situations. The first step in the reasoning to the mirror-image framework misunderstands the
comparison Descartes is making.

But even if Descartes does intend the second comparison as well as the first, the reasoning
to the mirror-image framework would be flawed. For “more” does not necessarily mean
“having a positive value” and “less” does not necessarily mean “having a negative value.”
Suppose, for example, that when an action is positively spontaneous, it has not a negative
degree of perversity, but no perversity at all. In that case, if we choose the option supported
by the weight of reason, we act spontaneously but with zero perversity. However, it would
still true that by acting with the weight of reason, we are acting less perversely than we
would act if we had made the opposite choice (in that same situation). For had we acted
against weight of reason, we would have exhibited a positive degree of perversity, and zero
perversity is less than some perversity. The same point just made about perversity would
hold for relative spontaneity as well. So positing negative degrees of spontaneity and
perversity is not required, even if we assume that Descartes makes both comparisons in
passage [C].
Furthermore, there is good reason to think that Descartes would positively reject one of the key assumptions behind Kenny’s mirror-image framework—namely, that every action has some degree of perversity. While for Descartes, every act must have some spontaneity (it is essential to action), it stands to reason that perversity would be an accidental feature possessed only by some acts: those which manifest our power to act against the overall weight of reason. When we act with the weight of reason, or when no overall weight of reason is present (as in cases of perfect motivational indifference), we do not exercise our power to act against reason. In such cases, our action does not possess negative perversity, but rather lacks perversity altogether.36

Someone might object: if the argument just given is correct, then it would also follow that not every action is spontaneous. For spontaneity is the extent to which one’s actions are supported by the weight of reason. Perverse actions are not supported by the weight of reason. So by parity of reasoning, they would not have negative spontaneity, but would lack spontaneity altogether. Now (the objection continues) since Descartes clearly maintains that all actions are spontaneous, there must be something wrong with the above argument.

This objection fails to distinguish between absolute and relative spontaneity. Descartes would indeed have to admit that perverse actions have no relative spontaneity, for they are not supported by the overall weight of reason (taking reasons both pro and contra into account). But this is consistent with every action having absolute spontaneity, i.e., being motivated by some reason or reasons. So the two situations used above to illustrate Kenny’s interpretation are better viewed as follows (“NA” means that a certain term is not applicable, because the volition lacks that characteristic altogether):

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<td>Perversity=2</td>
<td>Perversity=NA</td>
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Descartes’ main point in passage [C] concerns the italicized categories, and it is this: because greater freedom consists either in greater relative spontaneity or greater perversity, we will always have a greater degree of freedom (whichever way we act) in imbalanced choice situations than in balanced ones.

V.

In this final section, I will first briefly summarize how, on my interpretation, Descartes relates the freedom of an action to its spontaneity and perversity. Then I will consider two final objections—one to my interpretation, and the other to Descartes’ view.

In passage [A] of the letter, Descartes makes clear that he is discussing freedom “in the acts of the will.” How free an act is depends on whether we are relating it to the time at which it is elicited, or the time before it is elicited. As I interpret him, Descartes thinks that when we consider an act in relation to the time at which it is elicited, its degree of freedom corresponds to its degree of absolute spontaneity; considering only the reasons we have in favor of the action, the more the reasons, the freer the action. When we consider an action’s freedom with respect to the time before it is elicited, we must relate the action to the overall weight of reason, considering reasons both for and against it. If the action is opposed to the overall weight of reason, then the action is perverse, and its degree of freedom corresponds to its degree of perversity: the more reason (overall) is opposed to it, the more free it is, demonstrating more fully the extent of our power to flout reason’s demands. If, on the other hand, the action is supported by the overall weight of reason, then its degree of freedom corresponds to its degree of relative spontaneity: the action becomes more free as the extent to which the reasons for the action increasingly outweigh the reasons against it.

As I hope this summary has made clear, relative spontaneity and perversity are just two different ways of relating to the overall weight of reason. This leads to the first objection. Suppose we have one reason to do action A, and three reasons not to do it (all reasons of equal weight). If we ask, “to what extent does reason support doing A?” and we add up the reasons, our sum will be negative two. If we ask “to what extent does reason oppose doing A?” the answer will be positive two. A could thus be equally well described as having two degrees of perversity, or minus two degrees of relative spontaneity. Perversity just is negative spontaneity under a different label (and for similar reasons, we could say that spontaneity is just negative perversity). So mirror-imaging, which I have so strenuously opposed in Kenny’s interpretation, turns out to be built into my own!
I concede: instead of saying that the weight of reason produces two different positive effects (spontaneity and perversity), we could just as accurately say that it produces positive and negative values of one effect (e.g. positive and negative relative spontaneity). But if we talk in this new way, what will matter is not whether the magnitudes are positive or negative, but rather their absolute values. Descartes’ concern is about the unity of the agent’s total judgment about the action (taking all her reasons into account): the more she is of one mind about it—the more her reason (taken as a whole) leans in one direction—the greater the magnitudes (whether positive or negative) will be, and so the greater her freedom. Perfectly balanced reason will still create the nadir of freedom. Whichever way we choose to describe it, Descartes has one scale of freedom here, not two incompatible scales (as Kenny suggests).

The second objection arises from the connection that Descartes seems to draw between spontaneity and rationality. Earlier, I noted that Descartes’ notion of spontaneity, or not being subject to determination from outside oneself, seems also to involve being determined from within oneself, i.e., having one’s action manifest one’s true self, flowing from motives with which one identifies. On this view, an act of will is most spontaneous when the agent can wholeheartedly elicit it, and the least (relatively) spontaneous actions are those elicited by a fully ambivalent or double-minded agent.

This interpretation gets some support from The Passions of the Soul, where Descartes associates being opposed to oneself with being unfree or enslaved. The weakest souls, he says, are those who let themselves be carried away by their present passions. Such passions, being often opposed to one another, pull the will first to one side and then to the other, thus making it battle against itself and so putting the soul in the most deplorable state possible. Thus when fear represents death as an extreme evil which can be avoided only by flight, while ambition on the other hand depicts the dishonor of flight as an evil worse than death, these two passions jostle the will in opposite ways; and since the will obeys first the one and then the other, it is continually opposed to itself, and so it renders the soul enslaved and miserable. (AT 11:367 / CSM 1:347)

Though this passage concerns conflict of will with itself over time, Descartes would surely say something similar about conflict at a time. He almost certainly follows Plato and St. Paul in seeing an agent’s rational desires as an expression of the agent’s true self, and in seeing agents as enslaved when their actions oppose this rational “true will.” This is why
he thinks that we act more spontaneously when we “follow the course which appears to have the most reasons in its favor” (section [C]).

But if spontaneity and freedom go up or down with rationality, then it would seem that perverse actions—which go against the true self—should be less spontaneous than actions undertaken from motivational equilibrium. Consider, for example, addicts who see that it is best for them to stop taking their drug, but who take it anyway. Such “unwilling addicts”—to use Frankfurt’s terminology—experience conflicting desires, but identify with their rational desires. Because their desire for the drug, with which they have not identified, moves them to act, they are unfree and internally divided according to Frankfurt, experiencing the “frustrations . . . suffered by a person of whom it may be said that he is estranged from himself.” When unwilling addicts act perversely and take their drug, it seems they are more estranged from themselves, and hence less free, than they would be if (as they took the drug) their reason were indifferent about whether to take it.

This objection presupposes that Descartes’ account of spontaneity is relevantly similar to Frankfurt’s view of freedom. But perhaps that is not the case. My interpretation of spontaneity may falsely assimilate Descartes’ to Frankfurt’s sort of view. If so, then the objection we are considering loses its force. I think this is a possibility worth exploring, but doing so is beyond the scope of this (already long) paper. So let us grant the interpretation, and consider two ways in which Descartes (as I have been interpreting him) could plausibly respond to this objection.

First, Descartes could distinguish between the freedom of agents and the freedom of their actions. He could grant that perverse agents, who act in opposition to their “true self,” are less free as agents than indifferent agents who perform the same type of action. The unfreedom that Frankfurt identifies—the special agony of unwilling addicts—belongs to them as wholes, arising from a conflict between their action and their “true will.” But in our letter, Descartes is focusing on “freedom . . . considered in the acts of the will” (section [A]). He claims that an indifferent agent’s action is less free (than the same action committed by an agent who sees that it is opposed to reason) because it neither has relative spontaneity, nor demonstrates the agent’s power to resist reason. But this is consistent with maintaining that the indifferent agent herself is freer (than a similarly behaving perverse agent). Descartes thinks that the freedom of an action is a function not of whether it accords with reason, but rather of the extent to which the agent’s reason was integrated when she elicited the action. The issue is not whether one’s actions conflict with one’s “true will,” (such conflict may indeed reduce the freedom of the agent) but whether one’s “true will” points in any particular direction. This seems closer to the spirit of the passage from the
Passions quoted above, which discusses the will’s conflict with itself, rather than a conflict between will and action.

The response just given depends on the assumption that it is possible for agents to make themselves as agents less free by acting more freely (i.e. with greater perversity). Some people might reject this assumption, and so continue pressing the original objection. What could Descartes say on the assumption that the degree of freedom in agents always rises or falls with the degree of freedom in their actions? He could, it seems to me, simply deny that one who deliberately violates the commands of reason is less free than one who cannot discern those commands. When a person sees the reasons for and against an action as perfectly balanced, she resembles what Frankfurt calls a ‘wanton,’ someone who does not have any second-order volitions.40 Frankfurt says that wantons cannot be free at all, because they (lacking reflective preferences) are not even persons.41 A wanton may lack the special agony of the unwilling addict’s internal conflict, but is not thereby more free. Now, Descartes would not say that perfectly indifferent agents are not persons, but he could well argue that with respect to the time before an act is elicited, being aware of some (overall) weight of reason for or against one’s action is a precondition for having the scalar component of freedom.42 For a perfectly indifferent agent, there is no overall “voice of Reason” to either obey or flout. Thus, even though perfectly indifferent agents would lack the internal conflict of the perversely acting agent, they would not be more free, for they would entirely lack the component of freedom that comes in degrees.43

I conclude, then, that Descartes’ claims about the degrees of freedom in the 1645 letter are consistent with themselves. Had they not been, this would have been a reason to think that Gilson was right, that the letter is probably dishonest. However, given the self-consistency of the letter, we have no reason not to take it at face value as an honest exposition of what Descartes had been thinking about freedom all along. Absent a specific reason to think that Descartes was dissembling in this case, charity should move us to give him the benefit of the doubt.
Works Cited


While Descartes’ 1644 letter to Mesland contains a slightly longer continuous reflection on freedom (see AT 4:115-18 / CSMK 233-34), the mysterious text appears to conflict with many of Descartes’ other remarks, and so has received considerably more attention from commentators.

In this paper, references to primary texts from Descartes use the following abbreviations:


Translations are from CSM or CSMK unless otherwise noted.

Lennon suggests that the mysterious text may not even be a letter. See Thomas Lennon, “Descartes’s Supposed Libertarianism: Letter to Mesland or Memorandum concerning Petau?,” Journal of the History of Philosophy 51, no. 2 (2013), 228-29. However, it seems to be at least a draft of a letter, for it is addressed to “you,” though there is no evidence that Descartes ever sent it to anyone.


For examples of this interpretation, see Ferdinand Alquie, La Decouverte Metaphysique De L’homme Chez Descartes (Presses Universitaires De France, Paris, 1950), 285-92; Étienne Gilson, La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie (Paris: Alcan, 1913), 397-432, esp. 420; and Tad M. Schmaltz, Descartes on Causation (Oxford University Press, USA, 2007), 202-05.

Among prior commentators, Gilson sees this dishonesty most clearly. See especially Gilson, La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie, 422.

Lennon, “Descartes’s Supposed Libertarianism,” 229-36.

For example, in correspondence Descartes says, “The will does not tend toward evil except in so far as it is presented to it by the intellect under some aspect of goodness” (AT 1:366 / CSMK 56), and in Principles I.34 he says, “In order to make a judgment, the intellect is of course required since, in the case of something which we do not in any way perceive, there is no judgment we can make” (AT 8a:18 / CSM 1:204). See also Comments on a Certain Broadsheet (AT 8b:363 / CSM 1:307).

The following remark from a bit earlier in the Fourth Meditation also implies that Descartes enjoys two-way power during unclear perception: “If . . . I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not
perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly” (AT 7:59-60 / CSM 2:41).

9 See for example AT 7:69 / CSM 2:48; AT 7:145 / CSM 2:104; AT 7:166 / CSM 2:117; AT 8a:21 / CSM 1:207; AT 3:64 / CSMK 147; AT 4:115-16 / CSMK 233-34.

10 How to understand the moral/absolute distinction is one of the most important interpretive questions about the 1645 letter, but falls outside the scope of this paper. Here I will simply indicate what seems to me the most obvious way of understanding it: what we can do morally speaking is what we are categorically able to do, and what we can do absolutely speaking is what we are hypothetically able to do. While agents motivated only in one direction cannot act otherwise in those circumstances (categorical inability), if they were in different circumstances, they would be able to act otherwise (hypothetical ability). For example, if I want to prove that I am able to refrain from assenting to what I now clearly perceive (i.e., prove that I am free in assenting to it), I can deliberately stop thinking about the evidence that allows me to perceive it clearly; once I do that, I can withhold my assent. Alternatively, I can stop thinking about the clear and distinct proposition altogether, in which case I not only can withhold assent, but would do so (since we cannot assent to something unless we think of it first—see Principles I.34 (AT 8a:18 / CSM 1:204)). For a readings along these lines, see Kenny, “Descartes on the Will,” 28-31; Joseph Keim Campbell, “Descartes on Spontaneity, Indifference, and Alternatives,” in New Essays on the Rationalists, ed. Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Daniel Fogal, “Two Conceptions of Cartesian Freedom.”


12 Hence, Schmaltz refers to it as “the Jesuit letter.” See Schmaltz, Descartes on Causation, 202-05.


14 “That agent is called free which, when all the requisites for acting are posited, can act or not act, or can so do one thing that it can also do the contrary.” Molina, Concordia I q14 a13 d2 n3 (Luis de Molina, Liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinatione et reprobatione concordia (Ona and Madrid,1953), 14).

15 See Guillaume Gibieuf, De libertate Dei et creaturae (Paris1630). This complete work is now available for free download from the gallica bibliothèque numérique. Kenny, “Descartes on the Will,” 24 and 30 notes.
similarities between Descartes’ views and Gibieuf’s. For a very thorough discussion of Gibieuf and his relations with Descartes, see Francis Ferrier, *Un orateur ami de Descartes : Guillaume Gibieuf et sa philosophie de la liberté*, Bibliothèque d’histoire de la philosophie (Paris: J. Vrin, 1980).


17 See C. P. Ragland, “Alternative Possibilities in Descartes’s Fourth Meditation,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (2006). I argue there that the Fourth Meditation itself is best read as asserting that two-way power (in some sense) is essential to freedom. If this is correct, then the 1645 letter is in harmony—as it purports to be—with the Fourth Meditation.


19 The scholastic picture, which Descartes seems to have endorsed, is similar to a contemporary “agent causation” account. See Roderick Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self,” in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).


21 However, we remain indifferent so long as we experience any ambivalent motivation, even if the opposing reasons are very imbalanced.

22 Descartes probably refers to this line from the Fourth Meditation in section [E] above: “It was in this sense that I wrote that I moved towards something all the more freely when there were more reasons driving me towards it.”
In the Meditations, right after saying that freedom “consists simply” in two-way ability, he goes on to say that it “consists simply” in spontaneity. This language appears, at least on first inspection, to indicate that Descartes considers both two-way ability and spontaneity essential to freedom (AT 7:57 / CSM 2:40).

In this respect, Descartes’ account of how an agent can be free resembles our ordinary view of how a door can be “open”: to be open, a door must be ajar (that is, not flush with the door frame), where this is an all-or-nothing matter; but a door can be more-or-less open because there is more to being open than just being ajar, and that extra element is capable of infinitely many different degrees.

The link between being carried and being motivated is established in the Fourth Meditation just after Descartes defines freedom. He says: “For in order to be free it is not necessary that I can be carried in both directions, but on the contrary, the more I incline [propendeo] in one direction . . . the more freely do I choose it” (AT 7: 57-8 / CSM 2:40; my translation). We can be carried in both directions only if we are inclined in both directions, so inclinations are what “carry” us.


Shoshana Brassfield has pointed out that the relevant distinction here might not be between relative and absolute spontaneity. Might it not rather be between a relative and absolute number of reasons? There could be an unvarying notion of spontaneity that Descartes sometimes considers as resulting from the absolute number of reasons, and sometimes from the relative number of reasons. I suspect that the points I make in the next two paragraphs could be reworked in this sort of language without a substantive change in the interpretation (i.e., I could speak of “spontaneity resulting from the absolute number of reasons” rather than “absolute spontaneity”), but it is simpler to think of spontaneity here as a “historical concept” that includes the reasons from which it arises, so that we have two different types of spontaneity at play.

In a letter to Mersenne from May 1637, Descartes endorses 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.” He continues that “if the intellect never represented anything to the will as good without its actually being so, the will could never go wrong in its choice. But the intellect often represents different things to the will at the same time; and that is why they say ‘I see and praise the better, but I follow the worse’” (AT 1:366 / CSMK 56).

One might think that this simply shows that Descartes does not use a conception of absolute spontaneity at all. However, as I argued in the previous paragraph, we cannot make good sense of his remarks in section [E] unless we take him to be talking about absolute spontaneity. So he does employ the concept, just not in the earlier part of the letter.


Ibid., 31.

Ibid.
33 The first time was when he claimed that we are able—in a sense—to withhold assent from what we clearly perceive.

34 If we assume that Kenny’s criticism stands, we could insist on taking the 1645 letter at face value as an honest elaboration of what Descartes was thinking earlier, which would yield the result that Descartes’ view had always been incoherent. However, this would be a historically less plausible interpretation than Gilson’s, given the evidence of Descartes’ willingness to dissemble with the Jesuits. Furthermore, Gilson’s hypothesis is more charitable to Descartes’s philosophy (though not his character), insofar as it maintains the coherence of his account in the Meditations.

35 I thank Shoshana Brassfield, who pointed out to me the flaw in moving from “more/less” to “positive/negative.” The key insight in this paragraph is hers.

36 Randal Marlin, “Cartesian Freedom and the Problem of the Mesland Letters,” in Early Modern Philosophy: Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Politics, ed. Georges J. D. Moyal and Stanley Twye (Delmar, New York: Caravan Press, 1985) make a very similar point. However, his critique of Kenny does not address the fact that Descartes’ own words can seem to support Kenny’s view. By showing that Kenny’s criticism only seems to be supported by Descartes’ words, I hope to have provided a more thorough critique of Kenny’s objection.

37 See Republic 588b-589c, where Plato uses pictures to represent the parts of the soul: for the appetitive part, a many-headed monster; for the spirited part, a lion; and for the rational part, a human. By choosing to represent it as a human, Plato clearly identifies the rational part with the “true self.” St. Paul says: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin . . . So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin” (Romans 7:15-25, NRSV). Similarly to Plato, Paul identifies (in his “inmost self”) with his desire to do what he judges to be right. He desires to obey God, and truly wants this desire to be effective. He is enslaved because his actions conflict with what he truly wants, proceeding from alien motivations.

38 Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” 17.

39 I would like to thank Shoshana Brassfield, whose suggestion of this distinction gave me the idea for this possible line of response by Descartes.

40 Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” 11.

41 Ibid., 14.

42 In other words, it is a precondition for either spontaneity or perversity, but not for contingency.

43 They would, however, remain free insofar as they have two-way power to elicit a choice or not in those balanced circumstances. That is why Descartes says not that such “perfectly balanced” agents lack freedom altogether, but rather that they enjoy the “lowest grade” of freedom (AT 7: 58 / CSM 2:40): two-way power
alone, without the variable component of freedom (This point concerns relative spontaneity, not absolute spontaneity, and so does not negate the fact that some degree of absolute spontaneity is essential to any action).