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OBJECTIONS TO A THEODICY OF ERROR

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Introduction

In his Synopsis of the Fourth Meditation, Descartes offers the following caveat to his principle concerning the proper application of the will:[i]

> [It] should be noted...that I do not deal [in this section] at all with sin, i.e. the error which is committed in pursuing good and evil, but only with the error that occurs in distinguishing truth from falsehood. And there is no discussion of matters pertaining to faith or the conduct of life, but simply speculative truths which are known solely by means of the natural light.[1]

In this paper I will trace the theoretical implications of the theodicy that Descartes presents in the Fourth Meditation in response to this former class of error (i.e., that regarding the contemplation of truth) to the relevant counterparts in the moral-practical domain (i.e., that concerning the conduct of life). Although Descartes often makes remarks suggesting that the two domains are not relatable in this important way,[2] the present project should serve to demonstrate that they not only *are* so relatable, but that it is in fact Cartesian principles that bind them together.

The first part of my paper, therefore, will be devoted to the mapping out of a Cartesian ethical system that is suitable for technical critique. My primary aim in this section will be to identify the major components of Descartes' moral-practical apparatus that correspond to those elements already defined for the speculative apparatus, i.e. that which traces the response of the soul to perceptions of truth. What we will be looking for with regard to this practical apparatus are the particular mechanisms

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1 René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volume II, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 11.

2 Ibid., 106.

by which the soul, first, perceives the good and, second, responds to those perceptions. This will prepare the ground for consideration of whether there is in this latter sphere a class of error analogous to that which was determined irreducibly vicious[3] in the former sphere.

It was necessary in order to establish his principle of clear and distinct perceptions that Descartes clear the field of all prospects of vicious errors existing in the speculative sphere. It was only his claim to have accomplished this that justified him in thinking he had secured the route to attaining reliable knowledge. This route is that which became preserved in his rule for the application of the will with regard to the contemplation of truth. But similar work must be achieved in the moral sphere if this former principle is to stand. If it were possible to extend the arguments of the Fourth Meditation theodicy to resolve all forms of error which arise in the moral-practical realm, we should expect to find a rule for the application of the will in the conduct of our moral-practical lives that mirrors the first, a rule which essentially *guarantees* the reliability of our moral judgments upon threat of contradiction. I will show, however, that no such rule is provided, and then proceed to consider what I take to be the theoretical implications of this disanalogy.

In the second part of my paper, in order to demonstrate the positive failure of Descartes' theodicy in application to the moral-practical sphere, I will show how the theodicy fails to answer the problem of human error due to following the dictates of love. Here I will defend the view propounded by Harry Frankfurt characterizing the compulsions of love as a form of volitional constraint analogous to that which governs the will in its contemplation of truth. Specifically, I will attempt to highlight the similarities between the two forms of volitional constraint (which Frankfurt calls *volitional necessities*) and offer suggestions toward the acceptance of this former class as the legitimate moral-practical counterpart to knowledge in the speculative sphere. In order to further motivate my view, I will revisit Descartes' theodicy as it might pertain to the problem of moral error and attempt to demonstrate how such arguments ultimately fail.

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[3] This term will be defined in section 2.

Groundwork

Insofar as there is a "Cartesian ethical system," it will for the most part derive from his work in metaphysics and the natural sciences.[ii] In this present treatment, I am relying on passages extracted primarily from Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* and *The Passions of the Soul*. The thesis by which I will be proceeding (but for which I will not argue here) is that whatever is lacking in the way of a formal theodicy regarding moral error can nonetheless be inferred from Descartes' remarks on the role of the passions in the organization of the soul. Furthermore, I have chosen to restrict my analysis to that passion which I believe will provide the best material for application to the problem of moral error generally. To this end, I have decided to focus upon Descartes' account of love.

In choosing love as my paradigm instance, I am following upon the rationale of Harry Frankfurt, who identifies love as the "ultimate ground of practical rationality."[4] Frankfurt's model is important to our discussion in that it treats the determinations of our faculties, particularly those that work in conjunction with the will, as the ultimate regulators of our cognitive and practical lives;[5] and furthermore, in that it interprets the efficacy of these mechanisms in performing these functions as meaningful indicators of God's nature (or, as it may be, the logical integrity of such a concept in the abstract sense).[iii] Such sentiments harmonize nicely with certain remarks made by Descartes himself concerning the priority of love in practical affairs[6] and will become important in motivating my objections in the next section.

According to Descartes, the principle utility of the passions consists in their role in organizing the soul.[7] It is this process that ultimately yields one's moral-practical habit, which is describable as

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4 Harry G. Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 56.
5 Ibid., 64.
6 Byron Williston, "Descartes on Love and/as Error," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (Jul., 1997), 433.
7 René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volume I, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 354.

either “virtuous” or “depraved.”[8] The passions, therefore, can be conceived as nature's mechanism[iv] for orienting the soul-body complex toward the acquisition of goods and the avoidance of harms.[9] Insofar as it succeeds in this function, the soul is said to increase in perfection, i.e., to become more virtuous. Failure in this regard, however, produces negative effects in the soul, and in result becomes depraved.

This role of the passions in nurturing the health of the soul bears a strong resemblance to the role of the appetites whose inputs to the body can similarly incline it toward health or harm. Of these latter perceptions Descartes considers,

> When we say...with respect to the body suffering from dropsy, that it has a disordered nature because it has a dry throat and yet does not need drink, the term 'nature' is here used merely as an extraneous label. However, with respect to the composite, that is, the mind united with this body, what is involved is not a mere label, but a true error of nature, namely that it is thirsty at a time when drink is going to cause it harm. It thus remains to inquire how it is that the goodness of God does not prevent nature, in this sense, from deceiving us.[10]

Of great importance to the discussion of moral error, then, is the precise mechanism by which the soul acquires the habit that it does. Crudely speaking, this proceeds through regulation by the will, which in turn takes its cues from the dual input of reason and experience.[11] According to Descartes, the thoughts of the soul cannot be affected via the direct imposition of the will, but must rather be *guided* by the will in accordance with the prescriptions of reason and experience into nurturing experiences (i.e., experiences that strengthen virtuous thoughts and weaken depraved ones). As Descartes explains, “Our passions...cannot be directly aroused or suppressed by the action of our will, but only indirectly through the representation of things which are usually joined with the passions we wish to have and opposed to the passions we wish to reject.”[12] This arrangement does, however, allow for a certain level of active intervention in the otherwise natural causal process,[13] and this fact complicates matters in many ways that we will have to overlook for the time being.[v]

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8 Ibid., 387.
9 Ibid., 376.
10 CSM II, 59.
11 CSM I, 377.
12 Ibid., 354.
13 Ibid., 348.

The condition of one's soul is ultimately a function of their ability to rightly perceive the good and respond to it in constructive ways. This, if we recall from Descartes' Fourth Meditation theodicy, is in the first place a matter of achieving clear and distinct perceptions. But while Descartes goes to great lengths in the Fourth Meditation to defend the integrity of our judgments concerning perceptions of the true, it is significantly less clear how such a defense might be made on behalf of our practical and moral judgments (i.e., those that relate to perceptions of the good). As long as this task remains outstanding, it is difficult to see how Descartes' doctrine of clear and distinct perceptions, or his conception of God on which this doctrine stands, can be established.

Theodicy Revisited

One primary strategy that Descartes employs in his Fourth Meditation theodicy is to distinguish between errors of the benign and vicious sorts. In brief, benign errors are those errors in judgment that derive from what might be called "justifiably imperfect design" (i.e., *allowances* to err), in that they are conditioned upon man's finitude.[14] This class extends over such errors as those that arise from the natural limitations of the intellect, as well as from the soul's conjunction with the body.[vi] Vicious errors, on the other hand, are those errors in judgment that derive from "unjustifiably imperfect design" (i.e., *determinations* to err), and are conditioned upon man's infinite element, i.e., the will.[15] The argument on which Descartes relies to establish his principle of clear and distinct perceptions, therefore, should be understood as a form of free will argument.[16]

Of the two classes mentioned, it is vicious errors that pose the most serious threat to Descartes' project. This has to do with Descartes' conception of free will. According to Descartes, freedom of the will consists precisely in the unfettered capacity to act constructively upon that which the intellect represents to it, i.e., "it consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for

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14 Lex Newman, "The Fourth Meditation," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Sept., 1999), 562.
15 CSM II, 39-40.
16 Newman 1999, 563-66.

affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do not feel that we are determined by any external force." But this does not preclude the soul being naturally predisposed to respond with one action over another. On the contrary, such positive inclinations (whether in response to reason or to one's innate dispositions) are conceived as greatly *enhancing* our freedom.[17] Conversely, the indifference one feels when there is no reason compelling the soul in one direction rather than another is considered by Descartes to be the lowest grade of freedom. Hence, perfect freedom, as Descartes conceives it, consists in one's being able to confidently proceed in accordance with their native volitional compulsions as these, in turn, are informed by reliable perceptions of the true and good.[vii]

As Williston notes, the importance of our being aware of this relationship is different for each of the perception types.

> In the case of external sensations, the importance is epistemological – we are concerned to know the truth of the corporeal world in which we move. In the case of internal sensation the importance is functional – we need to know when our body is in danger or is expressing basic needs so that we may preserve it more efficiently. In the case of the passions, the importance is chiefly moral – we need to know how to enhance or perfect ourselves in so far as we are rational, though embodied, creatures.[18]

What will constitute a positive infringement of free will in any particular instance, therefore, will similarly vary as we transition between the respective spheres of knowledge.

The Cartesian strategy for handling moral error relies on the identification of the passions with the appetites, which is justified on the basis of their common connection to the body.[19] Hence, errors derived from the passions are meant to fall under the extension of the Sixth Meditation defense, which attempts to establish that our nature is of the *best possible arrangement*. Descartes' argument proceeds from his considerations of the dropsy patient mentioned above. Here he writes, "[Notwithstanding] the immense goodness of God, the nature of man as a combination of mind and body is such that it is

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17 CSM II, 40.
18 Williston 1997, 433.
19 CSM I, 339.

bound to mislead him from time to time...Yet it is much better that it should mislead him [on the occasion of some sickness] than that it should always mislead when the body is in good health."[20] He continues further with suggestions toward how we may even learn to cope with and correct such errors: "[In] matters regarding the well-being of the body, all of my senses report the truth much more frequently than not. Also, I can almost always make use of more than one sense to investigate the same thing; and in addition, I can use both my memory, which connects present experiences with preceding ones, and my intellect, which has by now examined all the causes of error."[21]

There are several reasons why I take this response to be unsatisfactory. In the first place, error derived from the passions is not susceptible to corrective mechanisms in the same way as are many of these other perceptions, providing strong justification for interpreting these as *determinations*, rather than benign allowances, of our faculties.[viii] It is therefore my contention that the following principle that Descartes lays down in defense of our purely speculative judgments should hold in our present context as well.[ix] Here he writes in reference to the form of argumentation used above,

> In the case of our clearest and most careful judgments, however, this kind of explanation would not be possible, for if such judgments were false they could not be corrected by any clearer judgments or by means of any natural faculty. In such cases I simply assert that it is impossible for us to be deceived. Since God is the supreme being, he must also be supremely good and true, and it would therefore be a contradiction that anything should be created by him which positively tends towards falsehood...Hence this faculty must tend towards the truth, at least when we use it correctly (that is, by assenting only to what we clearly and distinctly perceive...).[22]

The more important objections, I think however, relate to the integral role of the passions in fueling one's moral-practical life, and also to the strong correlation these have to our perceptions of the good. According to Frankfurt's model introduced above, the passions – and *love* more strongly than the others – govern our practical lives in analogous fashion to how the laws of logic govern our cognitive

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[20] CSM II, 61.
[21] Ibid.
[22] CSM II, 102-103.

lives.[23] The influence of each is described as imposing certain constraints on our agency that we cannot overcome.[x] Descartes himself seems to concede this point when he writes, for instance, of the desire which arises from attraction, "[When] we observe something in one [person] which is more attractive than anything we observe at the moment in the others, this determines our soul to feel towards that one alone all the inclination which nature gives it to pursue the good which it represents as the greatest we could possibly possess."[24] Insofar, then, as moral judgments based on love are susceptible to the same psychological impediments that render this former class of judgments incorrigible, both should be granted equal privilege under Descartes' principle.

Conclusion

Free will for Descartes consists in the positive inclination of the soul toward what is perceived as either true or good. Insofar as our moral-practical judgments in response to the passions are incorrigible – i.e., beyond our innate powers to correct through reflection or by subjugation to some higher faculty – errors derived from them must qualify as positive infringements upon man's free will. In the case of human beings, the only possible offender is nature, and therefore *God* in virtue of his sovereignty over nature.[25] What my objection amounts to, if sustained, is the demonstration of the fallibility of judgments as informed by perceptions of the good. In light of this disanalogy between the speculative and practical spheres, Descartes' theodicy is incomplete, failing to secure the relevant territory of our moral-practical judgments from vicious error. As such, his doctrine of clear and distinct perception likewise remains insecure, and with it, the logical integrity of his conception of God on which it depends.

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[23] Frankfurt 2004, 66.
[24] CSM I, 360.
[25] Recall Descartes' complex conception of nature on CSM II, 56.

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[i] This principle states, “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 will correctly” (CSM II, 41).

[ii] “Given [Descartes'] conception of the order of knowledge, conclusions about ethics must be established in a way that reveals their dependence on the prior conclusions of metaphysics and physics.” Donald Rutherford, "Descartes' Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2008/entries/descartes-ethics/>.

[iii] To be more precise, Frankfurt merely treats these volitional constraints teleologically, i.e. as legitimate authorities in the structuring of our intellectual and volitional lives. Taken in conjunction with the assumption that God is responsible for the nature we possess, however, we can treat these features as in some way indicative of God's nature.

[iv] Descartes has a complex understanding of this term. In the *Meditations* he writes, “[There] is no doubt that everything that I am taught by nature contains some truth. For if nature is considered in its general aspect, then I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God. And by my own nature in particular I understand nothing other than the totality of things bestowed on me by God (CSM II, 56).”

[v] This feature of human morality sounds like what Matthew Bagger in his 2002 paper, “The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition” calls *self-management*. This ability of rational beings (in contrast to lower animals) undoubtedly plays a significant role in the conducting of one's moral-practical affairs, but introduces levels of complexity to our discussion that will have to be disregarded for the time being. For perhaps relevant material on this subject, see CSM I, 348, 139-40; and CSM II, 144, 161.

[vi] Intellectual imperfection consists in man's limited access to empirical data *(*CSM II, 39) while sensory and appetitive imperfection consists in dispositions of the body (ibid., 56, 58-61).

[vii] “But the indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom; it is evidence not of any perfection of freedom, but rather a defect in knowledge or a kind of negation. For if I always saw clearly what was good true and good, I should never have to deliberate about the right judgment or choice; in that case, although I should be wholly free, it would be impossible for me ever to be in a state of indifference” (CSM II, 40).

[viii] As Williston points out, “[Since] external sensory perceptions almost always alert us to the existence of real objects in the world, they can be rendered less obscure through the application of mathematical and geometrical analysis. But the passions “are so close and so internal to our soul” that, even when severely disordered, they are not susceptible of correction in the same way. In the end the information of the external senses, once linked up clearly and distinctly with the matter it represents, is our guide through the world of extension, whereas the passions never lose their rootedness in the mind as embodied, and never therefore relinquish their status as irreducibly 'confused'” (Williston 1997, 433).

[ix] Newman explains the rationale for this defense: “God can allow errors that are *my* fault, though not errors that would be *God's* fault. When my perception is clear and distinct, giving assent is not a voluntary option – thus not explainable by the freewill defense. In such cases, assent is a necessary consequence of my cognitive nature: “our mind is of such a nature that it cannot help assenting to what it clearly understands”...Since, on occasions of clarity and distinctness, my assent arises from the cognitive nature God gave me, God would be blamable if those judgments resulted in error.” Lex Newman, "Descartes' Epistemology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/descartes-epistemology/>.

[x] “The necessities of a person's will guide and limit his agency. They determine what he may be willing to do, what he cannot help doing, and what he cannot bring himself to do. They determine as well what he may be willing to accept as a reason for acting, what he cannot help considering to be a reason for acting, and what he cannot bring himself to count as a reason for acting. In these ways, they set the boundaries of his practical life; and thus they fix his shape as an active being” (Frankfurt 2004, 50).