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Twists and Turns on the Road to Cartesian Deontology

Introduction

Noa Namann-Zauderer's *Descartes's Deontological Turn*[1] is a brilliant book. It is lucid in explanation and elegantly written, achieving a level of originality and mastery of her subject that significantly reshapes our understanding of central aspects of Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology, as well as ethical theory, to a degree not seen since Margaret Wilson's *Descartes*. The book is beautifully produced and edited by Cambridge University Press.

In her book Naaman-Zauderer argues for the following six main theses, as I count them, and not necessarily in the order given in the text:

The *first thesis* is that all ideas that represent possible existents – whether actual or merely possible – are true in a sense she will call "ontologically true": they correspond with reality. (Chap. 1.)

The *second* is that when in Meditation IV Descartes lays down the rule that we should refrain from assenting to any idea that is not clearly and distinctly perceived (clear and distinct ideas are, roughly, those whose truth is self-evident), she does so not because of the consequences of doing so – a guarantee that our beliefs will be true – but because there is a duty to do so that defines what an epistemically responsible agent should be. (Chap. 2.)

Her argument for this relies in part on a plausible reading of Descartes's obscure doctrine of the material falsity of ideas in Meditation III and the reply to Arnaud, among other texts – the *third main thesis* – and a (perhaps) not-so-plausible reading of Descartes's much clearer (as it is standardly thought) doctrine of the formal falsity to be found in judgments given in Meditation IV – the *fourth main thesis*. It is important for Naaman-Zauderer

[1] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. (Unspecified page references are to this book.)

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to show that formal falsity is not, as it seems, the falsity of the proposition asserted since in that case there would be an external value – the avoiding of propositional error – from which, contrary to the deontological reading, the rule of assent could derive value instrumentally. Demonstrating this rests in part on a *fifth main thesis*, that Descartes fundamentally recast the theory of judgment in the *Regulae*, where acts of judgment are carried out by the intellect and not the will, whereas in Meditation IV, the reverse is true. Naaman-Zauderer devotes, I should judge, perhaps half of the book (chapters 1 and 2) to stating and defending her interpretation of Descartes's doctrines of falsity.

Chapters 3 an 4 offer what may be the most novel of Zauderer's interpretations, her *sixth main thesis*: that a principle of Cartesian psychology – one is compelled to assent to what is clearly and distinctly perceived – unifies the will and the intellect experientially, thus representing in humans an image of God whose will and intellect are unified metaphysically. This provides an interesting and quite novel reading of what seem to be some inconsistent tendencies in Cartesian texts dealing with the comparison of human and divine will, and is an important consideration in her case that Cartesian epistemic ethics is deontological.

As a piece of philosophical and scholarly writing, Zauderer's book is a lucidly written monograph with several strands of interpretation that are startlingly novel; it is well argued and generally well grounded in Descartes's texts. The author deals extensively with the recent secondary literature on her topics, neither relying too much on the ideas of others nor always discounting them. With Descartes, as with any of the great figures in the history of philosophy, so much scrutiny over a very long period of time has been directed to his writings that finding interpretations that are thoroughly novel and yet offer highly plausible readings of all the texts is a great, and increasing, rarity. I would count Zauderer's work as falling into this category even if I think that some of her interpretations "push the envelop" of plausible readings of some of the texts she deals with. But all of her major interpretive theses are grounded in at least some central texts and she takes into account a wide range of other texts, including some that seem to be not supportive of her interpretations. These are generally plausibly handled. In reading this book I have had some Cartesian concepts clarified for me for the first time, had Cartesian doctrines suggested to me that I had not seen before, and been challenged to justify my own reading of texts when they

came into conflict with readings introduced here. Overall, Zauderer's book meets the high standards of philosophical interest, clarity of expression, and scholarship that we have come to expect of Cambridge philosophy offerings.

In the main part of this review that follows, I engage with the author on six themes, and do so in several ways. Sometimes I focus on exposition alone, sometimes on exposition and (what I intend as) a friendly extension or amendment to her arguments; occasionally I set off on my own to explore an idea only tangentially related to something she has said; and sometimes I will be critical and argue that she is wrong about certain things.

1. The Will and the Compulsion of Assent by Clear and Distinct Ideas

One of the critical tensions in Descartes's epistemology and theory of the will is that between declarations made in the Meditations (and elsewhere) that when a clear and distinct idea is before our mind the will is compelled to assent to it, and statements later on that seem to deny this. One of these later statements occurs in a letter to Mesland of 1645 where Descartes says that "although morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction, absolutely speaking we can" (AT IV, 173; CSMK, 245). This passage is extensively discussed by Naaman-Zauderer (pp. 120–130). Her discussion comprises an analysis and interpretation of the passage as well as consideration of various attempts to deal with the tension in the literature, including claims that Descartes simply changed his mind between earlier and later passages. Her own view is that Descartes did not change his mind but remained true to the compulsion-doctrine throughout. In the course of explaining how to read this passage consistent with the compulsion-doctrine she devotes considerable space (pp. 123–24) to Alanen's (2003, 245) theory of the texts. Alanen treats the moral necessity as a kind of epistemic necessity, so that one must assent to clear and distinct ideas *if one is to be following proper method*. But in terms of what is psychologically possible for us, we can simply refuse to assent under these circumstances, thus revealing Descartes to be endorsing the "2-way" freedom of the will, that is, the freedom of the will in which it is absolutely possible to affirm or deny even clear and distinct ideas. Naaman-Zauderer criticizes Alanen's reading quite effectively here. In contrast to Alanen, she maintains that, for Descartes, psychologically it is impossible for us not to assent to a clear and distinct idea – this is just what Descartes means by saying it is *morally* necessary

for us to assent. What then could Descartes mean when he says that from the absolute perspective it is still possible for us not to assent? Her answer is that it is *metaphysically* possible that the will can act independently of the intellect "precisely because, metaphysically speaking, our intellect and will remain distinct from one another even when the intellect's perceptions are clear and distinct" (p. 130). This is an innovative and intriguing suggestion, important in showing that Descartes did not repudiate the compulsion principle in 1645.

The compulsion principle itself is important to Naaman-Zauderer's purposes, as we shall see below, in establishing our likeness to God, and the latter plays a role in helping to establish the deontological character of Cartesian epistemology. But the compulsion principle is also important to Descartes's normative epistemology in general, which is our central concern here. This is what I propose to discuss in this section. A contrary view is proposed by Lilly Alanen. She argues that Descartes's view is that the compulsion of assent by clear and distinct ideas would actually negate Descartes's epistemic ethics since, unless we can (actually, psychologically) refuse to assent to clear and distinct ideas, we cannot be praised for doing so if we do so, or blamed for assenting to non clear and distinct ideas when we do that. But the compulsion rule is in itself a psychological principle for Descartes and not an epistemic principle, so its role in Cartesian epistemology remains to be determined. I now propose to argue that this principle can, and should, be accepted and *used* by reflective epistemic agents to solve a key problem in Descartes's epistemology. If I am right about this, this would turn the tables on Alanen, for it would show that we cannot reflectively follow rational method *unless* we accept the compulsion principle.

Let us first suppose that rational method is internalist in the sense that we have not only to be justified in asserting things; we have to be able to *show* that we are justified in asserting things. Call this "reflective rationality."

Early in Meditation III Descartes proposes the rule of truth:

> *Rule of truth:* If I have a clear and distinct idea to the effect that p then it is true that p. (AT VII, 35; CSM II, 35)

I don't propose here to focus on whether this is true or how we could show it to be true (this would be the validation question) but just accept it as part of Descartes's epistemology. Now I propose that we also include in the method the compulsion principle:

> *Compulsion principle*: If I have a clear and distinct idea to the effect that p then I am compelled to assent to p.

Let's take something that seems to be obvious to common sense that Descartes wants to reject, e.g., the view known as Naïve Realism (that objects in the material world are coloured in the primary sense of resembling our colour sensations). A naïve realist might well avail herself of these two principles, maintaining that she does have a clear and distinct idea to the effect that material objects are coloured and that it follows from this and the first principle just stated that this is in fact true. Something like this very issue seems to be a worry for Descartes early in Meditation III where he says

> But there was something... which I used to assert, and which through habitual belief I thought I clearly perceived, although I did not in fact do so. This was that there were things outside me which were the sources of my ideas and which resembled them in all respects. (AT VII, 36; CSM II, 25)

Let's say, then, that a primary concern of the epistemology of the natural light that Descartes is beginning to develop in Meditation III is to block such reasoning, and to show that these principles lead us only to the true results, that is, to the Cartesian world-view. As the passage just quoted indicates, it is possible for someone to *think* that an idea one has is clear and distinct, when it is not. To prevent someone who just thinks that something is a clear and distinct idea from getting started on a justification exercise, Descartes must deny that there is a putative rule of truth:

> *Putative Rule of Truth*: If I think that I have a clear and distinct idea to the effect that p then p is true.

In order, therefore, for anyone to be able to demonstrate something by using the actual rule of truth, one must be able to somehow distinguish between ideas that are actually clear and distinct and those that we just think are. This is where the Compulsion Rule plays a critical role. I think that Descartes supposes that we can tell introspectively when we are compelled to do something and when we are not. Let us take a certain proposition that is under consideration, say that naïve-realist proposition mentioned above. We want to know if we can use the natural-light epistemology to demonstrate it. So we look inside ourselves to see if we are psychologically compelled to assent to it. Let's say that we are not compelled to do so: we can imagine

a mechanistic world of the sort Descartes himself thinks to actually be the case. So we now infer that we do not have a clear and distinct idea that material objects are coloured. This blocks any further progress to justify that proposition since we cannot assert the antecedent of the (actual) Rule of Truth, thus cannot *use* the Rule of Truth. This shows how the inclusion of the compulsion principle as a premise in Descartes's positive natural-light epistemology plays a key negative role in blocking his scholastic opponents from demonstrating key elements of their ontology. I take it that blocking justification-inferences from merely putative but not really clear and distinct ideas is of major importance to Descartes. So the compulsion-rule has a major role to play in Cartesian epistemology even if it is a psychological and not a normative principle.

2. *Naaman-Zauderer's Account of Descartes's Deontological Epistemology*

The compulsion principle is a key part of Cartesian epistemology, as I have just argued, but by itself is not a duty in Descartes's commitment to deontological epistemology. According to Naaman-Zauderer the core duty of Descartes's deontological epistemology is the rule: *assent only to clear and distinct ideas*. Descartes gives this rule in the following passage from the Fourth Replies, which she quotes and divides into two numbered parts:

> (1) If, however, 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.
>
> (2) If I go for the alternative which is false, then obviously I shall be in error; if I take the other side, then it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth, and I shall still be at fault since it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will. In this incorrect use of free will may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of error. (AT VII 60; CSM II, 41)

A natural way to understand the problem that Descartes sees with affirming unclear and indistinct ideas is that there is a guarantee of truth only with clear and distinct ideas, so affirming other kinds of ideas incurs a risk of asserting something false – false in the sense of not corresponding with reality. Naaman-Zauderer calls this the "substantive interpretation" (p. 4), substantive because the correspondence sense of falsity (and truth) at issue here is a

"substantive notion" of falsity (and truth). The correspondence sense of truth and falsity she calls "ontological truth" and "ontological falsity" (p. 47). On the substantival reading, what makes my behaviour incorrect is the risk of asserting ontological falsehoods; asserting ontological falsehood is just what the essence of the error in question here amounts to, thus making the norm here a consequentialist norm. This is the position that Naaman-Zauderer means to refute.

She does so with respect to each part of the present passage. With respect to the first part, she says "I will be blamed for not using my free will correctly, irrespective of whether the content of my judgment is true or false" (p. 68). Now it may seem that this is simply to deny what the consequentialist reading affirms – that the risk of ontological truth and falsity of the content of an assertion is the essence of the problem – so we need to see more to be convinced of the anti-substantiavalist reading. She provides it in her interpretation of the second part. She focuses on two main things that Descartes says there. First, there is his declaration that if I "go for the alternative which is false, then obviously I shall be in error." This demonstrates that the concept of error is not the same as that of falsehood – the latter is sufficient but not necessary for the former. Second, there is an explicit assertion (in the last sentence) that "privation" is the essence of error. This does not quite get us the result that the essence of error is a normative deficiency but it does in the presence of Descartes's account of privation, discussed in a clear and illuminating way by Naaman-Zauderer (pp. 74–78). Privation, on this account, is not merely an absence – that is "negation" – but an absence of something which *should have been there*. Error, then, is a normative deficiency that can be occasioned when we make a false judgment but does not consist in false judgment. So what is incorrect about using the will to affirm unclear and indistinct ideas is not just that so doing runs the risk of assenting to false things. What is incorrect about such acts of the will is that they violate our epistemic duty: refrain from assenting to ideas that are not clear and distinct. This is where Descartes's deontological epistemology can be seen most clearly.

But *why* is this a duty? Why should we not affirm things that are likely to be true even if *not* guaranteed to be true? Indeed, the substantivalist interpretation invites such a response. One answer is that Descartes has a fixation on certainty and simply asserts without further justification that we have a duty to avoid asserting anything that is even a bit uncertain. However,

this is not a very satisfactory answer, amounting to a kind of "certainty fetishism" that lacks rational warrant. So we hope to find a better answer, and Naaman-Zauderer provides it.

In her discussion of Descartes's conception of the nature of intellect and will in God she argues that acts of will and intellect are not distinct acts for God: God does not experience any distance between acts of his intellect and acts of his will (pp. 132–35). The basis for the duty in humans to refrain from assenting to non-clear and distinct ideas lies in the nature of *the experience of necessity* we have when assenting to ideas that are clear and distinct. Descartes is saying that in this experience we are *closest* to experiencing what God's will is like, though in reality our will and intellect are distinct (pp. 144–48). So it would be a very bad thing indeed if we departed from that Godlike situation by using the will when the distance between will and understanding is most obvious. It is most obvious when we assent to something we feel pulled away from to any degree by the reasons our intellect presents to us. So, according to Naaman-Zauderer, that is why the precept "Refrain from judging when the intellect presents something that is not completely rationally compelling (i.e., a clear and distinct idea)" is made by Descartes, and why it is so important. If acting so as to maximize our likeness to God is a duty of some kind, then we can see why this precept is a duty, and why Descartes would call deviating from it a sin. Notwithstanding this point, the right use of free will still constitutes for Descartes an end in its own right and not a mere means for other ends (including acquiring true cognitions about reality). This is the overarching theme of her book,[2] and this is where the deontology fundamentally comes from in Naaman-Zauderer's view.

In section 6 below, I propose to look a bit more closely at the nature of these duties and the relationship they may bear to truth-consequentialist normativity, but overall I think that Naaman-Zauderer has made a convincing case that Descartes's concept of error is a normative notion, and that the norm in question is non-consequentialist.

However, Naaman-Zauderer extends the reach of deontological normativity beyond Descartes's notion of error to embrace his notion of "formal falsity," one of three notions of falsity that she finds in Descartes's writings. Her case here is more controversial and somewhat less developed,

[2] The language here has been suggested by the author (private correspondence).

but it derives great strength from the ingenious way in which it is applied to other Cartesian doctrines, especially that most vexed (and vexing) doctrine of the material falsity of ideas. I take this issue up in the next section.

3. The Non-substantival Reading of "Formal Falsity"

Perhaps the clearest text in which Descartes associates falsity, as expressed by the Latin *falsitas*, with error, and in which both are defined as privations, is the following from Meditation IV: "As for the privation involved – which is all that the essential definition of falsity and wrong consists in..." (AT VII, 60–61; CSM II, 42; quoted on p. 73). This is one of the key texts that Naaman-Zauderer draws upon in defence of her claim that formal falsity is a normative notion. Her argument is that when Descartes refers to falsity as *falsitas*, he is speaking of falsity in the strict sense, or "formal falsity" (*falsitas formalis*), and when he says here that *falsitas* is a privation (rather than a mere negation), he means to say that formal falsity is a normative notion, the notion of asserting something when we have no right to do so.

Naaman-Zauderer also maintains that there is another notion of falsity (and truth), the "ontological notion" which, she maintains, is distinct from the formal notion (pp. 47ff.). There are a number of texts in which she claims to find the ontological notion, the most important coming in the "material falsity" text of Meditation III and in a letter to Mersenne of 1639. From the former text she focuses on the italicized words in the following passage: "As for all the rest, including light and colours ... I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way, *to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false*, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are of real things or of non-things" (AT VII, 43; CSM II, 30). She observes that Descartes here distinguishes the obscurity property of our ideas (which, she maintains, he is about to identify as a third kind of falsity – "material falsity," p. 48) from the properties of truth and falsity at issue in this passage. Further, she maintains that Descartes is implicitly distinguishing this kind of falsity from "formal falsity," a conception of falsity said earlier in this passage to apply *only* to judgments. Since the kind of falsity applied to judgments is non-substantive, Naaman-Zauderer concludes that the kind of falsity applied to ideas in this passage is ontological. In the letter to Mersenne, Descartes formally characterizes "truth" as the correspondence of a thought with its object, implying that falsity is the absence of same (AT II, 597; CSMK, 139).

But falsity here is merely a negation, not a privation: "ontological falsity" must, again, be conceived by Descartes as different from formal falsity. The difference is that idea-falsity is an ontological notion and formal falsity a deontological notion. (The account is developed in chap. 2, pp. 28–37, 46–53.)

To arrive at this account Naaman-Zauderer has read the texts in a very subtle and original way. Moreover, this interpretation fits other key texts surprisingly well, even those that may seem to provide trouble. Take, for example, the obviously important text in Meditation III, where Descartes says that he must find what the proper bearers of truth (*veritas*) and falsity (*falsitas*) are (AT VII, 37; CSM II, 26–28). Strictly speaking he says, truth is a property of judgments rather than ideas since, "as far as ideas are concerned, provided they are considered solely in themselves and I do not refer them to anything else, they cannot strictly speaking be false; for whether it is a goat or a chimera that I am imagining, it is just as true that I imagine the former as the latter." Now, Naaman-Zauderer has been maintaining that Descartes does allow for ideas to be false (and true), apparently in conflict with this passage. However, she points out that the kind of falsity denied to ideas is falsity "in the strict sense," later to be characterized as "formal falsity," and this could be deontological falsity, a defect of the will rather than of the faculty of perception to which ideas belong. She maintains that she can thus show that Descartes is not denying that there is a sense in which ideas can be false (and true for that matter) – the ontological sense – rather he is only denying that ideas can be false in the "strict" sense, that is in the formal sense. I will scrutinize this reasoning more closely below, in section 5.

However, perhaps the greatest merit of her deontological reading of formal falsity lies in the light it casts on Descartes's doctrine of the material falsity of ideas. This is a topic that has been much discussed in Anglo-American scholarship since Margaret Wilson brought this fascinating aspect of Cartesian doctrine into the light in her book, *Descartes* (1978, 100ff.). Naaman-Zauderer is knowledgeable about this literature and reviews a good portion of it as a foil for her own interpretation. I shall not do that here but will instead try to bring out how she employs her normative treatment of formal falsity to allow for a novel reinterpretation of Descartes's doctrine of material falsity.

Let's begin with Descartes's introduction of the idea of material falsity in Meditation III, part of which we have seen already:

> But as for all the rest, including light and colours ... I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way, to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are of real things or of non-things. For, although, as I have noted before, falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can occur only in judgments, there is another kind of falsity, material falsity, which occurs in ideas when they represent non-things as things. (AT VII, 44; CSM II, 30)

Many interpreters, including his contemporary critic Arnauld, take Descartes to be giving us *the nature* of material falsity when he says that it "occurs in ideas when they represent non-things as things." On this reading, the material-falsity property is a kind of representational defect, a failure to represent reality as it really is. It is natural when reading this passage to suppose that Descartes has an example in mind, perhaps that of the common sense tendency to see the world of material objects as coloured and possessing formally the range of properties presented by our sensations. Descartes himself thinks that this is a radical mistake, of course, and it is natural to suppose that he is here offering his explanation of the mistake, showing that the mistake consists in a certain kind of representational deficiency in our ideas of these properties – the representing of non-things as things. Thus, for example, Wilson (1990, 1) and, more recently, De Rosa (2010, 11–32) read the reference to representing non-things as things as a case where our ideas somehow *refer to* material objects, which are in fact not coloured, but *present* them to us as coloured. This disconnection between reference and presentation in ideas of sense is their material falsity. This material falsity in turn occasions judgments to the effect that material objects are coloured, a judgment that is formally false. Of course, on this reading, the formal falsity of this judgment is taken to be a matter of the falseness of the propositional content of our naïve beliefs, *material objects are coloured*, a form of ontological falsity.

There are, however, two difficulties with this reading that I wish to mention, one of Naaman-Zauderer's, one of my own. There is no direct evidence that Descartes is thinking of the naïve-realist example here[3] and Naaman-Zauderer points out that it seems unlikely that this example is even implicitly in the background at this stage of the development of the *Meditations*, where the naïve-realist metaphysics of the first *Meditations*,

[3] For a suggestion about what kind of example Descartes *is* thinking of, see Vinci (1998), 184–87.

although certainly challenged epistemologically, has yet to be challenged ontologically. It is true that Descartes is beginning to lay the groundwork for that challenge here in the difference he sees between ideas of sense and ideas of primary qualities with respect to the property of material falsity, but it would be putting the cart before the horse to suppose that his case for the material falsity of ideas of sense rests on his rejection of the ontology of naïve realism. I would like to add to this the point that if the standard interpretation were the meaning that Descartes meant to convey by saying that materially false ideas occur when we represent non-things as things, Descartes's formulation would be infelicitous: he would be trying to convey by this account the point that what ideas of sense represent – the "non-things" in Descartes's formulation – are in fact the ultimately real things of his mechanistic ontology – material objects – just the opposite of what Descartes's words mean.[4] However, here I think that the problem lies with the interpreters, not with Descartes. Moreover, when we look to Descartes's reply to Arnauld's criticisms, also based on the assumption that material falsity is a defect in the representational capacity of ideas of sense, we see Descartes devoting much effort to emphasizing that the representationality of ideas of sense is *not* at issue in the material-falsity passages (AT VII, 232; CSM II, 163). Later Descartes says:

> Hence in asking what is the cause of the positive objective being which, in my view, is responsible for the idea being materially false, my critic has raised an improper question. For I do not claim that an idea's material falsity results from some positive entity; it arises solely from the obscurity of the idea. (AT VII, 234; CSM II, 164)

One of the difficulties in accepting that the material-falsity property as it is characterized in the Meditation III passage is the non-representational property of obscurity, as Descartes claims in the Reply, is that Descartes himself says in Meditation III that ideas are materially false "when they represent non-things as things." The latter is surely some kind of representational characteristic of ideas. But Naaman-Zauderer astutely notes

[4] A point also noticed by De Rosa, accommodated by denying that Descartes means what he appears to mean: "In light of these considerations, I conclude that by calling sensory ideas 'materially false' Descartes did not mean to say literally that they represent non-things as things. Instead, he meant to say metaphorically that sensory ideas misrepresent their objects or represent their objects as other than they are" (De Rosa 2010, 23).

(pp. 48–49) that Descartes does not say that the essence of material falsity *consists in* this characteristic, just that ideas have the latter when they have the former. If we accept this reading, then the way is clear to interpret the property of material falsity as Descartes says he intends – as an obscurity defect rather than a representational defect in ideas of sense.

This fits very well the first sentence of the passage quoted above from Meditation III and the main point about the objects of ideas of sense that it conveys: "that I do not even *know* whether they are true or false." One does not know this because the evidence one has for deciding that matter is insufficient to make the determination. But if the notion of *formal* falsity were simply the ontological falseness of some proposition that we are inclined to affirm, then material falsity, understood as an obscurity defect, would not explain this, for the fact that an idea is epistemically defective – too obscure to tell what kind of object it represents – does not entail that its object is ontologically false. Yet, Descartes at least suggests that what is "material" about materially false ideas is precisely that they *do* explain what makes formally false ideas formally false. This is suggested, for example, in the first point he makes about materially false ideas in the reply to Arnauld: "As I interpret this claim, it means that the ideas as such provide subject matter for error" (AT VII, 231; CSM II, 161). But now, if we accept Naaman-Zauderer's contention that formal falsity in judgments is an error in good epistemic method (a deontological rather than an ontological defect) then the explanation is entirely apt. We are not acting in accord with good standards of epistemic method when we make judgments about distinctions between things (for example, that they are real things rather than non-real things) when we do so on the basis of ideas that are too obscure to provide sufficient evidence to make the determination. Judgments of this kind are *formally* false, ideas of this kind are *materially* false, and the latter *explains what makes the former what it is*. Since this would not happen if formal falsity were ontological falsity, formal falsity is not ontological falsity. This is an ingenious and fresh reading of this topic that may well do the most justice to Descartes's (admittedly obscure) intentions among all those many interpretations (including my own) that I am aware of.

While I think that much credit goes to Naaman-Zauderer for her application of the deontological account of formal falsity, especially in the case just discussed, there are a number of problems with it that I feel obliged to discuss.

The first problem occurs in the one passage where Descartes explicitly says that *falsitas*, translated as "formal falsity" by Naaman-Zauderer, is a privation essentially, hence a deontological rather than an ontological notion of falseness. As noted above, the word *falsitatis* is there as well as *culpae*, at least in the Latin (see italicized words): "Privatio autem, in qua sola ratio formalis *falsitatis & culpae*" (AT VII, 60–61). They are not, however, both there in the French: "Pour la priuation, dans lequelle seule consiste la raison formelle *de l'erreur & du péché*." (Here "erreur" appears in place of a term like "fausseté.") I am not entirely sure what significance to assign to the difference between the French and the Latin, but overall it weakens the case that Descartes's ultimate and considered position is that the term "formal falsity" designates a deontological privation of acts of judgment as opposed to the negation of the ontological relation which a proposition bears to the world when it is true.

The second problem occurs in her account of how Descartes answers the question posed in par. 5 of Meditation III: what are the bearers of truth and falsity? This is the more weighty issue and I take it up in the next section.

4. Truth and Ideas

Naaman-Zauderer proposes that there is a strong connection between representation and truth for Descartes: ideas represent if and only if they are true (pp. 22–38). Truth is here understood in the sense of the 1639 letter to Mersenne: truth as correspondence between ideas and their objects – ontological truth in Naaman-Zauderer's terminology. Take as our text Descartes's discussion of the idea of the sun in the First Replies (AT VII, 102–103; CSM II, 74–75). Following Hoffman,[5] she takes the conformity in question to be between two modes of being of the sun: the formal mode and the objective mode (the sun as it is in the intellect). I agree. But notice that in this text Descartes takes the notion of the sun's being in the intellect as conceptually primary: this notion explains what it is for us to have an idea of the sun, not the other way around. So the notion of the sun being in the intellect is conceptually prior to the notion of the idea of the sun. But also notice that the former notion is one in which the term "the sun" occurs extensionally. We can truly say that the sun has two modes of being, where

[5] Hoffman (1996) is cited on p. 28, and Hoffman (2002) on p. 26.

the term "the sun" is used extensionally, only if there actually is something that is the sun. In general there can only be something x that has two modes of being if x actually exists. This is no problem in the case of the sun since it does exist. But what about a non-existent thing? What about the two modes of being of, for example, the second moon of the earth? How do we say that *it* has two modes of being when there is no *it*? And if we can't say this then, because of the conceptual priority of the notion of two modes of being over the notion of an idea, we can't give an account of an idea of a non-existent entity. This would be a disaster for the Cartesian theory of ideas.

Naaman-Zauderer is of course aware of the case of ideas of non-existent entities and maintains that whenever a possible, non-actual existent is thought of, the conformity relation holds between two objective beings: the true and immutable nature or essence in God, on the one hand, and the objective being of this essence in the human mind on the other.[6] This seems to me to be a plausible account, with one important qualification. Descartes's causal principle, as formulated in Axiom V of the geometrical method in the Second Replies (AT VII, 165; CSM II, 116) indicates that objective beings need a cause and that the cause must exist in a substance either formally or eminently. I take this to mean that the objective being of x is not a self-standing form of the being of x but must always have another form of the being of x, either formal or eminent, and this form of being must be "contained" in an actually existing thing. It follows that if a true and immutable nature or essence has objective being in God this is possible only if we can refer to a really existing thing that contains these essences in some non-objective mode of being.

What could "the really existing thing" be in the case of the essence of the second moon of the earth? Obviously, not the non-existent second moon or any existent physical object. The only things available are the essences themselves, considered perhaps as Platonic-like entities. These are real things of which we can say that they have two modes of being: formal reality (as Platonic essences) and being in the intellect. This fits with Naaman-Zauderer's realism about essences. Now, we cannot attribute full-blown Platonism to Descartes, but we can attribute to him a form of Platonism where

[6] Her discussion of the general issue of ideas of non-existent things occurs on pp. 31–38. However, this particular formulation comes in private correspondence from NZ, May 2012, as a clarification of her discussion in her book.

the home for the essences is the mind of God. But because they must have a form of being other than objective-being to serve as the reference-object for multiple modes of being, they must be contained in God in some other way. How? Descartes offers two choices: formally or eminently. Thus Descartes could maintain that the essences have formal being in God (formal being as essences of course, not as instances) or, if not, there is always eminent being.

Let me formulate this account of *objective being in the intellect* more formally as follows:

> (A) An object x (actual or just possible) is contained objectively in a (human) intellect I if and only if (1) there is a set E of essences of x existing in some non-objective way in God (or in Plato's heaven) and (2) the same set of essences E exists objectively in I.

We can now define the notion of *an idea of x* as follows

> (B) S has an idea of x if and only if S has an intellect I and x is objectively contained in I.

If we now go back to Naaman-Zauderer's leading idea that representation entails truth, we can see that it follows as a corollary of these definitions. Because the set of essences in God and in the human intellect are the same essences in different modes of being, they must correspond with one another, that is, essences in the intellect are true representations. And because we are defining the notion of "idea" or representation in terms of essences being in the intellect, truth as correspondence – *ontological truth* – is integral to representation. And representation is integral to ideas.

But what of *ontological falsity*? Where does it get introduced into the picture by Descartes?

5. *Falsity and Ideas*

We have already discussed one text, the material-falsity text, where the notion of ontological falsity *seems* to make an appearance in par. 18 of Meditation III (AT VII, 43; CSM II, 30). But much earlier in Meditation III, in par. 6,[7] Descartes appears to rule out the possibility of ontologically false ideas by

[7] In what follows I will be identifying Cartesian texts by the paragraph-order in the CSM translation in Meditation III.

his very clear declaration that ideas "provided they are considered solely in themselves ... cannot strictly speaking be false" (AT VII, 37; CSM II, 260). The latter text is clearly a central and important text for anyone interested in Descartes's views on ideas and falsity, and Naaman-Zauderer has to handle it carefully. This she does by maintaining that Descartes is not here talking about *ontological* falsity when he denies that ideas can be false in the text from par. 6. Rather, he is talking about "formal falsity," a normative defect that applies only to judgments. Thus there is no contradiction between his assertion in par. 6 that ideas cannot be false, and his implication[8] in par. 18 that they can. This is an ingenious device to remove the contradiction between the doctrine of par. 6 and par. 18, but, for the following reasons, I am doubtful that Descartes employs it.

It is in par. 5 that Descartes separates thoughts into two categories, ideas and other thoughts, and asks: Which are the bearers of truth and falsity? A reader encountering this question would assume that these are the usual properties of truth and falsity, it still being an open question which kind of thoughts they apply to. And the usual properties of truth and falsity are correspondence properties, as Descartes himself says quite clearly in the 1639 letter to Mersenne that is so central to Naaman-Zauderer's interpretation. The meditator is then being cautioned by Descartes to understand that ideas lack the falsity property – the correspondence falsity-property – and that "strictly speaking" this (same) property applies only to judgments. Why only to judgments? It seems likely to me that the reason that only judgments can be true or false, strictly speaking, is that the only kinds of thoughts that take propositions as objects are judgments, and only propositions can strictly speaking be true or false It is difficult for me to see how an alternative reading for Descartes's intentions in these paragraphs is possible. But Descartes himself is silent on the question, at least here.[9] That there is even room for an alternative is due to Descartes's failure to give a clear account,

[8] I say "implication" rather than "assertion" because Descartes does not assert that ideas can be false; he says that we cannot *tell whether* they are false or true in case they are sufficiently obscure.

[9] However, in a letter to Mersenne (July 1641) Descartes distinguishes between ideas and propositions: "the idea we have of God, or of a supremely perfect being, is quite different from the proposition 'God exists', so that the one can serve as a means or premise to prove the other" (AT III, 396; CSMK, 186). I am grateful to Wahl's discussion of this passage; see Wahl (1995), 190–92.

indeed *any* account, of the relationship between ideas and proposition in the *Meditations*.[10] Nevertheless, Naaman-Zauderer's alternative is one that I think very unlikely to reflect Descartes's intentions.

I have premised this conclusion on the assumption that Descartes's first answer to the question, posed in par. 5, whether ideas are true or false, is given in the first sentence of par. 6: "Now as far as ideas are concerned...." This assumption is not accepted by Naaman-Zauderer. She argues that Descartes has *already* committed himself to the doctrine that ideas are true and false in a passage in Meditation III, par. 5 (AT VII, 37; CSM II, 25), what she calls the "first classification," the passage in which Descartes says that ideas are "as it were images of things":

> The distinctive feature of ideas that makes them the locus of truth and falsehood is that they "purport" to represent things (real beings) outside themselves. Every idea is immediately received by the mind as a representation of a thing (*res*), that is, a possibly existing being, irrespective of whether it does in fact represent a thing (in which case it is true), or a non-thing (non *res* in which case it is false). (P. 18)

In this passage Naaman-Zauderer says that Descartes is committed in par. 5 of Med. III to the claim that ideas can not only be ontologically true but also ontologically false. This is because Naaman-Zauderer takes Descartes's account of representation to entail ontological truth, a point we have discussed in the previous section. However, even if we accept that the commitment to the ontological *truth* of ideas is already in place prior to par. 6, there is no corresponding reason for saying that it is in place for the property of ontological *falsity*. Indeed, this is the problem with which we began this section. So it seems as if the first indication of Descartes's attitude toward idea-falsity does in fact come in the first sentence of par. 6.

Why should Naaman-Zauderer maintain that Descartes nevertheless is committed to the view that ideas considered in themselves can indeed be false (in an ontological sense)? Her basis for this is not anything Descartes says here but, rather, comes in the later discussion of material falsity, which we have considered before. There, as noted above, Descartes does at least imply that ideas can be both true and false: "I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things or of non things" (AT VII, 43; CSM II, 30). Although out of place, this

[10] I suggest that material for a reconstruction of this account may be found in Rule 12 of the *Regulae*; see Vinci (1998), 13–19.

is evidence that Descartes does think that ideas can be false. How can my interpretation account for this?

The answer begins with a closer look at the critical first sentence of par. 6, which I reproduce here for convenience:

> Now as far as ideas are concerned, provided they are considered solely in themselves and I do not refer them to anything else, they cannot strictly speaking be false.

They cannot be false, says Descartes, "provided they are considered solely in themselves and I do not refer them to anything else." So Descartes does not say that ideas cannot be false, *tout court*, but that they cannot be false when the proviso is in place. This declaration would be in conflict with that in par. 18 only if Descartes were saying there that ideas can be false even when the proviso is in place. This, I am about to argue, is just what he does not do, so there is no conflict between the declarations of par. 6 and par. 18 even when the notion of falsity is taken in its ontological sense.

My argument begins with the fact that in par. 16, the next sentence after the one in which he says he doesn't know whether his (materially false) ideas are true or false, Descartes rephrases his formulation of false ideas as ideas which "represent non-things as things." If we take this formulation as canonical, the "as"-construction suggests that Descartes is considering the case where we are *referring* our ideas to something (the non-things) which we then represent as things. But Descartes's earlier formulation of the impossibility of ideas being false contained the proviso that we not be doing this, that is, we should not be referring our ideas to something else. When we do refer our ideas to other things that is a source of error, indeed, "the chief and most common mistake" (penultimate sentence of par. 6). Here the mistake "consists in my judging that the ideas which are in me resemble, or conform to, things located outside me." The mistake in question is that a certain proposition, which we are inclined to affirm, is (ontologically) false. Indeed, in the last sentence of par. 6, just after making this point, he reiterates the point made at the beginning of that paragraph, "Of course, if I considered just the ideas themselves simply as modes of my thought, without referring them to anything else, they could scarcely give me any material for error." It doesn't get any clearer than that! So I think that we should conclude, first, that there is no contradiction between Descartes's avowals in par. 6 and in par. 18 regarding the possibility of ideas being false and, second, that the sense of falsity that is denied to ideas in the former, and affirmed of them

in the latter, is the ontological sense. This significantly undermines one of Naaman-Zauderer's principal strategies in arguing for her thesis that formal falsity is not a kind of ontological falsity but a species of deontological epistemic infelicity.

I bring one final negative consideration to bear on this thesis. Ontological falsity can be assigned to judgments in virtue of the fact that judgments take propositions as objects not ideas: that is the consequence of the position I have been defending. If this is right, then formal falsity is a property of the *objects* of our thoughts (judgment-thoughts) rather than of the *acts themselves*. Yet this is the opposite of what Naaman-Zauderer contends: she maintains that what makes formal falsity *formal* is that it is the kind of falsity that applies to the acts rather than the objects of these thoughts. There is some reason to doubt that Descartes's terminology supports this reading, for there is a tendency in Descartes's terminological usage for "formal" to indicate the "object-related" rather than "act-related" aspects of thoughts. If this assumption is right, an infelicity in the *acts* of judgment should be called by Descartes a kind of "material falsity of judgment-acts," just as the obscurity of ideas (considered as acts) is called a "material falsity," and an infelicity in the *objects* of judgment should be called a "formal falsity." This, of course, is the opposite of what Naaman-Zauderer contends. I now argue that this assumption is indeed right.

There is a contrast in the preface to the *Meditations* between ideas taken in the "material sense" and ideas taken "objectively" (AT VII, 8; CSM II, 70). Ideas taken in the material sense are "operations of the intellect." Then, in the Second Replies' definition of "thought" and "idea" (AT VII, 160; CSM II, 113) there is a contrast between thoughts also understood as operations and the "form of any given thought." These latter are ideas and seem to involve the objects (contents) of thoughts understood as operations. So there is a contrast here between thoughts understood in the material sense, and thoughts understood in the form(al) sense. Might it not be that the contrast between material falsity and formal falsity is analogous? If so, that would indicate that the reason something is form(ally) false has to do with the falsity of its content. In the case of judgments that is its propositional content. This consideration supports the substantival view.

So I think that it must remain doubtful that Descartes intends formal falsity to be understood in a non-substantival, deontological sense. However, it is important to bear in mind that the criticisms offered here of Naaman-

Zauderer's claim that formal falsity is a deontological notion, even if they are accepted, do not in any way undermine her related claim that *error* for Descartes is to be given a deontological reading. Most of her central claims about Cartesian epistemic method, and the role that the good exercise of the will plays in avoiding error, remain undisturbed.

6. *Is Cartesian Normative Theory Deontological?*

I conclude this review with a few remarks on the question whether textual evidence supports Naaman-Zauderer's contention that Descartes's ethics and epistemology are truly deontological.

Several times Naaman-Zauderer says that Descartes's account is deontological because he tells us what our ultimate goal *ought* to be (pp. 9, 179). But this does not seem to be sufficient to establish his account as deontological since a deontological account rests on the notion of "duty," and I do not see "ought" in general as a term of obligation or introducing duties. Naaman-Zauderer reports in chap. 6 ("Descartes' Deontological Ethics of Virtue") that the central themes of Cartesian ethics may be summarized as follows: the highest good is the pursuit of virtue, virtue is understood as the right conduct of the will, and the latter is understood as choosing to follow the best reasons, where reasons are understood non-consequentially, things over which we have "control" like experiences, beliefs, evidence, judgments that we make. For example, in a passage quoted on pp. 184–85 Descartes says that what counts is doing what "we judge to be best," even if in fact it does not yield the best actual outcome. The contrasting theory would be one in which right action is that which has the best actual consequences that are external to virtue itself thus defined. This is a form of consequentialism and Naaman-Zauderer is at pains to point out, correctly, that Descartes is not a consequentialist in this sense. But I do not quite see why this position must be deontological.

One reason in favour of this characterization is that Descartes's own language is sometimes deontological, e.g., he says in the passage quoted on pp. 184–85 that "we always do our *duty* when we act this way" (*The Passions of the Soul*, art. 170: AT IX, 460; CSM I, 391). But even when Descartes uses the language of "duty" it may not always be to affirm a deontological character to normative judgment. Consider, for example, Naaman-Zauderer's discussion in chap. 6 (pp. 198ff.) of Descartes's account of generosity in *The Passions of the Soul* (art. 153: AT IX, 445–46;

CSM I, 384). Following Shapiro (1999) and Alanen (2003, 251ff.), Naaman-Zauderer there identifies two components in Descartes's account: a cognitive component and an affective component. The first involves understanding that praise or blame depends on our use of free will. I do not see that this is inherently deontological: if the highest good is using our free will correctly then, of course, that will be the ultimate consideration regarding the question whether we deserve praise or blame. No deontological implications necessary there. The second component is affective: here at least there is a reference to duties: "The second, affective element of generosity is the feeling we experience within ourselves by a *firm and constant resolution* to use this freedom well" (p. 198; my emphasis). But here the duty (resolution) is characterized as a feeling we have – a duty-type-feeling – that pushes us to act correctly. It appears that Descartes is offering a psychological account of how we come to form the habit of using the will correctly, hence making it likely that we will use the will correctly in the future. It is providential that we are constructed this way psychologically but this does not entail that there is a duty to act this way as an objective principle of deontological ethics, or so it seems to me.

A second reason Naaman-Zauderer has for thinking that Cartesian norms are deontological is the important connection Descartes draws between God and our virtuous action: "in our good use of the will we manifest our likeness to God."[11] Naaman-Zauderer discusses the likeness to God both in relation to the principle that we are compelled to accept clear and distinct ideas (chap. 4) and in relation to a quotation from a letter to Christina (on pp. 186–87, chap. 6). I have previously discussed the first in section 2, here I will look at the second.

In the letter Descartes says that what makes free will the "noblest thing" is that it "seems to exempt us from being his [God's] subjects... there is nothing that is more our own" (AT V, 85; CSMK, 326). This is the virtue of self-mastery that is so important to Descartes. But here again I fail to see a deontological ethics: achieving self-mastery is the highest good and the use of freewill is the highest embodiment of that good. Where does duty come in at all? If it comes in, is it a duty to God or to ourselves? One would like to hear more for a fully convincing case.

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[11] This is a formulation from NZ provided in private correspondence.

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