

DESCARTES' EXPERIENCE OF FREEDOM

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PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION: IN WHAT SENSE CAN THE WILL BE CALLED FREE?

According to Descartes, our will is a positive self-determining power that is potentially infinite, as the mind can apply it to its every idea. This is a freedom that Descartes considers unconditionally self-evident. And yet, because the will is limited and determined by other things than itself, most notably the mind's other faculty, the understanding, there is an ongoing discussion about whether the will can be considered free even though it is determined by other factors, or if freedom of will requires the will's *absolute* independence. In this paper, I want to intervene in this debate by focusing on the *experience of freedom*. That is, I will try to reconstruct how Descartes understands the act of willing to proceed in accordance with, or independently of, external factors. Instead of considering an underlying causality of volitions, independent of the conscious experience of the will, I will focus on a detail in

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Descartes' definition of the will that has so far received too little attention: the *feeling* that accompanies the will's self-determination. The main part of the paper will therefore discuss Descartes' notion that *acting freely means not feeling determined by external forces*. The guiding question is: can this feeling help us to assess in what sense the will can be called free?¹ Some preliminary discussion is necessary to clarify how this question can be situated within Descartes' theory of the will.

In his "Fourth Meditation," Descartes gives a twofold definition of will. On the one hand, "the will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something." On the other hand, the will consists rather (*vel potius*) "in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force."² Do these two aspects amount to a coherent definition or do they introduce a contradiction? Can the Cartesian mind be said to freely refrain from choosing something when at the same time it is inclined to assent by what it understands? Does not the force of the intellect overrule the freedom of the will, at least in cases of clear and compelling understanding?

To properly frame this question, it is necessary to note that the will is not equally compelled by all that is presented to it by the understanding. While our daily experience forces us to make decisions and

¹ My approach concerns the freedom related to the mind itself, not the freedom as implied by mind-body interaction, which Descartes considers "one of those self-evident things which we only make obscure when we try to explain them in terms of other things." "[...] haec enim una est ex rebus per se notis, quas, cum volumus per alias explicare, obscuramus." AT 5:2222/CSMK 358 (*For Arnauld, 29 July 1648*). Yet Descartes acknowledges that the freedom related to mind-body interaction brings with it its own problems, as a sick body can impede reasoning and prevent freedom of the will, effectively becoming an external force to it, cf. AT 4:282/CSMK 262f (*To Princess Elizabeth, 1 September 1645*).

References to Descartes use the following abbreviations.

AT: *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 12 vols (Paris: Vrin, 1996).

CSM: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985).

CSMK: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991).

All translations are from CSM or CSMK.

² "[...] in eo consistit quod idem vel facere, vel non facere [...] possimus [...] in eo tantum quod ad id quod nobis ab intellectu proponitur affirmandum vel negandum, sive prosequendum vel fugiendum ita feramur, ut a nulla vi externa nos ad id determinari sentiamus." AT 7:58/CSM 2:40 (*Meditations on First Philosophy*).

judgements based on sensual ideas we do not completely comprehend, the “assent-compelling” ideas on the other hand have to be clear and distinct, to the point that, were I to have only clear and distinct perceptions, I could not but act in accordance with them. According to a convincing argument brought up in recent literature,³ this does not really constitute a problem for Descartes. While we cannot be said to be free when being compelled to assent to an idea we clearly and distinctly perceive, nevertheless we can willfully divert our attention, holding back our judgment and demonstrating free will.⁴ But does this diversion really satisfy the freedom of choice, which is said to not be restricted in any way?⁵ At least for clear and distinct perceptions, Descartes' theory of mind seems to take on a Spinozist flair, as understanding and will collapse into necessary assent.⁶

³ As will become clear in the subsequent sections, I will develop the question of the experience of freedom along the lines of the compatibilist-libertarian debate surrounding Descartes' theory of will. Roughly speaking, the will is said here to be free either in an absolute sense (meaning that it can determine itself independently in every situation), in a relative sense (it can determine itself according to what it understands to be true or good) or not at all (the will is said to be completely determined by other factors). These options can be classified as a radical libertarian, moderate compatibilist or strict compatibilist reading, respectively. Instead of directly arguing for either side, I want to consider the experiential basis of the operations of the will. In a classical text, Jean Laporte has characterized Descartes' experience of thinking as an epistemic *gaze* in permanent contact with reality, cf. Jean Laporte, *Le rationalisme de Descartes* (Paris: PUF, 1945), 24ff. In another classical account, freedom is not said to arise with the act, but is explained from the essence of the will itself, cf. Henri Gouhier, *La pensée métaphysique de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1962), 224. The experience I am trying to tease out here is more indirect, as it can be only, albeit clearly, felt. While I may *know* myself to act freely, I understand the power of the will itself to be accessible by the feeling of not being determined. Thus, to describe the experience of understanding and willing, different conceptual approaches are needed. My method here also differs from more recent accounts of Descartes' nature of the will which focus on its infinity or indifference, cf. Dorottya Kaposi, “Indifférence et liberté humaine chez Descartes,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 41 (2004): 73-99 and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, “Descartes: L'infinitude de ma volonté: Ou comment Dieu m'a fait à son image,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 92 (2008): 287-312.

⁴ Cf. Lex Newman, “Descartes on the Will in Judgment,” in *A Companion to Descartes*, ed. Janet Broughton and John Carriero (Malden: Blackwell, 2011), 334-52 (p. 349). Another argumentative strategy has been to infer a change in Descartes' attitude concerning free will, cf. Tad Schmaltz, “Human Freedom and Divine Creation in Malebranche, Descartes and the Cartesians,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 2 (1994): 3-50 (pp. 5-13).

⁵ Cf. AT 7:56/CSM 2:40 (*Meditations*).

⁶ Cf. David Cuning, “Descartes' Modal Metaphysics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/descartes-modal/>.

The freedom of will is under question from another side as well, namely from the fact that according to Descartes, God has preordained everything, including the choice made by the free will of finite minds. He solves this by appealing to divine incomprehensibility, which includes knowing *that* everything is preordained, but precludes grasping *how* this is compatible with one's own free will.⁷ Nevertheless, Descartes is quite adamant about both things being true:

And it would be absurd, simply because we do not grasp one thing, which we know must by its very nature be beyond our comprehension, to doubt something else of which we have an intimate grasp and which we experience within ourselves.⁸

Can we be compelled to assent to something and *experience* our freedom of will at the same time? Descartes himself seems to answer this question in the "Fourth Meditation":

In order to be free, there is no need for me to be inclined both ways; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction — either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts — the freer is my choice. Neither divine grace nor natural knowledge ever diminishes freedom; on the contrary, they increase and strengthen it.⁹

The question then would simply misunderstand what Descartes means by freedom of choice. It would not be indifference (which constitutes the "lowest grade of freedom"), but being able to assent and act according to what is perceived as true and good. As Georges Moyal remarked, "the kind of necessities which Descartes mentions in connection with assent to the clear and distinct are moral, not psychological."¹⁰

⁷ In the next section, I come back to how this can be framed using the difference of the objective and formal being of ideas.

⁸ "Absurdum enim esset, propterea quod non comprehendimus unam rem, quam scimus ex natura sua nobis esse debere incomprehensibilem, de alia dubitare, quam intime comprehendimus, atque apud nosmet ipsos experimur." AT 8A:20/CSM 1:206 (*Principles of Philosophy*).

⁹ "Neque enim opus est me in utramque partem ferri posse, ut sim liber, sed contra, quo magis in unam propendeo, sive quia rationem veri & boni in ea evidenter intelligo, sive quia Deus intima cogitationis meae ita disponit, tanto liberius illam eligo; nec sane divina gratia, nec naturalis cognitio unquam imminuunt libertatem, sed potius augent & corroborant." AT 7:57-58/CSM 2:40 (*Meditations*).

¹⁰ George J.D. Moyal, "Magicians, Doubters and Perverts: On Doubting the Clear and Distinct," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 50, no 195 (1996): 73-107 (p. 93).

In so far as the will can be considered a “rational appetite,” inherently striving towards truth and goodness, it seems futile to demand a freedom of will that resists understanding.¹¹

The experience of freedom, which according to Descartes is available to everyone by simple introspection, would then be a reflection on the ability to make the right moral choice. But how is this applicable to clear and distinct ideas like the fact that I know that I exist because I think or that the three angles of a triangle equal 180 degrees? Does an assent to these clear and distinct perceptions have a moral quality? Also, the passage in which Descartes is most explicit about the moral dimension of our choice does not intimate that it is based on what we understand necessarily, but on the contrary, on the

extremely broad scope of the will. And it is a supreme perfection in man that he acts voluntarily, that is, freely; this makes him in a special way the author of his actions and deserving of praise for what he does.¹²

Moral praiseworthiness and intellectual determinism seem diametrically opposed here. The will's decisions are not moral because it is inclined by the understanding, but because its scope is extremely broad, enabling it to make morally good and bad decisions.

Thus, to consider the different modalities of the experience of freedom, I will distinguish between cases in which the will decides morally and cases in which it assents to clear and distinct perceptions. This distinction is not uncontroversial, as Descartes nowhere clearly claims that the use of the will is different in each case. Yet, for the purpose of my discussion, the distinction is necessary for developing the modalities of choice and assent in sections 2 to 4. Since I am ultimately arguing for a unified theory of the will, considering that it is “one simple power,” this distinction may be viewed as a working hypothesis.

Based on this discussion, three inherent difficulties of the freedom of the will have appeared: 1) My inclinations to act might be said to arise

¹¹ In a letter to Mesland, Descartes admits that considering this, the will should not be called free. Cf. AT 4:173/CSMK 245. I will come back to this problem in the fourth section.

¹² “[...] latissimi pateat voluntas, hoc etiam ipsius naturae convenit; ac summa quaedam in homine perfectio est, quod agat per voluntatem, hoc est libere, atque ita peculiari quodam modo sit author suarum actionum, & ob ipsas laudem mereatur.” AT 8A:18/CSM 1:205 (*Principles of Philosophy*).

necessarily out of my understanding, but this is based on clear and distinct perceptions, not confused empirical ideas. Thus, acting on moral grounds seems to be different from acting purely out of understanding (manifested in the act of will being either assent or choice). 2) When Descartes says that everyone can, by introspection, experience that their will is one simple act, it is unclear whether this is based on the inclinations to act according to understanding, or on the fact that we can indifferently choose to do or not to do. 3) Consequently, a unified theory would have to include self-determinations of the will based on clear and distinct ideas, as well as empirical ideas. But these are said to engage the will each in a different way. Yet since the will is described as *one simple power*, I take Descartes to mean that the experience of the will itself is *indivisible* and fundamentally the same in all cases of the will's application.

How does Descartes' experience of freedom then refer to acts of will that are necessitated by the understanding, to the indifference concerning moral actions and to the curbing of the will's judgements by the understanding? Are all these equally evidence for the freedom of the will? To answer these questions, I return to Descartes' definition in the "Fourth Meditation," where he deems the will to consist "in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do not feel (*sentiamus*) we are determined by any external force."¹³ In considering how something might constitute an external force, we are brought into the position of further elucidating how the *internal* force, namely the will itself, operates. My suggestion is that this feeling, or sense, of not being determined by any external force is the means that Descartes provides us with to describe the experience of freedom.

¹³ "[...] in eo tantum quod ad id quod nobis ab intellectu proponitur affirmandum vel negandum, sive prosequendum vel fugiendum ita feramur, ut a nulla vi externa nos ad id determinari sentiamus." AT 7:58/CSM 2:40 (*Meditations*). One could translate the term *sentiamus* either with 'feeling' or 'sensing,' in the sense that one merely notices not being determined by external forces. While the adequate psychological description of this feeling or sensing would be difficult to establish, my main concern is with the way this feeling is tied to the unequivocal experience of our freedom that Descartes evokes again and again, for instance AT 5:159/ CSMK 342 (*Conversation with Burman*) and AT 7:191/CSM 2:134 (*Meditations*).

In the following, I want to discuss three candidates for the “external force” in the definition and see how each affords a different experience of freedom, namely God, an evil genius and the understanding. I thus propose to consider what it means that our decisions are experienced as independent of God as the creator of the human mind, an evil genius as a reason to doubt the basis of our decisions and the understanding as the faculty that provides the perceptions for the will. The question then is: how can we characterize the experience of freedom, given that the will determines itself independently of God, an evil genius or one’s own understanding?

1. THE WILL, INDEPENDENT OF GOD

It is difficult to conceive of a free will independent of God, as for Descartes, God’s influence on our actions, for instance as a divine disposition of our thoughts,¹⁴ does not contradict, but reinforces the will’s freedom. But the question can still be asked: if the will determines itself, is a judgment made with the help of grace still considered a determination of the will *itself*? To ascertain this, one can ask whether God’s influence refers to the understanding, the will or to the mind *tout court*. It also seems necessary to differentiate between cases of clear and distinct perceptions (will as assent) and confused perceptions (decisions, and more specifically “desire, aversion, assertion, denial, doubt”¹⁵ etc.).

After having stated that the will consists in an inclination that does not feel like an external determination, Descartes continues: “the more I incline in one direction — either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts — the freer is my choice.”¹⁶ Here, the perceptions arising from understanding and grace are leveled by Descartes. The two are equal, in the sense that both create an

¹⁴ Cf. AT 7:58/CSM 2:40 (*Meditations*).

¹⁵ “[...] cupere, aversari, affirmare, negare, dubitare [...]” AT 8A:17/CSM 1:204 (*Principles of Philosophy*).

¹⁶ See footnote 9.

inclination of the will to act. It seems that grace here could be understood in analogy to clear and distinct perceptions. In fact, we cannot recognize that our thoughts have been divinely disposed without also recognizing that this is done by God, whose perfection precludes this recognition being anything but clear and distinct.

Can we thus consider whatever is revealed through grace as clear and distinct? And if so, would it be fair to simply equate grace with clear and distinct perceptions? This would be a nice way to apply Ockham's razor to the question of what counts as an external force to the will, as it would not make a difference for the will whether its inclination is based on natural light or divine influence. This way, grace would exclusively be equated with understanding as the faculty that creates the perceptions, leaving the will as a self-determining power. Thus, concerning the experience of freedom, Descartes could claim that even though his thoughts are divinely disposed, the moment of self-determination is due to his will, precisely because the situation is analogous to the necessary determination by clear and distinct perceptions.

Yet, I see a problem with this solution. As Descartes says in a letter to Mesland, one can even hold back on assenting to a clear and distinct idea, given that it appears to be the better course of action in a given situation.¹⁷ But is Descartes saying that we can also hold back from assenting to an idea which we know is due to divine disposition? In his second "Replies", distinguishing between the natural light of understanding and the supernatural illumination by God, Descartes deems grace more evident than any natural knowledge because it comes from God.¹⁸ Would not holding back one's assent amount to a form of atheism, a denial of grace? This is exactly the kind of *unwillingness* exemplified by the Turks who refuse to embrace the Christian religion mentioned shortly afterwards.¹⁹

Considering this, it may be that the comparison of grace to ideas of understanding in the "Fourth Meditation" is misguided. Perhaps, we

¹⁷ Cf. AT 4:173/CSMK 245 (*To Mesland, 9 February 1645*).

¹⁸ Cf. AT 7:148/CSM 2:105 (*Meditations*).

¹⁹ Cf. AT 7:148/CSM 2:105-6 (*Meditations*).

cannot know grace in the same way that we can perceive a clear and distinct truth, the difference being that there is no circumstance in which we are not able to assent to grace. And yet, it seems that we must always be able not to assent, lest our actions become automatic. In the *Principles*, Descartes clearly distinguishes between necessary and free actions:

We do not praise automaton for accurately producing all the movements they were designed to perform, because the production of these movements occurs necessarily. [...] By the same principle, when we embrace the truth, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than would be the case if we could not do otherwise.²⁰

The difficulty here, as in the definition of the will in the “Fourth Meditation,” is separating necessary and determined actions on the one hand from voluntary and free actions on the other. What makes an action free? One could see Descartes applying Duns Scotus’ distinction “between a natural passive inclination to the good or happiness and an active power [of the will] to elicit or not elicit it.”²¹ Thus, even though the will has no other choice but to assent to grace, this is done freely because it is driven by its natural inclination to truth and goodness.²² But I would like to consider another aspect which Descartes mentions in the same paragraph, namely that acting freely is the same as acting voluntarily.²³ While the Scotist argument of freedom is based on the *nature* of the will, this remark describes the *act* of willing itself. My action is not free because I know it to be true and good and thus it simply follows from the natural inclination of my will, but because I do it voluntarily. Thus, the volition does not turn on the nature, but the

²⁰ “Non enim laudantur automata, quod motus omnes ad quos instituta sunt, accurate exhibeant, quia necessario illos sic exhibent; [...] Eademque ratione, magis profecto nobis tribuendum est, quod verum amplectamur, cum amplectimur, quia voluntarie id agimus, quam si non possemus non amplecti.” AT 8A:18-9/CSM 1:205 (*Principles of Philosophy*).

²¹ Lilli Alanen, “Descartes on the Will and the Power to do Otherwise,” in *Emotions and Choice from Boethius to Descartes*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund and Mikko Yrjönsuuri (New York: Springer, 2002), 279-98 (p. 294).

²² One could also apply Anselm’s asymmetrical doctrine of freedom to Descartes: “Freedom is compatible with being able *only* to do good.” C.P. Ragland, *Will to Reason: Theodicy and Reason in Descartes* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), 162f.

²³ Cf. AT 8A:18/CSM 1:205 (*Principles of Philosophy*).

experience of willing. The understanding might present the will with absolutely compelling perceptions, but the fact that I do not feel determined by external forces to assent to them is due to me having the *feeling* of assenting to them voluntarily.²⁴

But is this feeling merely a psychological trick that veils the necessity of our actions in a voluntary disguise? In fact, this sounds more like Spinoza than Descartes. It seems clear that for Descartes, there is a tangible difference between these two options, as there would be nothing praiseworthy about acting like a machine. But what *is* praiseworthy about assenting to a compelling truth or grace? This problem can be put in more precise terms using the distinction Descartes makes between the objective and formal aspect of an idea. While the objective aspect concerns the idea in a material sense, as what the idea is about, the formal aspect of the idea refers to the mind's capacity to think it.²⁵ This difference is crucial when Descartes discusses assenting to grace:

Now although it is commonly said that faith concerns matters which are obscure, this refers solely to the thing or subject-matter [the objective being] to which our faith relates; it does not imply that the formal reason which leads us to assent to matters of faith is obscure. On the contrary, this formal reason consists in a certain inner light which comes from God, and when we are supernaturally illumined by it we are confident that what is put forward for us to believe has been revealed by God himself.²⁶

When we identify the formal reason of faith with the formal aspect of the idea of grace, i.e. our ability to know grace, Descartes is effectively saying that assenting to grace equals assenting to one's own capacity to think. Embracing grace means embracing the ability of one's

²⁴ Thus, I understand "voluntary" not just to "simply depend on the will." Cf. Vere Chappell, "Descartes's Compatibilism," in *Reason, Will, and Sensation: Studies in Descartes's Metaphysics*, ed. John Cottingham (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 177-90 (p. 180). Instead, I see "voluntariness" (*per voluntatem*) as intentional, in the sense that it is a mental act intrinsically conscious of itself. In the fourth section, I will discuss this in the context of Descartes' comments about the will in the *Passions*.

²⁵ Cf. AT 7:40/CSM 2:27-8 (*Meditations*).

²⁶ "Iam vero, etsi fides vulgo dicitur esse de obscuris, hoc tamen intelligitur tantum de re, sive de materia circa quam versatur, non autem quod ratio formalis, propter quam rebus fidei assentimur, sit obscura; nam contra haec ratio formalis consistit in lumine quodam interno, quo a Deo supernaturaliter illustrati confidimus ea, quae credenda proponuntur, ab ipso esse revelata [...]" AT 7:148/CSM 2:105 (*Meditations*).

God-given mind. The experience of freedom then does not hinge on the will being able not to assent. Instead, it hinges on the mind affirming its powers. In other words, the will, acting independently of God, viz. considering God as an external factor, experiences a freedom based on the formal being of its idea: I know myself to be free because I recognize my ability to know grace. In this way, God cannot be said to ultimately determine the will because the mind assents to this determination on its own formal grounds. This inner light, coming from God, is nonetheless defined as being an idea of the mind.²⁷ At the same time, this assent of the will is an avowal of Christian faith.

From this interpretation, two consequences follow which demand elaboration. 1) Since grace is based on the formal, not the objective being of the idea (following the distinction Descartes makes between the subject-matter and the formal reason of faith), one cannot differentiate between divine dispositions that concern either true or moral ideas, as these are distinguished by what they are about. Because the will is not compelled by the objective being of the idea, but by the fact that this idea is a divine disposition of the mind that demands assent, grace can only be known as perceived and affirmed, lest the divine disposition not be divine at all. 2) The discussion precludes the possibility that the will, determining itself as it knows grace, is actually determined by God without realizing it.

As to the first consequence, my reading of grace as a necessary self-affirmation of the mind collapses the differences between true and moral ideas and consequently between different kinds of volitions based on grace. Insofar as grace is thought to elicit only one response of the will, namely necessary assent, my reading might be considered to have a serious shortcoming. Yet, because this assent hinges on the formal aspect of the ideas of the mind (the fact *that* I have divinely disposed thoughts and the fact *that* I can know and affirm them) and

²⁷ Davies argues along similar lines, though without identifying the formal reason of faith with the formal being of the idea. For Davies, grace is compatible with freedom because it is a true notion which makes the mind more free and because God is acting from within, meaning that the assent is spontaneous. Cf. Richard Davies, *Descartes: Belief, Scepticism and Virtue* (London: Routledge, 2001), 120.

not on the objective aspect (the specific content of the divinely disposed thoughts, requiring specific actions of the will), I would argue that the interpretation avoids the need to distinguish between different kinds of ideas.

The second consequence can be considered in relation to what C.P. Ragland calls “supernatural compatibilism.” He quotes Descartes thus:

[...] if we define freedom so that it is not in my will if there is any power which — even if I am not aware of it — can bend my will toward this or toward that in such a way that it certainly wills this and not that, then freedom thus defined is not possible for a created thing once we have posited the omnipotence of the Creator.²⁸

In this passage, Descartes imagines the will as being determined by a supernatural power without knowing it. As Ragland states, this is in conflict with the self-evidence of the freedom of will in the *Principles*. He sees Descartes fundamentally arguing for a “*non-causal* model of providence.”²⁹ Based on my discussion, I want to add that considering the experience of freedom, this thought experiment is ultimately meaningless as it would not make a difference for the self-affirmation of the mind whether or not there is a hidden causality at play. The mind would still experience its assent to grace as its own volition. Also, in overstepping the boundaries of what a finite mind can know, this passage constitutes a practical example of what Descartes considers a wrong use of the will.

In consequence, I would argue for considering God as an external factor to the will not in a causal sense, as of course the mind is for its ongoing being dependent on God. Instead, I have shown that the freedom of the will here means that the mind affirms its own power to think and to judge based on the formal being of its idea of grace. The mind is free, in as much as it experiences itself as the formal ground of its assent to this idea. It is in this sense that I understand Descartes’ notion of freedom of will as a *feeling* independent of the external factor ‘God.’ It could also be argued that this freedom is

²⁸ Quoted in Ragland, *Will to Reason*, 207.

²⁹ Ragland, *Will to Reason*, 211-12.

necessary to rationally profess the Christian belief, as embracing faith through reason requires an action on the part of the believer.

After having considered God as an external force, I will now move to discussing what freedom of will could mean when it is understood as independent of God's malevolent *Doppelgänger*, the evil genius.

2. THE WILL, INDEPENDENT OF AN EVIL GENIUS

At first glance, introducing the concept of the evil genius into the discussion of the free will might seem like a questionable idea. After all, the evil genius was thought up by Descartes in the *Meditations* as a skeptical instrument with which to doubt even what seems completely indubitable to us. Considering the possibility of an evil genius enables the meditator to suspend the last bit of certainty. Yet, by the time Descartes gives his twofold definition of the will in the "Fourth Meditation," the hypothesis of the evil genius has been made obsolete by the proof of God. Concerning the certainty of knowledge, at this point we cannot doubt the clear and distinct perceptions which compel the assent of our will and thus increase our freedom.

With my discussion, I do not want to call these perceptions into doubt again. Instead, following a remark by Lex Newman, I would agree that the evil genius doubt is more generally about our cognitive nature.³⁰ While we cannot doubt what we clearly and distinctly perceive, we can doubt that we are able to do so in the first place. What I want to argue is that the evil genius hypothesis is not just tantamount to a defect of understanding, but has consequences for the will as well. This means that the hyperbolic doubt, expressed by the evil genius hypothesis, after ceasing to question the possibility of certain knowledge (this being established by the idea of God), continues to threaten our ability to decide independently of external forces.

³⁰ Cf. Lex Newman, "Descartes' Epistemology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/descartes-epistemology/>.

While discussing the “supernatural compatibilism” in the last section, we have seen that this thought experiment is not totally foreign to Descartes. What if all my decisions, even though I am absolutely certain to have made them freely, are in fact due to the omnipotence of another being? Above, I have argued that this is actually of no interest to Descartes. Concerning grace, the mind itself ultimately affirms its own freedom. But what if that omnipotent cause of all my volitions is not God, but an evil genius? Would this not negate freedom of the will? The difference is that, when God disposes my innermost thoughts, the fact that I assent to it is an indirect affirmation of the divine semblance of my mind, God being its creator,³¹ whereas an evil genius disposing my innermost thoughts constitutes a *deception*, as this malevolent being has to directly intervene as an external force. To discuss this problem, I will first consider how an evil genius would intervene in assent based on clear and distinct perceptions, and secondly how we can conceive of an evil genius to undermine moral decisions.

By the “Fourth Meditation,” Descartes has discovered that he can be certain that the veracity of his clear and distinct perceptions depend on God. Consequently, the will remains free when necessarily assenting to them. But given that this assent is based on truth, how is there even room left for deception by an evil genius? Even if I am said to assent to a clear and distinct perception not out of the will’s power of self-determination, but on account of some evil genius determining me, what difference does it make? Either way, I will assent to what I clearly and distinctly understand. Accepting this, is it then even possible to be deceived by the evil genius? It seems to me that regarding the experience of freedom, the evil genius hypothesis does not make a difference in assenting to clear and distinct perception.

The case is different for moral decisions, as the outcome of the volition is not predetermined by the clarity of understanding. At the end of the “Fourth Meditation,” Descartes thinks about self-deception, and how to avoid it. This could work in two ways: either God could bring it about that I perceive everything clearly and distinctly, thus making

³¹ Cf. AT 7:57/CSM 2:40 (*Meditations*).

it impossible to err (this is the scenario where my actions were the same whether or not they were controlled by an evil genius). Or “he could simply have impressed it unforgettably on my memory that I should never make a judgement about anything which I did not clearly and distinctly understand.”³² Descartes adds that strictly speaking there is no need for a divine reminder, since this “depends merely on my remembering to withhold judgement on any occasion when the truth of the matter is not clear.”³³

Now, it is not an evil genius tempting Descartes to misuse his will in extending it beyond what he clearly understands. The cause for error is nothing but a lack of knowledge, which is why Descartes considers it a privation. And yet, this strategy to avoid error appears to be a continuation of the thought experiment of the *Meditations* as a whole, namely to withhold judgment in order to arrive at certain knowledge. The uncertainties warranting this strategy could be regarded, as it were, as a remainder of the evil genius doubt. After the removal of hyperbolic doubt, there still remains the doubt inherent in the perceptions of the mind.

Should we then say that the will, in making a bad moral decision, has been determined by the evil genius as an external force? No, not in a literal way. But then again, the evil genius hypothesis was never intended in a literal way to begin with. Rather, it was the reminder to withhold judgement and “resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree.”³⁴

Following the “Fourth Meditation,” this could be considered the habit of the free will. It is a freedom from falsity and error, but only as long as we recognize the imperfections in our knowledge and have taken a skeptical attitude towards the perceptions that are not clear and distinct,

³² “[...] tantum si adeo firmiter memoriae impressisset, de nulla unquam re esse judicandum quam clare & distincte non intelligerem, ut nunquam ejus possem oblivisci.” AT 7:61/CSM 2:42 (*Meditations*).

³³ “[...] qui pendet ab eo tantum, quod recorder, quoties de rei veritate non liquet, a iudicio ferendo esse abstinendum [...]” AT 7:61-62/CSM 2:43 (*Meditations*).

³⁴ “[...] ne falsis assentiar, nec mihi quidquam iste deceptor, quantumvis potens, quantumvis callidus, possit imponere, obfirmata mente cavebo.” AT 7:23/CSM 2:15 (*Meditations*).

as far as possible. Put this way, Descartes' *moral* strategy regarding uncertain decisions comes into focus as a continuation of his *epistemic* strategy concerning uncertain knowledge. In both cases the withholding of assent plays the vital role of increasing our freedom. The will determining itself independently of an evil genius in this sense means withholding assent whenever necessary. The experience of freedom then hinges on the ongoing attention to our ideas. I feel free whenever I *knowingly* act according to the clarity and distinctness of my understanding.

Two objections concerning this interpretation come to mind: 1) The freedom of will considered in this way does not constitute a causal explanation. Insofar as the self-determination of the will has to include an elaboration of its causal dependency or independence, my interpretation does not explain the freedom of the will. 2) The experience of freedom here is not based on a positive, self-determining power. Instead, it hinges on the negative power of withholding assent, which effectively precludes the activity of the will. Consequently, it is questionable how this interpretation can be considered to concern the experience of a free will at all.

As to the first objection, I would agree that the will is neither shown to be causally independent or dependent on any external forces. But the experience of freedom I try to describe here does not hinge on the causality of the will. Rather, it is concerned with what the mind senses to be the internal or external forces of its inclination. The evil genius doubt can be considered as another way of expressing the constant risk of misusing one's will. Thus, the evil genius as a (rhetorical) external force translates into the admonition to avoid assenting to unclear perceptions as much as possible, and this is what constitutes the experience of freedom. In other words, I consider doubt, not as a causal, but as an ethical factor, to be an integral part of what constitutes a freedom of will in Descartes.³⁵

³⁵ This understanding of freedom closely resembles what Lisa Shapiro identifies as Descartes' virtue ethics. Shapiro shows that Descartes metaphysics of the free will as an epistemological project is indissociable from an ethics that is resolved to use this free will well. Cf. Lisa Shapiro, "Descartes's Ethics," in *A Companion to Descartes*, 445-63 (p. 449).

According to the second objection, the will as described here is not a self-determining power. But this is only the case if we consider withholding assent to be a purely negative action, which it is not. Instead, whenever I refrain from deciding based on uncertainty, I do make a positive judgement. This decision amounts to a self-determination. Also, since for Descartes we are freer the more we act out of understanding, there is a greater freedom involved in withholding action based on understanding that I do not understand, than would be if I chose more or less indifferently between two options. As Descartes replies to Gassendi, guarding against mistakes is an integral part of the experience of freedom.³⁶

3. THE WILL, INDEPENDENT OF THE UNDERSTANDING

To consider the will as acting independently of the understanding has to be qualified. To justify my approach, I would consider the separation of will and understanding an *experiential* distinction. This distinction is motivated, quite simply, by the fact that what it is like to understand something differs from making a choice based on that understanding. While Descartes certainly does not address this distinction in an explicit fashion, he does consider understanding and choosing as two different modes of the mind.³⁷ How then can we frame the distinction using Descartes' terminology? Obviously, it cannot mean that will and understanding, as the two faculties of the mind, are really distinct. According to Descartes' metaphysics, the mind is one indivisible substance. When making a conceptual distinction instead, understanding and will are taken to be two different attributes of the thinking substance.³⁸ Can one attribute, understanding, be conceived of independently of the other, the will? If we are speaking from a strictly metaphysical perspective, the mind is just one substance that is active and passive at the same

³⁶ Cf. AT 7:378/CSM 2:260 (*Meditations*).

³⁷ Cf. AT 7:36-7/CSM 2: 25-26 (*Meditations*).

³⁸ Cf. AT 8A:17/CSM 1:204 (*Principles of Philosophy*).

time. It is passive insofar as it has perceptions that arise from within it or from without. It is active insofar as it judges and acts according to how it understands these perceptions.³⁹

There is a more pressing objection to considering the understanding as external to the will. Should not the understanding's influence on the will be thought of as *internal*, rather than external? While it may thus be justified to speak of God or an evil genius as external to the will, this does not go for the understanding, being part of the same substance. As an internal determination of the will, the understanding would thus preclude the notion of freedom I am considering here, because the feeling of freedom in question would not depend on *external* forces. I disagree with this, on the grounds that the understanding may be considered internal to the will on the level of attributes (conceptual distinction), but not on the level of modes (modal distinction). When distinguishing the mind *conceptually*, we obtain the attributes will and understanding, which are reciprocal to one another. Yet, it would be equivocal to speak of the one faculty influencing the other.⁴⁰ When regarding the mind according to a modal distinction, we see it as a series of thoughts. Even though we make sense of these thoughts using the attributes (some being volitions, some being ideas etc.), the thoughts themselves are external to each other, which could be psychologically translated into a stream of thoughts of which the mind is conscious.

Is it possible then to consider the will as acting independently of the understanding by adhering to the modal distinction? It does not make much sense to simply consider the mind as a series of thoughts. To bring into focus the feeling of not being determined, we have to consider not just what the volition affirms (e.g. a clear and distinct perception, or the decision to do A instead of B), but also the feeling or sense that this affirmation was made independent of external forces. Descartes' distinction between simple ideas, consisting of images of things, and complex ideas

³⁹ Cf. AT 11:343/CSM 1:335-36 (*The Passions of the Soul*).

⁴⁰ Cf. Johannes Haag, "Descartes über Willen und Willensfreiheit," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 60 (2006): 483-503 (p. 489).

like judgements⁴¹ does not really help us here, as this is simply a description of the mind according to the modal distinction, but not an explanation of how, for instance, a complex idea follows from a simple one.

The case looks different when considering the thinking substance as a whole. Since the mind is necessarily conscious of all that it thinks, the complex idea of a volition includes what Descartes himself calls the "perception of volition."⁴² For instance, from a modal perspective the affirmation of a mathematical equation would consist of two modes: the perception of the equation and the judgement that it is true, viz. the assent. From the perspective of the thinking substance, this amounts to saying that I, seeing the equation in a book, judge it to be true while at the same time perceiving myself doing so. The question then is: does this perception (of myself assenting to the equation) amount to me feeling to not have been influenced by external factors? In other words, can this conscious volition be considered to be independent of the understanding? Can I *consciously* act independently of what I understand?

When put like this, another objection against conceiving the will as independent of the understanding arises. Does this not necessarily mean that I would have to will *without* my understanding? How could that even be possible? Here, a further distinction will be helpful. The will can certainly not act without perceptions, as there would be nothing to judge, affirm, choose etc. In other words, the will cannot act independently of the mind in an *absolute* sense (or, to use less equivocal language, there are no complex ideas without simple ones). But the will can be said to act freely in a *relative* sense, in every scenario where the understanding does not predetermine the will's action. In other words, whenever there are neither grace nor clear and distinct perceptions forcing assent. In the example of the equation, the will cannot act independently of the understanding, as the assent is based on necessarily understanding the equation. A scenario in which I act independently of my understanding would then have to include at least some measure of indifference. For instance, if I was not exactly sure if I understood the

⁴¹ Cf. AT 7:36-37/CSM 2: 25-26 (*Meditations*).

⁴² Cf. AT 11:343/CSM 1:335-36 (*The Passions of the Soul*).

equation, I would waver whether or not to assent to it. As the perception of the equation affords me two options, I act relatively independent (and thus my decision is not based on the geometrical truth as it would be if I had clear and distinct perception).

Of course, according to the “Fourth Meditation” the will is not freer when acting independently of the understanding, but less so. The highest degree of indifference is at the same time the lowest degree of freedom. On the other hand, it has been noted that this indifference can serve philosophical purposes, for instance in liberating the mind from prejudice, which is why Peter Schouls here speaks of a “liberty of opportunity.”⁴³ I think it is in this context that one should look for an experience of freedom of the will independent of the understanding because in this sense, indifference can actually lead to more knowledge, more certain self-determination and thus more freedom.

So far, I have argued that to conceive of the will as acting independently of the understanding, a relative independence is required which means 1) that the volition is conscious (I perceive myself as acting independently of what I understand) and 2) that the indifference of choice does not indicate the least amount of freedom, but an opportunity to become freer. How can we conceive of this productive form of indifference?

To act independently of the understanding entails that the perceptions do not, like clear and distinct ones, predetermine the decision. Two different scenarios of indifference are thus possible: the will would either have to be totally independent of the understanding (the case of total indifference) or the understanding would have to leave some room for deliberation. I would argue that both scenarios offer a different experience of freedom of the will. When I decide without basing my decision on anything that appears good and true, I have determined myself, but my decision has neither ethical nor epistemic value.

The more interesting scenario is the second one. When I am not completely determined by my perceptions, but still see reasons why one option would be preferable to the other, how far can these reasons be

⁴³ Peter Schouls, *Descartes and the Enlightenment* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 1989), 98.

considered external to my will, such that a decision based on them still feels free? One obvious way this could be conceived is described by Descartes in the "Fourth Meditation": "If [...] I simply refrain from making a judgement 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."⁴⁴ As the decision is based on the perceptions only in the negative sense of their insufficiency, it is made independently of the understanding.

In practical terms though, this strict habit would be very unhelpful, as decisions often have to be made under uncertainty. To counter this problem, I would argue that one can conceive of a habit of will that is dependent on the understanding in the relative sense that it refers to its perceptions, but that is ultimately independent of them because decisions are based on a habitual use of will. In other words, the will would be acting independently of the understanding in the sense that its actions are continuously shaped by philosophical resolve. Even though my actions are based on uncertainty to an extent, I feel free because the will is not reduced to reacting to the perceptions. I may deliberate to act either way in an empirical situation, but I can also consider my past volitions to guide me how to choose. Thus, while the mind might feel pushed and pulled in different directions, it can realize that its volitions are not defined by its perceptions by remembering how it consciously acted in the past. The mind is never exclusively tied to sensual and unclear ideas. This would then be the experience of freedom, relatively independent of the understanding: being aware of the ability to *always* do otherwise in the face of uncertainty.

This outcome might seem unsatisfactory, mainly for the reason that my interpretation is silent as to a freedom of will in concrete situations. But it has recently been argued that Descartes' theory of will is not meant to lay down the groundwork for an ethics that provides rules in all conceivable circumstances.⁴⁵ To even begin considering such an

⁴⁴ "Cum autem quid verum sit non satis clare & distincte percipio, si quidem a iudicio ferendo abstineam, clarum est me recte agere, & non falli." AT 7:59/CSM 2:41 (*Meditations*).

⁴⁵ Cf. Shapiro, "Descartes's Ethics," 452 and Noa Naaman-Zauderer, *Descartes' Deontological Turn: Reason, Will, and Virtue in the Later Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 180.

ethics, one would have to weigh the degrees of determination in a given situation.⁴⁶ This might be possible in the case of clear and distinct perceptions. Yet I hardly see how this could be argued regarding Descartes' comments about moral decisions. Instead, the experience of freedom I have discussed in this section is a positive effect of indifference, which here becomes the basis for the self-determination of the will. While being indifferent will not result in the highest degree of freedom, afforded by clear and distinct perceptions, it presents the mind with the opportunity to become conscious of its will as a self-determining faculty. Whether by doubting what seems certain or when facing uncertainty, Descartes does envisage an experience of freedom that makes productive use of the indifference opened up by understanding.

CONCLUSION

In considering God, an evil genius and the understanding as external factors to the will, I have shown how different experiences of freedom can be outlined based on Descartes' "Fourth Meditation." At the same time, I have left open the question whether an action that *feels* free really *is* free, according to the Cartesian theory of the will. Based on my discussion, I would argue that this cannot be answered in a straightforward way. I do not see a parallelism of causal and psychological factors in Descartes (as opposed, for instance, to Spinoza's theory of mind). Instead, I have shown that the experience of freedom is not just the result of the self-determination of the will in the face of external factors, but that this experience can in turn become the basis for future

⁴⁶ When Descartes considers the passions to arise (from the perspective of the mind) passively out of the diverse movements of bodily spirits, they clearly constitute an external force to the will, cf. AT 4:310f./CSMK 269f. (*To Princess Elizabeth, 6 October 1645*). Thus, the discussion of the passions falls out of the scope of my investigation, even more so when considering that they are primarily understood to be caused by the way external objects affect the senses, cf. AT 11:371/CSM 1:349 (*The Passions of the Soul*). One could consequently differentiate between a "mental" experience of freedom which is at stake here, and an "embodied" experience, which deals with the ethics of a "strong soul" and a "firm will," acting against or in accordance with the passions arising out of the body, cf. AT 11:366f./CSM 1:347 (*The Passions of the Soul*). How these two kinds or aspects of freedom could be related remains a subject for future investigations.

decisions, in the form of a will that is conscious of its self-determination and thus acting freely by habit, as it were. This reciprocity between determination by external factors and self-determination adds an ethical dimension to the problem of causality considered in the libertarian-compatibilist discussion. While Descartes certainly grants that we are necessarily determined by certain perceptions, he does not consider the mind to be an automaton. Rather, whatever determines the mind's reasoning can in turn become the subject of further reasoning. Thus, I wholeheartedly agree with Emma Gilby's assessment that Descartes "demonstrates, at one and the same time, the patience of systematic exegesis, and an anxious sense of the need for an everyday philosophy of complex mental states."⁴⁷ In elaborating on the experiential dimension of the will, I argue that the implications of this complexity are still far from being disentangled.

KEYWORDS: René Descartes, will, freedom, choice.

SUMMARY

In current debates on Descartes' metaphysics of the mind, the question tends to be whether his position is that of a libertarian or of a compatibilist concerning the freedom of the will. I intervene in this discussion by focusing on the experience of choosing freely. To do this I take a closer look at the "feeling of not being determined by external forces," an up to now too little discussed passage of the "Fourth Meditation." In successively considering God, an evil genius and the faculty of understanding as external forces acting on the will, I show how Descartes' discussion of freedom of choice implicates both his ethical and epistemological ambitions in a way that could benefit the libertarian-compatibilist debate. To determine the nature of the freedom of will in Descartes, one may not only discuss the causality of the operations of the will, but also the perception of this causality by the mind, in other words, the experience of freedom.

⁴⁷ Emma Gilby, "Descartes's Account of Indifference," *Renaissance Studies* 26 (2012): 658-72 (p. 672).