The Intellect, the Will, and the Passions: Spinoza's Critique of Descartes*

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Introduction

This paper examines (in Section 1) Descartes's theory of judgment and (in Section 2) Spinoza's well-known criticisms of it. I argue (in Section 3) that despite some important differences, there are many ways in which Spinoza's views, so far from being anti-Cartesian, can be seen as a natural development of those of Descartes. I then go on to argue (in Section 4) that Spinoza's general critique of the Cartesian theory of the will does not take sufficient account of what Descartes actually claimed, and that if the Cartesian concept of freedom is properly understood, Spinoza is closer to it than he himself recognized. Finally (in Section 5) I say a brief word about the relation between the will and the passions, and suggest that here again Spinoza tended to misinterpret Descartes's true position, and as a result exaggerated the difference between his own views and those of Descartes. I hope that it will emerge by the end of the paper that for all Spinoza's anti-Cartesian flourishes, his views on the will are much closer to those of Descartes than is often supposed.

1. Descartes's theory of judgement

Within the general category of conscious thought (*cogitatio*), one may, according to Descartes, distinguish two principal modes of operation: perception, or the operation of the intellect, and volition, or the operation of the will (comprising desire, aversion, assertion, denial and doubt (*Principles*, 1:32). This distinction is important for many reasons. In the *Passions de l' âme*, for example, it is suggested that perception is a passive faculty of the mind, while volition is active, and this notion seems to have influenced many later thinkers.[1] But in Descartes, the most important application of the distinction concerns the diagnosis of error in our judgments.

Descartes sees the problem of error as a theological problem, rather like the traditional problem of evil. Instead of having to explain away moral or metaphysical evil, Descartes feels himself called upon to explain away intellectual error; but the reasons why an explanation seems called for are closely parallel. Just as, if God is good and the omnipotent creator of all, it seems odd that there should be evil in the world, similarly, if God is good and the source of all truth, it seems odd that there should be error. More specifically, if God created me and gave me a mind which is, in principle, a reliable

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[1] *Passions of the Soul* [*Les Passions de l'âme,* 1639], Part I, art. 17 (AT XI 342: CSM I 355). 'AT' designates *Oeuvres de Descartes*, C. Adam and P. Tannery, eds. (Paris: Vrin/CNRS, rev. 1964-76); 'CSM' designates *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). For the active/passive distinction compare the letter to Regius of May 1641 (AT III 375); and for this distinction in later writers, compare George Berkeley, *Philosophical Commentaries* [1707-8], Notebook A, entry 643 (in *Philosophical Works*, ed. M. Ayers (London: Dent, 1993), pp. 382–3).

instrument for the perception of truth,[2] how does it happen that I often go astray in my judgments?

A standard theological move in coping with the problem of evil was to put the blame on man's exercise of his free will; and Descartes makes the self-same move in explaining away error. His first premise is that judgment is an act which involves the will as well as the intellect: ' In order to make a judgement , the intellect is of course required [since otherwise nothing would be perceived — there would be no content to the judgment] … but the will is also required so that, when something is perceived, our assent may then be given' (*Principles* Part I, art. 34). Descartes's second premise is the Cartesian thesis that the will extends further than the intellect: *latius patet voluntas quam intellectus*. ' The perception of the intellect extends only to the few objects presented to it and is always extremely limited. The will on the other hand can in a certain sense be called infinite, since we observe that its scope extends to anything' (*Principle*s Part I, art. 35). Given these two premises, the explanation for error is quite straightforward: ' It is easy for us to extend our will beyond what we clearly perceive; and when we do this it is no wonder that we may happen to go wrong' (ibid).

To complete the theodicy, Descartes adds some further considerations (the most detailed presentation is in the Fourth Meditation). God cannot be blamed for giving us an infinitely extended will; in this he has allowed men to share in one of his divine perfections. Nor can he be blamed for giving us a finite intellect, since if he is going to create at all, he must create creatures less endowed than himself.[3] Moreover, though our intellectual perception is limited, it is, as far as it goes, completely accurate. Whatever we do perceive clearly is true: that is guaranteed by God's goodness. But where we do not perceive something clearly, it is hardly God's fault if we jump in and rashly give our assent where we should have suspended judgment.[4]

How original was Descartes's approach here? According to Anthony Kenny, it was quite new to construe judgment as falling under a conative or appetitive, rather than a cognitive faculty: the doctrine that judgment is an act of the will has, he claims, no precedent in medieval or scholastic philosophy.[5] However that may be, Descartes's formal account in the *Principles* makes it clear that whenever judgment occurs, both the intellect and the will are always involved; intellectual perception and voluntary assent are both necessary conditions for the occurrence of a judgment (*Principles* Part I, art. 34).[6] And in broad outlines at least, this follows the traditional account of judgment. As Kenny himself notes, Aquinas makes a clear distinction between, on the one hand, apprehending (*apprehendere*) some fact (which happens willy nilly *per virtutem luminis naturalis*), and, on the other hand, assenting (*assentire*) to what is apprehended, which

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[2] 'My mind does not deceive me, since it is a reliable instrument which I received from God.' (AT V 148) and J. Cottingham (ed. & trans.), *Descartes's Conversation with Burman* [1648] (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), p. 5.

[3] 'It is in the nature of a finite intellect to lack understanding of many things, and it is in the nature of a created intellect to be finite' (AT VII 60: CSM II 42). The thought that created items must necessarily have some imperfection is developed in Leibniz, *Theodicy* [*Essais de Theodicée,* 1710], Part I, art. 20.

[4] Meditation Four, AT VII 61: CSM II 42; cf. *Principles.* Part I, art. 38 (AT VIII 19; CSM I 205).

[5] A. Kenny, 'Descartes on the Will', in R. J. Butler (ed.), *Cartesian Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972).

[6] See also Fourth Meditation, AT VII 60, line 27: CSM II 42.

is ‘ in our power and falls under the command of the will.’ [7] This Thomist distinction which Descartes broadly accepts, has an obvious and straightforward basis in common sense: there seems a clear intuitive difference between entertaining some proposition — being apprised of its content, as it were — and actually asserting it or assenting to its truth. (Take, for example, the proposition that there is life on other worlds; this is a proposition whose content we all understand, though we may be divided, as the scientific community in fact is at present, between those who believe it is true, those who are sceptical, and those who are agnostic).

2. Spinoza’s critique

In his exposition of Descartes’s Principles (*Principia Philosophiae Renati Descartes,* 1663), Spinoza gives a full account of the Cartesian diagnosis of the causes of error and its remedy. (The account is tolerably accurate, though there are some oversimplifications to which we shall return later.) ‘ Error depends entirely on the use of the freedom of the will. Since the will is free to determine itself, it follows that we do have the power to contain our faculty of assenting within the limits of the intellect, and so can bring it about that we do not fall into error.’ [8] But Spinoza’s own view of the matter is strongly at odds with this, as is explicitly recorded in Meyer’s Preface: ‘ Although the author felt himself to be obliged not to depart a hair’s breadth from Descartes’s opinion ... let no one think that he is teaching here either his own opinions or only those he approves of.... An example of this is what is said concerning the freedom of the will. For he [Spinoza] does not think that the will is distinct from the intellect, much less endowed with such freedom.’ [9]

There are two key points made here about Spinoza’s view as contrasted with that of Descartes. Firstly, the will is not distinct from the intellect; secondly, the will is not endowed with the kind of freedom that Descartes postulated. Both these points of difference were developed fully by Spinoza in the *Ethics*. I shall leave the second till Section 4, and concentrate here on the first.

In *Ethics* Part II Prop. 49, Cor., Spinoza asserts that the will and the intellect are one and the same: *voluntas et intellectus sunt unum et idem*. This uncompromising departure from Cartesian orthodoxy is perhaps initially a little surprising given that Spinoza fully accepts Descartes’s definition of the will as ‘ a faculty of affirming or denying’ (II P48). For in order to affirm X , one might have supposed, we must first understand the content of X: the faculty of affirming can only begin to operate, it might seem, once the faculty of understanding has done its work. As Descartes puts it: ‘ When we direct our will towards something, we must always have some sort of understanding of it.’ [10] Spinoza, however, makes it clear that he regards the notions of a faculty of understanding and a separate faculty of willing as ‘ fictions’ .[11] And at II P 49, he proceeds to provide a

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[7] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266–73], Ia IIae, Qu. 17, art. 6; cited in Kenny, ‘Descartes on the Will,’ p. 3. On the question of innovation, Kenny argues that Descartes’s thesis that judgment is not just *commanded* by the will, but *itself* an act of will, is new and requires explanation.

[8] G I 174: C 258. ‘G’ designates Spinoza, *Opera*, ed. C . Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Winters, 1925). ‘C‘ designates *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. 1, trans. E. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University, 1985).

[9] G I 131–2: C 229.

[10] AT VII 377: CSM II 259.

[11] For a discussion of Spinoza’s somewhat obscure support for this claim at *Ethics* Part II, Prop. 48, see E. Curley, ‘Descartes, Spinoza, and the Ethics of Belief’, in E . Freeman and M. Mandelbaum (eds.), *Spinoza: Essays in Interpretation* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1975), p. 167.

demonstration that the will and the intellect are identical, taking as an illustration the proposition that a triangle has angles equal to two right angles. Spinoza argues (i) that the affirmation or judgment that this property holds is inseparable from the concept or idea of the triangle — the affirmation cannot be conceived without the idea. Then he goes on to argue the converse, (ii) that the idea cannot be conceived without the affirmation. Presumably this is because to understand that X is a triangle is inseparable from affirming that X's angles equal two right angles. Thus, the affirmation cannot be conceived without the idea, nor the idea without the affirmation; and if X cannot be conceived without Y nor vice versa, then (by Definition Two at the start of *Ethics* Book Two) there is no essential difference between X and Y (X belongs to the essence of Y, says Definition Two, if X cannot be conceived without Y and vice versa). Spinoza concludes that so far from being distinct from intellection, will is ' something universal which is predicated of all ideas' (*universale quid quod de omnibus ideis predicatur*).[12]

The first premise of this argument (viz., that the affirmation of X is inseparable from the idea of X) is clearly correct. Evidently, one cannot affirm a proposition without perceiving its content. But what of the converse (premise two)? Recent commentators have on the whole been very sympathetic to Spinoza's refusal here to separate perception from affirmation. Thus R. J. Delahunty applauds Spinoza for having grasped on important insight: so far from its being true that judgment consists of an act of will that supervenes on the entertaining of a proposition, judgment is, says Delahunty (following Bell), ' phenomenologically basic' .[13] Well, if this means that introspection reveals that a judgment cannot be separated into a perceptual and a volitional component, I am not at all clear how introspection does, or indeed could, reveal any such thing. Delahunty, however, goes on to develop his argument in support of Spinoza, by reference to logico-grammatical considerations. ' The occurrence of an unembedded thought' , he tells us, ' is naturally or inherently assertoric' ; and this, he claims, shows that Spinoza is right in refusing to analyse judgment as a compound of (1) the entertaining of an idea and (2) the giving of assent. This argument seems to me to illustrate the dangers of approaching seventeenth-century philosophy from a modern, post-Fregean interpretative standpoint. It is, of course, correct that an indicative sentence is conventionally taken to be assertoric unless this assertive or assertoric force is nullified by the context, or by the scope of some special operator (e.g., inverted commas, or the prefix ' once upon a time'); but it is surely a mistake to transfer these truths about the grammar of declarative utterances to the realm of individual thoughts. The context in which Descartes and Spinoza are operating is not that of public discourse but that of private thought. The paradigm we should keep in front of our minds is not that of A's making a statement to B, but that of an idea's arising in A's consciousness. And when I have an idea, I am not (at least not typically) uttering or conveying a proposition to someone else. So whether or not Spinoza's position on the inseparability of idea and assertion is correct, it seems to me that it cannot plausibly be supported simply by reference to the logical grammar of declarative utterances.

The distinction between public discourse and private thought is clearly recognized by E. M. Curley in an illuminating defence of Spinoza's theory of judgment. Curley notes that in the realm of public discourse there is often a gap, as it were, between the declarations of a speaker and his judgment as to the truth; but in the realm of private thought such a gap is impossible: ' It is nonsense to speak of someone as saying-in-his-

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[12] G II 135: C 489

[13] R. J. Delahunty, *Spinoza* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 35.

heart or judging what he does not believe to be true.' [14] In short, to say (publicly) that P and to judge that P is true are different; but to say (privately) that P is to judge that P is true. This is undoubtedly correct; but it is not clear that it closes the gap between intellectual perception and voluntary assent. For it seems that one may ' entertain' (in one's heart) a proposition, while nevertheless withholding assent or denial. Is not the ' suspending of judgment' which is required by the Cartesian program just this? Curley is well aware of the possibility of this sort of reply, and he meets it by providing a rival, Spinozistic, analysis of what it is to suspend judgment. It will be convenient, however, to postpone discussion of this until the next section.

Another commentator who sees merit in Spinoza's view of judgement is Jonathan Bennett. Most of us, says Bennett in his book on Spinoza's *Ethics*, would agree with Spinoza as against Descartes that belief is not a ' voluntary intellectual act that we choose to perform on a given proposition'.[15] 'We cannot,' says Bennett, 'switch beliefs on and off at will' ; this he suggests may be a 'conceptual truth stemming from the structure of the concept of belief'.[16] Bennett is clearly right to point out that belief is not something we switch on and off at will (though what seems to be involved here is a plausible generalization rather than a conceptual truth, for it does seem that sometimes at least we can decide what to believe — or certainly what not to believe). In general, though, it is true that we do not go around deciding what to believe. But to suppose that this fact is fatal to Descartes's position is to miss, or to misrepresent, what Descartes is saying about the relation between the intellectual and the will. The fact is that Descartes is quite prepared to allow that there are many cases where believing a proposition is not something which is entirely within the control of the will — and interestingly such cases would include the very type of case which Spinoza takes as his illustration — a judgment concerning the elementary properties of a triangle.[17]

As several commentators have recognized, Descartes maintains that in the case of clearly and distinctly perceived propositions I do *not* have the two-way power to assent or dissent. On the country, it is asserted in Meditation Four that *ex magna luce in intellectu consequitur magna propensio in voluntate* — a great light in the intellect gives rise to a great propensity of the will: I *cannot but judge*, says Descartes, that what I understand so clearly is true (*non possum non judicare id quod tam clare intelligo verum esse*).[18] In the case of clearly and distinctly perceived propositions, then, Spinoza's account of the relation between the intellect and the will, so far from being radically opposed to Descartes's account, has some striking affinities with what Descartes himself says when he argues that clear and distinct perception is inseparable from assent. Of course, to say that X is inseparable from Y , or follows automatically on Y , is not to say that X is identical with Y, so we are still short of the Spinozan claim that the intellect and the will are one and the same. But as we have seen, Spinoza argues for the essential identity of X and Y on the basis that it is impossible to conceive of X without Y and vice versa. So if it were to turn out that one's perceptual state always necessarily fixed one's

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[14] Curley, 'Descartes, Spinoza, and the Ethics of Belief,' p. 177.
[15] J. Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 162.
[16] Bennett, *Spinoza's Ethics*, p. 160.
[17] Spinoza, *Ethics,* Part II, Prop. 49, Dem.
[18] AT VII 58–9: CSM 2:41 (tense altered from past to present). There are many other places where Descartes asserts the irresistibility of the clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect; lack of assent is possible only when there is lack of attention. See the letter to Mersenne of 24 April 1647 and the letter to Mesland of 2 May 1644 (discussed in Kenny, 'Descartes on the Will', p. 21ff.

belief states, so that it was inconceivable for the latter to change without a change in the former, then we would at least be partly on the way to the Spinozan position that there is no real distinction between intellect and will.

3. Suspension of assent and inadequacy of perception

But despite the convergence between Spinoza and Descartes over the psychology of clear and distinct perception there remains a crucial point on which their views appear to be in headlong conflict, viz, the question of what happens when a proposition is *not* clearly and distinctly perceived. In such cases, Descartes tells us, we can *either* jump in and rashly give our assent *or*, more prudently, we can decide to withhold assent (following the Cartesian recipe for the avoidance of error).[19] Here the will seems to be presented as a wholly separate and independent faculty which operates at one remove, as it were, from the perceptions of the intellect. On this issue it is the Cartesian position that appears to harmonize with our common sense beliefs about what happens when we do not perceive something clearly and Spinoza himself recognises this: 'It can be objected that experience seems to teach nothing more clearly than that we can suspend our judgement so as not to assent to things we perceive. For example, someone who imagines (*fingit*) a winged horse does not on that account grant that there is a winged horse … Therefore experience seems to teach that the will or faculty of assenting is free and different from the faculty of understanding' (*Ethics,* Part I, Prop. 49, Schol.).[20] Having apparently, devised a rod for his own back (in fact the example of the winged horse was one which Spinoza himself had earlier employed, in his *Exposition of Descartes's Principles*, to illustrate the plausibility of the Cartesian approach),[21] Spinoza now attempts to nullify its impact: 'I deny that a man affirms nothing in so far as he perceives. For what is perceiving a winged horse other than affirming wings of the horse?[22]

What Spinoza seems to be saying here is that the mere idea of a winged horse involves what might be called 'affirmatory predication'. The object referred to, or depicted by the idea, viz, *equus*, has ascribed to it the predicate *alatus*. One could debate whether there is any merit in adopting this distinctly attenuated sense of 'affirmatory' (which would entail that a composite idea of the form RA where R is a referring expression and A an attribute would automatically count as 'affirmatory'). But however that may be, Spinoza's strategy seems to involve a gross *ignoratio elenchi*. For the objection originally raised was that one can have an idea of a winged horse without affirming its *existence*. And Spinoza's point about the 'affirmatory' nature of the predicate 'winged' leaves this quite untouched.

What Spinoza goes on to say, however, is much more promising: 'If the Mind perceived nothing else except the winged horse, it would regard it as present to itself, and would not have any cause of doubting its existence, or any faculty of dissenting, unless either the imagination of the winged horse were joined to an idea which excluded the existence of the same horse, or the mind perceived that its idea of a winged horse was inadequate. And then either it will necessarily deny the horse's existence, or it will necessarily doubt it.'[23] This offers us a trichotomy. For any object represented by an idea, there are, as it were, three 'modes of presentation.' Either the object is presented as

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[19] AT VII 62: CSM II 43.
[20] G II 133: C 487.
[21] G I 173: C 257.
[22] G II 134: C 489.
[23] G II 134: C 489.

actually existing or (as in the case of a round square) it is presented as excluding existence or, thirdly, the idea manifests itself as inadequate. That is, it contains insufficient information from which to deduce the existence of non- existence of its object. But in this third case, it is not a matter of our having to *decide* to suspend assent; rather assent is already ruled out by the manifest inadequacy of the perception. As Spinoza himself puts it earlier in this section, ' when we say that someone suspends judgment, we are saying merely that he sees that he does not perceive the thing adequately. Suspension of judgment therefore is really a perception, not [a separate act of] free will.'

This position has considerable attractions. E. M. Curley has supported it as follows: 'I cannot doubt whether *p* unless I already have some existing tendency to believe *not-p,* unless it already seems to me in some measure that *p* is false. These conflicting tendencies are necessary conditions for doubt, and insofar as I am aware of them and find them to be of approximately equal strength, they are sufficient. Suspending judgment … is not an action I take as a consequence of finding the arguments pro and con are pretty evenly balanced. It is simply the state itself of finding them to be so..[24]The central point here, I take it, is that abstaining from judgment is not, so to speak, an arbitrary act of will, detached from the perceptions of the intellect; rather it is a perceived equilibrium in the reasons for or against a given proposition. This seems right; but it is interesting to note how close it comes to what Descartes himself says in the First Meditation about the suspension of assent. The meditator who wishes to find indubitable foundations for knowledge cannot simply 'decide' to suspend his previous beliefs. For the *praejudicia* or 'preconceived opinions' thoughtlessly acquired since his childhood are like an army of occupation. They 'capture his belief' *(occupant credulitatem);* his belief is chained to them *(devincta)* by 'long use and the law of custom' (*usus et ius familiaritatis).* His prejudices are like crushing weights *(pondera)* and no progress can be made in freeing oneself from these encumbrances, until some line of thought can be devised whereby the weights are 'counterbalanced' *(aequatis utrimque praejudiciorum ponderibus).*[25]

The suspension of assent on Descartes's view is thus not just a mental *fiat;* it occurs when meditative reflection has thrown up reasons for mistrusting previously held beliefs. The senses have been found to be unreliable in the past; I may now be dreaming; it is even conceivable, for all I know here and now, that the entire external world is a sham. The celebrated Cartesian technique of calling everything into doubt is thus not the exercise of a sovereign will acting 'at one remove' from intellectual perception. It is a technique of rational reflection on the adequacy (or lack of it) of one's basis for belief. It is true that Descartes speaks in Meditation One of 'turning his will in the opposite direction [from previous beliefs]' *(voluntate plane in contrarium versa);* but the will is employed not in 'suspending assent' *tout court,* but on the decision to explore arguments which provide *reasons* for doubt. This comes out with particular force in the Sixth Meditation, when Descartes provides a kind of resumé of his earlier train of thought (in the three paragraphs beginning *Primo… Postea vero… Nunc autem*}[26] What Descartes rehearses is not a series of independent decisions of a sovereign will concerning his beliefs, but a series of reflections, about the basis of his previous beliefs, the reasons for doubting them and the foundation for his present confidence in at least

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[24] Curley, 'Descartes, Spinoza, and the Ethics of Belief,' p. 175.
[25] AT VII 22: CSM II 15.
[26] AT VII 74–78: CSM II 51–54.

some of his judgments. Throughout this section, belief is represented as flowing not from volitional decision but from perceptual apprehension of reasons and causes. (Compare AT VII 74 (CSM II 51): *primo repetam quaenam illa sunt qua vera esse putavi et quas ob causas id putavi; deinde causes expendam propter quas eadem in dubiam revocavi*, etc.) It is true that Descartes frequently stresses the single-mindedness and determination needed to pursue his meditations resolutely (*Manebo obstinate in hac meditatione defixus;* AT VII 23: CSM II 15); but his exercise of will is not supposed to exert a direct control on his beliefs. These are always generated by the preponderance of reasons and causes pro or con. One could put the point by saying that we do not, according to Descartes, achieve suspension of assent by a direct act of will. Instead, we decide to follow up a certain line of argument which reveals the inadequacy of the grounds for our previously held beliefs, and it is the (intellectual) recognition of this inadequacy that brings suspension of assent. Again, though not exactly what Spinoza says, this is much closer to the Spinozan picture than at first appeared. The Cartesian meditator suspends assent in terms very close to those described by Spinoza: he 'comes to see that he does not perceive the thing adequately' (*Ethics,* Part II, Prop.49 Schol).

4. Spinoza and 'Cartesian freedom'

In Spinoza's critique of Descartes's account of the relation between intellect and will there seem to be two main strands. The first, which we have already examined (at least in part) hinges on Spinoza's theory of judgment and his thesis of the inseparability, in judgment, of the intellect and the will. The second strand relates to a more pervasive and general feature of Spinoza's philosophy--his thoroughgoing determinism. As Meyer puts it, Spinoza ' does not think that the will is distinct from the intellect, nor that it is endowed with the kind of freedom [that Descartes postulates].' [27] As Jonathan Bennett puts it, ' Spinoza would not use a concept of freedom radical enough to conflict with strict determinism.' [28] And as Spinoza himself puts it at *Ethics,* Part II, Prop. 48, in the section which leads on into the critique of Descartes we have just examined, there is ' no absolute or free will [*sc.* of the kind Descartes supposed]' : *nulla est absoluta sive libera voluntas.* Cartesian freedom, Spinoza insists, is a kind of illusion. Men think themselves free because they are conscious of their volitions, but not the causes thereof *(Ethics*, Part I, Appendix). This is, incidentally, one central area of metaphysics where Leibniz aligns himself with Spinoza against Descartes (though the details of his account of freedom are very different from Spinoza's). ' Monsieur Descartes,' writes Leibniz, 'requires a freedom for which there is no need when he insists that the actions of the will of man are entirely undetermined —a thing which never happens.'[29]

For both Spinoza and Leibniz, the non-freedom of the will (in what they take to be the ' absolute' Cartesian sense) follows from the particular brand of rationalism which each of them espouses. The term ' rationalism' , like charity, covers a multitude of sins; but in Leibniz' case the denial of ' absolute' freedom flows from his commitment to what Jonathan Bennett has called ' explanatory' rationalism — the refusal to allow the existence of unexplained ' brute facts'.[30]I n a universe in which there is a sufficient reason for everything that occurs, there can be no human two-way power such that, when all antecedent conditions are fixed, it is still possible for the agent to decide to X or

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[27]G I 131–2: C 229.

[28] Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics,* p. 159

[29] G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Preliminary Discourse*, §69.

[30] *Bennett, A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, p. 29.

not to X. For if such a power existed, then the actual decision would be undetermined by the antecedent conditions, so that it would be impossible, even in principle, to have predicted that the decision would go one way rather than the other — a clear violation of the principle of sufficient reason. In the case of Spinoza, the denial of absolute freedom flows from what is often called his ' necessitarianism' — a doctrine that is expressed most concisely in the *Metaphysical Thoughts*: 'If men clearly understood the whole of nature, they would find everything just as necessary as the things treated of in mathematics; but since this is beyond human understanding, we regard certain things as contingent.'[31] The precise sense in which all things are 'necessary' for Spinoza has been the subject of debate: it is possible, as E. M. Curley has suggested, that he is prepared to allow that individual truths are not absolutely, but only 'relatively' necessary (i.e., they are entailed by antecedent conditions plus nomological statements).[32] But however we construe Spinoza's necessitarianism, a two-way contra-causal power of the will is ruled out. For if I decide to X, then my X-ing is either necessary in some absolute sense, or 'relatively' necessary in the sense that given the total set of antecedent conditions, and the causal laws that govern the universe, it was impossible for me not to have X'd.

But did Descartes in fact postulate the existence of an absolute, contra-causal freedom of the kind which Spinoza and Leibniz denied? I shall argue that Spinoza (and Leibniz too for that matter) misinterpreted Descartes on this point; the position which they take to be the Cartesian one does not correspond to the stance which Descartes centrally and characteristically adopts in his discussions of freedom. The central Cartesian position on freedom, I shall suggest, is much closer to that of Spinoza; indeed there is a sense in which Spinoza's views, so far from being in radical conflict with Descartes' , can be seen as a natural development of those of his predecessor. To describe Spinoza as having ' misinterpreted' Descartes at once needs qualifying. The absolutist position which he attributes to Descartes is one for which some support can be found in the Cartesian texts. Unfortunately, the way Descartes expresses himself concerning the freedom of the will is often confusing; frequently his remarks seem open to an indeterministic interpretation (indeed, when I wrote my introduction to *Descartes' Conversation with Burman* I was persuaded that he was committed to an indeterministic view of the kind Spinoza attributes to him).[33]

Both Leibniz and Spinoza took Descartes's *Principia Philosophiae* as the main source for their view of Descartes on the subject of freedom. We know, of course, that Spinoza took the *Principles* as his text for his detailed exposition of Descartes' views in 1663 , and (as already noted) the question of free will is explicitly mentioned in the preface as one issue where Spinoza's views differ from those of Descartes. As for Leibniz, the phrasing which he uses to describe what he takes to be the Cartesian position, is directly lifted from the French version of Principles Part I, article 41: ' *La toute puissance de Dieu . . . laisse les actions des hommes entièrement indéterminées*.'

But there are important respects in which this particular section of the *Principles* is unrepresentative and potentially misleading in the picture it gives of Descartes's views.

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[31] *Cogitationes Metaphysicae* IX ii (G I 266; C 332). In this passage Spinoza explicitly cites a human act (Josiah's burning of the idolators' bones on Jereboam's altar) as an example of something which we may mistakenly suppose to be contingent, although it is in fact necessary. See. also *Ethics*, Part I, Prop. 35.

[32] E. M. Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1969), ch. 3.

[33] Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes' Conversation with Burman,* pp. xxxvi ff.

This is particularly true of the 1647 French version. Picot's phrase '*entièrement libres et indéterminées'* adds the emphasizer ' entirely' which is not present in the original; furthermore, by conjoining ' free' and ' undetermined' so closely, it almost suggests that being free is, for Descartes, practically equivalent to being undetermined (a highly misleading suggestion, as will appear). But in any case, and irrespective of whether one looks at the French or the original Latin, article 41 is dangerous ground on which to build an interpretation of Descartes' notion of freedom. For the article does not purport to contain any information about the precise respect in which we are free or about the way in which, according to Descartes, we exercise our freedom, nor does it touch on the all-important question of how our powers of willing are related to our intellectual perceptions. Instead, it is designed to steer the reader past the notorious theological puzzle of how to reconcile human freedom with divine preordination. As is well known, Descartes was always hesitant and evasive when dealing with areas which might embroil him in ecclesiastical controversy, and this is particularly true of the *Principles* — a book which he hoped would be approved and adopted as a university text. So what he says on this theological puzzle should be treated with great caution, rather than as a key text for unravelling his account of freedom. What he does say, in any case, is precious little: we cannot grasp how divine power and human freedom are reconcilable, but since we have inner awareness of our freedom, and since the nature of God cannot be grasped by us, it is best not to trouble ourselves with doubts on the matter.

Although Spinoza may have been influenced by the language of *Principles* Part I article 41, the article he explicitly mentions in his exposition of Descartes' views on freedom[34] is article 39 — a passage which at first sight might again be taken as evidence for an indeterministic view, since it appears to identify freedom with a two-way power. Freedom is defined in terms of the ability we have ' to assent or not assent at will in many cases' (*multis ad arbitrium vel assentiri vel non assentiri*). But as Anthony Kenny has noted,[35] it is important to stress that Descartes says *multis*, not *omnibus*: in many cases, not in all cases. It is soon made clear that our power to withhold assent is limited to those matters which are 'not quite certain or fully examined.'[36] In the case of truths which *are* clearly and distinctly perceived, it is explained in a later article, we are quite unable to resist giving our assent: *quoties aliquid clare percipimus, ei sponte assentimur et nullo modo possumus dubitare quin sit verum.*[37]

Now on an ' absolutist' or indeterministic conception, such inability to avoid assenting would negate freedom. Yet Descartes explicitly states in the *Meditations* that we are perfectly free when our will is determined, and our assent necessitated, by our intellectual perception: 'The more I incline in one direction, either because I clearly understand that reasons of goodness and truth point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thought, the freer is my choice.'[38] Cartesian freedom here is certainly not an absolute contra-causal power. On the contrary, it is the spontaneous assent that is irresistibly determined by the clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect. In putting forward this conception of liberty—liberté éclairée, as the great Cartesian scholar Ferdinand Alquié has aptly termed it[39] — Descartes seems much

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[34] *Principia Philosophiae Renati Descartes,* G I 175: C 258.
[35] *Kenny,* 'Descartes on the Will', p. 2I.
[36] *AT* VIII 20 line 5: CSM I:206.
[37] *Principles* Part I, art. 43 (AT VII 58: CSM I 207).
[38] AT VII 58: CSM I 207.
[39] Ferdinand Alquié (ed.), *Descartes, Oeuvres Philosophiques* (Paris: Garnier, 1963-73), Vol. II, p. 461.

closer to the compatibilist conception of Spinoza and Leibniz than is suggested by their attacks on ' absolute' Cartesian freedom.

It is clear from Spinoza's exposition of Descartes that he was well aware of these important passages in the Fourth Meditation.[40] How then was he able, at the end of the day, to characterize the Cartesian position on freedom as an absolutist one? Part of the reason for this may perhaps be found in the language Descartes uses, not just in the passages from the *Principles* already mentioned, but also elsewhere in the Fourth Meditation, to describe human liberty. In Meditation Four great stress is laid on the 'perfection' of the will; and Descartes asserts that 'my freedom of choice is so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp; so much so that it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear the image and likeness of God.'[41] This talk of a perfect will that is comparable to that of God himself might well suggest that Descartes is committed to an independent contra-causal conception of the will. But aside from the general impression left by Descartes's honorific language regarding the will, there is a more specific reason which may have led Spinoza to construe Cartesian freedom in absolutist terms, namely, what Descartes has to say about 'freedom of indifference.' The connotations of this phrase, as traditionally used, were highly positive: what the partisans of freedom of indifference believed in was an autonomous and sovereign power of the will — its unrestricted and total freedom. It is in this sense that God is said, in the *Conversation with Burman*, to be acting with 'maximum indifference.'[42]

Now Descartes does speak, in the Fourth Meditation, of the ' indifference' of the will. But scrutiny of the text reveals that what he means by this should be sharply distinguished from the autonomous sovereign power of the will such as God enjoys. The indifference referred to in the Fourth Meditation is described as evidence of a ' defect in knowledge' or a ' kind of negation' (*defectus in cognitione sive negatio quaedam*): 'The indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than the other is the lowest grade of freedom; it is evidence not of any perfection of freedom but rather of a defect in knowledge.'[43] The situation Descartes has in mind here is one where the reasons for and against a certain proposition (or course of action) are equally balanced. In such cases Descartes does imply that we can, by exercising our will, select one alternative rather than the other. But he goes on to contrast such 'low-grade' freedom with true liberty — the ' liberty of enlightenment' discussed above. True freedom, *liberté éclairée,* is in *inverse proportion* to freedom of indifference: *tanto magis sponte et libere credidi quanto minus fui indifferens*.[44] The point about situations of evenly balanced evidence, Descartes seems to want to say, is that although I can theoretically say to myself of a given proposition 'Yes, it's true' or 'No, it isn't,' such a move will be wholly arbitrary and empty.[45] For all I know the judgment may be quite

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[40] G I 174 lines 20-25: C 258.
[41] AT VII 57*:* CSM II 40*.*
[42] AT V166*:* Cottingham (ed.), *Conversation with Burman,* p. 33.
[43] AT VII 58: CSM II 40.
[44] AT VII 59 line 3: CSM 2:40 (quotation abridged*).*
[45] One may go further here and ask whether Descartes has not already gone too far in allowing that such behaviour (exercising the will in conditions of total equilibrium) is even feasible. Could one really judge in such cases? Or would the 'Yes, it's true' be no more than a mere *flatus vocis*, an empty gesture or grunt. Compare Curley's illuminating discussion of whether one could assent to the proposition 'It rained three hours ago on Jupiter''(Curley, 'Descartes, Spinoza, and the Ethics of Belief', p. 178).

wrong; but even if it happens to be true, this will be a pure accident (*casu incidam in veritatem*) and I will still be at fault (*non culpa carebo*).[46] The fact that we can be in such a situation at all flows, according to Descartes, from a 'privation' in our nature (AT VII 60-1). In short, though Descartes does acknowledge a two-way power of choice in conditions of equilibrium, he is very far from extolling it as the model of true human liberty.

Spinoza, both in the *Cogitationes Metaphysicae* and later in the *Ethics*, discusses this case of ' indifference' which he takes (mistakenly, as I hope it will now be emerging) to hold pride of place in Descartes's account of human freedom. The example he employs is the celebrated case of Buridan's ass, who is equally hungry and thirsty and equidistant from hay and water.[47] In the *Cogitationes Metaphysicae*, the imaginary Cartesian argues that a man in such a situation would clearly not perish from hunger and thirst; and hence (it is implied) man must have a contra-causal power of the will: he can just decide to go for either the food or the drink.[48] In the *Ethics*, we find Spinoza's own response to this supposed major Cartesian defence of contra-causal freedom: biting the bullet, Spinoza insists that the Buridanian man would indeed perish of hunger and thirst. The reasoning appears to be this: if the premise is that there is absolutely nothing impinging on the man's perception but the feelings of hunger and thirst and the equally distant food and drink, then on this assumption there will indeed be no decision. But Spinoza goes on: 'If you ask me whether such a man should be thought an ass rather than a man, I do not know.'[49] The point, I take it, is that a being whose perceptions were limited strictly to these immediate stimuli *and nothing else* would not be anything recognizable as a human being in the sense of a normal rational agent.

Modern scientific investigation of how primitive creatures like ants and wasps behave in response to environmental stimuli suggests that it might be possible to devise an experiment in which there would indeed be a kind of indefinite paralysis or suspension of action in an insect confronted with equal and opposite stimuli. But this hardly answers the question of what would occur in the more complex human case. For it does seem possible to imagine a situation where a given individual is ignorant of the considerations which would settle which of two alternatives X and Y is superior, and who, because of that ignorance, finds the arguments in favour of X and of Y to be evenly balanced. In this type of case it appears that Spinoza would deny the Cartesian thesis that when reasons appear evenly balanced we can, be mere exercise of will, effect a decision. Spinoza's comments do seem to be a good argument against the existence of the kind of pure libertarian free will conceived of by some philosophers (e.g., some existentialists). In such a situation of equilibrium, a pure exercise of will, *ex nihilo*, would not seem to be a rational decision at all. Yet once again, if this is supposed to constitute a decisive critique of the Cartesian account of free action, it seems to miss the target. For although Descartes does allow that we have the power to exercise the will in cases of indifference, he is, as we have seen, very far from holding up such a defective and arbitrary decision, taken in the absence of clearly perceived reasons on one side or the other, as a paradigm of human freedom. True freedom, for Descartes, is to be achieved first by rational reflection which leads to the complete suspension of judgment, and then by the search for a perception which is so clear and distinct that the

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[46] AT VII 60. line 3: CSM II 41..

[47] According to Curley, the historical author of the example is not in fact Jean Buridan(C487).

[48] G I 277: C 343.

[49] G II 135: C 490..

two proposed alternatives cease, and cease dramatically, to be equally attractive: the equilibrium is shattered and one of the two alternatives simply compels our assent.

In short, Descartes did not make the notion of a two-way contra-causal power central to his account of freedom (except in the case of God);[50] and the kind of human liberty he extolls is certainly not illustrated by the Buridanian type of case where choice is undetermined by reasons. In Descartes' view, the type of liberty we should aim for is not ' liberté Buridanienne' but liberté élairée; the truly free agent is one for whom the 'determination of the will' is always linked to the 'prior perception of the intellect'.[51] The conclusion Spinoza reaches about the will, though expressed in rather different terms, are by no means dissimilar from this.

5. Concluding note on the passions

A discussion of the Spinozan account of the passions and its relation to the work of Descartes would require a separate (and lengthy) paper in its own right. All I shall do in this brief final section is to call attention to how Spinoza's remarks on the passions illustrate his general tendency to see himself as breaking with the Cartesian account of freedom when in fact he is quite close to it.

In the Preface to *Ethics* Part V, Spinoza refers disparagingly to the Stoic view that we have 'absolute dominion' over the passions — that they 'depend entirely on our will and that we can control them absolutely.'[52] He then goes on to criticize Descartes for holding that 'there is no soul so weak that it cannot — when it is well directed — acquire an absolute power over its passions.'[53] To some commentators on this passage Spinoza's condemnation of Descartes seems entirely justified. Thus Delahunty writes: 'The Stoic-Cartesian view that we have, or can have, absolute control over our passions seemed to Spinoza quite laughably naive; and he was right.'[54] That the ' absolute control' view/s laughably naive certainly seems correct, as any air passenger who has experienced that exquisite modern form of torture known as an emergency landing will testify. As the plane circles around and around jettisoning its fuel, and the fire engines and ambulances form up below, one may exhort oneself to 'calm down', but the abject fear and its physiological accompaniments (rapid pulse, sweating) persist in a way which appears wholly resistant to the commands of the will. But, once again, it is far from clear that Spinoza is right in naming Descartes as the representative of the absolutist view he wishes to combat.

In the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes addresses the topic which was later to form the subject of Spinoza' s *Ethics,* Parts IV and V — the origin of the passions and the way to come to terms with them. But although Descartes does speak of 'absolute' mastery in the passage from article 5 which Spinoza quotes in the *Ethics*, he is very far from supposing that the will exercises a direct and immediate control over the passions. This is made explicit in *Passions* Part I article 45: 'our passions cannot be directly aroused or suppressed by the action of our will … For example, in order to arouse boldness and suppress fear in ourselves, it is not sufficient to have the volition to do so.'

In the following article Descartes offers an explanation for our lack of direct voluntary control over the passions. The passions are 'caused, maintained and strengthened' by physiological events `— disturbances in the heart, blood and animal

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[50] For God's absolute liberty, see Descartes's letter to Mersenne of 15 April 1630 (AT I:137).
[51] AT VII 60: CSM II 45.
[52] G II 277: C 595.
[53] G II 279: C 595. Spinoza is here quoting the title of article 50 of *The Passions of the Soul.*
[54] Delahunty, Spinoza, p. 190.

spirits; and physiological events of this sort are not under the direct control of the will (*Passions* Part I, art. 46). Descartes points out, however, that it is possible by careful training, to set up habitual associations between certain thoughts and certain movements in the pineal gland, which will in turn generate certain movements of the animal spirits; and once these networks are laid down, we will possess an indirect control over our passions.

Spinoza shows by what he says in the preface to *Ethics* Part V that he was well aware of these passages. But his main strategy in attacking Descartes is to pour scorn on the dualistic theory of psycho-physical interaction to which his predecessor was committed. 'I should very much like to know,' observes Spinoza acidly, 'how many degrees of motion the mind can give to that pineal gland and how great a force is required to hold it in suspense.'[55] The scenario of volitions pushing against the pineal gland from one side while animal spirits push against it from another does indeed seem a prime example of the 'ghost in the machine' at its most implausible; and I would certainly not want to defend everything Descartes says either about volitions or psycho-physical interactions in general. But in the particular case of the control of the passions, Spinoza seems to have underestimated the subtlety of Descartes' position. The point is not that the animal spirits generating fear are bubbling up on one side, and the volition to be brave is exerting pressure on the other side. As we have already seen, it is no use, according to Descartes, to just directly 'will' that the passion of fear should abate. I cannot directly will that the agitation of the animal spirits should cease (in modern terms, I cannot directly will that my pulse should slow or that my adrenalin levels should go down). What I *can* do, according to Descartes, is to set up a habitual response whereby some mental performance which *is* under my control will trigger some automatic reduction in the agitation of the spirits (adrenalin levels, or whatever).

An interesting illustration Descartes offers of the kind of point he is making is the way in which the decision to pronounce a word will automatically produce certain muscle contractions in the tongue which it would have been difficult or impossible to produce directly by the command of the will. Again, 'dilate your pupils' is a command we cannot obey directly; but we can manage to comply indirectly by deciding to look at a distant object (*Passions* Part I, art. 47; Descartes goes on to make a comparison with the way in which animals are trained: *Passions* Part I, art. 50).[56] Thus, returning for a moment to the plight of our modern hapless aircraft passenger, the Cartesian technique would not be to just try and will the fear to subside; rather one should have trained oneself in such a way that some voluntary act (perhaps the repeating of a mantra) will automatically have the desired effect. Notice that the inherent plausibility of this account is not affected by the question of whether the mind/body dualism which Spinoza so bitterly criticizes is tenable. For whatever the status of volitions (i.e., whether they are wholly incorporeal events, or whether they are physiological events 'conceived of under the attribute of thought'), it undoubtedly remains true that one cannot directly will passions such as fear to subside, yet one can decide to train oneself in such a way that a passion subsides or is reduced automatically by the performance of certain actions that are within voluntary control.

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[55] G II 180: C 569.

[56] Remarkably, Spinoza expressly notices these examples at *Ethics.* Part V, Preface; but his remarks at G II 279 lines 10-15 (C 596) suggest that he takes Descartes to be saying that a simple act of will suffices to 'join to any volition any motion of the gland (and consequently any motion of the spirits)'. Yet to leave the matter there does not do sufficient justice to what Descartes says about the role of careful training and habit.

This is not the place to discuss Spinoza's own account of the passions and how to control them (the general description and classification of the passions owes much to Descartes, though the recipe for control relies not on the type of technique envisaged by Descartes but rather on the role of the understanding in achieving a complete perception of what is inadequately or confusedly grasped by one who is passively in the grip of his passions).[57] The main point of this brief excursion into Descartes' theory of the passions has been to reinforce our earlier claim that Spinoza tended to exaggerate the kind of freedom which Descartes postulated. In the case of the passions, as in the case of the intellect, Descartes does not, *pace* Spinoza, make the notion of an absolute, contra-causal power central to his account of what it is to be free. 'The chief use of our wisdom,' wrote Descartes at the end of the *Passions de l' âme*, 'lies in its teaching us to be masters of our passions,' a sentiment with which Spinoza would surely have concurred. But such mastery was not for Descartes, any more than for Spinoza, a matter of standing wholly outside the world of natural causes, still less of simply deciding to override them by an arbitrary exercise of will. If there is a general lesson to be learned from this paper it is that care is needed in evaluating Spinoza' s claims to be departing from Cartesian orthodoxy. The methods and modes of argument of the two philosophers are radically different. But their philosophical positions, despite initial appearances, are often surprisingly close.

[57] *See Ethics* Part V, Prop. 4, and, for a critical discussion of Spinoza's strategy, Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's* Ethics, p. 332.