Rico Vitz

Reforming the Art of Living

Nature, Virtue, and Religion in Descartes's Epistemology

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Acknowledgments

As an undergraduate student, one of my friends, Dan Speak, encouraged me to pursue graduate studies in philosophy. Although I respected Dan and trusted his counsel, I was skeptical. "Why? What would I study?" I asked. He suggested that I concentrate on early modern philosophy since it focused on topics that I found interesting—e.g., philosophical issues related to science and to religion—and it seemed to be an area of philosophy for which I had some aptitude. My response to Dan's suggestion was anything but skeptical. It was an immediate and emphatic rejection of the idea. In fact, I think my exact words were, "No way! I hate that stuff." Roughly two decades later, my attitude has changed rather dramatically. I have come to find the period fascinating, especially the works of Descartes and of Hume. Although I neither can nor will claim to be a philosophical "disciple" of either philosopher, I have found that there is (still!) much to learn both from a careful reading of their texts and from a charitably critical reflection on their ideas.

My journey from being an undergraduate student who had little interest in the early modern period to being the author of a book on Descartes was inspired, encouraged, and strengthened by a number or people, for whom I am grateful. I would like to thank a few of them, here, all-too-briefly. Eiichi Shimomissee was an invaluable and patient teacher when I was undergraduate student at California State University, Dominguez Hills. In retrospect, his encouragement to attend graduate school and to write a dissertation on Descartes—because reading Descartes's collected works forces one to think clearly—was both wise and exceptionally helpful. Don Garrett has been an excellent mentor since I first met him at the University of Utah. It was in his seminar on Hume and during an independent study with him on Spinoza that I began not only to appreciate the richness of the modern period, but to learn how to do research in the history of philosophy. The Departments of Philosophy at the University of Utah and the University of California, Riverside, introduced me to the community of scholars who work in the history of philosophy. Various members of the Hume Society and the Cartesian Circle, at the University of California, Irvine, confirmed and strengthened my initial impressions of this community as one consisting not only of excellent scholars but, more importantly, of generous and helpful people. Among these, a few stand

Contents

Abbreviations

AT   Rene Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 12 vols. (Paris: Libraire Philosophique J. Vrin, 1964–7). References are to volume and page number.

CSM   Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, vols.1 and 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984–5). References are to volume and page number.

CSMK   Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991). References are to page number.

EHU   David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999). References are to section and paragraph.

EPM   David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998). References are to section and paragraph.

Essay   John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1975). References are to book, chapter, and section.

HR   Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Haldane and G. T. R. Ross, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972). References are to volume and page number.

SBN   References to 'SBN' will follow the standard practice, as follows:

- After a parenthetical reference to 'T', 'SBN' will refer to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978). References are to page number.

- After a parenthetical reference to 'EHU', 'SBN' will refer to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975). References are to page number.
- After a parenthetical reference to 'EPM', 'SBN' will refer to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975). References are to page number.

ST   Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*. References are to part, question, and article.

T   David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001). References are to book, part, section, and paragraph.

Chapter 1
Introduction

Descartes's concern with the proper method of belief formation is evident in the titles of his works—e.g., *The Search after Truth*, *The Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, and *The Discourse on Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*. It is most apparent, however, in his famous discussions, both in the *Meditations* and in the *Principles*, of one particularly noteworthy source of our doxastic errors—namely, the misuse of one's will (CSM 2.37-43; AT 7.52-62; see also CSM 1.204; AT 8A.17-21). What is not widely recognized, let alone appreciated and understood, is the relationship between his concern with belief formation and his concern with virtue. In fact, few seem to realize that Descartes regards doxastic errors as *moral* errors (CSMK 233; AT 4.115) and as *sins* (see, e.g., CSM 1.55; AT 10.436) both because such errors are intrinsically vicious and because they entail notably deleterious social consequences.

One of the aims of this book is to elucidate the nature of Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation and, thereby, to rectify this rather common oversight. The other is to illuminate and to analyze one particularly significant pragmatic and social consequence of his account. To explain this second aim, more clearly, let me offer a few preliminary clarifications.

The purpose of Descartes's philosophical program is exceptionally grand, as not only the titles of his works but also his own comments suggest. In the preface to the French edition of the *Principles*, for instance, he notes that philosophy is the study of wisdom, "and by 'wisdom' is meant *not only prudence in our everyday affairs but also a perfect knowledge of all things that mankind is capable of knowing, both for the conduct of life and for the preservation of health and the discovery of all manner of skills*" (CSM 1.179; AT 9B.2, emphasis mine). In essence, he understands philosophy as a comprehensive speculative and practical science (see CSM 1.120, 121-2; AT 6.19, 21-2). He describes the relationship of its parts as analogous to the relationships among the parts of a tree, claiming,

> The first part of philosophy is metaphysics, which contains the principles of knowledge, including the explanation of the principal attributes of God, the non-material nature of our souls and all the clear and distinct notions which are in us. The second part is physics,

where, after discovering the true principles of material things, we examine the general composition of the entire universe and then, in particular, the nature of this earth and all the bodies which are most commonly found upon it, such as air, water, fire, magnetic ore and other minerals. Next we need to examine individually the nature of plants, of animals and, above all, of man, so that we may be capable later on of discovering the other sciences which are beneficial to man. Thus the whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine,[1] mechanics and morals. By 'morals' I understand the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom. (CSM 1.186; AT 9B.14; see also CSMK 53, 58; AT 1.349, 370)

The "fruits" of this tree are things like intellectual virtue, a peaceful disposition that helps promote "gentleness and harmony," and satisfaction in making new discoveries in the sciences (CSM 1.188; AT 9B.17-8).

In fact, as Descartes sees it, "[T]he study of philosophy is more necessary for the regulation of our morals and our conduct in this life than is the use of our eyes to guide our steps" (CSM 1.180; AT 9B.3-4). Thus, on his account, the aim of philosophy is neither limited to nor principally focused on the discovery of speculative, or theoretical, truths. Rather, its purpose includes helping people to lead better lives (see, e.g., CSM 1.117, 125; AT 6.13-4, 28). Hence, he understands philosophy as a science that offers significant practical benefits to each individual who studies it. He does not, however, regard it as a science that merely benefits the individual. In fact, he claims, "[A] nation's civilization and refinement depends on the superiority of the philosophy which is practised there. Hence the greatest good that a state can enjoy is to possess true philosophers" (CSM 1.180; AT 9B.3). Thus, he contends that the practical and social benefits of philosophy are remarkably grand both for the individuals who study it and for the societies that cultivate it, which is why he claims that philosophy is the "supreme good" of human life—considered, at least, "by natural reason without the light of faith" (CSM 1.180-1; AT 9B.4; see also CSM 1.183; AT 9B.9).[2] Moreover, as Descartes sees it, he has developed philosophical system and, more specifically, a method of belief formation that will help both people and, ultimately, nations attain the supreme goods of human life.[3] Recognizing that he has a duty to do everything in his power "to secure the general welfare of mankind," he concludes that he would be "sinning gravely" if he were to fail to promote his method of virtuous belief formation (CSM 1.142; AT 6.61-2).

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[1] In a commitment to live in accordance with his philosophical position, Descartes suggests that being satisfied with his work in metaphysics and in physics, his next project would be to determine rules for medicine (CSM 1.151; AT 6.78).

[2] Keeping in mind Descartes's emphasis on propositions known "by natural reason without the light of faith" will be particularly important for an adequate understanding of Descartes's account of virtuous judgment—see Chap. 5, Sect. 5.2.

[3] On Descartes's account, society would receive these supreme goods from philosophy if there were a division of labor with a number of people united in offering help in the project of the universal science (CSM 1.148; AT 6.72-3).

Having provided a description of the social implications of Descartes's program, I am in position to state, more specifically, the goals of this text. The purpose of this book is twofold. One of its goals, as stated above, is to elucidate the nature of Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation. The other is (i) to illuminate the significance of Descartes's philosophical program for the understanding and practice of religion and (ii) to develop a kind of Leibnizian critique of the program in light of these consequences. According to the critique, Descartes's project is "dangerous," insofar as it is subversive of traditional Christianity—and, by implication, of those traditional forms of religion with similar philosophical commitments—both in theory and in practice.

To provide a better idea of how I intend to accomplish the goals of this book, let me offer a brief overview of the chapters that follow. In Chap. 2, I examine a contemporary debate concerning a central aspect of the *Meditations*. The debate is about the proper way to respond to the question "Who is the Cartesian meditator?" Descartes's commentators have offered a variety of answers, including (i) a philosophically naïve person of common sense, (ii) a skeptic, (iii) a Scholastic, and (iv) an amalgam of such personas. I argue that each of these responses is mistaken and that the proper response is not to attempt to *answer* the question but to *reject* it because the question falsely implies that the meditator is a fictional character. I contend that this kind of debate tends to misrepresent the significance of Descartes's selection of a specific literary genre—namely, meditations—for his seminal work. The selection of this particular literary genre is significant for Descartes, I suggest, because he aims to influence not merely *what* his readers come to believe but also *how* they come to believe.

In Chap. 3, I accomplish two objectives. First, I clarify Descartes's account of the nature of belief by examining carefully the Latin and French terms he uses for— what translators render as—"affirming," "judging," "assenting," and so forth. Moreover, I explain Descartes's distinction between merely accepting propositions as practical rules for ordinary affairs, judging propositions as scientific truths, and acquiring dispositional, or habitual, beliefs. Second, I explain how Descartes's conception of the nature of belief shapes his account of virtuous belief formation. More specifically, I show how Descartes's account of belief results in a framework for virtuous belief formation that has three aspects: an account of *virtuous enquiry*, an account of *virtuous judgment*, and an account of *virtuous belief fixation*. I then clarify Descartes's distinction between two contexts of enquiry—enquiries concerning foundational matters and enquiries concerning ordinary affairs—and explain how he uses it to develop different norms governing (i) the propositions people *believe* concerning the foundational sciences, which require *absolute certainty*, and (ii) the propositions people *accept* for pragmatic purposes in ordinary life, which require nothing more than *moral certainty*. I refer to this structure for developing beliefs as "the Cartesian framework for virtuous belief formation."

Having clarified Descartes's account of belief in Chap. 3, I focus his account of virtue in Chap. 4. I explain it in two steps. First, I argue that Descartes conceives of morality as an eclectic cosmopolitan art of natural beatitude, and I explain why his account of morality is not a science and is only problematically regarded as Stoic.

Second, I show how Descartes intends this art to be applied, explaining how he tries to advance beyond the theories of the ancient moralists by developing both an adequate account of virtue and an accurate account of the techniques that one can employ to acquire virtue. In so doing, I explain how Descartes attempts to provide his readers with the principal truths necessary to facilitate their development from having merely the passion of generosity to possessing the virtue of wisdom, in its highest degree and, consequently, to enjoying natural beatitude (see CSMK 258; AT 4.267). Chief among these truths are the techniques, or "remedies," for (i) controlling one's attention, by which a person can inhibit the influence of his or her passions, and (ii) regulating one's assent, by which a person can not only inhibit the influence of his or her passions but also (iii) eradicate or fix his or her habitual beliefs. These techniques, which are essential to the proper application of Descartes's account of morality, map on nicely to the Cartesian framework for virtuous belief formation, described in Chap. 2. One begins, in the process of *enquiry*, by attending to the relevant ideas. One continues, in the process of *judgment*, to assent to true ideas. One concludes, in the process of *belief fixation*, by developing habitual beliefs. That is, at least, the basic strategy. There is, however, much more to the process, as I go on to show.

In Chap. 5, I elucidate each of the three aspects of Descartes's systematic account of virtuous belief formation. First, I explain the essential elements of Descartes's account of virtuous enquiry—namely, its *structure*, its *goal*, and its *scope*. In so doing, I explain Descartes's intention to develop a practical philosophy that is grounded in scientific truths. Second, I describe the essential elements of Descartes's account of virtuous judgment. In particular, I clarify norms governing (i) *accepting* a proposition concerning *ordinary* matters; (ii) *judging* a proposition concerning *theological* matters, revealed by the *light of grace*; and (iii) *judging* a proposition concerning *scientific* matters, illumined by the *light of nature*. I do so by beginning to develop a more complete picture of Descartes's program for belief formation, as a remedy to the overly narrow and, thereby, misleading focus on the rule for withholding assent, which the meditator embraces at the end of the Fourth Meditation. Third, I continue to develop this more complete picture by showing that Descartes is concerned not merely with the way in which people conduct their enquiries and form their judgments but also with the method by which they fix their beliefs. More specifically, I explain Descartes's account of some of the principal virtues of belief fixation and his contention that those who fix their beliefs virtuously ought to commit themselves to a program by which their judgments become fixed.

In Chap. 6, I address a major challenge to Descartes's account of belief formation. The challenge stems from his claims (i) that an act of judgment is constituted by an act of the intellect and an act of the will (CSM 1.204; AT 8A.19; see also CSM 1.207; AT 8A.21), (ii) that people "can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend upon" an exercise of free will (CSM 1.384; AT 11.445-6), and (iii) that failure to judge properly is a moral failure (see CSMK 233; AT 4.115). The essence of the challenge is this: Descartes's account of virtuous judgment requires a commitment to doxastic voluntarism—that is, the view that people have

voluntary control over their beliefs—but doxastic voluntarism is clearly false. Hence, given his views on the requirements for praise or blame, people cannot be morally responsible for their judgments. Therefore, his account of virtuous judgment is false.

In response, I clarify the kind of voluntary control that Descartes claims people have over their judgments and argue that his account of virtuous judgment can meet this type of challenge. In short, I show that the textual evidence suggests that Descartes is committed to a negative form of direct doxastic voluntarism (DDV), according to which people have the ability to *suspend*, or to *withhold*, *judgment* directly by an act of will. I then note that participants in the doxastic voluntarism debate (e.g., Williams 1970; Alston 1989; Curley 1975; Pojman 1999) offer two types of arguments against DDV, neither of which addresses his position, much less shows that it is false. Thus, I conclude, Descartes's critics may be able to develop arguments showing that his account of virtuous judgment is false. In the absence of such arguments, however, not only does his account of virtuous judgment *not* fall prey to the challenge that it requires a commitment to a false version of *DDV*, it is worthy of serious consideration.

In Chap. 7, I illuminate one particularly significant aspect of the pragmatic and social nature of Descartes's philosophical program. Specifically, I begin to explain the significance of Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation for religion.[4] My explanation proceeds in two stages. First, I review some of the standard objections against his program and suggest that even if these objections show that his project fails in its aim to establish a new and lasting foundation in the sciences, they alone do not demonstrate that his philosophical program—and, more specifically, his account of virtuous belief formation—has no enduring social significance. Second, I argue that his account of virtuous belief formation is, in fact, significant not in helping Descartes achieve his scientific aspirations but in helping put him in position to attempt to reform not merely Christianity, in particular, but religion, in general. To establish this point, I explain the supernatural significance of Descartes's account of morality and identify what Leibniz calls Descartes's "dangerous doctrines." I then show that even if Descartes is not an atheist, as some of his critics suggest, he does develop an account of virtuous belief formation that aims to provide a reformed and—in his estimation, at least— improved conception of Christianity that would be appealing to the educated citizens of modern, Western Europe.

In Chap. 8, I elucidate some of the fundamental ways in which Descartes's philosophical program is antithetical to the Christian religion in the kind of way that Leibniz suggests, *even if* Descartes's disavowal of atheism is sincere. More

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[4] By "religion," here and elsewhere, I have in mind the great monotheistic religions that have their roots in the Near East. These are, obviously, not the only religions worthy of study. They are, however, the ones that are most salient for my particular examination in this book of Descartes's philosophical project—hence, the narrower scope of the term.

specifically, I explain how Descartes's conception of ethics is subversive of traditional Christianity.

Since there are a number of religious groups that claim the name "Christian," let me both clarify what I mean by "traditional Christianity" and explain my reasons for focusing on this particular religious tradition. As I am using the phrase, "traditional Christianity" refers to the religious tradition that (i) "uses first millennium theological texts as contemporary guides for understanding Christian morality"; (ii) "lives . . . in the texts, thoughts, and practices out of which all Christianity developed"; and (iii) "does not simply know and use" these ancient texts but is "immersed in the life-world that sustains them," living "fully in the mind" in which the authors of these texts wrote, fully embracing "their theological world-view" (Engelhardt 2000, 159–60).

The reasons that I am using the phrase in this way are both theological and philosophical.[5] The theological reason is that the first-millennium Christianity of the Greek-speaking part of the ancient Near East is the "mother tradition" that a number of religious groups claim as their own. The list of such groups includes, e.g., Orthodox Christians, from Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople; Catholics, from Rome; Anglicans, from Canterbury; as well as both Protestants in the Lutheran tradition, from Wittenberg, and Protestants in the Reformed tradition, from Geneva. Each of these religious groups attempts to justify its teachings and way of life, at least in part, by arguing for the continuity of its faith and practices with the essential faith and practices of this "mother tradition."

The philosophical reasons are twofold. First, regardless of its authoritative theological status, the traditional Christianity that is the mother tradition of Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Protestants is—as I will argue in some detail in Chap. 8—philosophically significant. Its significance lies in certain distinctive features of ancient, Near Eastern metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics that seem to have been lost not only to Descartes and to many "Western Christians" (see Bradshaw 2004, 153–277) but also to many within the Western philosophical tradition. Second, aside from its intrinsic philosophical value, an examination of Descartes's philosophical project in light of ancient, Near Eastern religious philosophy, as I will offer in this text, helps to enrich the diversity of contemporary philosophical thought. Moreover, as many have rightly noted, enriching the diversity of philosophical thought by considering marginalized or neglected voices within a community of discourse creates new opportunities for growth in intellectual virtue.

With these clarifications in mind, let me restate my objectives in Chap. 8 in a bit more detail. In short, I develop a kind of Leibnizian critique, from a traditional Christian perspective, of the conception of morality on which Descartes bases his account of virtuous belief formation. The reasons for adopting this perspective, as I noted above, are both theological and philosophical. Given my goals in this book, I

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[5] I would like the thank an anonymous referee both (i) for pressing me to clarify my reasons for adopting this perspective and (ii) for offering suggestions about how I might do so.

focus principally on the first philosophical reason. I begin by elucidating some fundamental *theoretical* differences and some of the key *practical* differences between Descartes's morality and traditional Christianity. I then argue that by developing a conception of morality that neglects key aspects of ancient, Near Eastern metaphysics and epistemology, Descartes ends up developing a conception of morality that is not complementary but is, in fact, antithetical to traditional Christianity. Consequently, I suggest, one important—and, possibly, unintended—consequence of Descartes's philosophical program is that it helps to pave the way for subsequent scholars not merely to attempt to *reform* traditional Christianity but to make bolder attempts to *subvert* both it and other similarly traditional religions.

I wrap things up in Chap. 9 by summarizing my arguments and highlighting the significance of Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation. In short, my conclusion is as follows. Based on his intricate conceptions both of belief and of morality, Descartes develops a comprehensive account of virtuous belief formation. This account ultimately fails to deliver on its promise of providing a new and lasting foundation for the sciences. Thus, its enduring significance is not where Descartes most hopes it will be nor is it in the place that most of his commentators focus their scholarly efforts. Rather, it is in helping to legitimize and to advance a movement in which philosophers strive to revolutionize and, ultimately, to naturalize not only Christianity but religious belief, in general.

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Chapter 2
Cartesian Meditation and the Pursuit of Virtue

As I noted in the Introduction, the focus of my project is one frequently neglected aspect of Descartes's philosophical program. Consequently, I will not be focusing my analysis exclusively on any single text. Given the significance of the *Meditations*, however, and the role it plays among Descartes's commentators in shaping people's perception of his program, let me begin there. In this chapter, I will analyze a contemporary debate concerning a central aspect of Descartes's most widely known work. The debate concerns the proper way to respond to the question "Who is the Cartesian meditator?" The answers offered by Descartes's commentators have included a philosophically naïve person of common sense, a skeptic, a Scholastic, and an amalgam of such personas (see, e.g., Broughton 2002; Carriero 1997; Frankfurt 1970; as well as Margaret Dauler Wilson 1978, especially pp. 4–5). I will argue that each of these answers is misguided and that the proper response is not to attempt to *answer* the question. Rather, I will contend, the proper response is to *reject* the question because it falsely implies that the meditator is a fictional character and that reading the *Meditations* as a work of fiction obscures Descartes's concern with the pursuit of virtue, in general, and with the virtues of belief formation, in particular.

2.1 Who Is the Cartesian Meditator? Four Proposed Answers

2.1.1 A Philosophically Naïve Person of Common Sense

One possible answer to the question "who is the Cartesian meditator?"—proposed, e.g., by Frankfurt—is that Cartesian meditator is, at least at the beginning of the *Meditations*, a philosophically naïve person of common sense. On this account, the meditator begins with the naïve assumption that his or her most assured beliefs are derived from the senses. The First Meditation is designed to show the difficulties

that result from this naïve assumption and to prepare the reader to accept the true science that will follow in the subsequent meditations (see Frankfurt 1970, 15ff, 34ff).

Such an interpretation seems plausible, at least at first glance. Compare this reading with, for instance, the skeptical project of Sextus, or Hume, or a twentieth century sense-datum theorist. The skeptical challenge begins by calling attention to the fact that the "vulgar" person, or the "man on the street," naïvely believes that he or she has sensory experiences of material objects. With a little philosophical tutoring, however, the commoner can be disabused of these uncritical opinions, or so we are told, once he or she is made aware that the evidence for them is compatible with some scenario in which they are false—for instance, the commoner might have an experience as if seeing a chair even if he or she were merely hallucinating, or dreaming, or under the influence of a nefarious neurosurgeon, and so forth. Perhaps the Cartesian meditator is simply engaged in a process of identifying the principles on which he or she uncritically bases his or her opinions, recognizing that such principles may be false, and coming to understand foundational principles that cannot be doubted.

Despite the initial appeal of identifying the meditator as a person of common sense, it might seem unlikely in light of Descartes's stated aim in the "Preface to the Reader." He says, "I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are *able and willing* to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions. *Such readers, as I well know, are few and far between*" (CSM 2.8; AT 7.9, emphasis mine). Moreover, he claims not to have published the work in French "to be read by all and sundry," lest "weaker intellects might believe that they ought to set out" on the path of the *Meditations* (CSM 2.7; AT 7.7). Hence, the meditator would have to be a person who could read Latin and follow Descartes's philosophical reasoning. Thus, Descartes seems to have tried to *limit* his audience in such a way that the meditator is unlikely to be one of the vulgar—that is, a seventeenth-century commoner. Hence, the identification of the meditator as a commoner might seem implausible.

How implausible is it, though? Could one not grant that the meditator is not a seventeenth-century commoner and still claim that the meditator is a philosophically naïve person of common sense? That is, could not the Cartesian meditator be any literate and moderately intelligent person who is not philosophically sophisticated? Granted, the meditator has to be able and willing to meditate, but he or she may still be one who is "just beginning to philosophize" (see Frankfurt 1970, 32; CSMK 332; AT 5.146). Such a person need not be philosophically sophisticated. He or she would only need to be capable, both intellectually and volitionally, of engaging in skeptical reflection. The existence of such intelligent and willing but philosophically naïve people has been presupposed by philosophers from Plato[1] to Ayer and Stroud (see, e.g., Ayer 1964; Stroud 1984, 39). This first proposed reading seems to rely on the plausible assumption that Descartes has created a similar

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[1] For example, the young slave in the *Meno*.

persona for the meditator. Hence, the fact that Descartes tried to limit his audience does not rule out the possibility that the meditator could be a philosophically naïve person of common sense.

There might seem to be another problem, however, with identifying the meditator as a person of common sense. One could grant that a seventeenth-century person of moderate intelligence, who is just beginning to philosophize and who is forced to confront the continuing effects of the reformation on religion and theology, the emerging revolutions in science, and the newly rediscovered threat of Pyrrhonian skepticism, might have "a general sense of the doubtfulness of his beliefs, and a general motivation for demolishing them" (Broughton 2002, 28). Nevertheless, one could still deny that this appeal to the general culture of the time explains why a person of common sense would say, "I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them," as the meditator does at the beginning of the First Meditation (CSM 2.12; AT 7.17). Specifically, one might wonder why a person of common sense would refer to a number of basic claims he accepted *in his childhood*, which he now knows to be *false* (Broughton 2002, 28).

The doubts expressed at the beginning of the First Meditation might raise questions for us concerning further details about the meditator's personality. Nevertheless, doubts about the details of the meditator's personality do not entail that he or she could not be a philosophically naïve person of common sense. Thus, we can rightly accept at least the weak claim that the identification of the meditator as a willing and moderately intelligent, if philosophically naïve, person of common sense would be *compatible with* the *Meditations* if it were a work of fiction.

2.1.2   A Skeptic

A second possible answer to the question "who is the Cartesian meditator?" is that Cartesian meditator is a skeptic. On a reading of this sort, Descartes uses the character of the meditator to refute skepticism, as a contemporary epistemologist might.

There seem, however, to be at least three compelling problems with such a reading.[2] First, the meditator refuses to consider a perfectly good skeptical scenario—namely, the possibility that he or she may be insane. Instead, the meditator says dismissively, "I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from [madmen] as a model for myself" (CSM 2.13; AT 7.19). If, however, Descartes were trying to refute the skeptic, then the meditator would have to rule out the possibility that he or she was, in fact, insane. Similarly, the meditator suggests that the brains of madmen, unlike his or her own, are damaged; but it is not explained

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[2] Carriero (1997, 3–5) identifies the following line of objections.

how the meditator can make this claim in a way that does not involve question-begging (see Carriero 1997, 3–4). Second, the meditator seems unaware of another legitimate skeptical concern, to which Hobbes appeals in the Third Set of Objections. Hobbes says,

> Consider someone who dreams that he is in doubt as to whether he is dreaming or not. My question is whether such a man could not dream that his dream fits in with his ideas of a long series of past events. If this is possible, then what appear to the dreamer to be actions belonging to his past life could be judged to be true occurrences, just as if he were awake. (CSM 2.137; AT 7.195)

Descartes responds by claiming that when the dreamer wakes up, he or she will know that he or she has been dreaming, but "[t]his reply seems to concede everything the skeptic needs to keep his scenario going, namely, that if we were dreaming, application of the anti-skeptical criterion might fail" (Carriero 1997, 4). Finally, "Descartes's explanation of why we shouldn't worry about the suggestion that God or an angel sees the truth differently from us is that 'we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it.'" As Carriero notes, however, "it is not incumbent upon the skeptic to make us believe or suspect that the scenario that he suggests is true . . . he only has to convince us [that] it is possible" (Carriero 1997, 5).

It might seem rather unlikely that the meditator would fail to see any one of these possibilities, let alone all three, if he or she were a skeptic. Thus, in light both of the apparently poor job Descartes does of handling his alleged skeptical program and of the desire to read him charitably, it might seem implausible that Descartes is trying to refute the skeptic. Hence, it might seem unlikely that the meditator should be identified as one.

How implausible is it, however, that the meditator is a skeptic? In the Second Set of Replies, Descartes tells Mersenne,

> [T]he best way of achieving a firm knowledge of reality is first to accustom ourselves to doubting all things, especially corporeal things. Although I had seen many ancient writings by the Academics and Sceptics on this subject, and was reluctant to reheat and serve this precooked material, I could not avoid devoting one whole Meditation to it. (CSM 2.94; AT 7.130)

Thus, Descartes certainly sees himself as confronting skeptical challenges in the First Meditation. Moreover, his contemporaries charged Descartes *not with failing to go far enough* in considering skeptical scenarios but *with going too far*. For instance, in the Seventh Replies, in an attempt to justify what seemed to Bourdin to be the meditator's excessive skepticism, Descartes says,

> [I]t is wholly false that in laying down our foundations in philosophy there are corresponding limits which fall short of complete certainty, but which we can sensibly and safely accept without taking doubt any further. For since truth is essentially indivisible, it may happen that a claim which we do not recognize as possessing complete certainty may in fact be quite false, however probable it may appear. To make the foundations of all knowledge rest on a claim that we recognize as being possibly false would not be a sensible way to philosophize. If someone proceeds in this way, *how can he answer the sceptics* who go beyond all the boundaries of doubt? How will he refute them? (CSM 2.374; AT 7.548, emphasis mine)

This passage implies that Descartes *is* concerned with refuting skeptical challenges in the *Meditations*, at least as he and some of his contemporaries understood them. In fact, he goes on to say,

> [The skeptics] do not see the existence of God and the immortality of the human mind as having the same appearance of truth [as whether they have heads, or whether two and three make five], and hence they are unwilling to treat these claims as true for practical purposes unless and until they have seen them proved by means of arguments more reliable than any of those which lead them to accept whatever is apparently true. ... I have provided a reliable proof of these matters, and this is something that no one, so far as I know, has done before .... (CSM 2.375; AT 7.549-50)

Because Descartes believes that he has proven the principal points for which he argues in the *Meditations*, he concludes, "I became the first philosopher ever *to overturn the doubt of the skeptics*" (CSM 2.375; AT 7.549-50, emphasis mine). Hence, Descartes claims not only to be engaged in the project of refuting skeptical concerns but to have succeeded in so doing.

Thus, it would at least be *compatible with* the *Meditations*, if it were a fictional work, that the Cartesian meditator could be a seventeenth-century skeptic, as Descartes understood one. Therefore, there are at least two possible identities for the meditator, conceived of as a fictional character.

2.1.3   A Scholastic Aristotelian

A third possible answer to the question "who is the Cartesian meditator?"— proposed, e.g., by Carriero—is that Cartesian meditator is a Scholastic Aristotelian. On this reading, the project of the First Meditation is roughly as follows. When the meditator considers the dream doubt, he or she suspends judgment on the reliability of the senses for knowledge of the external world. When the meditator considers the analogy between thought and painting, he or she abandons the Scholastic notion that there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses and accepts the Cartesian view that our ability to represent the external world is dependent on simple and universal ideas that are innate. Once the meditator begins to abandon these fundamental elements of Scholasticism in favor of the Cartesian conception of the mind, he or she begins to wonder about the relationship between his or her innate ideas and the external world. Thus, the meditator is forced to consider the author of his or her nature. Therefore, the evil genius doubt follows quite naturally, if the meditator is a Scholastic (Carriero 1997: 9, 11, 18–20, 29).

Despite the ways in which identifying the meditator as a Scholastic might help elucidate aspects of the *Meditations*, there might seem to be evidence against such a reading in Descartes's correspondence. Identifying the meditator as a Scholastic suggests that Descartes's principal concern in the *Meditations* is to overthrow Aristotelian principles, but in a letter to Charlet from 1644, Descartes denies that Scholasticism is his principal target. He says, "People have ... imagined that my aim is to refute the received views of the Schools, and to try to render them absurd;

but they will see that I do not discuss them any more than I would if I had never learnt them" (CSMK 238; AT 4.141).[3] In light of this letter, identifying the meditator as a Scholastic might seem to exaggerate Descartes's opposition to Scholasticism. Hence, this third possible identity of the meditator might seem implausible.

There are two problems with relying on this letter to Charlet as evidence against identifying the meditator as a Scholastic. First, Descartes does not appear to be speaking with the greatest candor. In the same letter, for instance, he says, "I do not use any principles that were not accepted by Aristotle" (CSMK 238; AT 4.141). In an earlier letter to Mersenne, he claims that the principles of his physics "destroy the principles of Aristotle" (CSMK 173; AT 3.298). Second, and more important for my purposes, even if Descartes is not *principally* concerned with refuting *all* Scholastic principles, he certainly seems to be concerned with refuting *some*—for instance, the principle that there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses. Hence, it is not out of the question that the meditator, understood as a fictional character, could be a Scholastic.

One could, however, also challenge the possibility that the meditator is a Scholastic by claiming that a Scholastic philosopher would believe that he *has* established a framework for "sturdy and lasting" results in the sciences and, hence, that he has no reason to attempt to "demolish" completely all of his prior opinions. Thus, one might conclude that the meditator could not be a Scholastic Aristotelian, who would not "fret the way the meditator does" but would be "smug in his invincibility" (Broughton 2002, 27).

We need not assume, though, that every Scholastic is smugly confident. Moreover, suppose that the fretful Scholastics, who are able and willing to meditate, are "few and far between." This fact, if it were a fact, would be consistent with Descartes's expectations (see CSM 2.8; AT 7.9), which would make identifying the meditator as a Scholastic more plausible.

Thus, the identification of the meditator as a Scholastic Aristotelian would at least be *compatible with* the *Meditations*, if it were a fictional work. Therefore, any one of three personas—a moderately intelligent person of common sense, a seventeenth-century skeptic, or a Scholastic Aristotelian—could be attributed to the Cartesian meditator, conceived of as a fictional character.

2.1.4   An Amalgam of Personas

The fact that it would be compatible with the *Meditations*, if it were a fictional work, to recognize the Cartesian meditator as any of three individuals might make

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[3] Descartes seems to be commenting on the project of the *Principles*, which was published shortly before this letter, but his comment applies equally well to the *Meditations*, if it is considered merely as a creative way of presenting the same arguments for which he argues in the *Principles*.

us suspicious that Descartes intends the meditator to have any *one* identity. In light of this suspicion, we should begin to look for alternative ways of addressing the question.

A fourth possible, and notably different, way of answering the question "who is the Cartesian meditator?"—proposed, e.g., by Broughton—is to identify the meditator as an amalgam of personas. On this reading, there is a similarity between the characters in *The Search for Truth* and the *Meditations*, which is as follows. In the *Search*, Descartes presents his principles of philosophy in the form of a dialogue between three characters—a Scholastic (Epistemon), a philosophically naïve person of common sense (Polyander), and a Cartesian (Eudoxus). Similarly, in the *Meditations*, Descartes presents these principles in the form of one person's interior dialogue. Broughton, for instance, claims that the interchange in the *Search*

> gets the personae of the First Meditation just about right: the person of common sense is at center stage; Descartes is engineering the course of reflection so that the scholastic philosopher will recognize a threat to his basic philosophical tenets; and he is motivating the inquiry by drawing, as he must, upon his own enlightened account of human cognitive development. (Broughton 2002, 30–1)

Therefore, one might be tempted to conclude that the meditator is an amalgam of the characters in the *Search*.

Identifying the meditator as an amalgam of characters seems to have two principal advantages. First, it would be compatible with the *Meditations*, if it were a fictional work. Second, it obviates the problem of attempting to decide whether the meditator is a person of common sense, a skeptic, or an Aristotelian. As I will show presently, however, it suffers from the same fundamental defect of the previous readings—namely, it attempts to answer, rather than rejects, the question "Who is the Cartesian meditator?" In so doing, it not only falsely implies that the meditator is a fictional character but also inhibits a proper understanding of Descartes's account of doxastic virtue.

2.2   An Alternative Kind of Response: Rejecting the Question

An accurate understanding of the nature of the Cartesian meditator requires an accurate understanding of the function of Cartesian meditation and, hence, of the literary nature of Descartes's *Meditations*. To elucidate the latter, let me being by clarifying the kind of meditations with which Descartes was familiar—namely, meditations in the Roman Catholic contemplative tradition.

2.2.1   Meditations in the Roman Catholic Contemplative Tradition

In the Roman Catholic tradition, books, especially the scriptures, and particularly the Psalms, are the object not merely of study but also of a way of reading called "lectio divina"—a manner of reading in which a text "is so read and meditated that it becomes prayer" (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1994, 305). One central purpose of this type of meditative prayer is to help a person cultivate moral and theological virtues.[4] Thus, practitioners of lectio divina, while meditating, would not be concerned with identifying the author of the passage nor with identifying what traits a person would need in order to utter such a passage, and so forth. While engaged in the practice of meditative reading, practitioners of lectio divina assume the role of the speaker in the text, with the intention that the passage might become their own prayer and, consequently, that they might develop certain virtues.

One classic example of the proper practice of lectio divina is St. Augustine's[5] interaction with the following words of Psalm 19:

> Cleanse me from my unknown faults.
> But from willful sins keep your servant;
> Let them never control me . . .
> Let the words of my mouth meet with your favor,
> Keep the thoughts of my heart before you. (Psalm 19:13-15 NAB)

Augustine, after meditating on this text, takes the words of the Psalmist as his own when writing the *Confessions*. There he prays,

> Too narrow is the house of my soul for you to enter into it: let me be enlarged by you. It lies in ruins; build it up again. I confess and I know that it contains things that offend your eyes. Yet who will cleanse it? Or upon what other than you shall I call? '*From my secret sins cleanse me, O Lord,* and from those of others spare your servant.' (Augustine 1960, 46, emphasis mine)

He is not merely borrowing a turn of phrase from the Psalmist; rather, he has meditated on the text and the words have come to reflect his own cognitive and volitional states. Thus, from the Roman Catholic perspective, he has cultivated virtues such as faith and humility,[6] though, given his admittedly reluctant

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[4] Thus, the kind of prayer involved in lectio divina differs fundamentally, say, from petitionary prayers or prayers of praise.

[5] Given my focus on "traditional Christianity," as described in the Introduction, I will use the title "Saint" for and only for those people who are regarded as saints by the "mother tradition" that is shared by Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, and Protestants. So, for example, I will refer to Paul the Apostle as "St. Paul" and to Augustine of Hippo as "St. Augustine" but to Frances de Sales simply as "Frances de Sales."

[6] See, e.g., Aquinas, ST I-II, Q. 62; ST II-II, Q. 161.

conversion,[7] we can reasonably infer that Augustine did not take the words as his own upon first reading. They likely came to reflect his convictions after he repeatedly not only read but also meditated on the text.

Scripture is not the only object of lectio divina in the Roman Catholic contemplative tradition. Catholic authors composed texts, or segments of texts, that were to be read in this meditative way. One such example, well known in Descartes's time—particularly to his Jesuit instructors at La Flèche—is *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola (see L. J. Beck 1965, 28–38; Hatfield 1986; see also Kosman 1986).[8] The *Exercises* were written by Ignatius to be used by a *director*, who would lead the exercises, and an *exercitant*, who would practice them. Consequently, parts of Ignatius's text are instructions for the director on how to conduct the exercises; others are passages on which the exercitant is supposed to meditate. For instance, at the end of the first exercise of the first week, Ignatius writes the following instruction to be given to the exercitant:

> Imagine Christ our Lord present before you upon the cross, and begin to speak with him, asking how it is that though He is the Creator, He has stooped to become man, and to pass from eternal life to death here in time, that thus He might die for our sins.

Then Ignatius changes from writing in the second person to writing in the first person. The passage continues:

> I shall also reflect upon myself and ask:

> What have I done for Christ?
> What am I doing for Christ?
> What ought I to do for Christ?

> As I behold Christ in this plight, nailed to the cross, I shall ponder upon what presents itself to my mind. (Ignatius of Loyola 1951, 28)

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[7] Even after Augustine becomes convinced of the essential claims of Christianity, he hesitates to embrace the requisite changes both of will and of action. For instance, alluding to a parable comparing the kingdom of God to a pearl of great price, he says, "I had found the good pearl, and this I must buy, after selling all that I had. Yet still I hesitated"—Augustine 1960, 182. Similarly, he confesses (to God), "I was overcome by your truth, I had no answer whatsoever to make, but only those slow and drowsy words, 'Right away. Yes, right away.' 'Let me be for a little while.' But 'Right away—right away' was never right now, and 'Let me be for a little while' stretched out for a long time"—Augustine 1960, 90.

[8] Note that I am merely using Augustine and Ignatius as examples from the general contemplative tradition with which Descartes is familiar in an attempt to help elucidate my thesis about the importance of reading the *Meditations* as meditations for understanding the Cartesian meditator. In so doing, I mean to suggest neither that Descartes's philosophy is fundamentally Augustinian nor that its origins are substantially Ignatian—cp. Menn 1998; Stohrer 1979.

I found Stohrer's paper to be helpful in elucidating the similarities between the practice of Descartes's *Meditations* and the kind of retreat one would make with Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*. It seems to me, however, that Descartes is likely to have a number of influences from the general contemplative tradition with which he is familiar—cp. Hatfield 1986. Thus, I think it is a virtue of my argument that it does not require an attempt to establish a link between Descartes and any one of his possible influences, and, consequently, that it does not require an attempt to explain the strength of the influence that any particular author(s) had on him.

Ignatius changes to writing in the first person not for the purpose of reporting his own mental activity but for the purpose of offering a passage on which the exercitant is to meditate. Ignatius and other authors of meditations write in the first person so that their readers might adopt the position of the "I" of their texts and, in so doing, cultivate virtues.

Essentially, a work of meditations is written by an author who both intends to take upon himself or herself the role of director and intends for his or her reader, as the exercitant, to adopt the position of the "I" of the text. Hence, the author of a work of meditations, unlike the author of a work of philosophical fiction, intends for the reader to see the first-person personal pronoun as referring to himself or to herself, not to some other, fictional person.[9]

2.2.2 *Meditations, the* Meditations*, and the Pursuit of Virtue*

With the nature of the literary genre of meditations in the Roman Catholic contemplative tradition in mind, the true nature of the Cartesian meditator becomes easier to understand. Descartes sees the role of any person who performs his *Meditations* as similar to that which any person who engages in the traditional religious meditations with which he is familiar. The meditator is an actual person who is laboring not merely to acquire cognitive content but to acquire doxastic virtues, which is why he notes that each of his meditations requires, minimally, a day's work (see, e.g., CSM 2.23, 35-7, 43, 94, 160-1; AT 7.34, 52, 62, 130, 229; see also CSM 2.334; AT 7.494).

Why does Descartes expect the meditator to do such work, reflecting repeatedly on each meditation? The reason is that although the purpose of the exercises is for the meditator to adopt the cognitive and volitional states of the "I" of the text, neither the author (as director) nor the meditator (as exercitant) expects this to happen, necessarily, on the first reading. As Cunning rightly notes,

> In the *Meditations* we are supposed to be taking the first-person point of view and accepting or rejecting things only when we see for ourselves that they are to be accepted or rejected. A consideration of Descartes's view on what our minds are like before we do philosophy gives us a glimpse of how this process would unfold as the meditator converges on truth. Throughout the enquiry, he will not affirm something unless he sees for himself that it is

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[9] Since literary genres are not the sorts of things that have "real essences," allow me to stipulate this point as marking the essential difference between the literary genre of "meditations" and the literary genre of "fiction," as I am using these (and related) terms in this chapter. Thus, the nature of a "work of philosophical fiction" is merely to present a philosopher's arguments in a stylized fashion by placing them in the mouth(s) of some fictional character(s). So, for instance, as I am using these and related terms, both Descartes's *The Search for Truth* and Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* are examples of philosophical fiction.

true, but at the beginning of the enquiry, and to a lesser extent as he proceeds, he does not have the best perspective from which see the truth. (Cunning 2010, 27)[10]

In essence, the author and the meditator enter, willingly, into a pedagogical relationship that requires both the wise leadership of the former and the faithful and critical exercise, or practice, of the latter.[11]

Thus, Descartes's *Meditations* is not a work of philosophical fiction but, as the title suggests, a series of exercises designed, at least in part, to help one cultivate virtues. Descartes writes in the first person with the expectation that his reader will adopt the cognitive and volitional states of the "I" of the *Meditations*. Since his reader is likely to be either an intelligent, but philosophically naïve, person, a skeptic, or a scholastic Aristotelian—to note a few of his more likely possible readers—Descartes must write in such a way that each of these can identify with the "I," which is why, as Broughton rightly notes, "we find it easy—all too easy—to project ourselves into the position the 'I' seems to occupy" (Broughton 2002, 22; see also Cunning 2010, 27ff).[12]

Since the *Meditations* is a set of meditations, a Cartesian meditator is not a character in a fictional narrative. Rather, he or she is any actual person who is attempting to adopt the cognitive and volitional states of the "I" of Descartes's

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[10] I am sympathetic with Cunning on this point, but our respective readings may differ. For instance, he agrees with commentators who claim that "Descartes writes from the first-person point of view *to identify with his readers*" and cites Wilson (1978) as an example of such a commentator (2009, 28). If, by this, he means to suggest that the *Meditations* is a work of fiction, then our readings do, in fact, differ in an important way since reading the *Meditations* in this manner seems to me to misrepresent Descartes's role as the director of a set of meditations. Given his emphasis on Descartes's role as "teacher," however, our readings may not differ all that greatly.

[11] Such practice aims to reform not merely the content of a meditator's knowledge but also his or her passions and, ultimately, his or her cognitive, conative, and affective habits. For more recent work on these aspects of Descartes's program, see not only Cunning 2010 but also, e.g., Davies 2001; Schmitter 2002.

[12] Broughton suggests that "the motivations Descartes describes for undertaking an inquiry guided by the method of doubt are not the motivations that might persuade any actual meditator to begin as the fictional meditator begins"—see, Broughton 2002, 31. Although it might be true that no one who is first beginning to philosophize would sit down and, without any guidance, start thinking through the issues of first philosophy as the 'I' of the *Meditations* does, it does not follow that a *meditator* would not sit down and begin to think through the issues of first philosophy in this way. This is because a meditator approaches Descartes's text with the intention of meditating seriously and attempting to identify with the 'I'. Just as Augustine may not originally have been motivated to meditate on the Psalms for the reasons expressed by the 'I' of the scriptures, the person who decides to engage in the Cartesian meditations may not originally be motivated by the reasons expressed by the 'I' of the *Meditations*. Nonetheless, in keeping with the object of meditation, Augustine's mind or will were changed as he came to identify with the 'I' of the Psalms. Similarly, even if the Cartesian meditator does not share Descartes's convictions, his mind or will may be changed as he comes to identify with the 'I' of the *Meditations*. Hence, Broughton's assertion is incorrect: an actual *meditator* may, indeed, begin as the Cartesian meditator does.

text.[13] Thus, were one to read the *Meditations* as a subversive fictional narrative that is merely a creative presentation of the arguments in *The Search for Truth* or the *Principles of Philosophy* (see Broughton 2002, 31; Margaret Dauler Wilson 1978, 4–5), one would fail to see clearly the nature of the activity in which the reader is— or, at least by Descartes's lights, ought to be—engaged (see Beck 1965, 30; Curley 1978, 43; Gilson 1951, 186; Schmitter 2002; Stohrer 1979, 20–2). Therefore, the proper response to the question "Who is the Cartesian meditator?" is not to attempt to answer the question but to reject it.

2.3 Conclusion

In summary, the contemporary debate about the nature of the Cartesian meditator has tended to downplay, if not to disregard, the significance of Descartes's selection of the literary genre of meditations for the definitive presentation of many of the key doctrines of his philosophical program. As a result, it has tended to belie the fact that Descartes is genuinely concerned not merely with *what* his readers come to believe but also with *how* they come to believe. Consequently, it has obscured Descartes's account of the virtues of belief formation. My aim in the next few chapters is to elucidate this account and, in so doing, to achieve the first of my two principal goals. I will take my first step towards that end in Chap. 3 by showing that Descartes develops a comprehensive method of belief formation, in light of his understanding of the nature of belief.

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[13] Thus, it is a bit of a misnomer to speak of "*the* Cartesian meditator." There is not one Cartesian meditator; there are many.

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Chapter 3
The Cartesian Framework

As I suggested in the last chapter, Descartes has a keen interest not only in reforming the content of people's beliefs but also in reforming the way in which they go about forming their beliefs. Hence, he has not only an interest in arguing for key philosophical doctrines but also in developing an account of virtuous belief formation, as I will show in the first part of this text. In order to elucidate this account, I will need to clarify some of its key components.

One of these key components is his conception of the nature of belief. As with many aspects of Descartes's program, there are important disagreements among his commentators concerning this account of belief.[1] Addressing these disputes and attempting to elucidate Descartes's conception of belief might seem, at least to those less familiar with his work, like little more than a minor interpretive issue. My aim in the following chapters is to show the ways in which this clarification is critical for understanding his philosophical program. In this chapter, however, my goal is more modest. I intend merely to clarify Descartes's conception of the nature of belief and to elucidate the significance of this clarification for understanding, what I will call, "the Cartesian framework for virtuous belief formation."

3.1 The Nature of Belief

Philosophers' accounts of belief fall, roughly, into one of three broad categories. According to the first, beliefs are essentially mental acts. For instance, according to Augustine's famous dictum, to believe is nothing other than to think with assent (Augustine 1954–1981: v; see also ST II-II, Q. 2, a. 1). According to the second, beliefs are essentially mental dispositions. For instance, Price claims, "Believing a

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[1] There are also important disagreements among Descartes's commentators concerning his account of the extent to which people can control their beliefs voluntarily. I will address this issue in Chap 5.

proposition is . . . a disposition and not an occurrence or 'mental act'" (Price 1954, 15). According to the third, although some beliefs are mental acts, other beliefs are mental dispositions (see Audi 1994, 424; Ryle 1952, 133–5; Scott-Kakures 1994, 79; Schwitzgebel 2002; see also Cohen 1989, 368; DeSousa 1971, 58–63; Ginet 2001, 67–70). In light of this apparent disagreement,[2] let me begin to elucidate Descartes's conception of belief by clarifying which of these three positions he propounds.

Descartes uses a number of Latin and French words that we associate with the English verb "to believe" and its cognates. Where we might use a phrase of the form "the person believes the proposition," Descartes speaks of "affirming," "judging," or "assenting" to the proposition.[3] For instance, in the *Meditations*, he identifies *I think; I am* as the first proposition the meditator *affirms* [*affirmo*] (CSM 2.19; AT 7.28). Likewise, in the *Discourse*, he commits himself to the rule that, as he sees it, should govern people's judgments, stating,

> I made a strong and unswerving resolution . . . never to accept [*recevoir*] anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth: that is, carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions, and to include nothing more in my judgements [*jugements*] than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it. (CSM 1.120; AT 6.18)

Similarly, in the Fourth Meditation, the meditator says,

> If . . . I simply refrain from making a judgement [*a judicio ferendo abstineam*] in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny [*affirmem vel negem*], then I am not using my free will correctly. (CSM 2.41; AT 7.59-60)

On Descartes's account, each of these instances of "believing" requires both the intellect[4] and the will,[5] as he notes in *Principles* 1.34:

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[2] I say "apparent disagreement" because philosophers' presentations on the topic are, all too frequently, ambiguous. Russell, for instance, says, "[W]e must distinguish belief as a mere disposition from actual active belief. We speak as if we always believed that Charles I was executed, but that only means that we are always ready to believe it when the subject comes up"—Russell 1921, 245–6. Russell's comment might be read in either of two ways. First, it might be read as saying that beliefs are essentially mental acts that are related to an essentially different dispositional phenomenon—namely, being disposed to believe. Second, it might be read as claiming that beliefs are essentially either mental acts or dispositions to have those mental acts. Given this ambiguity, it is not clear whether Russell's position is more in line with Augustine's dictum or the positions propounded by DeSousa (1971), Ryle (1952), Schwitzgebel (2002), and so forth. Price's position is similarly ambiguous at points—see, e.g., Price (1954), 15f and (1969), 243–89.

[3] That is, he uses cognates of the Latin terms *affirmo, assentio, confido, credo, judico*, and so forth and cognates of the French terms *croire* and *recevoir*.

[4] Which he also calls the "faculty of knowledge" [*facultate cognoscendi*], the "faculty of understanding" [*facultatem intelligendi*], and the "faculty of perception" [*facultas perceipiendi*]—CSM 1.207, 209, 2.39; AT 8A.21, 24, 7.56-7.

[5] Which he also calls the "faculty of choice or free will" [*facultate eligendi sive . . . arbitrii libertate*] and the "faculty of assent" [*facultas assentiendi*]—CSM 1.207, 2.39; AT 8A.21, 7.56.

> In order to make a judgment, the intellect is of course required since, in the case of something which we do not in any way perceive, there is no judgment we can make. But the will is also required so that, once something is perceived in some manner, our assent may then be given. (CSM 1.204; AT 8A.19; see also CSM 1.207; AT 8A.21)

Hence, each of the instances of "believing," mentioned above, is an instance of a Cartesian "judgment," a kind of mental act that has both a cognitive element and a volitional element.[6] Thus, Descartes's account of judgment is similar to accounts of belief considered as a mental act, according to which a person believes a proposition if and only if the person both (i) has a mental representation of the proposition (i.e., an idea) and (ii) assents to, or affirms, the proposition (see Price 1967, 43ff and 1969, 189–220; see also Russell 1921, 245–6). Therefore, a number of the Latin and French terms Descartes uses to refer to what we would call "beliefs" refer to *judgments*, which, at least on Descartes's account, are *mental acts*.

He does not, however, conceive of beliefs *only* as mental acts. For instance, when he suggests that the "truths of faith" have always been foremost among his beliefs (CSM 1.125; AT 6.28), he does not merely mean to suggest that he assents to propositions concerning matters of faith *on those occasions when he attends to the propositions*. Rather, he means to suggest that beliefs concerning the "truths of faith" are attributable to him *even when he is not attending to the propositions*. Similarly, when he suggests that people should "steadfastly believe" what the Roman Catholic Church teaches about the doctrine of the real presence (CSM 2.175; AT 7.252), he is not merely suggesting that people assent to the doctrine of the real presence on those occasions when they attend to it. Rather, he is suggesting that beliefs concerning what the Roman Catholic Church teaches about the real presence should be attributable to people even when they are not attending to the doctrine. Likewise, when he refers to "the sin that Turks and other infidels commit by refusing to embrace the Christian religion," he is not merely referring to a sin that "Turks and other infidels" happen to commit every time they attend to propositions concerning the "truths of faith." Rather, he means to suggest that beliefs concerning the denials of these "truths" are attributable to such persons even when they are not attending to propositions concerning "the Christian

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[6] Two brief observations and, subsequently, a corresponding comment are in order here. First, Alison Simmons attributes to Descartes's mental ontology "a mental operation (or set of operations) that falls somewhere between the mere perception of ideas and the affirmation or denial by the will of whatever those ideas represent to the mind." She identifies this type of operation as a "sensory judgment" that in and of itself does not "immediately result in any *beliefs* about the world"—Simmons (2003), 566–7, see also pp. 553–6. Second, Hiram Caton and Anthony Kenny suggest that, in the *Regulae* at least, Descartes assigns both perception and judgment to the understanding—see, e.g., Caton (1975), 88, 100; Kenny (1998), 132–59.

I do not wish to contest these readings. Nonetheless, I will be using the term "judgment" in the more narrow, belief-producing sense that Descartes does in his mature works—e.g., at *Principles* 1.34 and elsewhere—in which judgment is constituted by both an act of the intellect and an act of the will.

religion" (CSM 2.105-6; AT 7.148). On Descartes's account, beliefs are attributable to people not only when they are judging certain propositions as true or as false but also when they have what Descartes refers to, in Latin, as a *consuetudinem credendi*—a phrase that translators render as "habitual belief," "habit of believing," or "habitual tendency to believe" (CSM 2.25; AT 7.35; HR 1.159; Descartes 1978, 24).[7] These are the sorts of beliefs that people have acquired, for example, in their childhood and cannot eradicate even in the face of compelling counterevidence, unless they give the relevant arguments their "long and frequent attention" (CSM 2.162; AT 7.231). Thus, Descartes attributes beliefs to people both because of certain mental acts and because of certain *mental dispositions*.

Although he explicitly states his criteria for attributing judgments to people (see, e.g., CSM 1.204, 2.39; AT 8A.18, 7.56), he does not provide a similarly explicit statement of his criteria for attributions of dispositional beliefs.[8] We can, however, glean at least some of them from an examination of the terms he uses. He contrasts the term *credo* and its cognates with the term *nego* and its cognates. For instance, in the First Meditation, after coming to the conclusion that he should suspend judgment regarding all his beliefs, the meditator notes,

> My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief [*occupantque credulitatem meam*], which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom. I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions, so long as I suppose them to be what in fact they are, namely highly probable opinions—opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny [*credere quam negare*]. (CSM 2.15; AT 7.22)

This contrast between the Latin terms *credo* and *nego*, and their cognates, is roughly equivalent to the contrast between the English terms "believe" and "disbelieve," and their cognates. However, *credo* and *nego*, and their cognates, are not the only Latin terms Descartes uses to refer to the contrast between belief and disbelief. He also uses the Latin term *affirmo*, and its cognates, 12 times in the *Meditations* (CSM 2.18, 19, 24-6, 40, 41; AT 7.26, 28, 34-7, 57, 59-6).[9] The majority of the times he does so, he contrasts it with some form of *nego* (CSM 2.19, 24, 26, 40, 41; AT 7.28, 34, 37, 57, 59-6). For instance, in the Fourth Meditation, the meditator claims that if he affirms or denies [*vel affirmem vel negem*] a proposition that he does not perceive clearly and distinctly, then he is acting improperly (CSM 2.41; AT 7.59-60). Thus, in the *Meditations*, he uses the Latin terms *credo*, *affirmo*, and their cognates interchangeably. For Descartes, to affirm a proposition is a mental act. More specifically, on his account, to affirm is,

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[7] Descartes also uses the phrase *veteris opinionis consuetudo* to refer to the habit of "holding" old opinions—see CSM 2.8, 23; AT 7.9, 34. See also Descartes's correspondence with Princess Elizabeth, in which he speaks of the "habit of belief" [*habitude de la croyre*]—CSMK 267; AT 4.295-6.

[8] "Habitual beliefs," "habits of believing," or "habitual tendencies to believe"—that is, the kinds of beliefs to which Descartes refers as *consuetudinem credendi*.

[9] All twelve occurrences occur in three meditations—the Second, the Third, and the Fourth.

strictly speaking, the act of the will in judgment. Loosely speaking, however, he uses phrases of the form "the person *assents to* the proposition" and "the person *affirms* the proposition" interchangeably with phrases of the form "the person *judges* that the proposition is true." Thus, the textual evidence suggests that Descartes uses the Latin terms *credo*, *affirmo*, and their cognates to refer to the mental act of judgment. Hence, he uses the Latin phrase *consuetudinem credendi*, like the French phrase *habitude de la croyre*, to refer, specifically, to habitual *judgments* (see CSMK 267; AT 4.295-6). Therefore, he describes habitual beliefs as acquired dispositions to make judgments.[10] Thus, on Descartes's account, a person dispositionally, or habitually, believes a proposition if[11] (i) the person has a disposition to assent to, or affirm, the proposition and (ii) this disposition is the result of his or her assenting to, or affirming, the proposition.[12]

As a rule, the second condition, concerning the cause of the disposition, will be satisfied by a person's *repeatedly* assenting to, or affirming, the proposition, but this need not always be the case. Descartes acknowledges, like some of his Aristotelian predecessors, that at least some habits "can be acquired by a single action and [do] not require long practice" (CSM 1.348; AT 11.386-70; see also ST I-II, Q. 52, a. 3). For example, he claims that just as certain foods may become the objects of our habitual desires or aversions, after only one act of eating (see CSM 1.348; AT 11.386-70), so certain self-evident propositions, such as *nothing comes from nothing*, may become the contents of our habitual beliefs after only one act of judgment.

Moreover, although some habits may be acquired, or lost, by a single act, they are usually acquired, or lost, in degrees by the repeated performance of acts. For instance, Descartes claims that the habit of controlling the passion of wonder can be gained or lost gradually (CSM 1.354-6; AT 11.383-6). Similarly, he says that repeated and protracted study is required to eradicate some erroneous habitual beliefs (CSM 2.94; AT 7.131; see also CSM 2.43; AT 7.62). Hence, his account

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[10] In the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes's reference to "firm and determinate judgments" [*jugemens fermes and determinez*] seems to be yet another way of referring to habitual judgments—CSM 1.347; AT 11.366-8; see also CSM 1.390; AT 11.460.

[11] I say "if" instead of "if and only if" since Descartes might allow that dispositional beliefs can be acquired by other means. I take it that one possible implication of his reference to "opinions... that slipped into my mind without being introduced there by reason" and his claim that "many people do not know what they believe"—CSM 1.119, 122; AT 6.16-7, 23.

[12] Descartes's account of two kinds of belief is similar, though not identical, to some more recent accounts, e.g., Price (1954), 15f; see also DeSousa (1971), 58–63; Ginet (2001), 67–70. The principal difference between Descartes's view and that of contemporary philosophers, such as these, concerns the relationship between judgments and dispositional beliefs. A number of contemporary philosophers regard beliefs, essentially, as dispositions and judgments merely as manifestations of these dispositions. Thus, on their view, *dispositional beliefs*, not judgments, are the fundamental explanans. Descartes, on the other hand, regards habits as dispositions that are acquired by means of certain acts; consequently, he explains the existence of dispositional, or habitual, beliefs in terms of certain mental acts of believing—namely, in terms of judgments. Thus, on Descartes's account, *judgments*, not dispositional beliefs, are the fundamental explanans.

suggests that habitual beliefs are gained, or lost, in degrees.[13] Thus, although *judgments* do not admit of degrees, *habitual beliefs* apparently do.[14]

3.2   The Proper Method of Belief Formation

Having clarified Descartes's account of the nature of belief, I am now in position to show the significance of this clarification for understanding Descartes's account of the proper method of belief formation. I will begin by elucidating the method itself. I will then make clear the context and limits of his method.

3.2.1   The Method

In one of his earliest writings, Descartes laments, "[T]he sciences are at present masked." He notes, however, with a degree of hope, "[I]f the masks were taken off, they would be revealed in all their beauty. If we could see how the sciences are linked together, we would find them no harder to retain in our minds than the series of numbers" (CSM 1.3; AT 10.215). Inspired by a series of dreams, which he interprets as prophetic,[15] Descartes commits himself to unmasking the beauty of the sciences. In fact, discovering the foundations of a universal science is, arguably, the fundamental interest that animates Descartes's philosophy, and he seems to present it as such in the opening lines of the *Meditations*. On behalf of a meditator, Descartes writes,

> Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. (CSM 2.12; AT 7.17)

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[13] The reason I conclude that "Descartes's account *suggests that* habitual beliefs are gained or lost in degrees" instead of that "on Descartes's account habitual beliefs are gained or lost in degrees" is that the following scenario is possible. A person might judge that p 99 times and fail to develop a habit of judging that p. However, on the one-hundredth time, the person might form a habit of judging that p, and, hence, he or she would have the habitual belief that p. On this, alternative scenario, habitual beliefs are not acquired in degrees. One lacks, completely, the habitual belief until a certain threshold is met—e.g., until the person judges that p a certain number of times. Although this scenario strikes me as implausible both as a general description of human psychology and as a reading of Descartes, it is, nonetheless, logically possible—hence, the caution of my conclusion.

[14] Therefore, contrary to what some of his commentators might suggest, Descartes does seem to allow for degrees of belief—degrees, that is, of habitual belief—see, e.g., Curley (1978), 184–5.

[15] For brief descriptions of this period of Descartes's life, see, e.g., Williams (1978), 15–6; Catherine Wilson (2003), 2–3; Margaret Dauler Wilson, (1978): xiii–xv.

On Descartes's account, the lack of a unified science is not due to people's differing intellectual capabilities. In fact, he says, "[T]he power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false ... is naturally equal in all men" (CSM 1.111; AT 6.2). The lack of a unified science is due, principally, to the lack of a proper method of belief formation. Consequently, in the hope of establishing a firm foundation upon which to build the sciences, Descartes proposes a "plan for a universal science," which he describes in the *Discourse on Method* (see CSM 1.111-2; AT 6.2-4; CSMK 51; AT 1.339).

In the *Discourse*, Descartes provides a general outline for his method of belief formation in a set of four rules. According to the first rule, the person who searches after truth should carefully avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions and include nothing more in his or her judgments than what presents itself to his or her mind so clearly and so distinctly that he or she has no occasion to doubt it. According to the second rule, the person who searches after truth should divide each of the difficulties he or she examines into as many parts as possible and as may be required in order to resolve them better. According to the third rule, the person who searches after truth should direct his or her thoughts in an orderly manner, by beginning with the simplest and most easily known objects in order to ascend little by little, step by step, to knowledge of the most complex, and by supposing some order even among objects that have no natural order of precedence. According to the fourth rule, the person who searches after truth should, throughout his or her enquiry, make enumerations so complete and reviews so comprehensive that he or she could be sure of leaving nothing out (CSM 1.111, 120; AT 6.1, 18-9).

Thus, Descartes's method of belief formation describes how a person who seeks after truth should both conduct his or her enquiry (rules two, three, and four) and form his or her judgments (rule one). Descartes's method of belief formation, however, is not constituted by these two elements alone. As he reminds his interlocutors, a person who seeks after truth must meditate repeatedly during the course of his or her enquiry so that his or her judgments may become habitual, or dispositional, beliefs (see, e.g., CSM 2.94, 160; AT 7.131, 229; CSM 1.124; AT 6.26).

The application of Descartes's method of belief formation is most clearly evident in his *Meditations*. There are difficulties in mapping the four rules Descartes describes in the *Discourse* directly onto the practice of belief formation that he advocates in the *Meditations*.[16] Nonetheless, we can recognize the general features of Descartes's strategy for belief formation and his concern both for conducting enquiry carefully and for making judgments cautiously in the *Meditations* as variations on the theme he developed in the four rules of the *Discourse*. Consider, first, how a meditator practices each of the three rules that constitute virtuous enquiry—at least insofar as it is described in the *Discourse*. On Descartes's account, the process is as follows. A meditator divides his or her enquiry according to various distinctions among the sciences—in accordance with rule two. For instance, a meditator begins to enquire about metaphysics, before proceeding in

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[16] I would like to thank Janet Broughton for calling to my attention the need for clarification on this point.

an orderly manner to enquire about other sciences, such as physics. Moreover, within his or her metaphysical investigations, a meditator begins with that which is most easily known—his or her own mind—in accordance with rule three. He or she then builds from this first bit of knowledge, proceeding step by step, to knowledge of matters more complex—in accordance with rule three. Throughout his or her enquiry, a meditator conducts comprehensive reviews of his or her discoveries—in accordance with rule four. For instance, at the end of the Second Meditation, a meditator notes, "[S]ince the habit of holding on to old opinions cannot be set aside so quickly, I should like to stop here and meditate for some time on this new knowledge I have gained" (CSM 2.23; AT 7.34), and at the end of the Third Meditation, having proven the existence of God, a meditator pauses to "spend some time in the contemplation of God; to reflect on his attributes, and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of [his or her] darkened intellect can bear it" (CSM 2.36; AT 7.52).

Consider, next, how a meditator carefully avoids "precipitate conclusions and preconceptions"—in accordance with rule one. On Descartes's account, the process is as follows. In the First Meditation, a meditator begins by resolving to doubt whatever he or she possibly can and commits to persisting in this resolution "stubbornly and firmly" so that even if he or she is not capable of knowing any truth, a meditator shall at least do what he or she can to "resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods" (CSM 2.15; AT 7.23). In the Second Meditation, a meditator discovers that he or she cannot doubt his or her own existence (CSM 2.17; AT 7.25). In light of this discovery, a meditator considers adopting the following as a general rule in the Third Meditation: if I perceive p clearly and distinctly, then p is true (CSM 2.24; AT 7.35). In the Fourth Meditation, realizing that God is not a deceiver and that a person's errors in judgment are the result of a misuse of the will, a meditator recognizes that he or she can avoid error by adopting the general rule considered in the Third Meditation. Consequently, a meditator makes the following commitment: "I should never make a judgment about anything which I did not clearly and distinctly understand" (CSM 2.42; AT 7.61). Thus, a meditator proceeds systematically and carefully to discover the reasons for the first rule stated in the *Discourse*: "include nothing more in my judgements than what present[s] itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I [have] no occasion to doubt it" (CSM 1.120; AT 6.18).

Consider, finally, how a meditator "fixes" his or her beliefs according to the first rule of the *Discourse*. On Descartes's account, habitual judgments are ordinarily[17] formed from particular acts of judgment in the same way that habits are formed from acts more generally—namely, by repetition. Thus, he claims, "Protracted and repeated study is required to eradicate" certain incorrect habitual beliefs (CSM 2.94; AT 7.131). That is why a meditator is supposed to reflect on and to ponder repeatedly his or her discoveries (see, e.g., CSM 2.160; AT 7.229; CSM 1.124; AT 6.26). For instance, at the end of the Second Meditation, a meditator stops to "meditate for some time" on his or her discoveries so that he or she can eradicate old habitual beliefs and "fix" the new ones (CSM 2.23; AT 7.34). Similarly, at the

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[17] See Sect. 3.1, above.

end of the Fourth Meditation, a meditator recognizes that he or she must attentively and repeatedly meditate on the rule that should govern his or her assent so as to fix it in his or her mind (CSM 2.43; AT 7.62).[18]

Thus, on Descartes's account, the proper method of *belief formation* includes three elements: a proper method of *enquiry*, a proper method of *judgment*, and a proper method of *belief fixation*. The first two of these elements are governed by rules Descartes states in the *Discourse*, and each of the elements is evinced by the procedure illustrated in the *Meditations*.

3.2.2 Context and Limits

Descartes's method, however, must be understood in its proper context. It is a method for proper belief formation *in the sciences*. That is, it is a method for acquiring *scientia*, which Descartes describes in a letter to Regius as "conviction based on a reason so strong that it can never be shaken by any stronger reason" (CSMK 147; AT 3.65). To possess such conviction is to have "absolute certainty," which is based on knowledge of metaphysics, or "first philosophy," and requires "awareness of the true God" (see CSM 2.49; AT 7.71; CSMK 13, 147; AT 1.81; 3.65). Thus, the utility of Descartes's method might seem to be limited to those who are intellectually gifted. He suggests, however, that every person is, at least in principle, both able and required to use it[19] at least once in his or her life to

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[18] See Rule 11 of Descartes's *Regulae* (CSM 1.38; AT 10.408) and his comments on memory in the *Treatise on Man* (CSM 1.107; AT 11.177-8).

[19] It seems to me that Descartes's position on this point is inconsistent. Insofar as he claims that reason is "naturally equal in all men," he seems to imply that every person is able to follow his method (CSM 1.111; AT 6.2), but he suggests that he composed the *Meditations* in Latin, as opposed to French, so that they would not be read by "all and sundry" (CSM 2.6-7; AT 7.7). In fact, he says,

> I completely concede, then, that the contents of the First Meditation, and indeed the others, are not suitable to be grasped by every mind. I have stated this whenever the opportunity arose, and I shall continue to do so. This was the sole reason why I did not deal with these matters in the *Discourse on the Method*, which was written in French, but reserved them instead for the *Meditations*, which I warned should be studied only by very intelligent and well-educated readers. No one should object that I would have done better to avoid writing on matters which a large number of people ought to avoid reading about; for I regard these matters as so crucial that I am convinced that without them no firm or stable results can ever be established in philosophy. (CSM 2.172; AT 7.247)

However, he also claims to have published the *Principles*, which contains these same intellectual "fire and knives," in French so that his philosophy would receive a wide audience (CSM 1.179; AT 9B.1).

As Don Garrett suggested to me, however, one way Descartes's commentators could try to reconcile this apparent inconsistency is to suppose that Descartes thinks "common sense" is equally distributed and that knowledge is good but that many people have moral or intellectual defects of other kinds that make them unsuitable as they stand to pursue the project. It seems to me that Descartes's commentators would need to adopt this strategy, or something like it, to save him from the charge of inconsistency. I am not sure, though, whether such a strategy would ultimately succeed.

undertake an investigation into the foundations of the sciences (see, e.g., CSM 1.111, 193, 2.12; AT 6.2, 8A.5, 7.17).

According to Descartes's own experience, using the method to investigate truths in arithmetic and geometry can take months (CSM 1.121; AT 6.20-1). Similarly, an investigation into the foundations of the sciences is not a brief project. For instance, Descartes notes that merely acquiring the habit of distinguishing intellectual things from corporeal things "will take at least a few days," and he claims that a meditator is supposed "to devote several months, or at least weeks," to the First Meditation alone (CSM 2.94; AT 7.130-1).[20] Thus, Descartes does not expect a person simply to adopt his method of belief formation, take a week off, go into seclusion to perform the *Meditations*, learn the foundations of the sciences, and return to his or her ordinary life.

On Descartes's account, during the time a person uses the method, he or she should make time for quiet study (see CSM 2.12; AT 7.17-8), but he or she will continue to engage in ordinary affairs. When a person is meditating on the sciences, he or she should use Descartes's method of belief formation; however, when a person is engaged in ordinary affairs, he or she often has no time to conduct an enquiry, and waiting to act until he or she has absolute certainty would have harmful, and possibly fatal, consequences (see CSMK 189; AT 3.422-3). According to Descartes,

> [W]e must note the distinction which I have insisted on in several passages, between the actions of life and the investigation of the truth. For when it is a question of organizing our life, it would, of course, be foolish not to trust the senses, and the sceptics who neglected human affairs to the point where friends had to stop them falling off precipices deserved to be laughed at. (CSM 2.243; AT 7.350-1)

Thus, Descartes recognizes that in ordinary affairs a person is forced to act on probable opinions. As he notes in the *Discourse*,

> [S]ince in everyday life we must often act without delay, it is a most certain truth that when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable. Even when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some; and having done so we must then regard them not as doubtful, from a practical point of view, but as most true and certain, on the grounds that the reason which made us adopt them is itself true and certain. By following this maxim I could free myself from all the regrets and remorse which usually trouble the consciences of those weak and faltering spirits who allow themselves to set out on some supposedly good course of action which later, in their inconstancy, they judge to be bad. (CSM 1.123; AT 6.24-5)

Thus, on Descartes's account, there is a difference between the way in which a person should form his or her beliefs in the sciences and the way in which a person should adopt opinions to regulate his or her actions.

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[20] See also CSM 1.124; 2.16, 37, 41, 44, 61; AT 6.27; 7.23-4, 52-3, 58-9, 63, 89.

The relationship between Descartes's method of belief formation and his prescription regarding adopting opinions by which one governs his or her actions is important, so let me take a moment to clarify it in some detail. Notice that Descartes does not stipulate a new rule(s) for making judgments in ordinary affairs. He claims only that a person ought to trust his or her senses, "follow the most probable" opinions [*nous devons suivre les plus probables*], "adopt them" [*nous determiner a quelques unes*], and "regard them not as doubtful, *from a practical point of view*" [*les considerer après, non plus comme douteuses en tant qu' elles se rapportent a la pratique*]. On Descartes's account, insofar as we regard these opinions as probable and recognize them as rules for practical action, not as scientific truths, they have "moral certainty" and are appropriate guides for ordinary affairs (CSM 1.289; AT 8A.327; CSMK 233; AT 4.115; see also CSM 1.130; AT 6.37-8).

Descartes's conception of adopting an opinion as a practical rule for ordinary affairs seems similar to what contemporary philosophers call "acceptance" (see Bratman 1999, 15–34; Cohen 1989, 367–89). In a contemporary sense, let us say that a person *accepts* a proposition just in case he or she (i) has a mental representation (i.e., an idea) of a proposition, (ii) does not deny the proposition (i.e., judge that the proposition is false), and (iii) decides to act as if the proposition were true, regardless of whether it actually is, for the purpose of some project.

Note two points about this contemporary notion of acceptance. First, the three conditions provided above are for acceptance considered as a mental act, but we might also regard it as a mental disposition, such that a phrase of the form "the person, dispositionally, accepts that p" is true if (i) the person has a disposition to accept the proposition and (ii) this disposition is the result of his or her acts of accepting that proposition. Thus, acceptance is similar to belief insofar as each can be regarded either as a mental act or as a mental disposition—more specifically, an *acquired* mental disposition.[21] Second, the principal difference between belief and acceptance has to do with the affirmation condition, which concerns a person's attitude regarding the truth of a proposition.[22] With this in mind, we can highlight the principal difference between belief and acceptance this way: a person *believes* a proposition only if he or she regards the proposition as true; however, a person can *accept* a proposition without regarding it as true. Thus, Descartes says, "Even when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some" and act as if they were true (CSM 1.123; AT 6.25). Nonetheless, he grants that a person might believe that it is likely that a proposition is true and, thus, follow a probable opinion. There is, however, a significant difference between believing a proposition and believing that it is

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[21] See Sect. 3.1, above.

[22] See Sect. 3.1, above.

likely that the proposition is true. The content of the former is *the proposition*. The content of the latter is *it is likely that the proposition is true*. Thus, Descartes's account of adopting an opinion allows for the possibility that one can believe that it is likely that a proposition is true and, nevertheless, both accept and withhold judgment about the proposition itself.

To illustrate the similarity of Descartes's conception of adopting an opinion to this contemporary notion of acceptance, let us consider the example he uses when introducing his notion. According to Descartes, insofar as a person adopts an opinion for practical purposes, he or she

> would be imitating a traveller who, upon finding himself lost in a forest, should not wander about turning this way and that, and still less stay in one place, but should keep walking as straight as he can in one direction, never changing it for slight reasons even if mere chance made him choose it in the first place; for in this way, even if he does not go exactly where he wishes, he will at least end up in a place where he is likely to be better off than in the middle of a forest. (CSM 1.123; AT 6.24-5)

Nowhere in the example does Descartes describe the traveler as having an idea of a proposition; however, the traveler seems to act rationally, so it seems safe to assume that he or she engages in some form of practical reasoning and, hence, that he or she conceives a proposition, does not believe the proposition to be false, and elects to act as if it were true. Thus, although the example is surely under-described, the traveler seems (in contemporary terminology) to accept a proposition. That is, he or she seems to have an idea of a proposition, something like, *if I walk in this direction, I will find my way out of the forest*; moreover, he or she does not believe that the proposition is false, and he or she acts as if it were true for the purpose of getting out of the forest. He or she does not, however, *judge* that the proposition is true—that is, he or she does not *believe* the proposition. Thus, accepting a proposition is different from believing a proposition.

Understanding the difference between acceptance and belief is important to understanding the context and limits of Descartes's method of belief formation. In the *Discourse*, he claims,

> [B]efore starting to rebuild your house, it is not enough simply to pull it down, to make provision for materials and architects (or else train yourself in architecture), and to have carefully drawn up the plans; you must also provide yourself with some other place where you can live comfortably while building is in progress. (CSM 1.122; AT 6.22)

That is, before a person commits himself or herself to Descartes's rigorous and systematic method of belief formation *regarding propositions concerning the sciences*, he or she must first make some practical provisions. On Descartes's account, these practical provisions include the person committing himself or herself to a provisional code of conduct, which includes a commitment to *accept* (but not necessarily to *judge*) probable opinions as necessary for conducting ordinary affairs, as well as commitments to obey the laws and customs (including religious customs) of one's nation, to try to master oneself rather than fortune, and so forth

(CSM 1.122ff; AT 6.22ff; see also CSM 1.186-7; AT 9B.14-5).[23] Thus, on Descartes's account, the person who conducts his or her mental life properly embraces not only Descartes's rigorous and systematic method of belief formation, which is limited to *belief* formation *regarding propositions concerning the sciences*, but also his permissive and common sense code of conduct for accepting opinions and performing actions with respect to ordinary affairs.

3.3   Conclusion

In summary, Descartes provides a method of belief formation that includes not only a method of *enquiry* and a method of *judgment* but also a method of *belief fixation*. He intends this method to be understood in its proper context and complemented by his provisional code of conduct. That is, he conceives of the method as having different norms that govern (i) the propositions people *believe* concerning the foundational sciences, which require *absolute certainty*, and (ii) the propositions people *accept* for pragmatic purposes in ordinary life, which require nothing more than *moral certainty*. Moreover, Descartes claims that by following his method of belief formation, one should be able not only to unmask the beauty of the sciences but also *to raise one's nature to a higher degree of perfection* (see CSMK 51; AT 1.339). Thus, Descartes's proper method of belief formation is a normative method with, as I will make clearer in the chapters that follow, a distinctive, ethical focus on human excellence, or virtue. Using the term "belief" in a colloquial sense—which includes both "belief" and "acceptance" in the technical, philosophical senses of those terms, discussed above—let us refer to the method advocated by Descartes as "the Cartesian framework for virtuous belief formation."

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[23] Descartes does not fully explain the "provisional" nature of the code of conduct. As I understand his position, the code is provisional in the following way. People need to adopt the code of conduct so that they can act on doubtful opinions, as needed, for conducting their daily affairs; however, the scope of the code will change over time for the person who forms his or her beliefs properly. I take it that the way in which the scope of the code is supposed to change is (roughly) as follows. For a person deeply engaged in the methodological doubt of the First Meditation, the scope of the code of conduct may include all of the person's former beliefs. Having completed the *Meditations*, the scope of the code of conduct would likely include only those beliefs that do not concern the foundational metaphysical issues—e.g., beliefs about the existence of God, the nature of the soul, the eternal truths, and so forth. As the scope of his or her knowledge (i.e., *scientia*) continues to increase, the scope of the code of conduct would likely decrease and include only those beliefs that concern neither metaphysics, nor physics, nor medicine, nor mechanics, nor morals, etc. (see CSM 1.186; AT 9B.14; CSMK 53, 58; AT 1.349, 370). Thus, as I understand it, the code of conduct is "provisional" since its scope continually decreases as a person's knowledge (i.e., *scientia*) increases until, at last, he or she can abandon the code altogether, as it becomes irrelevant. Whether Descartes believes it is possible to abandon completely the code of conduct in one's lifetime is unclear.

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Chapter 4
Morality as a Cosmopolitan Art

To explain Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation, I need to clarify not only his account of the nature of belief but also his account of virtue. In the last chapter, I elucidated his conception of belief and, consequently, the Cartesian framework for virtuous belief formation, which I intend to elaborate in more detail in the next chapter. In this chapter, I will elucidate his account of virtue, in two parts. First, I will argue that Descartes conceives of morality as an eclectic cosmopolitan art of natural beatitude, and I will explain why his account of morality is not a science and is only problematically regarded as Stoic. Second, I will show how Descartes intends this art to be applied, explaining how he tries to advance beyond the theories of the ancient moralists by developing both an adequate account of virtue and an accurate account of the techniques, or "remedies," that one can employ to acquire virtue. In so doing, I will show how Descartes attempts to provide his readers with the principal truths necessary to facilitate their development from having merely the passion of generosity[1] to possessing the virtue of wisdom, in its highest degree, and, consequently, to enjoying natural beatitude (see CSMK 258; AT 4.267).

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[1] The term with which Descartes refers to this passion and the related virtue, *generosite*, has rather infelicitous connotations for speakers of English. Perhaps it would have been better, for English speakers at least, had Descartes chosen to use the scholastic term for the virtue—i.e., "magnanimity" (see CSM 1.387-8; AT 11.453-4; ST II-II, Q. 129, a. 3; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV.3). Nonetheless, Descartes's explanation of the nature of the virtue, which I will discuss below, should suffice to alleviate the confusion.

4.1   The Nature of Descartes's Morality

4.1.1   Is It a Science?

In the *Discourse*, Descartes offers a moral code, consisting of four maxims.[2] First, obey the laws and customs of one's country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace one had been instructed from one's childhood, and govern oneself in all other matters according to the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom one happens to live. Second, be as firm and decisive in one's actions as one can, and follow even the most doubtful opinions, once adopted, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain. Third, always master oneself rather than fortune, and change one's desires rather than the order of the world. Fourth, review the various occupations which men have in this life, in order to try to choose the best (CSM 1.122-4; AT 6.23-7). He recognizes this as "an imperfect moral code" and offers it merely as one people "may follow provisionally while [they] do not yet know a better one" (CSM 1.186-7; AT 9B.15).

In the *Principles*, he claims that "the study of philosophy is more necessary for the regulation of our morals and our conduct in this life than is the use of our eyes to guide our steps" (CSM 1.180; AT 9B.3-4). Moreover, he suggests that after developing adequate systems of metaphysics and of physics, one could develop all the other sciences, which he reduces, principally, to three: medicine, mechanics, and morals. "By 'morals'," he has in mind, "the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom" (CSM 1.187-8; AT 9B.16-7). Lacking adequate support, Descartes never completes such a system of the sciences (see CSM 1.187-8; AT 9B.16-7; CSMK 275; AT 4.329).[3]

He does not, however, leave his readers without any account of morality. Rather, he provides a fairly traditional and intriguing account of virtue ethics, the details of which appear, principally, in two sets of writings: *The Passions of the Soul* and his correspondence both with Princess Elizabeth and with Queen Christina. The question facing Descartes's commentators is: What is the nature of Descartes's account

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[2] As I noted in Chap. 3, Sect. 3.2.1.

[3] Levi suggests that Descartes views the challenge to obtaining such scientific knowledge of ethics as much stronger than that posed by a mere lack of adequate money, time, resources, or support. He writes,

> Materially ... the content of Descartes's ethics is not, and *cannot be*, 'scientific'. In the letter to Elizabeth of 15 September 1645 Descartes lists the fundamental metaphysical and physical truths which are required 'pour discerner ce qui est le meilleur en toutes les actions de la via.' To be 'disposé à bien juger' requires the knowledge of the truth and the 'habitude' which leads to it. But only God knows all things and we must content ourselves with knowing those 'qui sont le plus à notre usage.' (1964: 287, emphasis mine)

of ethics, if it is neither the provisional morality of the *Discourse* nor the most perfect moral science to which he alludes in the *Principles*?

One possibility is that it is not "the most perfect" moral science but, rather, a science of some other kind. Such a proposal might seem rather plausible since Descartes recognizes that there are instances of knowledge [*scientia*] that are not as certain as mathematics (see, e.g., CSM 1.12; AT 10.364-6). Perhaps he conceives of morality as such a science—"a real science," which, although "it has no relation to mathematics," remains "no less strictly rational since it pursues a clear and distinct, completely certain, knowledge of its object, even though the object is intrinsically obscure and confused" (Gueroult 1984, 202). However, Descartes contends that the sciences that provide less certainty that mathematics need to develop their conclusions by means of deduction, or "the inference of something as following necessarily from some other propositions which are known with certainty" (CSM 1 15; AT 10.369). Since the imperfect sciences require certain inferences from "propositions which are known with certainty" and the subject matter of Cartesian morality, on this proposal, "is intrinsically obscure and confused," it seems that the account of morality that Descartes offers is not an imperfect science. In fact, he seems to reject a "science" the object of which is uncertain when he says, via Eudoxus in the *Search after Truth*, "[I]n the case of sciences, whose principles are obscure and uncertain, those who are prepared to state their views honestly must admit that, for all the time they have spent reading many a vast tome, they have ended up realizing that they know nothing and have learnt nothing" (CSM 2.419; AT 10.526). So, there is a reasonable amount of evidence suggesting that Descartes's account of ethics is neither the provisional morality of the *Discourse*, nor the most perfect moral science to which he alludes in the *Principles*, nor an imperfect science.

What is it, then? A comment Descartes makes at *Principles* 4.204 suggests a plausible answer. Discussing the limits and significance of his account of physics, he says,

> I shall think I have achieved enough provided only that what I have written is such as to correspond accurately with all the phenomena of nature. This will indeed be *sufficient for application in ordinary life*, since *medicine and mechanics, and all the other arts which can be fully developed with the help of physics*, are directed only towards items that can be perceived by the senses and are therefore to be counted among the phenomena of nature. (CSM 1.289; AT 8A.327, emphasis mine)

Descartes counts the actual, as opposed to the ideally possible, disciplines of medicine and mechanics among the *arts* and suggests that what is required for these is an account that corresponds accurately with the phenomena of nature and is sufficient for application in ordinary life. Given his description of philosophy in the Preface to the *Principles*, it seems reasonable to read *Principles* 4.204 as suggesting that Descartes regards morality as one of "the other arts which can be fully developed with the help of physics." Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the account of morality that Descartes provides is, strictly speaking, not a *science* but an *art*, which has at least the moral certainty required for ordinary life (see CSM 1.289-90; AT 8A.328-9). It is not, however, a merely empirical art of trial and

error (see Gueroult 1984, 200). Rather, it is an art *informed by* the sciences of metaphysics and of physics.

Those with certain sympathies to the doctrines of Descartes's Scholastic predecessors might wonder why he seems to disregard another possible alternative in developing his account of morality. Scholastics, such as Aquinas, claim that there are two kinds of sciences. On the one hand, there are those that "proceed from a principle known by the natural light of intelligence, such as arithmetic and geometry." On the other hand, there are those that "proceed from principles known by the light of a higher science," such as sacred science, which "proceeds from principles established by . . . the science of God and the blessed" (ST I, Q. 1, a. 2). Given both Descartes's apparent commitment to the existence of God and his interest in establishing sciences on firm foundations, one might wonder whether Descartes offers an account of morality as a type of sacred science.

In fact, there is compelling evidence against such a proposal. Descartes distinguishes between *supernatural beatitude*, which one can know by means of the supernatural light, and *natural beatitude*, which one can know by the natural light, or reason (see CSMK 258, 272, 324; AT 4.267, 314; 5.82; Gueroult 1984, 180). As is his custom, Descartes leaves supernatural theorizing to the theologians and makes no effort to develop an art of supernatural beatitude. Rather—like the ancient philosophers, in general, and Seneca, in particular—Descartes develops an art of natural beatitude (see CSMK 324-6; AT 82-5; CSM 1.404; AT 11.488). In so doing, he develops a kind of naturalistic account of ethics.

It is not, however, "the morality of an atheist" (Gueroult 1984, 189).[4] Rather, as one would reasonably expect from a philosopher with broad and radical ambitions, Descartes offers an account of morality that he intends to be useful for every person—Christian, Jew, "Turk," pagan, and so forth. In so doing, he attempts to provide a truly cosmopolitan art of morality (see Rodis-Lewis 1998, 210).

4.1.2   Is It Stoic?

In light of his intention to develop a cosmopolitan art of natural beatitude, it has become relatively common among Descartes's commentators to identify his account of morality as "Stoic." This characterization of his view has a reasonable amount of evidential support. For instance, he suggests (i) that virtuous people ought to focus on that which they can control, (ii) that they ought to control their passions, and (iii) that they ought to strive to live in accordance with nature, or God's will (see, e.g., CSM 1.384-8, 396, 403-4; AT 11.446-54, 471-2, 487-8; CSM 2.39-43; AT 7.56-62; CSMK 256-8, 260-2, 324-6; AT 4.263-7; 273-7; 5.81-6). It is, however, rather misleading for at least two reasons, as I will show presently.

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[4] For a historical assessment of Descartes's religious views, see, e.g., Rodis-Lewis 1998, 200–15.

4.1.2.1   The Supreme Good and the End of Human Action

One of ways that identifying Descartes's account of morality as "Stoic" is misleading is that it mischaracterizes his accounts of the supreme good and the end, or goal, of human action. Let me explain.

According to Descartes, the supreme good "considered in itself without reference to anything else" is God (CSMK 324; AT 5.82). Among the goods with which his account of morality is concerned—namely, the goods of this life—Descartes focuses on two, "the one being to know, and the other to will, what is good" (see CSMK 325; AT 5.83; CSM 1.404; AT 11.488). In the Preface to the French edition of the *Principles*, he seems to defend a traditional ancient view, claiming that "the supreme good, considered by natural reason without the light of faith, is nothing other than the knowledge of the truth through its first causes, that is to say wisdom" (CSM 1.180-1; AT 9B.4). In a letter to Queen Christina from 1647, the year of the publication of the French edition of the *Principles*, he seems to defend, more specifically, a traditional Stoic view. He says, "I do not see that it is possible to dispose [the will] better than by a firm and constant resolution to carry out to the letter all the things which one judges to be best, and to employ all the powers of one's mind in finding out what these are. This by itself constitutes all the virtues . . ." (CSMK 325; AT 5.83). He goes on, however, to note that this way of controlling one's will "alone, finally, produces the greatest and most solid contentment in life" and concludes that "this is what constitutes the supreme good" [*c'est en cela que consiste le souverain bien*] (CSMK 325; AT 5.83).

To what, though, does the "this" [*cela*] in the final sentence refer: (i) to virtue, which is the proper control of one's will by means of right reason; (ii) to the resulting contentment, which he refers to as "tranquility" or "peace of mind" (see CSM 1.396; AT 11.471); or (iii) to both? Which is the supreme good? According to Descartes,

> [T]here is a difference between happiness [*beatitude*], the supreme good, and the final end or goal towards which our actions ought to tend. For *happiness is not the supreme good, but presupposes it*, being the contentment or satisfaction of mind which results from possessing it. *The end of our actions*, however, *can be understood to be one or the other*; for the supreme good is undoubtedly the thing we ought to set ourselves as the goal of our actions, and the resulting contentment of the mind is also rightly called our end, since it is the attraction which makes us seek the supreme good. (CSMK 261; AT 4.275, emphasis mine; see also CSMK 268; AT 4.305)

In essence, Descartes's view is this: Human beings naturally desire tranquility, or peace of mind. This desire causes people of sound judgment to pursue virtue. The pursuit of virtue naturally causes tranquility, or peace of mind. Thus, both virtue and tranquility, or peace of mind, are reasonably regarded as the end, or goal, of human action; strictly speaking, however, it is virtue that is "the supreme good."

Descartes suggests that by giving a proper account of the relationship between the supreme good and the end of human action, he is able to "reconcile the two most opposed and most famous opinions of the ancient philosophers—that of Zeno, who thought virtue or honor the supreme good, and that of Epicurus, who thought the

supreme good was contentment, to which he gave the name pleasure" (CSMK 325; AT 5.83). Why, though, does he think that his view allows him to *reconcile* the traditional Stoic and classical Epicurean views when he seems, simply, to affirm the Stoic view that virtue is the supreme good? His comments in a letter to Princess Elizabeth from August 18, 1645 suggest a plausible answer. The relevant passage is worth quoting at length:

> [T]he pagan philosophers had three main views about the supreme good and the end of our actions: that of Epicurus, who said it was pleasure; that of Zeno, who insisted that it was virtue; and that of Aristotle, who made it consist of all the perfections, as much of the body as of the mind. These three views can, I think, be accepted as true and as consistent with each other, provided they are interpreted favorably.
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> For Aristotle considered the supreme good of the whole human nature in general . . . And so he had reason to make it consist of all the perfections of which human nature is capable. But this does not serve our purpose.
>
> Zeno, by contrast, considered the supreme good which each person can possess. That is why he also had very good reason to say that it consists solely in virtue, because this is the only good, among all those we can possess, which depends entirely on our free will. By equating all the vices, however, he made this virtue so severe and so inimical to pleasure that I think only depressed people, or those who minds are entirely detached from their bodies, could be counted among its adherents.
>
> Lastly, when Epicurus considered what happiness consists in and to what purpose or end our actions tend, he was not wrong to say that it is pleasure in general—that is to say, contentment of the mind. For although the mere knowledge of our duty might oblige us to do good actions, yet this would not cause us to enjoy any happiness if we got no pleasure from it. . . . Suppose there is a bull's-eye: you can make people want to hit the bull's-eye by showing them the prize, but they cannot win the prize if they do not see the bull's-eye; conversely, those who see the bull's-eye are not thereby induced to fire at it if they do not know there is a prize to be won. So too virtue, which is the bull's-eye, does not come to be strongly desired when it is seen all on its own; and contentment, like the prize, cannot be gained unless it is pursued. (CSMK 261; AT 4.276)

Descartes seems to think that by regarding tranquility, or peace of mind, not as "the supreme good" but as, in some sense, both a *cause* and an *effect* of the wise person's pursuit of virtue, he is able to develop an account or morality that affirms the truths both of Stoicism and of Epicureanism without denying the truths that each omits.

How, though, does he reconcile his Stoic-Epicurean synthesis with his understanding of Aristotle's treatment of the supreme good and the end of our actions? To answer this question, let me begin by clarifying a distinction from Aristotle. In his discussion of happiness in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1096b–1097a), Aristotle explains the nature of various types of goods. The first are *instrumental goods*—that is, those goods that are merely a means to an end. His example of such a good is money. The second are *intrinsic goods*. Among these, he distinguishes between two types. On the one hand, there are *incomplete* intrinsic goods—that is, those things that are good in their own right and for some other end. On the other hand, there are *complete* intrinsic goods—that is, those things that are good in their own right and never for some other end. His examples of incomplete and complete intrinsic goods are virtue and happiness, respectively. On Descartes's account, the supreme good of which one is capable by means of natural reason, without the light

of faith, is an incomplete intrinsic good—namely, virtue. The end, or goal, of human action is a complete intrinsic good—namely, tranquility or peace of mind.

Thus, one of the ways that it is misleading to identify Descartes's account of morality as "Stoic" is that it mischaracterizes his accounts of the supreme good and the end of goal of human action. More specifically, it obscures his ambitious attempt to reconcile the views of Zeno, Epicurus, and Aristotle by conceiving of virtue both as an end in itself—that is, as "the supreme good"—and as a means to an end.[5]

4.1.2.2 The Role of the Passions

A second way that identifying Descartes's account of morality as "Stoic" is misleading is that it mischaracterizes his conception of the role of the passions in the good life. To elucidate the problem, let me explain both the traditional Stoic account and Descartes's account in a bit more detail.

Contrary to what an unscholarly caricature suggests, the traditional Stoic account of morality does not teach that virtue requires the extirpation of all of one's emotions or "passions," in the common sense of the term. It does teach that people should strive for *apatheia* and, thus, that the virtuous sage is free from *pathe*. The set of affective states to which the Greek term *pathe* refers, however, is much smaller than the set of affective states to which the English term "passions" refers. The English term "passions" refers to two different kinds of affective states. First, it refers to what the Stoics called *pathe*, or those affective states that are overwhelming and contrary to reason. Among the *pathe* are four principal groups: (i) appetite or desire, which includes anger, sexual lust, and honor of riches; (ii) pleasure, which includes self-gratification and rejoicing at the misery of others; (iii) fear, which includes anguish, shame, and confusion; and (iv) distress, which includes pity, grief, worry, and sorrow. Second, it refers to what they called *eupathe*, or those affective states that are in accordance to reason. Among the *eupathe* are three principal groups, corresponding to each of the first three principal groups of the *pathe*: (i) wishing, (ii) joy, and (iii) watchfulness or caution.[6] Thus, in claiming that virtuous people should strive for *apatheia*, the traditional Stoic account of morality suggests merely that they should strive to lead a life that is characterized by the absence of some affective states—namely, *pathe*—without denying that such a life would be marked by the presence of other affective states—namely, *eupathe* (see, e.g., Annas 1992, 114–5; Cottingham 1998, 55–7; Pereboom 1994, 594–8).

Descartes, however, explicitly rejects the Stoic account of the passions. According to him, they "are *all* by nature good" (CSM 1.403; AT 11.485-6, emphasis mine). Their function is to dispose people's souls both to want things

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[5] Thus, on my reading, Descartes does characterize virtue as a means to an end, but he does not characterize it as a *mere* means to an end, or as a "mere technique" (cf. Marshall 1998, 85–95).

[6] The Stoics did not recognize a virtuous analogue to distress.

that are useful for them and to persist in these volitions (CSM 1. 349; AT 11.372). Their utility consists in strengthening and prolonging "thoughts in the soul which it is good for the soul to preserve and which otherwise might easily be erased from it," and their harm consists solely "in their strengthening and preserving these thoughts beyond what is required, or in their strengthening and preserving others on which it is not good to dwell" (CSM 1. 354; AT 11. 383).

Moreover, his specific treatment of some of the Stoic *pathe* evinces his rejection of the traditional doctrine of *apatheia*. For instance, he characterizes anger as "a kind of hatred or aversion that we have towards those who have done some evil or who have tried to harm ... us" (CSM 1.399; AT 11.478), and he describes it as "useful in giving us the strength to ward off ... wrongs." Similarly, he characterizes shame as a "sadness based also on self-love, which proceeds from the expectation or fear of being blamed," and he claims that it is a passion that is essential for the good life since it moves us to virtue (CSM 1.401; AT 11.482). Likewise, to cite one final example, he characterizes pity as "a kind of sadness mingled with love or with good will towards those whom we see suffering some evil which we think they do not deserve" (CSM 1.395; AT 11.469), and he claims that this passion is felt by "those who are the most generous and strong-minded" (CSM 1.395; AT 11.469-70). In fact, in stark contrast to traditional Stoic doctrine, which apparently has no place for even a *eupathos* analogous to pity, he says, "[T]hose who are insensible to pity comprise only evil-minded and envious people who naturally hate all mankind, or people who are so brutish and so thoroughly blinded by good fortune or rendered desperate by bad fortune, that they do not think any evil could possibly befall them" (CSM 1.396; AT 11.470-1).

In essence, on Descartes's account, people have nothing to avoid but the misuse and excess[7] of the passions (CSM 1.403; AT 11.485-6). Thus, he affirms a more Aristotelian doctrine of *metriopatheia*, which claims the passions are affective states that people ought to moderate,[8] and rejects the traditional Stoic doctrine of *apatheia*, which claims that there are certain kinds of passions that people ought to eliminate.

4.1.2.3   A Kind of Stoicism?

In his attempt to "reconcile the two most opposed and most famous opinions of the ancient philosophers—that of Zeno ... and that of Epicurus" (CSMK 325; AT 5.83), Descartes seems to develop a moral theory that is, strictly speaking, neither traditionally Stoic nor classically Epicurean. Those familiar with his moral writings

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[7] On Descartes's account, "There are ... two kinds of excess. There is one which changes the nature of a thing, and turns it from good to bad, and prevents it from remaining subject to reason; and there is another which only increases its quantity and turns it from good to better" (CSMK 276; AT 4.331). Descartes is concerned with the former.

[8] See, e.g., his specific comments on anger in the *Principles* (CSM 1.400; AT 11.481).

would likely be willing to grant *that* point, but they may object, offering the following argument: Descartes's account of morality has affinities with that of Seneca, and Seneca's account is certainly Stoic. Therefore, despite his evident differences with certain traditional doctrines, Descartes's account of morality is still Stoic.

Is the argument in defense of the objection cogent? As is evident in his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth, Descartes certainly has an appreciation of Seneca's work on morality. In a letter from August 4, 1645, he recommends Seneca's *De Vita Beata* to her and suggests that discussing the work with her would give him the opportunity to improve his own moral theorizing (CSMK 256, AT 4.252-3). In that same letter, he expresses his respect for Seneca's views and claims that the book would have been "the finest and most useful that a pagan philosopher could have written" had he taught his readers "all the principal truths whose knowledge is necessary to facilitate the practice of virtue and to regulate [their] passions, and thus to enjoy natural happiness." (CSMK 258; AT 4.267). In a subsequent letter, two weeks later, he expresses qualified agreement with Seneca's position (CSMK 259-62; AT 4.271-7). Thus, there is evidence that the first premise of the argument is warranted.

Moreover, Seneca (c. 1 B.C.–65 A.D.) is widely recognized, along with Marcus Aurelius (121–180 A.D.) and Epictetus (55–135 A.D.), as one of the "Late Stoa," which succeeded both the "Middle Stoa"—most notably, Posidonius of Apamea (c. 135–c. 51 B.C.) and Panaetius of Rhodes (c. 185–109 B.C.)—and the "Early Stoa"—Antipater of Tarsus (second century B.C.), Diogenes of Babylon (c. 240–152 B.C.), Chrysippus (c. 280–c. 206 B.C.), Cleanthes of Assos (331–c. 230 B.C.), and the founder of Stoic school, Zeno of Citium (c. 334–263 B.C.). Thus, there is reason to regard the second premise of the argument as warranted.

The inference might seem compelling, but is it? Let me begin to answer that question by noting three senses in which Descartes's account of morality is not "Stoic." First, it is not "Stoic" in the sense that it maintains doctrinal purity with the teachings of the school's founder. Second, although Descartes agrees with some of the principal doctrines of Seneca, he also criticizes and offers a reinterpretation of Seneca's work. For instance, in the letter to Princess Elizabeth from August 18, 1645, Descartes criticizes Seneca's use of "many superfluous words" and offers Christianized readings of Stoic terms like "nature" [*natura*] and "wisdom" [*sapientia*, *sagesse*]. Furthermore, it is unclear whether Descartes's attempt to reconcile the supreme good and the end, or goal, of human action is compatible with Seneca's own attempt to accommodate the views of Epicurus. Thus, Descartes's account of morality is not even "Stoic" in the sense that it maintains doctrinal purity with the Late Stoa. Third, it is not "Stoic" in the sense that it shares the kind of historic continuity that the philosophical work of Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, Diogenes, Anitpater, Panaetius, and Posidonius share. So, if the argument concludes by asserting that Descartes's account of morality is still "Stoic" in any of these three senses, it is not cogent.

Perhaps, however, the conclusion of the argument is much weaker. If the objector who offers such an argument intends to suggest merely that Descartes's

account of morality has some notable similarities to Stoic morality, then the argument might be cogent, but it remains problematic for two reasons.

First, as noted above, Descartes attempts to reconcile not only substantial Stoic and Epicurean doctrines but also substantial Aristotelian and Christian teachings as well. So, one may reasonably be tempted to characterize his account of morality in a variety of ways—for instance, (i) as a Stoic theory that is influenced by the views of Epicurus and Aristotle, (ii) as an Aristotelian theory that is influenced by the views of Seneca and Epicurus, (iii) as an Epicurean theory that is influenced by the views of Seneca and Aristotle, (iv) as a Christian theory that is influenced by the philosophical views of the Stoics, Epicureans, and Aristotelians, and so forth.

Second, a number of influences, both direct and indirect, on Descartes's account of morality came from the Stoic Revival of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For the sake of brevity, let me note just five.[9] The first is Justus Lipsius, who develops a Christian interpretation of Seneca's *De Vida Beata* that seems to influence Descartes's own reading of that Stoic work (Levi 1964,67–73, 291–2). The second is Guillaume du Vair, who develops a Christian reading of the morality of Epictetus, which seems to influence Descartes's account of the will (Levi 1964,74–95, 286–7, 295). The third and fourth are Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Charron, two authors who are influenced by Lipsius and du Vair (Levi 1964,1, 70, 75, 94–111) and with whose work Descartes is familiar (CSMK 303; AT 4.574-5; see also Rodis-Lewis 1998, 47). The fifth is Frances de Sales who may have influenced Descartes in developing both his account of the will and his distinction between passions of the body and those of the soul (Levi 1964, 113ff, 271, 284).

Therefore, reading the conclusion in the weaker sense—that is, as claiming that Descartes's account of morality merely has some substantial similarities to Stoic morality—might help save the argument from trying to establish its conclusion by means of a fallacious inference. However, to claim simply that "Descartes's account of morality is Stoic" without proper clarification significantly obscures both (i) Descartes's eclectic appreciation and utilization of the views of the ancients and (ii) the influence on his account of morality by his contemporaries and immediate predecessors.

Thus, given the problems with attempting to characterize Descartes's account of morality as an instance of, or even a close kin of, some particular school of thought, it would be better to appreciate it for what it is. On Descartes's account, morality is an eclectic cosmopolitan art of natural beatitude—one that is worthy of consideration, on its own merits, both in theory and, as I will show presently, in application.[10]

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[9] Levi (1964) provides an excellent and detailed account of the movement.

[10] So doing not only avoids the problems previously noted; it has an added benefit, as well. In a letter to an undetermined correspondent in 1679, Leibniz claims that Descartes's "morality is a composite of the opinions of the Stoics and Epicureans" and suggests that this Cartesian synthesis of ancient moral systems is not particularly remarkable "for Seneca had already reconciled them quite well" (Leibniz 1989, 241). Leibniz's critique suggests that Descartes's account of morality is little more than a rehashed presentation of the work of Seneca with little, if anything, more to offer. This characterization of Descartes's account is misleading, for the reasons noted above.

4.2   The Application of Descartes's Cosmopolitan Art

Descartes expresses a general suspicion about the ancients' understanding of morality. In the *Discourse*, for instance, he compares their moral writings "to very proud and magnificent palaces built only on sand and mud" since although they extol the virtues, "they do not adequately explain how to recognize a virtue, and often what they call by this fine name is nothing but a case of callousness, or vanity, or desperation, or parricide" (CSM 1.114; AT 6.8). He even has reservations about the best of such writings, expressing disappointment, for example, that Seneca's account of morality fails to make clear "the principal truths whose knowledge is necessary to facilitate the practice of virtue" so that people can learn "to regulate [their] passions, and thus to enjoy natural happiness" (CSMK 258; AT 4.267). Nonetheless, he claims that one of the chief ways that one can discover the means that philosophy provides for acquiring natural beatitude is "to examine what the ancients have written on this question, and try to advance beyond them by adding something to their precepts" (see CSMK 256; AT 4.252).

In essence, he claims that ancient morality fails to provide both an adequate account of virtue and an accurate account of the psychological mechanisms and techniques that one could employ to acquire virtue. For each of these shortcomings, Descartes offers a solution, as I will explain presently.

4.2.1   Virtue

In the *Passions*, Descartes describes virtues, very generally, as "habits in the soul which dispose it to have certain thoughts" (CSM 1.387; AT 11.453). Elsewhere, however, he offers two important clarifications. First, in his correspondence, he claims that virtue consists in adhering to "the firm and constant resolution *to carry out whatever reason recommends* without being diverted by [one's] passions" (CSMK 257-8; AT 4.265, emphasis mine; see also CSMK 325; AT 5.83-4). This clarification is important since, on Descartes's account, a person can be praised or blamed not for possessing dispositions to have just any kind of thoughts but for possessing acquired dispositions to have a particular kind of thoughts—namely, volitions, or exercises of our free will (see CSM 1.384; AT 11.445-6). Second, in the Preface to the *Principles*—in accordance with his intention to offer an art of natural beatitude—he distinguishes "true virtues" from "pure and genuine virtues." He says, "As for the true virtues, many . . . arise not solely from the knowledge of what is right but from some error," such as goodness that arises from simplicity, piety that arises from fear, and courage that arises from desperation. In contrast, he claims that the "pure and genuine virtues"

> proceed solely from knowledge of what is right . . . have one and the same nature and are included under the single term 'wisdom'. For whoever possesses the firm and powerful resolve always to use his reasoning powers correctly, as far as he can, and to carry out whatever he knows to be best, is truly wise, so far as his nature permits. And simply because

of this, he will possess justice, courage, temperance, and all the other virtues; but they will be interlinked in such a way that no one virtue stands out among the others. Such virtues are far superior to those which owe their distinguishing marks to some admixture of vice, but because they are less well known to the majority they do not normally receive such lavish praise. (CSM 1.191; AT 8A.2-3)

This distinction is important since, on Descartes's account, wisdom requires not only the proper disposition of the will but also the accurate perception of the intellect (CSM 1.191; AT 8A.3).

According to Descartes, the pure and genuine virtue of wisdom is the supreme good of life, considered by natural reason without the light of faith, by which human beings possess all the other virtues and achieve natural beatitude—that is, tranquility, or peace of mind. Why, then, does he describe generosity, not wisdom, as "the key to all the other virtues and a remedy for every disorder of the passions" (CSM 1.388; AT 11.454; see also CSM 1.385; AT 11.447-8)?

To answer this question, let me begin by noting Descartes's distinction among the various levels of wisdom. He explains them, as follows:

The first level contains only notions which are so clear in themselves that they can be acquired without meditation. The second comprises everything we are acquainted with through sensory experience. The third comprises what we learn by conversing with other people. And one may add a fourth category, namely what is learned by reading books—not all books, but those which have been written by people who are capable of instructing us well; for in such cases we hold a kind of conversation with the authors. I think that all the wisdom which is generally possessed is acquired in these four ways. ... Now in all ages there have been great men who have tried to find a fifth way of reaching wisdom—a way which is incomparably more elevated and more sure than the other four. This consists in the search for the first causes and the true principles which enable us to deduce the reasons for everything we are capable of knowing; and it is above all those who have laboured to this end who have been called philosophers. (CSM 1.181; AT 9B.5)

Each of these types of wisdom may be a virtue, but only the fifth qualifies as the "pure and genuine virtue" of wisdom to which he refers in the Preface to the *Principles* since only this level of wisdom would essentially consisted of knowledge that arises free from error. Nonetheless, on Descartes's account, even those who lack the "pure and genuine virtue" of wisdom may possess the true virtue of generosity, if, for example, they read books by someone who is capable of instructing them well. For instance, Descartes presumably thinks that people who read the *Meditations* and the *Passions* properly would occupy themselves frequently in consideration of "frequently in considering the nature of free will and the many advantages which proceed from a firm resolution to make good use of it— while also considering, on the other hand, the many vain and useless cares which trouble ambitious people." Consequently, they may arouse the passion of generosity. Subsequently, they may acquire the virtue (CSM 1.388; AT 11.454). This virtue has two components:

The first consists in his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him but this freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using this freedom well or badly. The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well—that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best. (CSM 1.384; AT 11.445-6)

The person who possesses the true virtue of generosity is able to pursue and, ultimately, to possess and to exercise the "pure and genuine virtue" of wisdom (see CSM 1.384; AT 11.445-6), and "simply because of this, he will possess justice, courage, temperance, and all the other virtues" (CSM 1.191; AT 8A.2-3). In this way, generosity is the key to wisdom and, hence, all the other virtues.

Thus, on Descartes's account, the moral life begins with generosity and ends with wisdom. How, though, does that work in practice? That is, how does one proceed from the former to the latter?

4.2.2   Moral Psychology

To answer the question, let me begin by discussing an ideal case.[11] On Descartes's account, wise people choose to perform good acts because they have knowledge—that is, a set of well-founded, true, habitual beliefs—that manifests itself in the form of certain occurrent beliefs, or judgments, when they attend to certain ideas. There are, in this progression, three acts with which his account of morality is most concerned. Ordered in the sequence leading to action, they are: attending, assenting, and choosing. On Descartes's account, people naturally choose well once they have formed true judgments. As he notes in the *Discourse*, "[S]ince our will tends to pursue or avoid only what our intellect represents as good or bad, we need only to judge well in order to act well, and to judge as well as we can in order to do our best" (CSM 1.125; AT 6.28). Thus, if there is a problem for the wise, it is not with the control of their choosing, which follows naturally, provided that they are making true judgments. Moreover, given their knowledge—or well-founded, true, habitual beliefs—once they attend to certain ideas, they are naturally disposed to assent.[12] Thus, in the case of the wise, it is not only choosing that comes naturally but assenting as well. Therefore, if there were a moral struggle for the wise, it would be merely with their ability to control one act of the will—namely, attending to the right ideas.

For present purposes, let us set aside the question of whether the wise would have such a struggle and focus, instead, on the significance of these ideal cases for the nonideal cases of those who are trying to proceed from generosity to wisdom. As is evident from the passage from the *Discourse* in the discussion of the wise, above (i.e., CSM 1.125; AT 6.28), it is true not merely of the wise but of all people that choosing well follows inevitably, or almost inevitably, after the formation of

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[11] One of the ways in which Descartes attempts to improve on the work of the ancient moralists is to develop a detailed account of the psychological mechanisms employed in the acquisition of virtue, which he does in the *Passions*. In the remainder of this chapter, I will merely sketch part of his account of these mechanisms and explain some of the techniques he suggests that one ought to employ in the pursuit of virtue. In the following chapter, I will explain the process of virtuous belief formation in more detail.

[12] See Descartes's account of habitual belief—Chap. 3, Sect. 3.1.

true judgments (see also CSMK 233, 342; AT 4.115-6, 5.159). Consequently, the principal acts of the will with which Descartes's account of morality is concerned are, simply, attending and assenting. Since one of the things that most clearly distinguishes those who are wise from those who are not yet wise is the possession of well-founded, true, habitual beliefs, Descartes emphasizes the importance of forming such beliefs as one of the chief means of acquiring virtue. They are the "proper weapons of the soul" (CSM 1.347; AT 11.367-8), one of which—namely, the belief that one ought to withhold judgment whenever the truth of the matter is not clear—plays a particularly important role in the *Meditations*. Beliefs such as this, which become habitual "by attentive and repeated meditation," help people who are pursuing virtue to regulate future acts of assent concerning other propositions (see CSM 2.43; AT 7.61-2; CSMK 267; AT 4.295-6). In fact, according to Descartes, they are critical for the pursuit of virtue since people's failings are due, with the possibility of rare exceptions, not to a lack of theoretical knowledge but "to lack of practical knowledge—that is, lack of a firm habit of belief" (CSMK 267; AT 4.296). To acquire such habitual beliefs, however, is no mean feat since so doing is often impeded by one's passions. On Descartes's account, for most people to acquire greater virtue and, thereby, proceed from generosity to wisdom, they need to learn to control their passions not only at the point at which they assent to certain ideas but, even prior, at the point at which they attend to certain ideas.[13]

In some cases—especially those concerning the weaker passions—people are able to *inhibit* their passions, preventing them from becoming the focus of their attention. They are, however, not able to do so directly. As Descartes notes,

> Our passions . . . cannot be directly aroused or suppressed by the action of our will, but only indirectly through the representation of things which are usually joined with the passions we wish to have and opposed to the passions we wish to reject. For example, in order to arouse boldness and suppress fear in ourselves, it is not sufficient to have the volition to do so. We must apply ourselves to consider the reasons, objects, or precedents which persuade us that the danger is not great; that there is always more security in defence than in flight; that we shall gain glory and joy if we conquer, whereas we can expect nothing but regret and shame if we flee; and so on. (CSM 1.345; AT 11.362-3)

By inhibiting their passions in this way, people are able to divert their attention from misleading ideas that may otherwise elicit their assent and influence, if not compel, their choice.

In other cases—including those concerning the stronger passions—people are able to *override* their passions, refusing to will that to which the passions impel them. For instance, as Descartes mentions in his correspondence with Elizabeth, since the passions present desirable goods "as being much greater than they really are," when people feel themselves moved by some passion, they ought to withhold their assent until the passion is calmed (CSMK 264, 267; AT 4.285, 294-5). Moreover, he suggests not only that people ought to withhold their assent in such

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[13] According to Descartes, because "passions cannot lead us to perform any action except by means of the desire they produce, it is this desire which we should take particular care to control; and here lies *the chief utility of morality*" (CSM 1.379; AT 11.436-7, emphasis mine).

cases but that sufficiently strong-willed people can, in fact, do so (see, e.g., CSMK 245; AT 4.173; CSMK 244, 342; AT 4.173, 5.159). Similarly, he notes, "if anger causes the hand to rise to strike a blow, the will can usually restrain it; if fear moves the legs in flight, the will can stop them; and similarly in other cases" (CSM 1.345; AT 11.363). By overriding their passions in this way, people are able to avoid making judgments improperly. This is particularly significant since, on Descartes's account, failure to regulate one's assent properly not only prevents a person from eradicating false habitual beliefs and acquiring true ones; it is itself a moral failure (see CSMK 233; AT 4.115; see also CSM 2.105-6; AT 7.148).

Returning to the question that motivated this section, how does a person proceed from the passion of generosity to the virtue of wisdom—specifically, the fifth degree of wisdom? On Descartes's account, people can acquire the passion and, subsequently, the virtue of generosity if they occupy themselves "frequently in considering the nature of free will and the many advantages which proceed from a firm resolution to make good use of it—while also considering, on the other hand, the many vain and useless cares which trouble ambitious people" (CSM 1.388; AT 11.454). Then, by using what limited amount of the lower degrees of wisdom they possess, they can arm themselves with habitual beliefs that help them combat their misleading passions. In addition to the proper use of these "proper weapons of the soul," they can both utilize and develop their strength of soul by inhibiting or overriding their misleading passions, as necessary. In so doing, they will increase both the amount and the degrees of their wisdom, insofar as they are naturally able.

4.3 Conclusion

In summary, although inspired by the ancients, in general, and by the Stoics, in particular, Descartes develops his own account of morality as an eclectic cosmopolitan art of natural beatitude. As he sees it, this account advances beyond those of the ancients in two ways. First, it provides an adequate account of virtue. Second, it provides an accurate account of the psychological mechanisms and techniques that one could employ to acquire virtue and, consequently, to enjoy natural beatitude. Chief among these techniques, or "remedies," are (i) the control of one's attention, by which a person can inhibit the influence of his or her passions, and (ii) the regulation of one's assent, by which a person can not only inhibit the influence of his or her passions but also (iii) eradicate or fix his or her habitual beliefs, which are the "proper weapons of the soul."

These techniques, which are essential to the proper application of Descartes's account of morality, map on nicely to the Cartesian framework for virtuous belief formation, described in Chap. 3. One begins, in the process of *enquiry*, by attending to the relevant ideas. One continues, in the process of *judgment*, to assent to true ideas. One concludes, in the process of *belief fixation*, by developing habitual beliefs. That is, at least, the basic strategy. There is, however, much more to the process, as I will explain in the next chapter.

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Chapter 5
Virtuous Belief Formation

In the previous chapters, I introduced both the Cartesian framework for virtuous belief formation and Descartes's conception of virtue. Having done so, I have laid the groundwork for achieving the goal of this chapter, namely, to elucidate Descartes's systematic account of virtuous belief formation. My explanation of his account will proceed in three stages, corresponding to each of the three aspects of the framework. I will begin by clarifying Descartes's conception of *virtuous enquiry*, continue by clarifying his conception of *virtuous judgment*, and conclude by clarifying his conception of *virtuous belief fixation*.

5.1 Virtuous Enquiry

Descartes's conception of virtuous enquiry relies on a distinction between *foundational enquiry* and *ordinary enquiry*, to which I alluded briefly in Chap. 3. For the sake of clarity, however, let me define each more explicitly.

"Foundational enquiry," as I am using the phrase, refers to the search for truths that are essential to the sciences—especially, to metaphysics and to physics, or natural philosophy. Among the propositions that are the objects of foundational enquiry, Descartes is concerned with scientific principles that one can know by means of a simple act of rational intuition—e.g., propositions such as *it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time*, or *what is done cannot be undone*—as well as with scientific propositions that follow from such axioms— e.g., on Descartes's account, *the existence of God can be known merely by considering his nature*, *there is a real distinction between the mind and body*, *I am a thinking thing that can exist without my body* (see, e.g., CSM 1.209, 2.54, 117-20; AT 8A.23-4, 7.78, 166-70).

"Ordinary enquiry," as I am using the phrase, refers to the search for truths that are not essential to the sciences. Among the propositions that are the objects of ordinary enquiry, Descartes is chiefly concerned with those that affect human health and well-being—e.g., in contemporary terms, propositions such as

given the current state of the economy, investing money in bonds is likely the best means of ensuring that I can retire by the age of 65, or *attending Stanton College Preparatory School would provide the best secondary education for my sons.*

5.1.1   Foundational Enquiry

Having defined "foundational enquiry" and "ordinary enquiry," let me explain in greater detail the nature of each and the relationship between the two, beginning with the former. Descartes's conception of foundational enquiry is influenced by his Scholastic-Aristotelian predecessors. Thus, for the sake of clarity, let me briefly elucidate the Scholastic background.

5.1.1.1   The Scholastic-Aristotelian Background

According to the Scholastic-Aristotelians, there are two kinds of sciences. Each allegedly provides knowledge that is absolutely certain since both have as their objects universal propositions that are necessary truths (see, e.g., Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* I.2, 4, 6, 9, 31, 33; *Metaphysics* I.1; *Nicomachean Ethics* IV.3.). They differ, however, with respect to the way in which their principles are known. As Aquinas notes, "There are some [sciences] which proceed from a principle known by the natural light of the intellect" and there "are some which proceed from principles known by the light of a higher science" (ST I, Q. 1, a. 2). For instance, metaphysics is the highest science, the principles of which are known "by the natural light of the intellect." Its principles underlie all the other sciences—hence, the Scholastic's reference to metaphysics as "first philosophy." By comparison to metaphysics, physics is a "lower" science: at least some of the principles of which are known by the light of a higher science—namely, metaphysics (see, e.g., Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.1, II.2, XII.7; *Physics* I.5; ST I, Q. 2, a. 3.). By comparison to metaphysics and physics, psychology is an even "lower" science: at least some of the principles of which are known both by the light of a higher science—namely, physics—and, in turn, by the light of the highest science—namely, metaphysics.

Philosophical (or speculative) wisdom, on the Scholastic-Aristotelian account, is a comprehensive knowledge of the sciences that has as its foundation knowledge of metaphysics. Thus, the person who possesses wisdom knows not only the first principles of metaphysics but also those truths that follow from these principles (see, e.g., Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.1, VI.1, XI.4; *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.7; ST I-II, Q. 3, a. 6; ST I-II, Q. 57, a. 2).[1] A person acquires this comprehensive scientific

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[1] It seems to follow from this view that only an omniscient being could be perfectly wise, which is perhaps why Aristotle claims that the wise person "knows all things, *as far as possible*"— *Metaphysics* I.2, emphasis mine.

knowledge—i.e., philosophical (or speculative) wisdom—by properly executing the method of science, as follows. The person begins with "basic truths," which are indemonstrable definitions that are necessary truths known by rational intuition (see, e.g., Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* I.2, 3, 6, II.19). These "basic truths" function as the premises in syllogistic reasoning from which one acquires new instances of scientific knowledge (see, e.g., *Posterior Analytics* I.2).

To set up my analysis of Descartes's conception of foundational enquiry, let me highlight five elements of the Scholastic conception of foundational enquiry. First, the Scholastic conception of foundational enquiry implies that a person can be absolutely certain of the claims of science since, second, the objects of science are necessary, universal truths. Third, it suggests that the sciences are comprehensively hierarchically interconnected such that, for example, to have knowledge of psychology requires knowledge of physics, which requires knowledge of metaphysics, or "first philosophy." Fourth, it claims that one has knowledge of "basic truths" by rational intuition and, fifth, that further truths can be known by forming syllogistic demonstrations from these "basic truths."

5.1.1.2 Descartes's Account

Descartes's relationship with the philosophy of his Scholastic predecessors is complex. Sometimes he seems to adopt the tone of a reformer or, perhaps, even a collaborator. For instance, he claims that his purpose is not to refute Scholastic philosophy (CSMK 238; AT 4.141) and suggests that a number of his philosophical principles are, in fact, compatible with those of the Scholastic-Aristotelians (see, e.g., CSMK 240; AT 4.157; CSM 1.286, 2.169; AT 8A.323, 7.242). Other times, however, he takes the tone of a revolutionary who wishes to "destroy" Scholastic principles and "replace" them with his own (see, e.g., CSM 1.142; AT 6.61-2; CSMK 173; AT 3.298; CSM 1.94-5; AT 11.41).

Descartes's relationship to the conception of foundational enquiry propounded by his Scholastic-Aristotelian predecessors is similarly complex. Of the five elements of the Scholastic conception highlighted above, Descartes adopts some without qualification, adopts others with qualifications, and denies others.

Regarding the first element, Descartes, like his Scholastic predecessors, contends that a person can be absolutely certain about the principles of scientific knowledge. According to Descartes, scientific knowledge is a "firm," "evident," and "indubitable" form of cognition (CSM 1.10; AT 10.362). As he says in a letter to Regius, "[Scientific] knowledge is conviction based on a reason so strong that it can never be shaken by any stronger reason" (CSK 147; AT 3.65), and in his replies to the second set of objections, "[N]o act of awareness that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called [scientific] knowledge" (CSM 2.101; AT 7.141). Moreover, a principal purpose both of the *Meditations* and of the *Principles of Philosophy* is to develop this kind of certain, scientific knowledge upon a foundation that is truly unshakable (see CSM 2.12; AT 7.17; CSM 1.179; AT 9B.2). Hence, as Descartes sees it, a person has scientific knowledge regarding some proposition if and only if

he or she is certain of the truth of that proposition and the proposition is, in fact, indubitable (see CSM 2.408; AT 10.513).

Regarding the second element, Descartes, unlike his Scholastic predecessors, does not claim that the objects of scientific knowledge need to be necessary, universal truths. In fact, the first principle of Descartes's "first philosophy" is not a necessary, universal proposition, but the contingent, particular proposition *I am, I exist* (CSM 2.17; AT 7.25; see also CSM 1.194-5; AT 8A.7). Nonetheless, a number of the axioms of science, on Descartes's account, are necessary, universal propositions (see, e.g., CSM 1.209, 2.116-7; AT 8A.23-4, 7.164-6).

Regarding the third element, Descartes, like his Scholastic predecessors, contends that the sciences are comprehensively hierarchically interconnected. Moreover, he agrees that wisdom is the comprehensive knowledge of these "interconnected and interdependent" sciences, which have as their foundation metaphysics (see CSM 1.10, 181; AT 10.361, 9B.4). He suggests that wisdom is like a tree: the principles of metaphysics are the roots, the science of physics is the trunk, and the principal branches are medicine, mechanics, and morals (see, e.g., CSM 1.186; AT 9B.14; CSM 1.115, 121-2; AT 6.8-9, 6.21-2; CSMK 53, 58; AT 1.349, 370).

Regarding the fourth element, Descartes, like his Scholastic predecessors, contends that the "basic truths" of scientific knowledge are known by rational intuition. For instance, as he says of the Cogito in his replies to the second set of objections,

> [W]hen we become aware that we are thinking things, *this is a primary notion which is not derived by means of any syllogism*. When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', *he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind*. This is clear from the fact that if he were deducing it by means of a syllogism, he would have to have had previous knowledge of the major premiss 'Everything which thinks is, or exists'; yet in fact he learns it from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing. (CSM 2.100; AT 7.140-1, emphasis mine)

Unlike his Scholastic-Aristotelian predecessors, however, Descartes denies that knowledge of these principles requires sense perception.[2]

Finally, regarding the fifth element of the Scholastic-Aristotelian conception of foundational enquiry, Descartes understands Scholastic logic and admits that he is willing to use syllogistic reasoning where it would be appropriate (see CSM 2.355; AT 7.522). He rejects, however, the Scholastic use of the syllogism as the principal means of scientific reasoning. On the Scholastic-Aristotelian account, philosophers should come to have certain knowledge of necessary, universal propositions by means of rational intuition and syllogistic reasoning. As Descartes notes, however, Scholastic science fails to deliver on this promise. As he says in a letter to Voetius,

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[2] On Aristotle's account, people have a natural capacity to know such principles. They come to know the principles by means of rational intuition, which is occasioned by sense experience—see *Posterior Analytics* I.2, 3, 6, II.19.

> The ordinary philosophy which is taught in the schools and universities is ... merely a collection of opinions that are for the most part doubtful, as is shown by the continual debates in which they are thrown back and forth. They are quite useless, moreover, as long as experience has shown us; for no one has ever succeeded in deriving any practical benefit from 'prime matter', 'substantial forms', 'occult qualities', and the like. (CSMK 221; AT 9B.26)

The reason that Scholastic science is "merely a collection of opinions," Descartes suggests, is that the syllogistic reasoning used by the Scholastics "contributes nothing whatever to knowledge of the truth." According to Descartes,

> [O]n the basis of their method, dialecticians [i.e., Scholastic-Aristotelian philosophers] are unable to formulate a syllogism with a true conclusion unless they are already in possession of the substance of the conclusion, i.e., unless they have previous knowledge of the very truth deduced in the syllogism. It is obvious therefore that they themselves can learn nothing new from such forms of reasoning, and hence that ordinary dialectic is of no use whatever to those who wish to investigate the truth of things. Its sole advantage is that it sometimes enables us to explain to others arguments which are already known. (CSM 1.36-7; AT 10.406)

Thus, he concludes, the syllogism is more properly a tool of rhetoric than of science (see CSM 1.37; AT 10.406).[3]

Hence, Descartes agrees with the Scholastics that wisdom is the comprehensive knowledge of the sciences, of which metaphysics is the most fundamental, followed immediately by physics, then by other sciences.[4] Moreover, he agrees that people can have absolutely certain knowledge of these sciences by means of rational intuition of innate principles (e.g., the Cogito) and by deducing the propositions that follow from such principles. Therefore, Descartes, like his Scholastic predecessors, is committed to *radical foundationalism*—that is, the view according to which (i) the objective of scientific enquiry is to have comprehensive knowledge of foundational principles in the sciences as well as the truths that follow from these principles, and (ii) a person can be absolutely certain about such propositions because they are either "basic truths" that he or she knows by rational intuition or propositions that he or she recognizes as following necessarily from these "basic truths."[5]

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[3] The reason Descartes's position avoids falling prey to the same type of argument is that, unlike his Scholastic predecessors, Descartes is concerned principally not with the *form*, but with the *content*, of arguments. For a detailed analysis of Descartes's conception of deductive reasoning, see Owen 1999, 12–29; see also Larmore 1984: 61–74.

[4] Thus, on Descartes's account, the truths of metaphysics, of physics, and of other sciences (e.g., medicine, mechanics, and morals) are all objects of foundational enquiry; however, among the truths of these various sciences, some are more fundamental than others.

[5] At the end of the Sixth Meditation, Descartes acknowledges that people lead busy lives that infrequently permit the leisure for careful enquiry (CSM 2.62; AT 7.90). He also suggests that even among those who might have the kind of time requisite for foundational enquiries, few are capable of conducting them properly (see CSM 2.6-7, 172; AT 7.7, 247). In light of these facts, it seems that Descartes thinks very few people are truly able to achieve *scientia* regarding foundational matters. Nonetheless, striving do so, insofar as one is able, is essential to virtuous enquiry on his account.

5.1.2 Ordinary Enquiry

How ought foundational enquiry be related to ordinary enquiry on Descartes's account? Descartes does not have a work in which he explicitly describes the details of the relationship between foundational enquiry and ordinary enquiry; however, a number of his comments provide guidelines from which we can infer his position. He contends that his philosophical method is "a general method," one that "could be used to explain any . . . subject" and "can be applied to everything" (CSMK 58; AT 1.370). He claims that the principles of medicine, of mechanics, and of morals are founded on the principles of physics, which are founded on the principles of metaphysics (see, e.g., CSM 1.186; AT 9B.14; CSMK 173; AT 3.298). He suggests that from his scientific principles people can form judgments regarding matters that are useful for the general welfare of mankind. He says, for instance, that his foundational enquiries

> opened [his] eyes to the possibility of gaining knowledge which would be very *useful in life*, and of discovering a *practical philosophy* which might replace the speculative philosophy taught in the schools. Through this philosophy we could know the power and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies in our environment, as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans; and *we could use this knowledge . . . for all the purposes for which it is appropriate, and thus make ourselves, as it were, the lords and masters of nature*. This is desirable not only *for the invention of innumerable devices* which would facilitate our enjoyment of the fruits of the earth and all the goods we find there, but also, and most importantly, *for the maintenance of health*, which is undoubtedly the chief good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life. (CSM 1.142-3; AT 6.61-2, emphasis mine)

Thus, as Descartes sees it, people ought to make ordinary enquiries against the background of some set of propositions that the enquirer believes, and each of these propositions either is or is dependent upon a proposition believed on the basis of some fundamental enquiry. Note, though, that unlike foundational enquiries, which require absolute certainty, ordinary enquiries require only moral certainty (see CSM 1.289-90; AT 8A.327-8). Hence, on Descartes's account, in properly conducted ordinary enquiries, people attempt to reason, not necessarily deductively, regarding the proposition(s) in question, drawing on the findings of properly conducted foundational enquiries.[6]

Let me elucidate what Descartes takes to be the proper relationship between foundational enquiries and ordinary enquiries by means of an example. Consider the case of Constance. Constance is a gifted intellectual with a kind heart who has two particularly intense desires—to practice medicine and to help people grow in

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[6] One reason that virtuous ordinary enquiries are dependent upon virtuous foundational enquiries, on Descartes's account, is because significant differences arise in people's ordinary enquiries as the result of the propositions they come to believe from their foundational enquiries. It is because foundational enquiries have such significant implications for ordinary enquiries and, hence, for people's conduct and well-being, that Descartes, like his Scholastic predecessors, is committed to radical foundationalism: given what is at stake (namely, one's eternal destiny on the accounts of Descartes and of Aquinas), one cannot afford to err in his or her foundational enquiries.

virtue. She is also a young, seventeenth-century aristocrat who is wondering how best to invest her energies to do some good in the world. In effect, she is pondering a very practical matter—what we might refer to as her "career options." Due to her relationship with Princess Elizabeth, she becomes interested in studying medicine as a science that is built upon firm and lasting foundations. She performs Descartes's *Meditations* faithfully and comes to believe that the mind is really distinct from the body, that these two substances interact at the pineal gland, and that the proper function of this gland is essential to the proper operations of a person's mind (see CSM 1.340, 2.59-60; AT 11.351, 7.86; CSMK 143, 145, 149; AT 3.19, 47-8, 123). Thus, she concludes, a doctor who could cure diseases of the pineal gland could help people grow in virtue, and she decides to devote her life to searching for a cure to any and all such diseases.

In this (admittedly fanciful) case, Constance's ordinary enquiry regarding her "career" is shaped by her foundational enquiries, from which she forms beliefs about the nature of substances, the nature of the mind, the way in which the proper function of the body affects the proper function of the mind, and so forth. Thus, Constance's ordinary enquiry is dependent upon her foundational enquiries. In this respect, it represents an attempt to conduct ordinary enquiries virtuously, on Descartes's account.

5.1.3 Summary: Virtuous Enquiry

In summary, Descartes's account of virtuous enquiry has three essential elements. First, it has a proper *structure*: virtuous ordinary enquiries are dependent upon virtuous foundational enquiries.[7] Second, it has a proper *goal*: in virtuous enquiry, one aims to discover true and, ultimately, useful propositions.[8] Finally, it has a proper *scope*: the proper objects of virtuous enquiry include a wide variety of propositions ranging from more abstruse matters, such as metaphysical propositions about God and the nature of the soul, to more mundane matters, like the moral decisions one ought to make in the course of any given day.

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[7] That is, in a properly structured virtuous enquiry, a person attempts to reason, not necessarily deductively, about propositions concerning nonscientific matters, drawing on the findings of properly conducted foundational enquiries.

[8] In fact, on Descartes's account, every virtuous enquiry aims to discover truths that are instrumentally valuable; however, this does not entail that Descartes conceives of knowledge merely as an instrumental good. A virtuous enquirer may inadvertently discover trivial truths. Such truths may not be instrumentally valuable; nonetheless, I see no reason to think that Descartes would deny that even the trivial knowledge one gains via virtuous enquiry is intrinsically valuable. Moreover, regarding those nontrivial truths that a virtuous enquirer discovers, I see no reason to think that Descartes would deny that such knowledge is both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable. In fact, in the Preface to the *Principles*, when he discusses wisdom (or "the knowledge of the truth through its first causes"), which is the "supreme good" of human life, he does not argue that its goodness is exclusively, or even principally, instrumental. He does, however, seem to conceive of it as an instrumental good (CSM 1.179-90; AT 9B.1-20).

5.2 Virtuous Judgment

Having completed the first objective of this chapter—namely, to clarify Descartes's account of virtuous enquiry—I will proceed presently to the second objective—namely, to clarify his account of virtuous judgment.[9] I will begin by explaining, briefly, his claim that judging is something for which people are subject to moral appraisal. I will then elucidate his conception of the norms to which people who judge propositions virtuously conform. Before I do so, however, let me reiterate a few points that will be crucial to bear in mind in the analysis that follows. In this section, I will focus on elucidating the norms for *judging* propositions, as one does in the case of *foundational* enquiries. I will not focus on the norms for *accepting* propositions, as one does in the case of *ordinary* enquiries. The reason for this is simple. With respect to Descartes's norms for accepting propositions virtuously, there is little more to say than that which I have already noted in Chap. 3. With respect to ordinary affairs, virtuous people trust their senses, "follow the most probable" opinions, "adopt them," and "regard them not as doubtful, from a practical point of view." Insofar as they merely regard such opinions as probable and recognize them as rules for practical action, not as scientific truths, they have "moral certainty" and act virtuously (CSM 1.289; AT 8A.327; CSMK 233; AT 4.115; see also CSM 1.130; at 6.37-8).[10]

5.2.1 Judgment and Moral Appraisal

Descartes claims that God has provided people with an infallible means to make true judgments. He argues for this claim in the Second Replies, as follows. People have within themselves ideas of truth and of falsehood. So, people have a faculty for recognizing truth and distinguishing it from falsehood. God gives people their cognitive faculties; therefore, if this truth-discerning faculty were not reliable, then God would be a deceiver. However, God is not a deceiver, so this truth-discerning faculty must be infallible, at least when people use it properly (CSM 2.103; AT 7.144).

On Descartes's account, people have an obligation to use their truth-discerning faculty properly. As he notes in the Fourth Meditation, the truth-discerning faculty is the faculty of judgment, which consists of both the intellect and the will, and the

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[9] The account of virtue ethics on which his project is based is an ethics of *character*, not an ethics of *action*. Thus, the object of evaluation is the *person*, not the *act*. Hence, phrases of the form "the person virtuously acquires his or her belief that a proposition is true" are somewhat misleading since they seem to imply that the object of evaluation is the act of believing. What I mean to convey is that a person is virtuous with respect to the way in which he or she acquires the belief that the proposition is true.

[10] Chapter 3, Sect. 3.2.1.

cause of people's errors is their failure to control their wills by assenting only to those things that they understand (CSM 2.39-40; AT 7.56-8; see also CSM 1.204-5; AT 8A.18). Failure to control one's will and, hence, to use one's faculty of judgment properly is, as Descartes sees it, a *moral* failing (see CSMK 233; AT 4.115).

In fact, he identifies such failings as sins. Consider, for example, his reply to the charge that by his method infidels might not be blameworthy for their failure to believe the truths of the Christianity. The "theologians and philosophers" present Descartes with the following objection:

> [I]f the will never goes astray or falls into sin so long as it is guided by the mind's clear and distinct knowledge, and if it exposes itself to danger by following a conception of the intellect which is wholly lacking in clarity and distinctness, then note what follows from this. A Turk, or any other unbeliever, not only does not sin in refusing to embrace the Christian religion, but what is more, he sins if he does embrace it, since he does not possess clear and distinct knowledge of its truth. (CSM 2.90; AT 7.126-7)

To this objection, Descartes responds,

> The sin that Turks and other infidels commit by refusing to embrace the Christian religion does not arise from their unwillingness to assent to obscure matters (for obscure they indeed are), but from their *resistance to the impulses of divine grace* within them, or from the fact that they make themselves unworthy of grace by their other sins. Let us take the case of an infidel who is destitute of all supernatural grace and has no knowledge of the doctrines which we Christians believe to have been revealed by God. If, despite the fact that these doctrines are obscure to him, he is induced to embrace them *by fallacious arguments*, I make bold to assert that he will not on that account be a true believer, but will instead be committing *a sin* by *not using his reason correctly*. (CSM 2.105-6; AT 7.148, emphasis mine)

In his reply, Descartes clarifies the principle that the "theologians and philosophers" attribute to him—namely, that people expose themselves to danger by following a conception of the intellect which is wholly lacking in clarity and distinctness. He suggests that the "theologians and philosophers" misrepresent his position by failing to consider not only his account of how people err in their response to the *light of nature* but also how they err in their response to the *light of grace*. On Descartes's account, people can make judgments viciously in either of two ways. First, they can make judgments viciously by assenting to that which is not made evident by the light of nature and, hence, that which is not clearly and distinctly perceived. Thus, he counsels the meditator, whose search after truth is guided by the light of nature, to "withhold judgement on any occasion when the truth of the matter is not clear" (CSM 2.43; AT 7.61-2). Second, they can make judgments viciously by rejecting that which is made evident by the light of grace and, hence, that which they are confident has been revealed by God himself (see CSMK 191; AT 3.425-6). Thus, in *Principles* 1.25 he reminds the person whose search after truth might be guided by the light of grace: "if God happens to reveal to us something about himself or others which is beyond the natural reach of our mind—such as the mystery of the Incarnation or of the Trinity—we will not refuse to believe it [*non recusabimus alla credere*], despite the fact that we do not clearly understand it" (CSM 1.201; AT

8A.14). In each case, he articulates a specific instance of his general position: failure to use one's God-given faculty of judgment properly is not only a moral failure but also a sin.

5.2.2   The Norm for Virtuous Judgment

Similarly, he claims that the proper use of one's faculty of judgment is a virtue. For instance, as he notes in the dedicatory letter of the *Principles*,

> [T]he pure and genuine virtues, which proceed solely from knowledge of what is right, all have one and the same nature and are included under the single term 'wisdom'. For whoever possesses the firm and powerful resolve always to use his reasoning powers correctly, as far as he can, and to carry out whatever he knows to be best, is truly wise, so far as his nature permits. (CSM 1.191; AT 8A.2-3)

How, though, does one use one's faculty of judgment virtuously? In other words, what is the norm for virtuous judgment?

At the end of the Fourth Meditation, Descartes identifies "man's greatest and most important perfection" as the ability to overcome the vices of prejudice and credulity by making judgments virtuously (CSM 2.43; AT 7.61-2; see also CSM 1.207; AT 8A.21; CSM 1.13, 207, 2.407; AT 10.366-7, 8A.21, 10.510). To achieve this perfection, at least with respect to scientific propositions, apprehended by the light of nature, he encourages his readers to heed the following maxim: people ought to make judgments regarding only those things that they perceive clearly and distinctly. How, though, should we understand this prescription?

Descartes attempts to explain the nature of clear and distinct perceptions in two ways. First, he offers formal definitions of the terms "clear" and "distinct." For instance, in *Principles* 1.45, he says,

> I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear. (CSM 1.207-8; AT 8A.22)

Second, he offers an ostensive definition of clear and distinct perceptions. In the Second Replies, at the behest of his interlocutors, Descartes offers "arguments proving the existence of God and the distinction between the soul and the body arranged in a geometric fashion." This geometric presentation begins with a section of formal definitions in which he notably omits a definition of "clear and distinct perception" like the one he offers at *Principles* 1.45. However, in the following section of the geometric presentation, in the section entitled "Postulates," Descartes attempts to elucidate such perception. He asks his readers "to ponder on all the examples that I went through in my *Meditations*, both of clear and distinct perception, and of obscure and confused perception, and thereby accustom themselves to distinguishing what is clearly known from what is obscure" (CSM 2.116; AT 7.164). In so doing, he provides ostensive definitions of the concepts.

Intriguingly, he contends that the ability to distinguish perceptions that are clear and distinct from those that are not "is something that it is easier to learn by examples than by rules," and he suggests that he addressed "or at least touched on all the relevant examples" in the *Meditations* (CSM 2.116; AT 7.166). In large part, one would suspect, because these "rules," or formal definitions, provide us with little more than a vague description of clear and distinct perception as that which "is both present and accessible to the attentive mind" and "so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only" that which "is both present and accessible to the attentive mind." Hence, of the two ways in which he attempts to clarify the nature of clear and distinct perceptions, Descartes appears to favor his ostensive definition to his formal definition.

Consider the examples Descartes provides to help elucidate the notion of such perceptions. On his account, those things that a meditator would perceive clearly and distinctly include

(1) the nature of God, at least insofar as he or she has an idea of God as a supremely perfect, uncreated, independent, thinking substance (CSM 2.31-2; AT 7.46; see also CSM 1.199, 211; AT 8A.12, 25-6),

(2) the nature of material objects insofar as such objects are the subject of pure mathematics (CSM 2.50; AT 7.70-1; see also CSM 2.20-2, 29-30; AT 7.30-2, 43),

(3) himself or herself as a thinking, non-extended thing that is really distinct from his or her body (CSM 2.54; AT 7.78; see also CSM 7.22, 24; AT 7.33-5),

(4) his or her body as a non-thinking, extended thing that is really distinct from his or her mind (CSM 2.54; AT 7.78), and

(5) eternal truths, such as *it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time* and *he who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks* (see CSM 1.209; AT 8A.23-4).

Notice that the term "perception" can refer either to an act of the mind or to an object of the mind. In the examples of clear and distinct perceptions cited above, Descartes is referring to objects of the mind; thus, he is referring to ideas.[11] Hence, he is suggesting the things one perceives clearly and distinctly are not God, the soul, and so forth; rather, they are the ideas that represent God, the soul, and so forth. Furthermore, he identifies clear and distinct perception as "strong perception" or "evident knowledge" (see, e.g., CSM 2.24-5; AT 7.35; CSM 1.120; AT 6.18). As he uses the phrase "evident knowledge," evidence [*evidentem*] is a quality of an object of perception [*cognitionem*]—that is, of an idea. Thus, for Descartes, evidence is a quality of ideas—more specifically, it is the evidentness of an idea to an agent. Hence, when he refers to clear and distinct perception, he refers to a particular kind of evidentness of a perception—the kind of evidentness possessed by ideas that represent propositions like *God exists*, *he who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks*, and so forth.

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[11] Recall that, according to Descartes, the faculty of judgment requires both the faculty of knowledge [*facultate cognoscendi*], or the faculty of perception [*facultas perceipiendi*], and the faculty of assent [*facultas assentiendi*] (CSM 1.207; AT 8A.21; see also CSM 1.207, 209, 2.39; AT 8A.21, 24, 7.56-7; see Chap. 3, Sect. 3.1). Ideas are objects of the faculty of knowledge, or the faculty of perception (see, e.g., CSM 2.113; AT 7.160-1). In fact, on Descartes's account, they are the "only immediate" objects of perception (see, e.g., CSM 2.32; AT 7.75).

How does understanding Descartes's conception of clear and distinct perception as evident cognition help elucidate his conception of virtuous judgment? Consider the maxim for virtuous judgment that Descartes offers in the *Meditations* and the *Principles*: with respect to the sciences, people ought to form judgments regarding only those things that they perceive clearly and distinctly (see, e.g., CSM 1.207, 2.43; AT 8A.21, 7.61-2). Since, on Descartes's account, clear and distinct perceptions are evident cognitions, or ideas with a particular kind of evidentness, it follows that Descartes's maxim for virtuous judgment can also be understood as follows: with respect to the sciences, people ought to form judgments regarding only those things for which they have evident cognition. Thus, Descartes provides us with an account of virtuous judgment according to which a person seeking the truth by the light of nature is virtuous in assenting to a given proposition only if the idea, which represents the proposition concerning the sciences, has a particular degree of evidence, or evidentness, for him or her.

5.2.3   Summary: Virtuous Judgment

In summary, according to Descartes, acquiring beliefs is something for which people are subject to moral appraisal. The norms governing belief acquisition vary depending on the type of belief acquired. In the case of acquiring a belief—more precisely, *accepting* a proposition—concerning *ordinary* matters, a virtuous person adopts the most probable opinion, both treating it as indubitable, from a practical point of view, and yet regarding it merely as nothing more than a rule for practical action that has only "moral certainty." In the cases of acquiring a belief—more precisely, *judging* a proposition—concerning *theological* matters, revealed by the *light of grace*, a virtuous person assents to the proposition when he or she recognizes that it has been revealed by God, even if he or she does not understand the proposition clearly. In the case of acquiring a belief—more precisely, *judging* a proposition—concerning *scientific* matters, illumined by the *light of nature*, a virtuous person assents to the proposition only if he or she perceives it clearly and distinctly—that is, only if the idea, which represents the proposition, has a particular degree of evidence, or evidentness, for him or her.

5.3   Virtuous Belief Fixation

Having completed the second objective of this chapter—namely, to clarify Descartes's account of virtuous judgment—I will now proceed to the third, and final, objective—namely, to clarify his account of virtuous belief fixation. I will begin by reviewing, briefly, Descartes's concern with this third aspect of his framework. Next, I will elucidate his conception of some of the principal virtues of belief fixation—both greater and lesser. I will then note, briefly, his conception of the need for a program to develop such virtues.

5.3.1 The Concern

Recall that on Descartes's account there are two kinds of beliefs—judgments and dispositional, or habitual, beliefs. Each of these kinds of beliefs involves both the faculty of the intellect and the faculty of the will, as follows. According to Descartes, a person *judges* a proposition if and only if the person both (i) has a mental representation of the proposition (i.e., an idea) and (ii) assents to, or affirms, the proposition; and a person *dispositionally, or habitually, believes* a proposition if[12] (i) the person has a disposition to assent to, or affirm, the proposition and (ii) this disposition is the result of his or her assenting to, or affirming, the proposition.[13]

With Descartes's account of the nature of belief in mind, we are in position to consider his concern with the need for belief fixation. As he notes in the Sixth Meditation, one of the reasons that people fail to acquire true beliefs properly is that they have deeply engrained, poorly formed habitual beliefs (CSM 2.56-8; AT 82-3). He makes a similar point in the *Principles*. He notes,

> [A]ll of us have, from our early childhood, judged that all the objects of our sense-perception are things existing outside our minds and closely resembling our sensations, i.e. the perceptions that we had of them. Thus, on seeing a colour, for example, we supposed we were seeing a thing located outside us which closely resembled the idea of colour that we experienced within us at the time. And this was something that, because of our *habit of making such judgements*, we thought we saw clearly and distinctly—so much so that we took it for something certain and indubitable. (CSM 1.216; AT 8A.32, emphasis mine)

In a similar vein, he suggests in the Sixth Replies that these deeply engrained, poorly formed habitual beliefs are what prevent even educated, experienced philosophers from perceiving, clearly and distinctly, fundamental metaphysical truths (CSM 2.30; AT 7.446). Thus, Descartes has an interest in virtue as it related to habitual beliefs. More specifically, he is concerned with the proper method of belief fixation, as well as the related practice of belief eradication.

5.3.2 Greater and Lesser Virtues

When performing the First Meditation, a meditator recognizes that he or she has a number of false beliefs (CSM 2.12; AT 7.17-8). Such a person is concerned with his or her failure to form judgments properly, and he or she discovers that reason dictates that one should withhold assent "from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as [he or she does] from those which are

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[12] Recall that I state this in the formation of a conditional, rather than as a biconditional, to allow that Descartes might grant that dispositional beliefs can be acquired by other means—see Chap. 3, Sect. 3.1.

[13] Chapter 3, Sect. 3.1.

patently false" (CSM 2.12; AT 7.18). Thus, a meditator is concerned with the way in which he or she makes judgments, as discussed above. Such a person does not, however, merely admit that he or she has made a number of false judgments throughout the course of his or her lifetime. Rather, a meditator admits that he or she *currently* has a number of false beliefs. Since we can reasonably suppose that the meditator is not speaking about only those beliefs about propositions to which he or she is currently attending, it is reasonable to infer that a meditator is admitting that he or she has number of false *dispositional beliefs*. Thus, from what he has written very early in the *Meditations*, it is clear that Descartes is concerned with helping people reform not only their *judgments* but their *dispositional beliefs* as well.

Within the first few paragraphs of the *Meditations*, Descartes also alludes to one of the causes of vicious belief fixation. He writes such that a meditator must recognize that he or she acquired a number of erroneous beliefs *as a child*. To see why this is significant, consider Descartes's comments both in Part I of the *Principles* and in Part II of the *Discourse* on the way in which people acquire their prejudices.[14] At *Principles* I.1, he notes,

> *Since we began life as infants*, and made various judgements concerning the things that can be perceived by the senses *before we had the full use of our reason*, there are many preconceived opinions that keep us from knowledge of the truth. It seems that the only way of freeing ourselves from these opinions is to make the effort, once in the course of our life, to doubt everything which we find to contain even the smallest suspicion of uncertainty. (CSM 1.193; AT 8A.5, emphasis mine; see also CSM 1.218-9; AT 35-6)

In the second part of the *Discourse*, he says,

> I reflected that we were all children before being men and had to be *governed for some time by our appetites* and our teachers, which were often opposed to each other and neither of which, perhaps, always gave us the best advice; hence I thought it virtually impossible that our judgements should be as unclouded and *firm* as they would have been if we had had the full use of our *reason* from the moment of our birth, and if we had always been *guided by it alone*. (CSM 1.117; AT 6.13, emphasis mine)

Children acquire and, consequently, fix their beliefs not as the result of reason and reflection but as the result of appetite and passion. Correcting these prior judgments, these prejudices, is a project not for children but for adults. Thus, according to Descartes, in order to reform one's beliefs, one needs to have achieved a certain level of maturity. Moreover, one must "expressly rid [one's] mind of all worries and [arrange for oneself] a clear stretch of free time" to begin the process of reforming his or her dispositional beliefs (see CSM 2.12; AT 17-8; CSM 1.193; AT 8A.5). Thus, one needs to find time apart from the project of satisfying his or her basic appetites.

Thus, on Descartes's account, to reform one's dispositional beliefs properly, a person needs to have come to a point in life at which he or she has an adequate

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[14] See also Descartes's comments in the Sixth Replies (CSM 2.296; AT 7.439).

degree of mastery of his or her emotions.[15] Descartes suggests that this emotional maturity is required because strong passions negatively affect a person's judgment. What he says is, in fact, much stronger. At *Passions* 202-3, he suggests that "the most abject and weak" among us "let themselves most readily be carried away" by excesses of emotion, like the kind of anger that "confuse[s] our judgement" (CSM 1.400; AT 11.480-1; see also CSM 1.355; AT 11.385). Those who are emotionally mature can guard against such excesses by cultivating two habits. The first requires both a developed ability of self-reflection and a firm commitment to withhold judgment when passions adversely affect the proper function of reason. As Descartes notes at *Passions* 211,

> [T]here is something we can always do on such occasions [i.e., when we recognize that our emotional condition is impeding the proper function of reason], which I think I can put forward here as the most general, and most readily applicable *remedy against all excesses of the passions*. ... When ... passion urges us to pursue ends whose attainment involves some delay, *we must refrain from making any immediate judgement about them, and distract ourselves by other thoughts until time and repose have completely calmed the disturbance in our blood.* (CSM 1.403; AT 11.487, emphasis mine)[16]

He makes a similar point in a letter to Princess Elizabeth from September 15, 1645. He says that for those cases in which one feels oneself "moved by some passion," one must suspend one's judgment until the passion is calmed (CSMK 267; AT 4.295). However, one's ability to suspend judgment in such cases requires both the developed ability to reflect on one's emotional state when making a judgment and a firm commitment to withhold judgment when one recognizes that his or her emotional condition is not conducive to the proper function of reason. To exercise such care in forming one's beliefs requires what Descartes calls "strength of soul"—the ability to control one's passions by the exercise of one's will (see, e.g., CSM 1.347; AT 11.366-7; CSM 1. 342, 345; AT 11. 356-7, 363-4).

Moreover, according to Descartes, one will not have strength of soul unless he or she has another virtue—namely, generosity,

> which causes a person's self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be, has only two components. The first consists in his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him but this freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using this freedom well or badly. The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well—that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best. (CSM 1.384; AT 11.445-6)[17]

Hence, what Descartes calls "generosity," and what the ancients call "magnanimity," is a necessary virtue for strength of soul, which is a highly desirable virtue both for virtuous judgment and, consequently, for virtuous belief fixation.

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[15] In the remainder of this section, I will recapitulate and further explain the nature of Descartes's account of virtue, which I explicated in Chap. 4, Sect. 4.2.

[16] See also the related discussions of inhibiting and of overriding one's passions in Chap. 4, Sect. 4.2.2.

[17] See Chap. 4, Sect. 4.2.1.

The reason I refer to strength of soul as a *highly desirable*—as opposed, say, to a necessary—virtue is that Descartes believes that even the weakest souls can develop habits of mind by which they can control the passions that adversely affect judgment and, consequently, belief fixation. Although people with weak souls might not be able *to control such passions in a given moment*, they can develop habits of mind by which they *prevent such passions from occurring*.[18] Thus, although weak souls lack the virtue by which they can control their passions directly, they can still develop the virtue(s) by which they can control their passions indirectly. The former is more desirable than the latter, but either can be an effective means of preventing the passions from adversely affecting the proper function of reason in the process of belief formation.

Thus, as Descartes sees it, belief formation is a bit like gardening. To develop healthy plants, a gardener needs to plant his seeds properly. If he fails to do so, his plants will fail to grow. Even if he plants his seeds well, though, his plants will fail to grow if he has not prepared the soil. Preparing the soil is certainly related to planting seeds, but it is also relevant to subsequent events, like watering, fertilizing, and pruning, that help the seeds to develop into healthy plants. Similarly, to prepare to develop dispositional beliefs virtuously, one needs to make judgments properly. If one fails to judge properly, one will fail to develop dispositional beliefs virtuously. Even if one judges properly, though, those judgments will not become "fixed" if one has not, so to speak, prepared one's soul emotionally. That is, if I judge, virtuously, that a proposition is true but I have a strong emotional aversion to the truth of the proposition, it is less likely that I will develop the dispositional belief that the proposition is true. Descartes describes the situation this way at the end of the First Meditation:

> I am like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep; as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can. In the same way, I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness . . .. (CSM 2.15; AT 7.23)

Thus, on Descartes's account, generosity and strength of soul are highly desirable not only for making judgments virtuously but also for fixing one's beliefs virtuously. Nonetheless, even people with weak souls who lack these greater virtues can develop lesser virtues by which they control their passions in such a way that they are able to judge and, consequently, fix their beliefs virtuously.

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[18] For a detailed discussion of Descartes's account of the way in which people can control their passions by the exercise of their will, see Hoffman 1991, 153–200, especially pp. 166–70; as well as Hoffman 2003, 289–95.

5.3.3   The Need for a Program

These virtues will be of little use to people, however, unless they actually *do* fix their virtuously acquired beliefs. As Descartes notes in a letter to Princess Elizabeth from September 15, 1645,

> We cannot continually pay attention to the same thing; and so, however clear and evident the reasons may have been that convinced us of some truth in the past, we can later be turned away from believing it by some false appearances *unless we have so imprinted it on our mind by long and frequent meditation that it has become a settled disposition with us.* (CSMK 267; AT 4.295-6, emphasis mine)

A Cartesian meditator engages in this exact procedure. For instance, at the end of the Second Meditation, the meditator says, "[S]ince the habit of holding on to old opinions cannot be set aside so quickly, I should like to stop here and *meditate for some time* on this new knowledge I have gained, so as to *fix it more deeply in my memory*" (CSM 2.23; AT 7.34, emphasis mine). Thus, the process of meditating is not incidental to Descartes's project, as I argued in Chap. 2. In fact, repeatedly pondering various propositions and the arguments for those propositions is essential to the process by which people fix their beliefs properly on Descartes's account. As a number of commentators have argued, the *Meditations* is a set of meditations (see, e.g., Beck 1965, 28–38; Hatfield 1986; Kosman 1986; Stohrer 1979.). Thus, as Descartes makes clear in the *Objections and Replies*, the work is a set of exercises for one to practice repeatedly (see, e.g., CSM 2.43, 94, 160; AT 61-2, 130-1, 228-9).[19] This point is important to Descartes both because he wants to help people develop doxastic virtues and because he wants to help people develop habitual beliefs about what he regards as the most important aspects of "first philosophy."

5.3.4   Summary: Virtuous Belief Fixation

In summary, Descartes is concerned not merely with the way in which people conduct their enquiries and the way in which they form their judgments. He is also concerned with the method by which people fix their beliefs. On Descartes's account, virtuous belief fixation has two fundamental aspects. First, the person who fixes his or her beliefs virtuously must attempt to develop generosity and strength of soul, by which the person can control his or her emotions so that they will not interfere with the development of habitual, or dispositional, beliefs. Second, the person who fixes his or her beliefs virtuously must commit himself or herself to a program by which one's judgments become fixed. Just as a good gardener must prepare the soil and then water and prune his plants until they are

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[19] See Descartes's comments on memory in the *Treatise on Man* (CSM 1.106-7; AT 11.177-8).

fully grown, so a virtuous doxastic agent must prepare his or her soul, emotionally, and then commit himself or herself to a program of "protracted and repeated study" by which his or her judgments become dispositional, or habitual, beliefs.

5.4   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have elucidated each of three aspects of Descartes's systematic account of virtuous belief formation. First, I explained his account of *virtuous enquiry*, clarifying its proper *structure*, *goal*, and *scope*. Second, I explained his account of *virtuous judgment*, clarifying the norm for accepting propositions concerning ordinary matters; the norm for judging propositions concerning theological propositions, revealed by the light of grace; and the norm for judging propositions concerning scientific propositions, illumined by the light of nature. Third, I explained his account of *virtuous belief fixation*, noting both his conception of greater and lesser virtues and his understanding of the need for a program by which people fix their beliefs.

In the next chapter, I will analyze and evaluate an objection to Descartes's method of virtuous belief formation. It arises from a conjunction of some of the central aspects of his system—e.g., his accounts of judgment, of the will, and of moral responsibility—and, thus, poses a fundamental and potentially fatal challenge to his project.

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Chapter 6
Virtue, Volition, and Judgment

As I have explained in the previous chapters, Descartes is committed to each of the following three claims. First, an act of judgment is constituted by an act of the intellect and an act of the will (CSM 1.204; AT 8A.19; see also CSM 1.207; AT 8A.21). Second, people "can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend upon" an exercise of free will, which "renders us in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves" (CSM 1.384; AT 11.445-6). Third, failure to use one's faculty of judgment—and, more specifically, one's faculty of will—properly is a moral failure (see CSMK 233; AT 4.115).

Descartes's commitment to these claims might seem to pose a rather formidable challenge to his account of virtuous judgment. The simple version of the challenge is as follows. Descartes's account of virtuous judgment requires a commitment to doxastic voluntarism—that is, the view that people have voluntary control over their beliefs—but doxastic voluntarism is clearly false. Hence, given his views on the requirements for praise or blame, people cannot be morally responsible for their judgments. Therefore, his account of virtuous judgment is false. Descartes was aware, however, that people cannot simply change their beliefs on a whim. That is one of the reasons why he suggests that people may have to perform the First Meditation multiple times, over the course of weeks or months, before they can overcome their biased beliefs (CSM 2.43, 94, 160; AT 61-2, 130-1, 228-9; see also CSM 2.23; AT 7.34; CSMK 267; AT 4.295-6). So, if there is a compelling challenge to his account of virtuous judgment, one should expect it to be more nuanced than this simple version.

Articulating a more nuanced version of the challenge requires a more detailed understanding of the debate concerning the kind of doxastic voluntarism that seems to generate a problem for Descartes's account. There are, at least conceptually, two basic types of doxastic voluntarism. On the one hand, there is *indirect doxastic voluntarism* (*IDV*)—i.e., the thesis that people have the ability to control their beliefs indirectly, by controlling behaviors relevant to belief formation, such as gathering or attending to evidence. On the other hand, there is *direct doxastic voluntarism* (*DDV*)—i.e., the thesis that people have the ability to control their beliefs directly, by an act of the will. It is the latter—i.e., *DDV*—that is relevant in

assessing Descartes's account of virtuous judgment. The distinction between *IDV* and *DDV* alone, however, is insufficient to articulate, properly, the more nuanced version of the challenge to Descartes's position since there are, at least, two ways to conceive of *DDV*. On one hand, we could conceive of *DDV* as the thesis that people have the ability to control their beliefs directly and *negatively*—i.e., as the thesis that people have the ability to *suspend*, or to *withhold*, *judgment* directly by an act of the will. Call this *negative DDV*. On the other hand, we could conceive of *DDV* as the thesis that people have the ability to control their beliefs directly and *positively*—i.e., as the thesis that people have the ability to *form a judgment* directly by an act of the will. Call this *positive DDV*.[1]

With these distinctions in mind, we are in a better position to articulate the seemingly formidable challenge to Descartes's account of virtuous judgment. It is as follows. Descartes's account of virtuous judgment requires a commitment to some false version(s) of *DDV*—i.e., negative *DDV*, positive *DDV*, or both. Hence, given his views on the requirements for praise or blame, people cannot be morally responsible for their judgments. Therefore, his account of virtuous judgment is false.

My aims in this chapter are (i) to clarify the kind of *DDV* to which Descartes is committed and (ii) to explain, briefly, why his account of virtuous judgment does not easily fall prey even to this more nuanced challenge. To do so, however, I need to make one final clarification concerning Descartes's account of the nature of the act of will in judgment. In a letter from February 9, 1645, Descartes makes a distinction between acts of the will "*before* they are elicited" and acts of the will "*after* they are elicited" (CSMK 245; AT 4.173, emphasis mine). Although he exhibits a desire to distance himself from the intricacies of Scholastic faculty psychology (see, e.g., CSM 2.125; AT 7.177), in this letter he seems to endorse a familiar Scholastic distinction. According to Descartes's Scholastic predecessors, like Aquinas, we can distinguish, at least conceptually, between two different kinds of acts of the will. Consider, for instance, the raising of my arm. On Aquinas's account, the first act of the will is the one by which I elect, or choose, to raise my arm; the second is the one by which I attempt to carry out my choice. Appropriating Scholastic terminology, call the first kind of act an *elicited act* and the second kind a *commanded act* (see ST I-II, Q. 15, a. 1, ad 3; ST II-II, Q. 2, a. 1; ST II-II, Q. 4, a. 2; ST I-II, Q. 17, a. 5). What is important to note, in order to understand Descartes's

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[1] Likewise, there are, at least, two ways to conceive of *IDV*. On one hand, we could conceive of *IDV* as the thesis that people have the ability to control their beliefs indirectly and *negatively*. That is, we could conceive of *IDV* as the thesis that people have the ability to cause themselves to *suspend*, or to *withhold*, *judgment* by controlling behaviors relevant to belief formation. Call this *negative IDV*. On the other hand, we could conceive of *IDV* as the thesis that people have the ability to control their beliefs indirectly and *positively*. That is, we could conceive of *IDV* as the thesis that people have the ability to cause themselves to *form a judgment* by controlling behaviors relevant to belief formation. Call this *positive IDV*. This distinction will be important for my argument in Sect. 6.1 below.

account of *DDV*, is that Descartes identifies the act of the will that is constitutive of judgment as an elicited act (see, e.g., CSM 2.42; AT 7.60).[2]

With this clarification in mind, I am now in position to address two questions regarding Descartes's account of the extent to which people have voluntary control over their judgments. First, does he claim that people have *negative direct* control over their judgments and, hence, affirm negative *DDV*? Second, does he claim that people have *positive direct* control over their judgments and, hence, affirm positive *DDV*? After answering these questions, I will conclude by explaining, briefly, why Descartes's account of virtuous judgment does not easily fall prey even to the seemingly formidable challenge raised above.

6.1   Negative Direct Doxastic Voluntarism

The evidence alleged to show that Descartes endorses negative *DDV* might seem ambiguous at first glance. In the opening paragraphs of the *Meditations*, immediately after saying, "Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent *from opinions which are not completely certain*" (CSM 2.12; AT 7.18, emphasis mine), the meditator suggests not that he or she needs to find compelling evidence against his opinion, as one might expect if Descartes were committing himself to *IDV* in this passage. Instead, the meditator contends merely that he or she needs to find "some reason for doubt." Similar statements occur elsewhere in Descartes's mature, published works. For instance, in the *Principles*, he claims that in many cases—specifically, in doubtful matters—people have the power to withhold their assent from a proposition (CSM 1.194, 205-6; AT 8A.6, 19-20), and in both the *Discourse* and the Fourth Meditation, he counsels people to withhold judgment when a proposition is doubtful (CSM 1.120, 2.41-3; AT 6.18, 7.59-62). These passages clearly indicate that if, upon considering the evidence for a proposition, people do not have overwhelming evidence that the proposition is true, then they can suspend judgment regarding it. What might seem unclear, however, is exactly *how* people suspend judgment in such cases. Is Descartes actually suggesting that they do so *directly*? More specifically, we might put the question this way: Does finding "some reason for doubt" *entail* suspension of judgment—in which case these passages from Descartes's mature, published works would seem to evince his commitment to *IDV*—or does it indicate *a necessary and effective precondition* for suspension of judgment[3]—in which case these passages would seem to evince his commitment to *DDV*?

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[2] Kenny suggests that both the French translation of the *Meditations* and Descartes's *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* make the nature of the act of the will in judgment even clearer—see Kenny 1998, 139n27, 142n32; AT 9.48, as well as CSM 1.307; AT 8B.363.

[3] Referring to "a necessary and effective precondition for suspension of judgment," I have in mind a state of affairs that (i) must obtain before a person suspends judgment, (ii) is part of the cause of a person suspending judgment, and (iii) is not a *sufficient* condition for a person to suspend judgment.

Descartes's *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* provides a piece of compelling prima facie evidence that he endorses some version(s) of *DDV*. Recognizing that "we are often free to withhold our assent," Descartes "assign[s] the act of judging itself … *to the determination of the will* rather than to the perception of the intellect" (CSM 1.307; AT 8B.363, emphasis mine). He could have maintained the traditional Scholastic position that judgment and, more specifically, assent is an act of the intellect that is merely, in some broad sense, *under the control of the will*. That is, he could have affirmed that although certain acts of the will such as attending to evidence ultimately affect our judgments, our judgments themselves are not acts of the will. So doing would evince a commitment to *IDV*, but it is not the position that he adopts. Instead, he chooses to identify assent as *an elicited act of the will itself* and, hence, seems to evince a commitment to some version(s) of *DDV*.

Nonetheless, one might argue that in the relevant passages from the *Meditations*, the *Principles*, and the *Discourse*, Descartes merely suggests that people can control the elicited act of the will in judgment indirectly and, thus, endorses a version of *IDV* (see, e.g., Cottingham 1988, 247–8 and 2002, 352–5). Evidence from his correspondence might seem to support such an argument. For instance, in a letter from May 2, 1644 (CSMK 233-4; AT 4.115-6), Descartes explains to his correspondent what he means when he says that we can suspend our judgment in cases of clear and distinct perception. He says,

> [I]t seems to me certain that a great light in the intellect is followed by a great inclination in the will; so that if we see very clearly that a thing is good for us, it is very difficult—and, on my view, impossible, as long as one continues in the same thought—to stop the course of our desire. But the nature of the soul is such that it hardly attends for more than a moment to a single thing; hence, as soon as our attention turns from the reasons which show us that the thing is good for us, we merely keep in our memory the thought that it appeared desirable to us, we can call up before our mind some other reason to make us doubt it, and so suspend our judgment, and perhaps even form a contrary judgment. (CSMK 233-4; AT 4.116)

This letter might seem to suggest that, on Descartes's account, calling "before our mind some other reason to make us doubt" a proposition entails either suspending judgment or forming a contrary judgment. Thus, it might seem to provide evidence for reading the previously cited passages from his mature, published works as endorsements of *IDV*.

Notice, however, that the final sentence in the passage is ambiguous in such a way that, at first glance, we could read it as lending support to any of, at least, six versions of doxastic voluntarism. If we read the phrase "*and so* suspend our judgment" [& *ainsi suspender nostre iugement*] as indicating *entailment*, then the passage might seem to support one or more of the following types of *IDV*:

- *Negative IDV$_1$*: By performing the elicited act of the will by which one controls one's attention, one deprives one's intellect of specific content (i.e., a particular idea), thereby depriving one's will of the opportunity to act on that content, thereby suspending judgment.
- *Positive IDV$_1$*: By performing the elicited act of the will by which one controls one's attention, one deprives one's intellect of specific content (i.e., a particular idea), thereby depriving one's will of the opportunity to act on that content, thereby forming a contrary judgment.

- *Negative IDV$_2$*: By performing the elicited act of the will by which one controls one's attention, one alters the manner in which one's intellect perceives a particular idea, causing it not to be clear and distinct, thereby suspending judgment.
- *Positive IDV$_2$*: By performing the elicited act of the will by which one controls one's attention, one alters the manner in which one's intellect perceives a particular idea, causing it to appear less "desirable" than its denial, thereby forming a contrary judgment.

Alternatively, if we read the phrase "*and so* suspend our judgment" [& *ainsi suspender nostre iugement*] in the ambiguous final sentence not as indicating entailment, but as indicating *a necessary and effective precondition*, then it seems to favor one or more of the following types of *DDV*:

- *Negative DDV*: By performing the elicited act of the will by which one controls one's attention, one alters the manner in which one's intellect perceives a particular idea, causing it not to be clear and distinct, thereby making it possible for oneself to perform a separate, elicited act of the will by which one suspends judgment.
- *Positive DDV*: By performing the elicited act of the will by which one controls one's attention, one alters the manner in which one's intellect perceives a particular idea, causing it to appear less "desirable" than its denial, thereby making it possible for oneself to perform a separate, elicited act of the will by which one forms a contrary judgment.

Do any of these six readings of Descartes's letter offer helpful evidence for interpreting the relevant passages from his mature, published works?

Reading the letter as implying either *negative IDV$_1$* or *positive IDV$_1$* is implausible since Descartes specifically says not merely that one needs to distract oneself, thereby depriving one's intellect of certain content—namely, a particular idea—but that one needs to call to mind some reason to make oneself doubt the idea. Moreover, the previously mentioned passages from the *Meditations*, the *Principles*, and the *Discourse* are not concerned with people preventing themselves from attending to an idea. Rather, they are concerned with people merely putting themselves in a position such that they do not perceive an idea clearly and distinctly. So, even if such a reading of the letter were plausible, it would not provide helpful evidence for how to interpret the passages in question.

Reading the letter as implying either *negative IDV$_2$* or *positive IDV$_2$* is also implausible in light of central themes from Descartes's mature, published works. First, consider *negative IDV$_2$*. Descartes acknowledges that people can, and all too frequently do, affirm ideas that they do not perceive clearly and distinctly. On his account, so doing is the cause of the acquired prejudices that people must eradicate (see, e.g., CSM 1.117, 193; 2.12; AT 6.13; 8A.5; 7.17; CSMK 194-5; AT 3.430-2; ST I-II, Q. 17, a. 6; Kenny 1998, 133–4). Hence, he is *not* committed to the view that failing to perceive an idea clearly and distinctly *entails* that people suspend judgment. Second, consider *positive IDV$_2$*. Descartes admonishes people to suspend

judgment when they lack clear and distinct perception, suggesting that they could suspend judgment even if a particular idea appeared "desirable" (CSM 1.120, 2.41-3; AT 6.18, 7.59-62). Hence, he is *not* committed to the view that altering the manner in which one's intellect perceives a particular idea, causing its denial to appear more "desirable," *entails* forming a contrary judgment. Therefore, the letter fails to provide evidence for reading the previously cited passages from Descartes's mature, published works as endorsements of *IDV*.

Since (i) Descartes is attempting to explain to his correspondent what he means when he says that we can *suspend our judgment* in cases of clear and distinct perception and (ii) the proposed *IDV* readings are implausible, the letter presents suspension of judgment not merely as an act that is indirectly under the control of the will but as an elicited act of the will itself (see Kenny 1998, 139). Hence, it evinces Descartes's commitment to *negative DDV*. Thus, minimally, the letter from May 2, 1644 provides evidence for reading the previously mentioned passages in the *Meditations*, the *Principles*, and the *Discourse* as endorsements of a version of negative *DDV*.

Moreover, given Descartes's assignment of "the act of judging itself . . . to the determination of the will" (CSM 1.307; AT 8B.363) and the claim to his correspondent that by calling before our mind some reason to make us doubt an idea, "we can . . . perhaps even form a contrary judgment" (CSMK 233-4; AT 4.116), the letter might seem to evince his commitment to a version of positive *DDV*. Note, though, that the disclaimer—"*perhaps* even form a contrary judgment" (CSMK 233-4; AT 116, emphasis mine)—is ambiguous. On one hand, it could imply a little more than that, on Descartes's account, if "we can call up before our mind" some reason to make us doubt a proposition, we *might* be able to form a judgment that the proposition is false. Thus, the comment could indicate little more than a passing speculation about the possibility of positive *DDV*. On the other hand, it could imply that, on his account, although finding some reason for doubt is a necessary and effective precondition for withholding assent, it may not be a necessary and effective precondition for forming a contrary judgment. Thus, the comment could indicate that Descartes endorses positive *DDV* but that he sees an asymmetry between the preconditions for suspending judgment and the preconditions for forming a contrary judgment.

Therefore, the previously mentioned passages from the *Meditations*, the *Principles*, the *Discourse*, the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, and the letter from May 2, 1644 are helpful in shedding light on Descartes's commitment to negative *DDV*. These sources, however, do not offer compelling evidence regarding his position on positive *DDV*. Is there evidence elsewhere that clarifies his view?

6.2   Positive Direct Doxastic Voluntarism

The ending of the First Meditation might seem to do so. In the penultimate paragraph, the meditator resolves to free himself from the habitual opinions that continually "capture" his belief, saying, "I think it will be a good plan to turn my

will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary" (CSM 2.15; AT 7.22). This passage might seem to imply that Descartes endorses positive *DDV*.

There is, however, a significant interpretive problem with this reading. In the penultimate paragraph, it is far from clear that the meditator actually commits to *judging* that the propositions he once believed to be true are, in fact, false. Rather, the meditator claims to *pretend* that his former opinions are wholly false and imaginary [*omnino falsas imaginariasque esse fingam*]. In the final paragraph, the verbs the meditator uses to describe his position—*suppono*, *puto*, and *considero*— are ambiguous. They could suggest that the meditator judges his former opinions to be false. Alternatively, they could suggest that the meditator merely pretends that they are false without, in fact, judging that they are. By "pretending" that a belief is false, I take it that Descartes means both supposing that it is false for the sake of argument and trying, insofar as one is able, to eradicate it by, for example, taking seriously reasons one might have for doubting it, as the First Meditation and *Principles* I.1-5 suggest.[4] This ambiguity presents us with the challenge of determining which interpretation is more plausible.

Reading the verbs in the final two paragraphs of the First Meditation as evidence that Descartes endorses positive *DDV* requires us to see the meditator as adopting a strategy that goes far beyond the one he articulates at the beginning of the *Meditations*—namely, to try to find in each of his opinions some reason for doubt (CSM 2.12; AT 7.18; see also CSM 1.193; AT 8A.5). Moreover, reading these paragraphs as an endorsement of positive *DDV* is at odds with Descartes's remarks to Bourdin in the *Objections and Replies*. Commenting on what it means for the meditator to regard something as false, Descartes says, "When I said that doubtful matters should for a time be *treated as false*, or rejected as false, I merely meant that when investigating the truths that have metaphysical certainty we should regard doubtful matters as not having any more basis than those which are quite false" (CSM 2.309; AT 7.460-1, emphasis mine). Thus, reading these passages as an endorsement of positive *DDV* requires us not only to see the meditator as making a needless and unnecessarily ambitious change in strategy at the end of the First Meditation but also to attribute to Descartes a position that is at odds with his comments in the *Objections and Replies*.

Alternatively, reading the verbs in the final paragraphs as ways in which the meditator merely pretends that his or her former opinions are false is consistent both with the penultimate paragraph and with the position the meditator takes in the opening paragraphs of the *Meditations*, which is consistent with the positions Descartes articulates in the *Principles*, the *Discourse*, the *Comments on a Certain*

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[4] Thus, utilizing a contemporary distinction, we could say that the meditator seems to propose something like merely *accepting* rather than *believing* the propositions—see Bratman 1999, 15–34; Buckareff 2004; Cohen 1989, 367–89 and 1992.

Broadsheet, and the *Objections and Replies*. Hence, reading the verbs in the final paragraphs of the First Meditation as evidence that Descartes merely suggests that a meditator pretends that his former opinions are false is both more plausible and more charitable than reading them as evidence that he endorses positive *DDV*. Therefore, if there is compelling evidence regarding his position on positive *DDV*, it must lie elsewhere.

6.3 Conclusion

I have two goals in this chapter. The first is to clarify the kind of *DDV* to which Descartes is committed. With that end in mind, I have attempted to establish both (i) that there is strong textual evidence from the *Meditations*, the *Principles*, the *Discourse*, the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, and the letter from May 2, 1644, that Descartes endorses a version of negative *DDV*[5] and (ii) that there is insufficient textual evidence, at least from those works, that he endorses any version of positive *DDV*.

The second is to explain, briefly, why Descartes's account of virtuous judgment does not easily fall prey even to the more nuanced version of the challenge. The concise explanation is as follows. Participants in the doxastic voluntarism debate offer, roughly, two types of arguments against *DDV*. Arguments of the first type attempt to show that *it is impossible* for people to choose to believe a proposition independently of all truth considerations (see, e.g., Williams 1970; Scott-Kakures 1994; Alston 1989). Arguments of the second type attempt to show simply that *it is not the case that* at any given time people can choose to believe a proposition regardless of the evidence (see, e.g., Curley 1975; Pojman 1999). Thus, participants in the debate target versions of positive *DDV* and fail to address versions of negative *DDV*. Hence, by showing that the textual evidence suggests that Descartes endorses negative *DDV* rather than positive *DDV*, I have, in fact, shown that his account does not *easily* fall prey to the challenge.

It does not follow, of course, that Descartes's account of virtuous judgment is impervious to such a challenge. Critics can show that his account is fundamentally flawed by offering, e.g., either (i) a compelling argument showing that negative *DDV* is false or (ii) compelling textual evidence that Descartes is committed to positive *DDV* and that his account of virtuous judgment relies on this commitment.

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[5] Lex Newman (2007) suggests that, to date, philosophers have offered strong but not definitive cases for reading Descartes as endorsing negative *DDV*—see, e.g., Broughton 2002, 54–61, especially, p. 58; Della Rocca 2006, 148–52; Price 1969, 224; Larmore 1984, 61–74, especially pp. 67–8; Williams 1978, 176–9. I am not sure whether the argument I have presented here will make such a reading *definitive*. I hope that it will, at the very least, make such a reading *more compelling*.

In the absence of forceful argument or evidence, however, not only does Descartes's account of virtuous judgment *not* fall prey to the challenge that it requires a commitment to a false version of *DDV*, it remains worthy of serious consideration.[6]

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[6] The conclusion to this chapter poses a significant authorial challenge. A comprehensive defense of Descartes's view would be rather lengthy and, hence, detract from the fundamental narrative of the text. Such a defense, however, is important for my project. In an attempt both to keep a clean narrative and to offer a proper defense of Descartes's view, I have adopted the following strategy. In the conclusion of this chapter, I offer merely a brief explanation of why Descartes's account of virtuous judgment does not easily fall prey even to more nuanced arguments against doxastic voluntarism. Those readers who are satisfied with this explanation can continue, immediately, on to Chap. 7. For those readers who are not satisfied with such a brief explanation, I offer a detailed defense of Descartes's view vis-à-vis contemporary arguments against doxastic voluntarism in an appendix.

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Chapter 7
Natural Beatitude and Religious Reform

In the previous chapters, I explained Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation, elucidating both his account of belief and his account of morality as a cosmopolitan art of natural beatitude. In this chapter, I will illuminate one particularly salient aspect of the pragmatic and social nature of his philosophical program. More precisely, I will begin to explain the significance of Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation for religion. My explanation will proceed in two stages. First, I will review some of the standard objections against Descartes's philosophical program. I will then suggest that even if these objections show that his project fails in its aim to establish a new and lasting foundation in the sciences, it would be premature to conclude that it fails to have any enduring social significance. Second, I will argue that Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation is, in fact, significant not in helping Descartes achieve his scientific aspirations but in helping put him in position to attempt to reform not merely traditional Christianity, in particular, but traditional religion, in general. To establish this point, in the second part of the chapter, I will explain the supernatural significance of Descartes's account of morality and identify what Leibniz calls Descartes's "dangerous doctrines." I will then show that even if Descartes is not an atheist, as some have suggested, he develops an account of virtuous belief formation that aims to provide a reformed and—in his estimation, at least—improved conception of Christianity that would have evangelical appeal to modern, educated, Western Europeans.

7.1 Changing the Question

The most famous goal of Descartes's philosophical program is to establish certain things in the sciences that are "stable and likely to last" (see CSM 2.12; AT 7.17). The immovable foundation of this aspect of his project is a set of indubitable truths—e.g., that God exists, that God is not a deceiver, and so forth (see, e.g., CSM 2.49; AT 7.71). Since people ought to include nothing more in their judgments than those ideas that present themselves to their minds so clearly and so

distinctly that they have no occasion to doubt it (CSM 1.120; AT 6.18-9), those who take this endeavor seriously should, at least once in their lives, try to doubt "everything, as far as is possible" (see CSM 1.193, 2.12; AT 9A.5; 7.17-8). In essence, the success of the most famous goal of Descartes's philosophical program depends on a commitment both to a radical form of methodological doubt and to a radical form of foundationalism.

Critics claim that there are fatal flaws with Descartes's project. Hume, for example, suggests that it requires a commitment to radical skepticism and that if the form of doubt it requires were "ever possible to be attained by any human creature," it "would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject" (EHU 12.3; SBN 150).[1] This objection might seem rather compelling, at least at first glance. It becomes less convincing, however, once one realizes that it relies on a misrepresentation of Descartes's position. Descartes commits himself not to radical skepticism but to a radical form of methodological doubt. That is, his project requires *not* that people *succeed in doubting* everything but that, at least once in their lives, they *try to doubt* "everything, *as far as is possible*." As Descartes sees it, such an attempt is bound to fail since some of the propositions we attempt to doubt require mental perceptions that "are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true." For example,

> [t]he fact that I exist so long as I am thinking, or that what is done cannot be undone, are examples of truths in respect of which we manifestly possess this kind of certainty [i.e., firm and immutable conviction]. For we cannot doubt them unless we think of them; but we cannot think of them without at the same time believing they are true, as was supposed. Hence we cannot doubt them without at the same time believing they are true. (CSM 2.104; AT 7.145-6)

Thus, Descartes might be willing to grant Hume's point: if radical doubt were ever possible to attain, it would be incurable. He contends, however, that this type of doubt is not possible to attain. In fact, it is essential to his project that there are some propositions that people simply cannot succeed in doubting, such as *I exist*.[2]

A successful defense against the foregoing Humean objection might seem like good news for Descartes's hope of establishing "something firm and lasting in the sciences"; however, his project faces more threatening challenges. As those familiar with the scholarly literature are well aware, there is a group of other problems directly related to his commitment to a radical form of foundationalism. For example, to meet the requirements of Descartes's radical foundationalism, people must overcome their methodological doubts by acquiring knowledge of God, which they gain by understanding their own minds and ideas. His critics, however, identify a number of objections to Descartes's account of how we acquire knowledge of God. Caterus and Hobbes each contend that Descartes mischaracterizes the nature

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[1] Gassendi raises a similar related concern in the Second Objections (CSM 2.180; AT 7.257-8).

[2] See Janet Broughton's discussion of "dependency arguments" in Part II of *Descartes's Method of Doubt* (2002).

of ideas (see, e.g., CSM 2.69-70, 127; AT 7.96, 180). Mersenne contends that he misidentifies the origin of our ideas (CSM 2.88; AT 7.123). Arnauld contends that he argues in a circle—contending that one must know that God exists and is not a deceiver to know that his or her clear and distinct ideas are true, and one must know that his or her clear and distinct ideas are true to know that God exists and is not a deceiver (CSM 2.150; AT 7.214).[3] Thus, Descartes's early modern critics raise serious doubts about his arguments for the existence of God. Moreover, a number of Descartes's more recent critics claim that he fails to answer these or other critical objections.[4] Consequently, Descartes's early modern and more recent critics charge that the status of his philosophical project is as follows. Those utilizing Descartes's strategy for belief formation fail to meet the requirements of his radical foundationalism. Therefore, they are left in a Pyrrhonian position: they can accept certain propositions as true for the purposes of common life, but they are able to form very few, if any, of the beliefs that Cartesian science requires (see Sextus Empiricus 2000, 6–7, 9).

Both Descartes and his commentators offer a number of creative replies to these challenges. I intend neither to add to that number nor to assess the status of the debate. Instead of traveling down this well-worn path, I would like to take another tack. Suppose there is at least one fatal objection to Descartes's foundationalism and, hence, to his goal of establishing the sciences on firm foundations. That would not demonstrate that Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation has no enduring social significance. For those who are being careful to avoid a hasty dismissal of his philosophical program, it would merely raise a question: is there some other way, or perhaps other ways, that Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation might be important?

7.2   A Second Pragmatic and Social Implication

The specific scientific aims of Descartes's philosophical program, which are familiar to his commentators, are not something he overtly promotes. In fact, they are something he actively works to conceal. For instance, he says to Mersenne in a letter from January 28, 1641,

> I may tell you, *between ourselves*, that these six Meditations contain all the foundation of my physics. But *please do not tell people*, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. *I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice* that they destroy the principles of Aristotle. (CSMK 173; AT 3.297-8, emphasis mine)

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[3] The so-called 'Cartesian Circle'.

[4] See, e.g., Curley 1978, 96–169; Bernard Williams 1978, 130–62; Margaret Dauler Wilson 1978, 131–8. For a defense of Descartes's position, see, e.g., Rickless 2005, 309–36.

As I will argue presently, his innovative scientific aspirations are only one aspect of his philosophical program; another is his subversive goal of reforming religion, and it is by promoting religious reform that Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation is significant, even if it fails to establish a new and lasting foundation for science.

7.2.1 The Supernatural Significance of Descartes's Morality

Descartes conceives of medicine and morality as similar kinds of arts.[5] In very general terms, he alludes to this similarity by suggesting that each has a therapeutic purpose—namely, to treat a certain set of ailments of the body, in the case of the former, and to treat a certain set of ailments of the mind, or soul, in the case of the latter. For instance, he notes in his early writings, "I use the term 'vices' to refer to the diseases of the mind, which are not easy to recognize as diseases of the body. This is because we have frequently experienced sound bodily health, but have never known true health of the mind" (CSM 1.13; AT 10.215; see also Gueroult 1984, 188). In what ways, though, is morality similar to medicine?

Aristotle explains the similarity, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, by appealing to naturally discoverable "final causes" of the body and of the mind. It is tempting to dismiss this possibility out of hand, given Descartes's well-known comments about final causes in the *Meditations*, where he refers to "the customary search for final causes" as "totally useless," or in the *Principles*, where he claims that he "shall entirely banish" from his philosophy "the search for final causes" (CSM 2.39, 1.202; AT 7.55, 8A.15). In each context, however, Descartes explicitly dismisses the appeal to final causes *in physics*. Moreover, in the Fifth Replies, he might seem to express a more permissive attitude about appeals to final causes. He says, "In ethics . . . where we may often legitimately employ conjectures, it may admittedly be pious on occasion to try to guess what purpose God may have had in mind in his direction of the universe" (CSM 2.258; AT 7.37). So, one needs to be careful not to dismiss, too quickly, the possibility that Descartes offers an Aristotelian answer. Nonetheless, in his comments in the Fifth Replies, where he clearly has ethics in mind, he only grants that people may make *an occasional pious guess* about God's plans. He does not invoke an appeal to final causes to help understand the purpose of the body or the mind. Instead, he claims that although "[t]he function of the various parts of plants and animals . . . makes it appropriate to admire God as their efficient cause—to recognize and glorify the craftsman through examining his works," people "cannot guess from this what purpose God had in creating any given thing" (CSM 2.258; AT 7.374-5). Thus, rejecting an appeal to final causes, known by means of natural reason, an Aristotelian explanation of the similarity between medicine and morality is unavailable to Descartes.

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[5] See Chap. 4, Sect. 4.1.1.

Even if final causes cannot be known by means of *natural reason*, one might claim to know them by means of *divine revelation* and, hence, one might appeal to them for explanatory purposes, as, for example, Aquinas does in explaining the nature of happiness, or "man's last end" (see, e.g., ST I-II, Q. 1, a. 7; ST I-II Q. 2, aa. 7-8; ST I-II Q. 3, aa. 4, 8). Descartes, however, regularly tries to avoid such reasoning, treating it as the proper province not of philosophers but of theologians.[6] His *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* offer a concise summary of his understanding of the division between philosophy and theology. After declining to examine his critic's reading of Holy Scripture, evincing his reluctance to engage in theological disputes (see CSM 2.394; AT 7.598), he distinguishes among three different types of questions. The first concerns those "things are believed through faith alone—such as the mystery of the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the like." The second concerns those things that "while having to do with faith, can also be investigated by natural reason"—such as "the existence of God, and the distinction between the human soul and the body." The third concerns those things that "have nothing whatever to do with faith, and which are the concern solely of human reasoning, such as the problem of squaring the circle, or of making gold by the techniques of alchemy." According to Descartes, the principal task of theologians is to show that answers to questions of the first type, obtained through biblical interpretation, "are not incompatible with the natural light," and it is the proper province of philosophers to demonstrate answers to questions of the second type by means of natural reason (CSM 1.300-1; AT 8B.353). Thus, given his avowed desires to avoid theological controversy and to work on questions that are strictly philosophical, he cannot rely on divinely ordained and divinely revealed ends in his account of ethics. Hence, a Scholastic explanation of the similarity between medicine and morality is unavailable to him. Therefore, although Aristotelian or Scholastic strategies might seem appealing to certain early modern figures, like Leibniz (Leibniz 1989, 126, 157, 242; see also 52-3, 224, 233), they are both unappealing and unavailable to Descartes.

Descartes's conception of medicine differs from those who appeal to final causes in the Scholastic sense. As he sees it, the aim of medicine is to treat a person's body so that his body parts can work harmoniously and, consequently, that he can pursue his goals, free from physical pain. For this to happen, certain bodily states are required—e.g., eyes that can be used to read and to see objects at a distance, a heart that pumps circulates blood throughout the body, and so forth. As a matter of convention, he can claim that a body part that fails to perform these required operations is "disordered" or "diseased" and refer to maladies of this type as failures of "proper function." Thus, he can claim that the therapeutic art of medicine aims to restore both "proper function," so defined, to ailing body parts and, consequently, harmony to the body as a whole.

His conception of morality is similar. As he sees it, the aim of morality is to treat a person's mind or soul so that his mental faculties can work harmoniously and,

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[6] See Chap. 4, Sect. 4.1.1.

consequently, that he can pursue his goals with tranquility, or peace of mind. For this to happen, both (i) certain mental virtues—e.g., generosity, strength of mind, and so forth—and (ii) certain habitual beliefs—e.g., that God exists, that the soul is really distinct from the body, and so forth—are required. A mind that fails to possess virtues and beliefs such as these is disordered. Some such disorders are due to diseases of the body. Treatments for disorders such as these fall within the scope of medicine. Others, however, are due to a person's failure to use his mind properly. Treatments for disorders of the latter type fall within the scope of morality. For disorders such as these, the art of morality aims to introduce or, perhaps, to restore "proper use," so defined, to the person's mental faculties and, hence, tranquility, or peace, to the mind. Thus, Descartes is able to avoid both a kind of Aristotelian and a kind of Scholastic appeal to final causes to explain the similarity between medicine and morality. Rather, he can adopt a pragmatic and naturalistic approach not only to explain the ends of these therapeutic arts but also to characterize the arts themselves.

One might worry that this pragmatic and naturalistic conception of morality is a threat to religion. He assures his readers and interlocutors, however, that it is not. In fact, he claims that his account of morality is not simply *consistent with* but actually *beneficial to* the pursuit of supernatural beatitude. His view is evinced in the following pair of examples. First, he says that in pursuing natural beatitude, one will learn the proper objective of prayer. As he notes in his letter to Elizabeth from October 6, 1645, when people pray, they ought to do so neither to inform God of their needs nor to try "to get him to change anything in the order established from all eternity by his providence." He claims, in stark contrast to traditional religious conceptions of the nature of petitionary prayer, that these intentions are morally blameworthy. Rather, according to Descartes, what people ought to do is to pray so that they may learn "simply to obtain whatever [God] has, from all eternity, willed to be obtained by our prayers," as "all theologians agree" (CSMK 273; AT 4.316; see also Pereboom 1994, 606). Second, from his claim that people can be praised or blamed only for the proper or improper use of their wills, he infers that "there is nothing to repent of when we have done what we judged best at the time when we had to decide to act, even though later, thinking it over at our leisure, we judge that we made a mistake" (CSMK 269; AT 4.307; see also CSM 1.384; AT 11.446). Consequently, he concludes that pursuing natural beatitude, in accordance with the teachings of his account of virtuous belief formation, actually helps people to "achieve wisdom according to their lights *and thus to find great favour with God*" (CSM 1.191; AT 8A.2-3, emphasis mine).[7] Thus, Descartes claims that rather than being a threat to religion, his account of morality as a cosmopolitan art of natural

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[7] One of Descartes's underlying assumptions seems to be that the attainment of supernatural beatitude is a legal affair and, hence, if one cannot be the object of blame, even from God, then one can attain supernatural beatitude. On this point, he seems to be following a, if not the, received opinion of his milieu—see, e.g., Leibniz's characterization of ethics as "eternal and divine jurisprudence" (Leibniz 1989, 324).

beatitude actually helps people in their pursuit, if not their attainment, of supernatural beatitude.

7.2.2   "Dangerous Doctrines"?

His contemporaries, however, are not convinced. Perhaps the most insightful and compelling critique of his account comes from Leibniz. In a notably candid and critical letter from roughly 1679, he characterizes Descartes's morality as an unoriginal "composite of the opinions of the Stoics and Epicureans," similar to that of Seneca (Leibniz 1989, 241). His most compelling critique, however, is not of Descartes's lack of originality but of the extent to which Descartes's moral theory subtly and nefariously opposes Christian morality. Descartes alleges that his morality is compatible with Christianity: it artfully attempts to avoid making any claims concerning supernatural beatitude and offers an account of natural beatitude that is informed by Cartesian metaphysics and physics—most importantly, his teachings on the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. It is from these very things, which Descartes claims make his view compatible with Christianity, that Leibniz develops his critique.

Leibniz's negative assessment seems to be motivated, in particular, by two doctrines that inform Descartes's account of morality. The first is Descartes's teaching about how God relates to the world. At *Principles* 3.47, he claims that all physical changes in the universe "must occur in accordance with the laws of nature" and, moreover, that "by the operation of these laws *matter must successively assume all the forms of which it is capable*" (CSM 1.257-8; AT 8A.103, emphasis mine). From Descartes's conception of physical change and his rejection of final causes, as noted above, Leibniz infers that those who accept Descartes's morality as being compatible with Christianity "are deceived by fine words, since Descartes's God, or perfect being, is not a God like the one [they] imagine or hope for, that is, a God just and wise, doing everything possible for the good of creatures." On Leibniz's account, "Descartes's God is something approaching the God of Spinoza, namely, the principle of things and a certain supreme power or primitive nature that puts everything into motion [*action*] and does everything that can be done," according to "a necessary and fated order," without any particular interest in the well-being of his creatures (Leibniz 1989, 242).

The second is his teaching on memory. In *The Treatise on Man*, Descartes claims that the brain is "the seat of the memory" and that memories consist in physical traces made in certain "pores or gaps lying between the tiny fibers" towards the base of the brain (CSM 1.106-7; AT 11.177-8; see also Leibniz 1989, 243n299). From Descartes's account of memory, as described in the *Treatise*, and his teaching on the immortality of the soul, Leibniz concludes that Descartes provides nothing more than an account of "a soul which is immortal without any memory." In essence, he argues that Descartes's account of the immortality of the soul is incompatible with

Christianity and, consequently, that his conception of natural beatitude offers people "no consolation other than that of patience through strength" (see Leibniz 1989, 243).

In fact, Leibniz concludes not merely that Descartes's account of morality is incompatible with Christianity but that it is actually inimical to the faith. As he sees it, Descartes's morality is little more than an "art of living" or, more specifically, an "art of patience," which is without hope, "cannot last, and scarcely consoles" (Leibniz 1989, 241–3). Moreover, since Descartes's "dangerous doctrines" are misleadingly dressed up in Christian guise, they have the potential to deceive people, uproot true principles of the faith, and, thereby, corrupt the Christian religion.

These charges are reminiscent of those issued by the faculty at the University of Utrecht, as Descartes understands them. Incited by Voetius, the academic senate at the University issues a decree in which they formally reject Cartesian philosophy for three reasons:

> First, it is opposed to the traditional philosophy which universities throughout the world have hitherto taught on the best advice, and it undermines its foundations. Second, it turns away the young from this sound and traditional philosophy and prevents them reaching the heights of erudition; for once they have begun to rely on the new philosophy and its supposed solutions, they are unable to understand the technical terms which are commonly used in the books of traditional authors and in the lectures and debates of their professors. And, lastly, various false and absurd opinions either follow from the new philosophy or can be rashly deduced by the young—opinions which are in conflict with other disciplines and faculties and above all with orthodox theology. (CSM 2.393n1; AT 7.592f)

Descartes characterizes the first reason as baseless and the second as ridiculous (see CSM 2.393-4; AT 7.596-7). He is particularly troubled, however, by the third. As he reads it, it contains two particularly damning charges, asserting not merely that he is an atheist but also that he uses the techniques of the notorious Cesare Vanini[8] "to erect the throne of atheism in the minds of the inexperienced" (CSMK 223; AT 8B.175). He claims that the third charge is both false and malicious,[9] denying that one can deduce principles from his philosophy that "are in conflict with orthodox theology" (CSM 2.394; AT 7.597).

Descartes's vehement denial notwithstanding, are charges such as those raised by Leibniz and Voetius correct? Are Descartes's doctrines dangerous, in the sense that they threaten to undermine Christian morality?

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[8] Lucilo (Giulio Cesare) Vanini was an Italian priest who was charged with, tried for, and convicted of "atheism, blasphemy and 'other crimes'," likely homoerotic sexual acts. He was then sentenced to have his tongue cut out and to be both strangled and burned at the stake. The sentence was executed immediately after the verdict, on February 9, 1619 (Clarke 2006, 72–3; Rodis-Lewis 1998, 71).

[9] In fact, he characterizes Voetius's attacks as ones filled with "scurrilous insults," "atrocious slanders," and "criminal lies" that "could not be employed between enemies, or by a Christian against an infidel, without convicting the perpetrator of wickedness and criminality" (CSMK 224; AT 8B.193).

7.2.3   Descartes's Defense

In Descartes's defense, his commentators submit several pieces of counterevidence against such charges. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on six.

First, Descartes has what he seems to regard as a powerful religious experience on St. Martin's Eve, November 10, 1619. His concern with the search for truth causes him "much mental torment," which his friends are unable to dissipate. This experience tires him so much that his brain becomes "inflamed" and he falls "into a kind of enthusiasm," which leaves his "depressed spirit" in a state that is "ready to receive dreams and visions." He retires to bed "full of enthusiasm" from finding, earlier that day, "the foundations of a wonderful science" and has three dreams "which he imagined could have come only from on high" (Gabbey and Hall 1998, 652; see also Rodis-Lewis 1998, 36–43; CSM 1.4; AT 10.216). He interprets the third dream, in particular, "as evidence of his destiny to produce a new mathematical and scientific system" and, regarding this evidence as of divine origin, makes "a vow to the Virgin to visit her shrine in Loretto" (CSM 1.4n1; see also CSM 1.5, 116; AT 10.218, 6:10-1; Rodis-Lewis 1998, 41).

Second, he seems to have a more nuanced account of memory and, consequently, of the immortality of the soul than the one that Leibniz attributes to him. Writing to Huygens on October 10, 1642, he says,

> I know ... that you have great strength of mind and are well acquainted with all the remedies which can lessen your sorrow. But I cannot refrain from telling you one which I have always found most powerful, not only to enable me to bear the death of those I have loved, but also to prevent me from fearing my own, though I love life as much as anyone. It consists in the consideration of the nature of our souls. I think I know very clearly that they last longer than our bodies, and are destined by nature for pleasures and felicities much greater than those we enjoy in this world. Those who die pass to a sweeter and more tranquil life than ours; I cannot imagine otherwise. We shall go to find them some day, and *we shall still remember the past; for we have, in my view, an intellectual memory which is certainly independent of the body*. (CSMK 216; AT 3.798-9, emphasis mine)

Third, he explicitly denies the charges raised against him by Voetius. In response, he says,

> I do not doubt that the time will come when my arguments, despite all your snarling, will have the power to call back from atheism even those slow-witted enough not to understand them. For they will know that they are accepted as the most certain demonstrations by all those who understand them aright, that is, by all the most intelligent and learned people, and that although they are looked at askance by you and many others, no one has been able to refute them . ... (CSMK 223-4; AT 8B.177)

Fourth, his response to the charges of Voetius appears to be more than a mere public charade to protect himself from persecution, in light of the fact that he uses his arguments to persuade others to convert to Roman Catholicism. These include Queen Christina, David Beck,[10] and a number of Huguenots (Rodis-Lewis 1998, 209, 217).

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[10] The Dutch artist who worked for Queen Christina in Stockholm and painted her portrait (see Rodis-Lewis 1998, 217).

Fifth, he remains a practicing Roman Catholic until the very end of his life. In fact, he attends Mass and receives the Eucharist as late as February 1, 1650, ten days before his death (Rodis-Lewis 1998, 201).

Sixth, a number of people with whom he is acquainted testify of Descartes's strong religious convictions. Chanut attests that although illness prevents Descartes from making a sacramental confession on his deathbed, he still offers signs that he will depart "happy with life and with men, and confident in the grace of God" (Rodis-Lewis 1998, 203). Claude Saumaise, another scholar working in Queen Christina's court, attests that Descartes is not merely a Roman Catholic, but "among the most zealous" of the faith (Rodis-Lewis 1998, 207). Even Descartes's fencing instructor characterizes him as "a man of great religion" whose work is an honor "to the Roman Church" (Rodis-Lewis 1998, 215).

7.2.4   The Reformative Nature of Descartes's Program

There are, of course, other commentators who suggest that such counterevidence is flawed, misleading, or otherwise inadequate. For instance, Descartes's appeal to intellectual memory to explain the immortality of the soul might seem problematic for two reasons. First, Descartes composed this letter shortly after the death of Huygens' brother (Rodis-Lewis 1998, 210), potentially calling into question the sincerity of the explanation. Second, in the "Conversation with Burman," Descartes allegedly claims, "[T]his intellectual memory has universals rather than particulars as its objects" (CSMK 337; AT 5.150; see also Gueroult 1984, 306n27).[11] If the arguments of the dissenting commentators, such as these, are correct, then Descartes may very well be an atheist.

For the sake of argument, however, let us suppose that the commentators who come to Descartes's defense are correct and that Descartes is not, in fact, an atheist. That might suffice to rebut one of the most scandalous charges that Voetius makes—namely, that Descartes is an atheist like Vanini. It would not, however, address the heart of the challenge that Leibniz raises—namely, that *Descartes's doctrines* are inimical to Christianity. Thus, the issue that remains to be addressed is whether his doctrines do, in fact, threaten to undermine Christian morality, regardless of his private views about religion.

Although Descartes denies being an atheist, he does confess to having "a weakness" concerning religious belief. In his correspondence with Huygens, he admits that, like "the majority of men," regardless both of how much he desires to believe and of how much he thinks he does firmly believe all that his religion teaches, he is not usually so moved by it as when he is convinced by very evident *natural* reasons (CSMK 216; AT 3.798-9). Nonetheless, acknowledging that he has "no desire to meddle in any theological disputes," he focuses solely on

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[11] See also Caton 1970, 1975; Dorter 1973; Loeb 1986, 1988.

philosophical debates and, more specifically, on "matters that are known very clearly by natural reason," which "cannot be in conflict with anyone's theology," provided that one's theology does not manifestly clash with the light of reason (CSM 2.394; AT 7.598; see also CSM 1.300-1; AT 8B.353; see also Rodis-Lewis 1998, 208–15). Thus, hoping to pursue his projects in peace, he attempts to maintain a strict distinction between philosophy and Christian theology.[12]

He is aware, however, that the findings of one realm may be incompatible with those of the other—hence his disclaimer that he intends his findings to be compatible with Christian theology, *provided that* such theology does not manifestly clash with the light of reason. In his published works, he professes to defer to the authority of the Roman Catholic Church if, and to the extent that, his views are incompatible with the teaching of Her Magisterium. For instance, he concludes the *Principles* by stating, "Nevertheless, mindful of my own weakness, I make no firm pronouncements, but submit all these opinions to the authority of the Catholic Church and the judgement of those wiser than myself. And I would not wish anyone to believe anything except what he is convinced of by evident and irrefutable reasoning" (CSM 1.291; AT 8A.329). Similarly, in the Fourth Replies, he claims to submit his judgments to those of the "court of pious and orthodox theologians," whose correction he appears ready to accept (CSM 2.178; AT 7.256). Likewise, at *Principles* 1.28, he states, "[T]he natural light is to be trusted only to the extent that it is compatible with divine revelation" (CSM 1.202-3; AT 8A.16).

Thus, Descartes publicly commits himself to a strict distinction between philosophy and Christian theology and submits his judgment on controversial matters to that of the Roman Catholic Church. In so doing, he adopts the kind of public stance that had become common among French Catholic scholars since the thirteenth-century controversies at Paris and Toulouse concerning the adoption of Aristotelian science.[13]

This public stance might seem to weaken the creative strength and influence of a scholar like Descartes. As I will argue presently, however, it has just the opposite effect. The essence of the position that Descartes adopts is captured nicely by an adage from Augustine, which Arnauld is fond of citing: "What we know, we owe to reason; what we believe, to authority" (Schmaltz 1999, 53). Working within this mindset, Roman Catholic scholars develop a tradition of reinterpreting certain religious claims in light of the dictates of natural reason. For instance, Aquinas claims that a theory developed from a literal reading of the creation narrative in Genesis 1:6 "can be shown to be false by solid reasons"; thus, he concludes, "it cannot be held to be the sense of Holy Scripture. It should rather be considered that Moses was speaking to ignorant people, and that out of condescension to their

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[12] More specifically, he desires to maintain a distinction between Cartesian philosophy, on the one hand, and Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies, on the other, since he seems completely unaware of the relevant differences between these theologies and that of the Orthodox Christian Church.

[13] For a helpful summary of the controversy concerning Aristotelian science in the thirteenth century, see Grant 1996, 70–85.

weakness he put before them only such things as are apparent to sense" (ST I, Q. 68, a. 3). Essentially, the interpretive strategy of Roman Catholic scholars like Aquinas is similar to that of Jews like Maimonides: "[T]hose passages in the Bible, which in their literal sense contain statements that can be refuted by proof, must and can be interpreted otherwise" (*Guide for the Perplexed* II.xxv). In more general terms, the strategy is, roughly: those religious doctrines that can be refuted can and must be interpreted in such a way that they are compatible with the demonstrations of natural reason. Therefore, not only does Descartes's public stance allow him to placate certain Roman Catholic officials, it also gives him the freedom to pursue his philosophical program with the confidence that his work has the potential to modernize Christian theology and thereby—in his eyes, at least—to improve it.

7.3   Conclusion

Let us pause here, briefly, to take stock of where we are and where we are headed. To this point, I have argued as follows. Even if Descartes fails to establish a new and lasting foundation for the sciences, his philosophical program has enduring social significance. Focusing exclusively on knowledge obtained by natural reason and claiming that by such means a philosopher cannot know God's ends, the only way for him to offer a distinctively *religious*—and, in his case, this means a distinctively *Christian*—ethic would be for him to appeal to divine revelation. He does not make this move, however. Instead, he offers his readers a naturalized, cosmopolitan account of morality that, he claims, is not only compatible with but actually helpful for attaining the beatitude that is the goal of the Christian life. Thus, Descartes's program aims not only to reform the nature of science but also to reform the Christian approach to ethics.

As I will argue in the next chapter, however, Descartes's merely palliative art of living is both incompatible with the traditional, curative Christian conception of morality and, actually, inimical to it. Thus, I will contend that even if Descartes is not an atheist, his account of virtuous belief formation subversively aims at reforming traditional Christianity, thereby paving the way for subsequent philosophers to make bolder attempts at naturalizing not only Christianity but religion, in general.

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Chapter 8
The Subversion of Traditional Christianity

In the previous chapter, I argued that despite the fact that Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation is not significant in helping him achieve his aspirations to reform science, it is successful in putting him into a position to attempt to reform not only Christianity but religion, in general. In this chapter, I will show that, even if Descartes's disavowal of atheism is sincere, his philosophical program, broadly conceived, is antithetical to traditional Christianity in the kind of way that Leibniz suggests. More specifically, I will explain the way in which Descartes's conception of morality is subversive of traditional Christian ethics, both in theory and in practice. In so doing, I will show that Descartes's program is an attempt to influence subsequent scholars not merely to *reform* but, in fact, to *subvert* traditional Christianity and, by implication, those traditional forms of religion with similar philosophical commitments.

Because the terms "Christian" and "Christianity" have varying uses, let me make some important clarifications at the outset, lest my thesis be misunderstood before I even begin to develop my argument. I am using the term "traditional Christianity," and related phrases, in a particular sense, as I noted in the Introduction. On my account, the term "traditional Christianity" refers to the religious tradition that (i) "uses first millennium theological texts as contemporary guides for understanding Christian morality," (ii) "lives ... in the texts, thoughts, and practices out of which all Christianity developed," and (iii) "does not simply know and use" these ancient texts, but is "immersed in the life-world that sustains them," living "fully in the mind" in which the authors of these texts wrote, fully embracing "their theological world-view" (Engelhardt 2000, 159–60). Essentially, the referent of such phrases is Christianity both as it was manifested in the Greek-speaking part of the Near East in the first millennium after the birth of Christ—e.g., in Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Jerusalem—and as it is still manifested today, most clearly, in traditional Orthodox Christian churches throughout the world.

Why do I focus on a form of Christianity that is different from that which both Descartes and the majority of contemporary Americans and Western Europeans are most familiar—namely, the forms of "Western Christianity" that (i) have their principal foci in Rome, Canterbury, Wittenberg, and Geneva and (ii) are uniquely

and robustly developed in the second millennium after Christ (see Bradshaw 2004, 153–277)? As I noted in the Introduction, the reasons are both theological and philosophical. The theological reason is that what I am calling "traditional Christianity" is the "mother tradition" that a number of religious groups claim as their own. Moreover, it is this tradition to which these groups appeal in their attempts to justify themselves, by arguing that their life of faith and practice manifests a substantial continuity with the essential faith and practice of this "mother tradition." The philosophical reasons are twofold. First, traditional Christianity is philosophically valuable insofar as it develops and relies on certain distinctive features of ancient, Near Eastern metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics that have been lost not only to Descartes but also to many in the West (see Bradshaw 2004, 153–277). Second, examining Descartes's philosophical project in light of ancient, Near Eastern religious philosophy helps to enrich the diversity of Western philosophical thought.

Exploring the significance of each of these reasons would be interesting. For my purposes, however, I will focus on the first philosophical reason, highlighting the profound ways in which Descartes's understanding of the nexus of nature, virtue, and religion differs significantly from that of the historical core commitments of the religion that he might seem—at least nominally or at first glance—to represent.

With these clarifications in mind, let me turn to the task at hand. I will begin by explaining some fundamental *theoretical* differences between Descartes's morality and traditional Christianity. I will then explain some key *practical* differences between the two.[1] Finally, I will develop a kind of Leibnizian critique and elucidate some ways in which these theoretical and practical differences are not complementary but are, in fact, antithetical to and subversive of traditional Christianity and, by implication, of similarly traditional forms of religion.

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[1] Some traditional Christians have suggested that my presentation in this chapter is misleading. The concern, as I understand it, is as follows. The way in which I describe the similarities and differences between Descartes's view and the traditional Christian view makes the latter sound as if it were nothing more than one philosophical system among many. However, it is not a *philosophical system*, consisting of a set of *abstract principles*, known by means of natural reason. Rather, it is a *way of life*, consisting of a set of *concrete practices*, by which one knows—in the sense of "enters into union with"—the Living God.

I agree that traditional Christianity is not *simply* a philosophical system and that it is *principally* a way of life. The way that I am describing the differences, however, is compatible with both of these points. By embracing the traditional Christian way of life, people commit themselves both to affirming a certain set of propositions and to denying others. Insofar as those principles have philosophical content, traditional Christians commit themselves to a certain set of *philosophical* principles. Insofar as these principles are systematically related, they form what can rightly be described as "a philosophical *system*." To the extent that one subset of these principles can rightly be described as "theoretical" and another as "practical," in the sense that I am using those terms in this chapter, one can rightly characterize the differences between Descartes's morality and traditional Christianity without mischaracterizing either.

8.1   Descartes's Morality and Traditional Christianity: *Theoretical* Differences

8.1.1   *Beatitude and the Supreme Good in Descartes's Morality*

Some of the most fundamental *theoretical* differences between Descartes's conception of morality and the traditional Christian conception of ethics stems from two sources: his account of beatitude and, consequently, his account of the supreme good of life understood by the light of nature. As I noted in Chap. 3, Descartes identifies two types of beatitude: supernatural and natural. The former is known by the supernatural light; the latter, by the natural light, or the light of reason (see CSMK 258, 272, 324; AT 4.267, 314; 5.82; Gueroult 1984, 180). Leaving supernatural theorizing to the theologians and following the lead of ancient philosophers like Seneca, Descartes offers an account of natural beatitude (see CSMK 324-6; AT 82-5; CSM 1.404; AT 11.488). On this account, one might reasonably regard both virtue and tranquility, or peace of mind, as the end or goal of human action, but, strictly speaking, it is virtue that is "the supreme good" of which one is capable by means of natural reason, without the light of faith.

Among the virtues, or "habits in the soul which dispose it to have certain thoughts" (CSM 1.387; AT 11.453), Descartes distinguishes between those that are "true" and those that are "pure and genuine." Among the "true virtues" are things like goodness, piety, or courage that arise not from knowledge of what is right but from something like simplicity, fear, or desperation. The "pure and genuine virtues" arise from knowledge of what is right, have the same nature, and "are included under the single term 'wisdom'." For, according to Descartes, "whoever possesses the firm and powerful resolve always to use his reasoning powers correctly, as far as he can, and to carry out whatever he knows to be best, is truly wise, so far as his nature permits. And simply because of this, he will possess justice, courage, temperance, and all the other virtues" (CSM 1.191; AT 8A.2-3). Thus, on Descartes's account, it is the pure and genuine virtue of wisdom that is the supreme good of life, considered by natural reason without the light of faith, by which human beings can achieve natural beatitude—that is, tranquility, or peace of mind.

To understand Descartes's position accurately, one needs to note that when he refers to the "pure and genuine virtue of wisdom," he has in mind the highest level of wisdom among the five he identifies. The first level includes knowledge of notions that are "so clear in themselves that they can be acquired without meditation." The second level "comprises everything we are acquainted with through sensory experience." The third "comprises what we learn by conversing with other people." The fourth includes those things that one learns by reading books that "have been written by people who are capable of instructing us well." The fifth level, however, is one that "is incomparably more elevated and more sure than the other four" and "consists in the search for the first causes and the true principles

which enable us to deduce the reasons for everything we are capable of knowing." Those who have labored to this end are called "philosophers" (CSM 1.181; AT 9B.5). To the extent that they attain such wisdom, they possess "justice, courage, temperance, and all the other virtues" (CSM 1.191; AT 8A.2-3). According to Descartes, it is this fifth, philosophical type of wisdom that is the pure and genuine virtue that is the supreme good of life.

In short, on Descartes's account, there are two types of beatitude: supernatural and natural. The supreme good of those who attain natural beatitude is wisdom, or knowledge of first causes and true principles, which enables people to deduce the reasons for everything that they can know. The means to attaining this type of beatitude is the proper form of philosophical reflection, as exhibited, for example, in the therapeutic practice of the *Meditations*—in which people free themselves from prejudice, start with sure and certain knowledge of first philosophy, and begin to acquire the highest form of wisdom. The effect of attaining this type of beatitude is tranquility, or peace of mind. Moreover, as Descartes sees it, he not merely provides properly reasoned accounts of natural beatitude and of the supreme good of human life. Rather, he offers accounts of these that are complementary to Christianity.

8.1.2 Beatitude and the Supreme Good in Traditional Christianity

What should we make of Descartes's accounts of natural beatitude and of the supreme good of human life? Are they complementary to traditional Christianity? In what follows, I will suggest that they are not, highlighting some of the key differences, in two stages. First, I will show that the traditional Christian account of beatitude relies not on a distinction between that which is supernatural and that which is natural but on a distinction between God's essence and God's energies. Second, I will show that on the traditional Christian account, the supreme good of human life is not merely tranquility, or peace of mind, but union with God. To explain this second point clearly, I will elucidate the traditional Christian conception of religious epistemology and highlight some significant ways in which it differs from Descartes's conception of wisdom.

8.1.2.1 The Essence-Energies Distinction

Traditional Christianity recognizes both a distinction between that which is *created* and that which is *uncreated* and, consequently, a distinction between *creature* and *Creator*. It does not, however, recognize a distinction between a realm of nature as something separated from God. Rather, traditional Christianity recognizes that it is *in God* that human beings live and move and have their being, as St. Paul notes in his address to the people of Athens (Acts 17:28). This view is evinced in the

common liturgical prayers of the Church, such as "O Heavenly King," the most frequently recited prayer to the Holy Spirit:

> O Heavenly King,
> the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth,
> *Who art everywhere present and fillest all things*,
> Treasury of blessings and Giver of life,
> Come and live in us.
> Wash away all our sin and save our souls, O Good One. (emphasis mine)

Moreover, the view is evinced in the lives of the Church's saints, specifically in the form of contemplative prayer known as *theoria physike*, in which one contemplates what St. Anthony calls "the word of God in nature," or "sees" God's presence in the physical world (see, e.g., McGuckin 2011, 202). In fact, both sacred scripture and sacred tradition reveal that Christians not only recognize God as being *everywhere present* and *filling all things* but also invite God to come and *live in* them and cleanse them from every sin.

Appealing to sacred scripture and sacred tradition, as I do here, will likely only add to the puzzlement of many, who accept something like the following line of thought: The natural-supernatural distinction simply suggests that God is transcendent, and rightfully so, since to deny that God is transcendent would entail either (i) an endorsement of pantheism or, at least, (ii) an implied commitment to a Spinozistic claim that God is essentially extended, or physical. Therefore, traditional Christianity must accept the natural-supernatural distinction to avoid claims such as these, which it regards as essentially incompatible with its faith.

This puzzlement stems, in large part, from the loss of an understanding of the traditional Christian distinction between God's *ousia* and God's *energeiai*.[2] Christians of the first millennium, especially those in the Eastern sees—such as Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem—appropriate the terms "ousia" and "energeiai" from ancient Greek metaphysics. The former refers to a being's essence, or nature, and the latter, to "the activity innate in every essence," by which "its nature is made manifest" (*De Fide Orthodoxa* II.xxiii).[3] Traditionally, Christians applied the terms to God as follows: God's *ousia* is God's essence, or nature, and God's *energeiai* manifest God's *ousia*, making it present in an active and dynamic way.

Given what I have said to this point, the essence-energies distinction might sound to some like nothing more than the distinction between God and God's effects in the world, dressed up in unfamiliar technical jargon. It is, however, significantly different. God's *energeiai* are not something that God creates, nor are they merely God's effects in the world. Rather, they are God Himself, but they do not constitute God's *ousia* (Bradshaw 2004, 170). Hence, they are not something

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[2] For a systematic treatment of the distinction and its significance for the division between traditional and Western Christianity, see, e.g., Bradshaw (2004) as well as Engelhardt (2000) and Bradshaw (2006).

[3] Here and hereafter, "De Fide Orthodoxa" refers to St. John of Damascus 1994, followed by references to the book and chapter, in which the passage occurs.

to which God can be reduced or equated (Bradshaw 2006, 281). In short, as Bradshaw suggests, God's *energeiai* are "God Himself under some nameable aspect or form" (Bradshaw 2004, 165).

So, although it is compatible with traditional Christianity to claim that God is "transcendent" insofar as He is neither limited to nor coextensive with the physical universe, it is incompatible with traditional Christianity to claim that God is "transcendent" insofar as this entails that He is separated from the physical universe. In this sense, one can rightly say that on the traditional Christian account, there is "*no dividing line* between the natural and the supernatural" (Bradshaw 2006, 284, emphasis mine).

8.1.2.2 The Supreme Good of Human Life

Perhaps most people in Europe and America conceive of Christian ethics in light of the familiar legal metaphors for salvation that become particularly salient in soteriological discussions around the time of the Reformation. That most contemporary Europeans and Americans conceive of Christian ethics in this way should be unsurprising, given that the view is appropriated by early modern intellectuals and given particular prominence in their works, which heavily influence contemporary Western thought. As Hume rightly notes, conceiving of ethics, in general, and religious ethics, in particular, in legal terms is a common practice among the moderns. Towards the end of the second *Enquiry*, he addresses the way in which modern philosophers' conceptions of ethics have differed, markedly, from those of the ancients. He claims that modern philosophy of all kinds, but especially ethics, has been closely united with certain religious systems. Consequently, he suggests, "philosophers, or rather divines under that disguise," end up "*treating all morals, as on a like footing with civil laws, guarded by the sanctions of reward and punishment*" and, thus, are "necessarily led to render this circumstance, of voluntary or involuntary, the foundation of their whole theory" (EPM App4.21; SBN 322, emphasis mine; see also T 3.3.4.1ff; SBN 606ff). This practice is evident in the works of some of the most prominent figures of the period. For instance, in his essay "Anti-barbarus Physicus," Leibniz identifies ethics as "eternal and divine *jurisprudence*" (Leibniz 1989, 320, emphasis mine). Similarly, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke describes the "*Moral Rules*, or Laws, to which Men generally refer and by which they judge of the Rectitude or Pravity of their Actions" as being of three sorts "with their three different Enforcements, or Rewards and Punishments" (Essay II.xxviii.6). These three sorts are "1. The *Divine* Law, 2. The *Civil* Law, [and] 3. The Law of *Opinion*, or *Reputation*." With the relation people bear to the first sort, people judge whether their actions are sins or duties. With the relation people bear to the second, people judge whether their actions are criminal or innocent, and with the relation people bear to the third, people judge whether their actions are virtues or vices (Essay II.xxviii.7). Moreover, one of the functions of his account of personal identity is to help account for the proper distribution of rewards and punishments, by God, in the afterlife (Essay I.iv.5; II.xxviii.26).

Although traditional Christians do not reject the familiar legal metaphors for salvation that become particularly salient in soteriological discussions around the time of the Reformation or the related practice of using legal language in certain ethical discussions, such Christians do not conceive of salvation or of ethics either exclusively or primarily in legal terms. Rather, on the traditional Christian account, the principal and most fundamental goal of life is not a judicial acquittal by a divine judge but *theosis*, or "divinization"—that is, becoming "partakers of divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4),[4] *both in this life and the next*, by uniting oneself with the *energeiai*, not the *ousia*, of God. Let me explain, briefly, what this means.[5] To do so, I will need to elucidate the relationship between a principal aspect of traditional Christian *metaphysics*—the essence-energies distinction—and three key aspects of traditional Christian *epistemology*: the principal *object* of knowledge of God, the principal *faculty* of knowledge of God, and the principal *type* of knowledge of God.

The Principal *Object* of Knowledge

What is the principal *object* of knowledge of God? In a sense, the answer seems straightforward: it is God. In light of the essence-energies distinction, however, this straightforward answer is clearly insufficient. When people know God, to what do they hold a special epistemic relation: God's essence? God's energies? Both God's essence and God's energies? Neither God's essence nor God's energies but something else—perhaps, e.g., God's created effects in the natural world?

Christians of the first millennium use the distinction between *ousia* and *energeiai* to explain what one can and what one cannot know about God. For the sake of brevity, I will simply note examples from four particularly significant Christian Fathers. First, St. John of Damascus identifies what one cannot know about God. He says that the essence, or nature, of God is "absolutely incomprehensible and unknowable," such that even those things that we can know of God, either because God has implanted certain knowledge of His existence in us or revealed certain things about Himself in Sacred Scripture, give us "no true idea of His essence" (*De Fide Orthodoxa*, I.iv; see also I. i–iii, v, ix–x). Second, St. Gregory of Nyssa makes a similar point in his *Homilies on the Beatitudes*. Explaining Christ's claim that the "pure in heart" will see God, he says, "What the divine nature might be in and of itself transcends all conceptual comprehension, being inaccessible and unapproachable to speculative thoughts" (Gregory of Nyssa 2000, 68). Third, St. Basil the Great identifies both what one can and what one cannot know about God. He says, "[W]e know our God from His *energeiai*, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His *energeiai* come down to us, but

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[4] See Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 8.54.

[5] Given my aim in this text, the explanation I give will focus, principally, on epistemological and ethical aspects of *theosis*. For a helpful discussion of some of the ontological implications of *theosis* as well as references to related theological texts, see Jacobs 2009.

His essence remains beyond our reach" (Bradshaw 2004, 166). Fourth, St. Isaac of Syria makes a similar point in his *Aescetical Homilies*, claiming,

> It is one thing to be moved by revelations concerning God's *operations*, and another to be moved by revelations concerning *the nature of His being*. The first naturally comes to us through an occasion furnished by perceptible things. But the second does not take occasion from the intellect or from anything else. For, they say, this is the threefold and principal purity of the parts [of the soul], and it is not possible that even one in a thousand righteous men should be accounted worthy of this lofty [*noetic*] perception. (Isaac of Syria 1984, 113, emphasis mine)

As these examples suggest, according to the Christian Fathers of the first millennium, the divine *ousia* is God, as He is known to Himself; the divine *energeiai* are God, as He is known to us (see Bradshaw 2004, 167–8; 2006). Thus, on the traditional Christian account, it is (i) one or more of the Persons of the Trinity, in and through the divine *energeiai*, not (ii) God's *ousia*, that is the principal object of knowledge of God.[6]

The Principal *Faculty* of Knowledge

What is the principal *faculty* of knowledge of God? On the traditional Christian account, the principal faculty by which one comes to know God is the "intellect" (*nous*)[7]—which knows God by means of immediate experience or intuition, not by means of abstract concepts and logical arguments. The principal faculty by which one comes to know the truths of academic disciplines, like philosophy or science, is "reason" (*dianoia*)[8]—"the discursive, conceptualizing, and logical faculty in man," the function of which is to formulate concepts and to draw conclusions from data provided, for example, by sensation (see Palmer et al. 1979, 362, 364; see also St. Isaac of Syria 1984, cviii–cxi; Popovich 1994, 135). So, on the Christian account, it is by means of a particular *faculty*—namely, the "intellect," or *nous*, as opposed to "reason," or *dianoia*—that people come to experience a particular *object*—namely, God as present in the divine energies, as opposed to God's essence.

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[6] For some readers, the Orthodox distinction between *ousia* and *energeiai* may seem strikingly similar to the Kantian distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena*. Bradshaw describes the strengths and weaknesses of such a comparison, as follows:

> This comparison [between the *essence-energies* distinction and the *noumena-phenomena* distinction] is helpful in underscoring . . . the fact that the divine *ousia* is unknowable not due to our current circumstances but is a necessary limitation of any created intellect. But in other respects it misses the mark. Kantian phenomena present themselves automatically, as it were, simply in virtue of the existence of things-in-themselves and our own nature as knowing subjects. The distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena* is thus not distinctive to any particular *noumenon*, but is a universal condition imposed by the circumstances that make knowledge possible. By contrast, the *energeiai* of God are not 'automatic' but are acts by which God reaches down to creatures and manifests Himself to them. (Bradshaw 2004, 169)

[7] Syriac: *hauna* or *mad'a*.

[8] Syriac: *re'yana*.

The Principal *Type* of Knowledge

What is the principal *type* of knowledge of God? Since the foregoing distinctions might seem rather foreign to those readers who are less familiar with traditional Christianity, let me answer this key question in terms that might be more familiar in contemporary, Western, philosophical discourse. The traditional Christian account of the type of knowledge of God employs something like Russell's distinction between *knowledge by acquaintance* and *knowledge by description* (see Russell 1910). In the Christian sense of these terms, the first type of knowledge "consists solely in the actual enjoyment of divine realities through direct vision, without the help of . . . [the mind's] intellections" and the second "resides in the intelligence and its divine intellections, and does not include, in terms of actual vision, a perception of what is known" (Palmer et al. 1981, 242). The former type of knowledge is constituted by a "perception of the known object *through a participation by grace*"; the latter is constituted by a perception of a rational concept (Bradshaw 2004, 192, emphasis mine; see also Palmer et al. 1981, 242).

Given that this talk of "participation" is likely foreign to many, it might seem—at least at first glance—to be rather mysterious. What is it to "participate" in God, and what is the perception one gains by means of participation if it is not a rational concept? On the Christian account, to participate in God is neither to unite oneself with the divine essence nor merely to act in accordance with God's commands. Rather, it is to unite oneself with the divine energies—that is, to synergize one's own energies with the ever present, uncreated energies of God. As Bradshaw suggests, commenting on St. Gregory of Nyssa's discussion of that which the pure in heart "see," "If the human heart is passive with respect to God, then it plays the role of a smaller version of creation, a sort of canvas on which God paints. On the other hand, if cooperation is necessary then the notion of participation acquires a much richer meaning. The human agent would then manifest these divine traits in virtue of his own action, the divine energeia working only in and through his own energeia." As a result of this synergistic activity, the "eyes" of the agent's soul are purified, allowing him or her to see God by means of an *eikon* in his or her soul (Bradshaw 2004, 176; see also Popovich 1994, 133). This *eikon* is not merely a representation of God "painted" on the human heart. Rather, it is—to use a phrase familiar in discussions of Christian iconography—a "window into Heaven," through which an agent can, metaphorically speaking, "see" God or, philosophically speaking, noetically perceive God's presence by synergizing his or her own energies to the uncreated and everywhere present energies of God.

Knowledge of God and the Supreme Good

In short, the traditional Christian account of ethics neither relies on a distinction between natural and supernatural nor conceives of ethics fundamentally and primarily in legal terms. Rather, on the traditional Christian account, the principal goal of life is *theosis*, or "divinization." To be "divinized" is to become a partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). One partakes of the divine nature, both in this life and in

the next, by synergistically uniting oneself—or, more specifically, one's own energies—with the divine energies. This type of union with God is available to every human being because the uncreated energies of God are, in accordance with God's nature, eternal and everywhere present. To the extent that one is united with God's energies and, thus, becomes a partaker of the divine nature, he or she is "saved"—that is, the person's sinful nature is truly *cured*; he or she is not merely *legally acquitted* or, even more inaccurately, spared the wrath of an angry God.[9] To the extent that one is not united with God's energies and, hence, fails to become a partaker of the divine nature, he or she is not "saved"—that is, his or her sinful nature is not *cured*.

Thus, on the traditional Christian account, knowledge of God is not simply an indirect, discursive precondition for salvation, conceived of as something distinct from the ethical concerns of human beings in their natural realm. Rather, it is a direct, experiential union with God, which is *itself* the activity of beatitude that constitutes the fulfillment of the human *telos* and, hence, constitutes "salvation" both in this life and the next.

8.1.3   Summary of the Differences

In summary, Descartes's accounts of natural beatitude and of the supreme good of human life differ from traditional Christianity in three key areas. First, with respect to metaphysics, Descartes's accounts rely on a conception of God's transcendence that does not employ the traditional Christian distinction between God's *ousia* and God's *energeiai*—i.e., between God's essence and His energies. Second, with respect to epistemology, Descartes's accounts rely on a conception of knowledge that differs from the traditional Christian conception in three ways: namely, it identifies not only (i) a different principal *object* of knowledge of God—God's essence rather than God's energies—but also (ii) a different principal *faculty* of knowledge of God—"the discursive ... faculty in man" (*dianoia*)[10] rather than the noetic faculty (*nous*)[11]—and (iii) a different *type* of knowledge of God—knowledge by description rather than knowledge by acquaintance, or perhaps more accurately, knowledge by *participation*. Third, with respect to ethics, Descartes's accounts rely on a distinction between two, separate realms of human goods—natural and supernatural—rather than the single, seamless conception of human goods employed by traditional Christianity. Moreover, Descartes permits, if not endorses, a common legal model to characterize the goods characteristic of human beings' relationship with God rather than the medical model employed by traditional Christians. The result is that ethics and soteriology are distinctly

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[9] This image, popularized by Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth century—stemming from Anselm's penal substitutionary theory of atonement from the eleventh century—does not represent the view of the traditional Christian Church of the first millennium.

[10] Syriac: *re'yana*.

[11] Syriac: *hauna* or *mad'a*.

different in Descartes's philosophy in a way that they are not on the traditional Christian account. If Descartes's accounts of natural beatitude and of the supreme good of human life are not merely compatible with but, in fact, complementary to traditional Christianity, then these theoretical differences should provide improvements to the traditional Christian accounts. I will offer an evaluation of whether these theoretical differences do provide such improvements in Sect. 8.3. Before I do so, however, let me highlight the key practical differences between Descartes's morality and traditional Christianity.

8.2 Descartes's Morality and Traditional Christianity: *Practical* Differences

8.2.1 *The Pursuit of Virtue in Descartes's Morality*

There are a number of ways in which Descartes's conception of the pursuit of virtue is both similar to and compatible with the traditional Christian account of ethics. The most fundamental differences between the two follow from the theoretical differences, as I hope to make clear in the remainder of this section.

With respect to ethics, as I noted in Chap. 4, Descartes's philosophical program is an attempt to improve upon the work of the ancient moralists by providing an accurate account both of human moral psychology and, consequently, of certain techniques that people should use in the pursuit of virtue. On his account, there are three kinds of psychological acts that are of particular importance: attending, assenting, and choosing. Since, as he sees it, the human will tends to pursue or avoid only what the human intellect represents as good or bad, one needs only to judge well in order to act well (CSM 1.125; AT 6.28; see also CSMK 233, 342; AT 4.115-6, 5.159). Thus, for Descartes, the chief practical concern of morality is not with teaching people to control their acts of *choosing*, which follow naturally from their assenting to true propositions. Rather it is with teaching people to control their acts of *assenting* and *attending*. A key purpose of the *Meditations* is to help people come to acquire the "proper weapons of the soul": namely, well-founded, true, habitual beliefs (CSM 1.347; AT 11.367-8; see also CSMK 267; AT 4.296). In the process of helping people not merely to acquire but to fix such beliefs, "by attentive and repeated meditation," Descartes sees himself as helping those who are pursuing virtue to regulate future acts of assent concerning other propositions (see CSM 2.43; AT 7.61-2; CSMK 267; AT 4.295-6).

According to Descartes, however, there is a challenge more fundamental than that of helping people to regulate the acts of assenting by which they acquire and fix true beliefs. It is the challenge of helping people to regulate their acts of attending, which are so often impeded by their passions. Since vicious passions can lead to vicious desires, it is critically important to teach people to regulate their affective states. In fact, on Descartes's account, it is in this type of affect regulation that "the chief utility of morality" lies (see CSM 1.379; AT 11.436-7).

With this principal end of morality in mind, Descartes counsels people to keep both their weaker and their stronger passions in check. With respect to the weaker passions, he encourages people to *inhibit* those passions that might lead to desires to execute vicious acts of will. More specifically, he counsels them to turn their mind to representations of things which are usually joined with the passions they ought to have and opposed to the passions they ought to reject. For example, in order to arouse boldness and suppress fear, he encourages people to consider the reasons, objects, or precedents which persuade them that the danger is not great, that there is always more security in defense than in flight, that they shall gain glory and joy if they conquer, etc. (CSM 1.345; AT 11.362-3). On Descartes's account, since people cannot control their affective states directly, this indirect method of affect regulation is the proper way to inhibit those passions that tempt people to acquire and, consequently, to act on vicious desires. With respect to the stronger passions, he encourages people to *override* those passions that might lead to desires to execute vicious acts of will, by simply refusing to will that to which the passion impels them. He recognizes that this may be difficult but claims that it is certainly possible, especially for those who are sufficiently strong-willed (see CSMK 245; AT 4.173; CSMK 244, 342; AT 4.173, 5.159).

Thus, in light of his account of moral psychology, Descartes counsels people to pursue virtue, principally, by regulating their affective states in such a way that they will be able to control two particular kinds of psychological acts: acts of attending and acts of assenting. On his account, this type of indirect act regulation by means of affect regulation is the chief purpose of morality.

8.2.2   The Pursuit of Virtue in Traditional Christianity

To help elucidate both certain points of similarity and some notable, and funda-mental, points of difference between Descartes's conception of morality and the traditional Christian conception of virtue and its pursuit, I will focus on just two topics: human affective states[12] and the ascetic life. In limiting the discussion to these topics, I will quite obviously be omitting a great deal about traditional Christian moral psychology that is interesting and worthy of discussion. As I hope to make clear, however, elucidating these two aspects of the pursuit of virtue in traditional Christian ethics should suffice for present purposes.

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[12] As a rule, in this section, I will use the phrase "affective state" and its cognates instead of "passion" and its cognates since the latter terms tend to have a technical meaning and a negative sense in traditional Christianity. (I would like to thank Bruce Foltz for pressing me to be more careful on this point. I suspect that in what follows I have still made mistakes in my representation of traditional Christian moral psychology. Nonetheless, I hope that I have, at the very least, been able to mitigate my errors on this topic.)

8.2.2.1   The Nature and Significance of Human Affective States

On the traditional Christian account, human affective states are by nature good. That is not to say that every *instance* of human emotion is a good thing.[13] Let me illustrate the point by focusing, for the sake of clarity, on one particular affective state: anger. There are, within the Christian tradition, a number of cases where anger is condemned. For instance, among the desert fathers and mothers, Abba Agathon says, "A man who is angry, even if he were to raise the dead, is not acceptable to God." Likewise, Abba Poemon remarks, "God has given this way of life to Israel: to abstain from everything which is contrary to nature, that is to say, anger, fits of passion, jealousy, hatred and slandering the brethren." Similarly, if more gently, Amma Syncletica notes that it is good not to get angry (Ward 1975, 23, 176, 233). So, clearly, some cases of anger are condemned, but not *every* case. St. Isaiah the Solitary, for example, notes:

> There is among the passions an anger of the intellect, and this anger is in accordance with nature. Without anger a man cannot attain purity: he has to feel angry with all that is sown in him by the enemy.[14] ... He who wishes to acquire the anger that is in accordance with nature must uproot all self-will, until he establishes in himself the state natural to the intellect. (Palmer et al. 1979, 22)

Those affective states that are condemned, like certain kinds of anger, are those that are not "in accordance with nature."

What, though, does *that* mean? What could be more natural than getting angry, say, at a person whom people perceive as having wronged them? The conception of "nature" employed in discussions of traditional Christian moral psychology does not refer simply to a human being's biological responses to external stimuli. Rather, it refers to psychological function that is in harmony with a human being's essence. On the traditional Christian account, since God is a communion of three Persons, God's nature and, consequently, "Being" itself are essentially relational. Moreover, each of the three Persons of the Trinity bears a special relationship to human beings. God created human beings in God's image and likeness. Human beings maintain the image, essentially; the likeness, however, is something that, because of their sinful state, they must labor to acquire (see Lossky 1976, 114–34; see also Lossky 2001). Therefore, when traditional Christians speak of affective states that are not "in accordance with nature," they are referring to "passions"—in the traditional Christian sense of the term—that are inconsistent with the image of God, which human beings bear essentially.

Thus, when traditional Christians refer negatively to an affective state, they have in mind a "passion" that provides people with a motive to commit acts by which

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[13] For present purposes, I will use (i) the phrase "affective state" and its cognates and (ii) the term "emotion" and its cognates interchangeably. This is neither because there are no technical distinctions we can make between the two nor because such technical distinctions are unimportant. On my view, we can make them and they are important. Rather, I am adopting this use of terms for the sake of simplicity, in order that I might merely highlight the differences between Descartes's views and those of traditional Christians.

[14] Cultivating this type of "intellectual," or spiritual, anger is part of traditional Christian ascetic practice—especially, e.g., during Lent by praying the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete.

they break communion both with God and with one another—e.g., as Abba Zacharias does when he equates anger with "quarreling, lying and ignorance" (Ward 1975, 70). On the traditional Christian account, human beings are called— both by God and, consequently, *by their own nature*—to get rid of "passions" such as these. Not only that, they are called to be compassionate, as Christ is (see, e.g., Eph 4:31-32) and, thereby, to cultivate affective states like love, joy, peace, patience, and kindheartedness (see Gal 5:22-3).[15]

In fact, traditionally, when Christians read St. Paul's exhortations to transform their minds and to acquire the mind of Christ (see, e.g., Rom 12:2, Phil 2:5-11), they understood this, principally, as a call to transform the human "intellect" (*nous*) as opposed to human "reason" (*dianoia*). Moreover, they recognized that one of the, if not *the*, most important fruits of this transformation would be to acquire a merciful heart.[16] To have a merciful heart is, in the words of Isaac of Syria, to have "a heart burning with love towards the whole of creation: towards men, birds, animals, demons, and every creature." The person with such a heart "cannot bear to hear or see the least harm done to or misfortune suffered by creation. Therefore, he also prays with tears incessantly for irrational beasts, for opponents of the truth, and for those who do him harm, that they may be preserved and receive mercy." By cultivating such a heart, the person becomes like the Persons with Whom he or she is in communion—namely, each of the hypostases of the Trinity (see Popovich 1994, 161–2). In essence, on the traditional Christian account, to pursue virtue is to strive to acquire the mind of Christ and, thereby, to have compassion and mercy, as Christ has compassion and mercy—not merely for every human being but for every member of God's creation.

8.2.2.2 The Nature and Significance of the Ascetic Life

How, though, does one transform one's mind (*nous*) and, thereby, cultivate a merciful heart? The short answer is, by violence: as Christ says, "the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matt 5:12). Traditionally, Christians interpret this verse, as they do many of the verses in the New Testament, not as a political statement but as a statement about the need for and significance of the ascetic life. Since the short answer I have given contains two terms—namely,

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[15] This twofold reform of human affective states is a common theme in the writings of traditional Christian ascetics—see, e.g., "On the Virtues and Vices" (in Palmer et al. 1981, 333–342) and "Asceticism and Stillness," "On Discrimination," "On Watchfulness," and "Eight Vices" (in Palmer et al. 1979, 31–7, 38–52, 53–4, 72–93).

[16] My use of the term "heart" here, in keeping with the Christian tradition, does not refer simply to an affective faculty, or set of affective faculties. It includes, but is not limited to, that. To offer an adequate explanation of the nature of the "heart" on the traditional Christian view is significantly beyond the scope of my project in this text, but I would be remiss if I did not at least note this point. For a nuanced explanation of the nature of the "heart" in traditional Christianity, see, e.g., Bradshaw (2009).

"ascetic" and "violence"—that have become verboten in a number of contemporary circles, including a number of contemporary Christian circles, let me begin my longer answer by offering some necessary, corrective clarifications.

Contrary to an all-too-prevalent popular legend, the kind of asceticism practiced among traditional Christians is not a series of body-loathing exercises performed as a means of making satisfaction for legal improprieties, thereby placating a wrathful God. The Greek term *ascesis* means "exercise" or "practice," and traditional Christians understand asceticism in a literal sense, as spiritual exercise, spiritual practice (*praxis*), or "the practice of the virtues." Thus, on the traditional Christian account, to be an ascetic is to engage in practices such as keeping silence, keeping vigil, praying, fasting, giving alms, and so forth, for the purpose of taming the "flesh," in the technical sense of the term. In this sense, the "flesh" (*sarx*) is neither equivalent to nor synonymous with the "body" (*soma*). Rather, it is contrasted with the "spirit" (*pneuma*) such that the term "flesh" refers to "the *whole* soul-body structure in so far as a [human being] is fallen" and the term "spirit" refers to "the *whole* soul-body structure in so far as a [human being] is redeemed"—or, perhaps more clearly, sanctified or divinized. Thus, on the traditional Christian account, asceticism "involves a war against the flesh . . . but not against the body as such" (Palmer et al. 1981, 383). So, in at least a narrow sense of the term, "asceticism" refers to a set of spiritual exercises, prescribed by God and practiced by human beings, with God's help, for the therapeutic purpose of healing people—healing, that is, the entire soul-body structure that constitutes the being of each.

So, to this point, I have only explained, rather briefly, the nature of asceticism in a narrow sense of the term. Let me make three more clarifications in order to explain the nature of asceticism in a broader sense. First, as Amma Syncletica notes, there is one kind of asceticism that is divine and liberating, and another that is demonic and tyrannical (Ward 1975: 233). So, ascetic labors are not inherently good. Second, they are, nonetheless, necessary for human flourishing. Abba Agathon makes the point rather artfully, as follows:

> [A human being] is like a tree, bodily asceticism is the foliage, interior vigilance the fruit. According to that which is written, 'Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit shall be cut down and cast into the fire' (Matt 3:10) it is clear that all our care should be directed towards the fruit, that is to say, guard of the spirit; but it needs the protection and the embellishment of the foliage, which is bodily asceticism. (Ward 1975, 21)

Third, although ascetic labors are necessary for human flourishing, they are not sufficient, as the ancient Christian fathers and mothers suggest. For instance, St. Anthony the Great says, "Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far off from God" (Ward 1975, 3). Similarly, St. Hesychios the Priest claims that ascetic labors are good "for they train the outer self and are guard against the workings of passion," but notes that "they are not a defence against and they do not prevent mental sins, so as to free us, with God's help from jealousy, anger, and so on" (Palmer et al. 1979, 181). So, on the traditional Christian account, ascetic labors are necessary but neither inherently good nor sufficient for the pursuit of virtue.

Asceticism, however, is not merely a set of spiritual exercises or practices. Rather it is, as a broader sense of the term *ascesis* suggests, *a way of life*. St. Theodoros the Great Ascetic describes it well. He says,

> He who yokes the practice of the virtues to spiritual knowledge is a skillful farmer, watering the fields of his soul from two pure springs. For the spring of spiritual knowledge raises the immature soul to the contemplation of higher realities; while the spring of ascetic practice mortifies our earthly members: 'unchastity, uncleanness, passion, evil desire' (Col 3:5). Once these are dead, the virtues come into flower and bear the fruits of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, self-control' (Gal 5:22-3). And then this prudent farmer, having 'crucified the flesh together with the passions and desires' (Gal 5:24), will say together with St. Paul: 'I no longer live, but Christ lives in me; and the life I now live . . . I live through faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me' (Gal 2:20).

Thus, as St. Theodoros suggests, asceticism is not an oddly fitted appendage to the traditional Christian life. Rather, it is the essence of the Christian life for fallen human beings, by which they therapeutically tame their fallen nature, with God's help and by God's grace, for the purpose of coming into full communion with God—or, in technical terms, becoming united with the Persons of the Trinity, in and through Their divine *energeiai*. To the extent that people achieve this kind of union, they become one with God in something like the way a husband and wife become one by faithfully entering into and living out the sacrament of marriage. In this sense, each can rightly say that he or she no longer exists, in the manner that he or she once did—echoing the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians.

8.2.3   Summary of the Differences

In summary, Descartes's conception of the pursuit of virtue is similar to the traditional Christian account in a few important ways. Each affirms the essential goodness of human affective states.[17] Each recognizes that such states are properly controlled indirectly and that people do well to have something like a plan, or set of plans, by which they regulate their emotions.

These conceptions differ significantly, however, in how they conceive of the nature and purpose of their regulative strategies. On Descartes's account, the regulative strategy is, principally, a strategy for *act regulation* that has a *negative aim*—insofar as it helps people to inhibit or to override their emotions—which is ultimately *in the service of reason*, especially insofar as it helps people in their attempt to establish metaphysical and epistemological principles that could help provide a new and lasting foundation for the natural sciences. On the traditional Christian account, the regulative strategy is, principally, *a way of life* that has *both a negative and a positive aim*—insofar as it aims not only at eradicating those "passions" that are inimical to nature but also at cultivating those affective states that are in accordance with nature—which are ultimately *for the purpose of theosis*,

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[17] I have offered an example, above, of a traditional Christian affirmation of this claim. For Descartes's affirmation, see *Passions* 210 (CSM 1.403; AT 11.485-6).

or cultivating union with God and, consequently, communion with others. If the nature and purpose of Descartes's regulative strategies are not merely compatible with but, more importantly, complementary to traditional Christianity, then these practical differences should provide improvements to the regulative strategies offered by traditional Christianity.

But do they? Do the theoretical and practical elements of Descartes's conception of morality offer improvements to the traditional Christian conception of ethics? It is to that question that I will turn presently.

8.3   Descartes's Morality and Traditional Christianity: Complementary or Inimical?

Descartes contends that the proper development of applied arts, like ethics, is dependent on a proper understanding both of issues in natural science and, most fundamentally, of issues in metaphysics—such as the existence of God and the nature of the human mind, or soul (see CSM 1.186; AT 9B.14). The traditional Christian account might seem to entail a similar view. On the traditional Christian account, for human beings to flourish—to be truly excellent members of their natural kind—they must become "partakers of divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4).[18] Hence, the proper development of the therapeutic art by which human beings care for their souls requires a proper understanding of a human person, both (i) in and of himself, or herself, and (ii) how such a person ought to relate to other persons, both human and divine. In what follows, I will develop a kind of Leibnizian critique,[19] in which I will show that beneath these surface similarities lie two critical differences, which reveal that Descartes's morality is not complementary but is, in fact, inimical to traditional Christianity.

8.3.1   Human Nature and Human Flourishing

The first critical difference is at the foundation, or—in keeping with Descartes's metaphor of wisdom as a tree—at the roots of traditional Christian ethics. In Sect. 8.1 of this chapter, I suggested that Descartes's account of human nature differs, fundamentally, from the traditional Christian conception. Presently, I will explain in greater detail why the former is at odds with the latter.

In the millennium immediately after the birth of Christ, Christians appropriated certain philosophical concepts and adapted them to articulate certain critical and distinctive doctrines about God and God's relationship to human beings. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on three: the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Hypostatic

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[18] See Ireneus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.xx.7, Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 8.54.

[19] Since my critique will go beyond Leibniz's essential, metaphysical concerns with Descartes's morality, it is more accurate to characterize what I will do as *developing* a kind of *Liebnizian* critique, rather than, e.g., as *explaining Leibniz's* critique.

Union. According to the doctrine of the *Trinity*, there are neither three Gods nor merely one God who appears in three different modes, or wearing any one of three different masks (*prosopa*).[20] Rather, in God, there are three persons (*hypostases*) but only one being (*ousia*).[21]

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[20] Traditional Christianity rejects both the former, polytheism, and the latter, Sabellianism (or Modalism), as heretical.

[21] This doctrine is summarized in detail in the Athanasian Creed:

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith; Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this:

That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible.

So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty. And yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; And yet they are not three Gods, but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord; And yet they are not three Lords but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord; So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say; There are three Gods or three Lords. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten.

The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits. And in this Trinity none is afore or after another; none is greater or less than another. But the whole three persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.

Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man. God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of substance of His mother, born in the world. Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood. Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of that manhood into God. One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ; Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead; He ascended into heaven, He sits on the right hand of the Father, God, Almighty; From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies; and shall give account of their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.

This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.

According to the doctrine of the *Incarnation*, the second Person of the Trinity—the Son of God—became a human being: Jesus Christ. Traditional Christians took great care to articulate what this doctrine did not imply, in light of a number of problematic hypotheses. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on four, which are particularly salient for my argument. First, traditional Christians rejected the view that the second Person of the Trinity did not really take on human nature and, hence, did not really suffer.[22] Second, they rejected the teaching according to which (i) in the Incarnation, there are two persons (*hypostases*), the Son of Mary and the Son of God,[23] and (ii) the second Person of the Trinity is the latter.[24] Third, they rejected the view that in the Incarnate Christ, there is a single person (*hypostasis*) with a single nature (*physis*)—namely, the divine nature.[25] Finally, they rejected the view that in the Incarnate Christ, there is a single person (*hypostasis*) with a single will (*thelema*). Rather, traditional Christianity endorses the doctrine of the *Hypostatic Union*, according to which there is a union (i) of two natures (*physeis*), one divine and one human, and (ii) of two wills (*thelemata*), one divine and one human, in a single person (*hypostasis*). In short, traditional Christians claim that Christ is both *fully* God and *fully* man.[26]

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[22] Traditional Christianity regards this as the heresy of Docetism.

[23] It is for these distinctively *Christological* reasons that traditional Christians preserve and emphasize the references to Mary as the "Theotokos," or "Mother of God."

[24] Traditional Christianity regards this as the heresy of Nestorianism, which was explicitly condemned at the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (431).

[25] Traditional Christianity regards this as the heresy of Monophysitism, which was explicitly condemned at the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451).

[26] Each of these doctrines is summarized in detail in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which was originally crafted at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea (325), revised at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381), and declared complete and irreformable at the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (431). It is the creed that traditional Christians recite at every Divine Liturgy, as well as in their daily prayers:

> I believe in one God, Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.
>
> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages, Light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one essence with the Father, through him all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man, And was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, And rose on the third day according to the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father, And He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.
>
> And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who together with the Father and the Son, is worshipped and glorified, and Who spoke through the Prophets.
>
> In one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. I expect the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come. Amen.

At a glance, especially to those who are not traditional Christians, these clarifications might seem like inconsequential religious minutiae. These doctrines are essential, however, for affirming that Jesus Christ is the true image, or icon (*eikon*), not merely of God but of a human being.[27] Think of the implications of that claim for a traditional conception of virtue in the near east prior to the birth of Christ. On a traditional account such as this, a virtue (*arete*) is an excellent quality of a kind of thing. Thus, to understand human virtue requires an understanding of human nature. To understand human nature requires an understanding of the faculties of the human soul—"reason" (*logistikon*), "spirit" (*thymetikon*), and "appetite" (*epithymetikon*).[28] More specifically, it requires an understanding of these faculties in light of the distinctively human function, or *telos*—namely, for "reason" to function properly on its own and for "spirit" and "appetite" to function in accordance with "reason." On the traditional Christian account, to understand the distinctively human *telos* requires, as Aristotle rightly noted, an accurate understanding of the *telos* of an excellent individual of the kind.[29] According to traditional Christians, the moral exemplar of the human kind is not a hypothetical Aristotelian "just man" or a hypothetical Stoic "sage." Rather, it is a particular human being, Jesus Christ, the One Who is both (i) fully God and, hence, a moral exemplar and (ii) fully man and, hence, a *human* moral exemplar. Thus, on the traditional Christian account, the doctrines of the *Trinity*, the *Incarnation*, and the *Hypostatic Union* are indispensable to a proper understanding of human nature.

Thus, on the traditional Christian account, by failing to ground his ethical reasoning in a proper understanding of Christ, Descartes fails to explain, if not to understand, human nature and, consequently, true human flourishing. For instance, on the traditional Christian account, by failing to ground his ethical reasoning with a proper understanding of the doctrine of the *Trinity*, Descartes fails to explain adequately, e.g., that "Being" is essentially relational and that persons are a fundamental ontological *relata*, which are not reducible to modes or properties of an essence. Similarly, by failing to ground his ethical reasoning in a proper understanding of the doctrines of the *Incarnation* and the *Hypostatic Union*, Descartes fails to explain that human beings are teleologically constituted for union, *in this life* and in the next, both (i) with each of the Persons of the Trinity, in and through their *energeiai*, and (ii) with one another, in and through a shared form of life.

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[27] See Col 1:15 as well as John 14:9, 2 Cor 4:4, and Heb 1:3.

[28] In essence, the ancient Christian fathers and mothers of the first millennium after the birth of Christ appropriated the schema and terminology of Plato's conception of the soul without committing themselves to his philosophical system. For examples of Plato's conception of the soul, see, e.g., *Phaedrus* and Book IV of the *Republic*; Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.6. For examples both of the patristic appropriation of this terminology and of some of the differences in their conception of the functions of the parts of the soul, see, e.g., "On the Virtues and Vices" (in Palmer et al. 1981, 337) and "Eight Vices" (in Palmer et al. 1979, 78, 83–8).

[29] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7.

Regardless of whether these traditional Christian doctrines are *true*, they are *essential* to a traditional Christian conception of ethics. Consequently, a conception of ethics like Descartes's, which offers—what is on the traditional Christian account—an impoverished conception of human nature, will likely recommend an impoverished conception of human flourishing, not only of, what Descartes considers, "supernatural" human flourishing but also of "natural" human flourishing. Moreover, as I will argue presently, it fails to recommend a *way of life* and, to this extent, a true *art of living*.

8.3.2   A Way of Life and an Art of Living

The second critical difference is, in keeping with Descartes's tree metaphor, at the branches of traditional Christian ethics. In Sect. 8.2 of this chapter, I suggested that Descartes's conception of the pursuit of virtue differs from that of traditional Christianity in important ways. Presently, I will argue (i) that Descartes's account of the pursuit of virtue, unlike that of traditional Christianity, is severed from a robust conception of a *way of life* and, hence, (ii) that, as Leibniz suggests, Descartes fails to offer a true *art of living*.

There are important epistemic and, consequently, ethical implications both for accepting and for rejecting, or even for bracketing, the traditional Christian conception of human nature. By accepting the traditional Christian conception, people are committed both, epistemically, to endorsing a particular set of ethical principles and, ethically, to adopting a particular way of life. Likewise, by rejecting or even bracketing, this conception of human nature, people are committed, epistemically, to rejecting or to bracketing a particular set of ethical principles and precluded, ethically, from wholeheartedly adopting a particular way of life.[30] It does not follow, of course, that there might not be important similarities between the set of ethical principles endorsed by those who accept the traditional Christian conception of human nature and the set of ethical principles endorsed by those who reject or bracket it. Nor does it follow that the forms of life adopted by each might be similar in a variety of ways. The central point, for our purposes, is simply this: by failing to endorse certain essential Christian doctrines about human nature, Descartes fails to endorse certain ethical principles and, more importantly, fails to offer a wholehearted recommendation of a particular way of life.

How, exactly, do Descartes's morality and traditional Christian ethics differ, and what, if anything, is lost in Descartes's failure to endorse a traditional Christian way of life? As I noted in Sect. 8.2, in his account of the pursuit of virtue, Descartes focuses, principally, on articulating strategies for regulating people's actions so that

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[30] A person who rejects or brackets the traditional Christian conception of human nature could practice the exterior rituals of a traditional Christian form of life but could not *wholeheartedly* commit himself or herself to that way of life.

they can override their emotions and, thereby, aid reason—especially insofar in their attempt to establish metaphysical and epistemological principles that could help provide a new and lasting foundation for the natural sciences. Descartes's negative, and essentially Stoic, focus on regulating the mental and physical acts of individuals differs significantly from the traditional Christian aim. Although he does articulate and model some strategies whereby enlightened individuals can stay out of trouble with political and ecclesiastical authorities, Descartes does not develop an account of ethics with a significant and robust social aspect.

Unlike Descartes's morality, the traditional Christian conception of ethics focuses not merely on articulating strategies for regulating people's actions but on developing (i) a communal *way of life* that is essentially constituted by (ii) a set of daily, weekly, and seasonal *rites*, which foster (iii) a set of *ascetic practices* with the twofold purpose of eradicating those "passions" and of cultivating those affective states for the sake of (iv) achieving the truest form of genuine human flourishing, *theosis*, by which people *enter deeply into loving communion* both with God and, consequently, with other human beings and, ultimately, with all of God's creation. It would take volumes to describe these aspects of traditional Christian ethics adequately. To highlight the key differences[31] between Descartes's morality and traditional Christian ethics, however, sketching a few of the details of these aspects should suffice.

The traditional Christian way of life is framed by the annual liturgical cycle, which consists of a variety of twelve major feasts—not counting Pascha, or the "Feast of Feasts"—as well as four, longer penitential seasons, or as Hume refers to them in the *Natural History*, "[t]he four Lents of the Muscovites" (2007, 82). For present purposes, let me elucidate traditional Christian ethical practice by highlighting a few of the elements of one of these penitential seasons, the "Great Lent," which precedes Pascha. The season begins, in the Eastern practice, on Forgiveness Sunday. During evening prayer, or Vespers, each member of one's local community approaches and bows before each of the other members—individually, not corporately—and asks for forgiveness for the ways in which he or she has failed or hurt each brother or sister. Such traditional Christians then begin their longest penitential season of roughly fifty days, during which they attempt to increase the strictness of their normal ascetic labors by, e.g., (i) fasting, more rigorously, from certain foods, such as meat, animal products, wine, and oil; and (ii) engaging, more deeply, in acts of love such as almsgiving and charitable service; and (iii) praying, more frequently and more reverently. The purpose of their ascetic practices during this penitential season is threefold. First, they aim to help traditional Christians regulate their "passions"—especially their desires for honor, wealth, and sensual pleasures.[32] Second, they aim to help traditional Christians to cultivate greater

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[31] More accurately: "the key differences, *for present purposes*."

[32] For examples of patristic authors highlighting these as three, primary, primitive passions, see, e.g., "On the Virtues and Vices" (in Palmer et al. 1981, 333–342) and "Eight Vices" (in Palmer et al. 1979, 72–93).

sympathy, compassion, and love of other people as well as, ultimately, of every member of God's creation.[33] Third, they aim to help traditional Christians to enter, more deeply, into a loving communion with God. Thus, these ascetic practices are designed to help a person enter into communion with every member of creation and with creation itself by providing healing for one's whole soul—"appetite" (*epithymetikon*) by fasting, "spirit" (*thymetikon*) by labors of love, and "reason" (*logistikon*) by prayerful communion with God.

This ascetical spirit of healing for the purpose of communion is, perhaps, most evident in the Great Lent, but it is not limited to that penitential season. It permeates each of the other penitential seasons, and it echoes throughout each of the rituals that constitute the traditional Christian way of life.[34]

As I noted above, if Descartes's conception of morality is not merely compatible with but, in fact, complementary to traditional Christianity, then it should offer improvements to the traditional Christian accounts. Descartes's account does not aim at elaborating the traditional Christian account. Rather, it attempts to strip away what Descartes takes to be certain elements that are inconsequential to what he calls "natural beatitude." For this reason, it employs a conception of human nature that is metaphysically thinner than that of traditional Christian ethics. Consequently, it provides a substantially narrower conception of human flourishing, which lacks a significant and robust social aspect. Moreover, it fails to prescribe an ascetic way of life that is centered *in community* and constituted by a set of rites that are intended *for communion* not merely with God but also with other people and, ultimately, with all of God's creation. In other words, by treating the traditional Christian way of life, including its rites and ascetic disciplines, not as properly constitutive of human flourishing per se but as a supernaturally oriented add-on to "natural" human flourishing, Descartes's morality requires not a *reformation* of traditional Christian ethics but a *rejection* of its distinctive, essential, and broadly communal

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[33] See St. Isaac of Syria's comments on a "merciful heart" (in Popovich 1994, 161–2).

[34] It is reasonably well known that Christians are committed to a certain set of beliefs, identified within the Creed, noted above in footnote 26. What frequently goes unrecognized, however, is the context of this commitment, as evinced in the Divine Liturgy. As traditional Christians prepare for the most solemn part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist and before they recite the Creed, they perform something like the rituals of Forgiveness Sunday, in miniature. Here is the text of the exchange:

> **Priest**, to the Congregation: "Peace be with you all."
> **Congregation**: "And with your spirit."
> **Priest**: "Let us love one another that with one mind we may confess:"
> **Congregation**, completing the prayer: "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Trinity one is essence and undivided."

After this exchange, those present briefly exchange the "Kiss of Peace" with those around them, reflecting the beauty of Forgiveness Sunday. Only then do those present continue on to recite the Creed, complete the Eucharistic prayer, and partake of the Eucharist. There is no partaking of the Eucharist without a commitment to the Christian faith, and there is no genuine intellectual commitment to the Christian faith without a heart committed to the kind of communal love that is the traditional Christian *telos*.

orientation.[35] Hence, regardless of whether one regards the traditional Christian conception of ethics as *true*,[36] one should recognize that Descartes's conception of morality is inimical to the traditional Christian account. Moreover, if one regards communion with other people and with all of what traditional Christians refer to as "God's creation" as important moral goods, then one has at least prima facie reason for regarding Descartes's conception of morality not merely as inimical but also as inferior to traditional Christian ethics.

8.4   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to show that even if Descartes fails to establish a new and lasting foundation for the sciences, his philosophical program has enduring social significance. Focusing narrowly on knowledge obtained by natural reason and claiming that by such means a philosopher cannot know God's ends, the only way for him to offer the kind of monotheistic, religious conception of morality with which he is familiar would be for him to appeal to divine revelation. He does not make this move, however. Instead, he offers his readers a naturalized, cosmopolitan account of morality that, he claims, is not only compatible with but actually helpful for attaining the beatitude that is the goal of the Christian life. In fact, however, this merely palliative art of living is actually inimical to the traditional, curative Christian conception of ethics. To put the point in rather provocative, traditional terminology, regardless of whether Descartes is, in fact, an atheist, his conception of ethics requires the handmaiden, i.e., philosophy, to practice the therapeutic art of the Queen, i.e., theology, which—at least by traditional Christian lights—she is insufficiently equipped to perform. Thus, even if Descartes is not an atheist, his philosophical program, in general, and his account of virtuous belief formation, in particular, aim at subverting traditional Christianity, thereby helping to pave the way for subsequent philosophers to make bolder attempts at naturalizing not only traditional Christianity but religion, in general.

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[35] By "broadly communal orientation," I mean its conception of human beings as constituted for communion with God, with one another, and with all of God's creation, as I described it above.

[36] I am inclined to think that it is, but making that argument is a project for another time.

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Chapter 9
Conclusion

To the extent that my argument in the preceding chapters has been successful, I have accomplished two goals. First, I have elucidated the nature of Descartes's account of virtuous belief formation. Second, I have clarified the pragmatic and social nature of Descartes's philosophical program, by showing how his account of virtuous belief formation is subversive of traditional Christianity and, by implication, of those traditional forms of religion with similar philosophical commitments. I will conclude by summarizing my case and by describing in a bit more detail the significance of Descartes's program.

9.1 Summary

After introducing my project in Chap. 1, I attempted to achieve the first of my goals in Chaps. 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. In Chap. 2, I analyzed a contemporary debate concerning a key issue in the *Meditations*. The debate concerns the proper way to respond to the question "Who is the Cartesian meditator?" I explained a variety of answers offered by Descartes's commentators—namely, that the meditator is (i) a philosophically naïve person of common sense, (ii) a skeptic, (iii) a Scholastic, or (iv) an amalgam of such personas. I argued that each of these responses to the question is misguided and that the proper way to respond is not to attempt to *answer* the question, but to *reject* it because the question falsely implies that the meditator is a character in a work of fiction. I noted that this kind of debate, though interesting, tends either to downplay or to disregard the importance of Descartes's selection of the literary genre of meditations for his seminal work. The selection of this specific literary genre is significant, I suggested, because Descartes intends to reform not merely *what* his readers believe but also *how* they come to believe.

In Chap. 3, I clarified Descartes's account of the nature of belief and elucidated his distinction between merely accepting propositions as practical rules for ordinary affairs, judging propositions as scientific truths, and acquiring dispositional, or habitual, beliefs. Next, I explained how his account of belief is critical in the

development of "the Cartesian framework for virtuous belief formation," consisting of an account of *virtuous enquiry*, an account of *virtuous judgment*, and an account of *virtuous belief fixation*. I then clarified Descartes's distinction between foundational enquiries and ordinary enquiries, and I explained how Descartes uses this distinction to develop different norms governing (i) the propositions people *believe* concerning the foundational sciences, which require *absolute certainty*, and (ii) the propositions people *accept* for pragmatic purposes in ordinary life, which require nothing more than *moral certainty*.

In Chap. 4, I elucidated Descartes's account of virtue. I argued that he conceives of morality as an eclectic cosmopolitan art of natural beatitude, one which is only problematically regarded as Stoic. I then explained how he intends this art to be applied. More specifically, I clarified how he attempts to provide his readers with the principal truths necessary to facilitate their development from having merely the passion of generosity to possessing the virtue of wisdom, in its highest degree and, consequently, to enjoying natural beatitude (see CSMK 258; AT 4.267). I concluded by noting that these techniques map on nicely to the Cartesian framework for virtuous belief formation, beginning with the process of *enquiry*, continuing in the process of *judgment*, and ending in the process of *belief fixation*.

In Chap. 5, I explained in greater detail Descartes's systematic account of virtuous belief formation. I began by explaining the *structure*, *goal*, and *scope* of virtuous enquiry. I then elucidated the account of virtuous judgment and clarified the norms governing (i) *accepting* a proposition concerning *ordinary* matters; (ii) *judging* a proposition concerning *theological* matters, revealed by the *light of grace*; and (iii) *judging* a proposition concerning *scientific* matters, illumined by the *light of nature*. I concluded by explaining both some of the principal virtues of belief fixation as well as Descartes's claim that a person who fixes his or her beliefs virtuously ought to commit himself or herself to a program by which one's judgments become fixed.

In Chap. 6, I addressed a major challenge to Descartes's account of belief formation, related to his account of doxastic voluntarism. In responding to this challenge, I demonstrated that the textual evidence suggests that Descartes is committed to a negative form of direct doxastic voluntarism, according to which people have the ability to *suspend*, or to *withhold*, *judgment* directly by an act will. I then argued that participants in the doxastic voluntarism debate offer two types of arguments against direct doxastic voluntarism and neither of these addresses Descartes's view, much less shows that it is false. I concluded by noting that although Descartes's critics may be able to develop arguments showing that his account of virtuous judgment is false, his account remains worthy of more serious consideration, until they develop such arguments.

Hoping to have successfully achieved the first of my goals in Chaps. 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, I attempted to achieve the second in Chaps. 7 and 8. In Chap. 7, I argued for two claims. I elucidated one particularly important pragmatic and social aspect of Descartes's philosophical program. I did so in two stages. First, I recapitulated some of the common objections against his program and suggested that even if they succeed in showing that Descartes fails in his attempt to establish a new and lasting

foundation in the sciences, they fail to demonstrate that his program has no enduring social significance. Second, I argued that Descartes's philosophical program—and, more specifically, his account of virtuous belief formation—is, in fact, significant not because it helps him achieve his scientific aims. Rather, I argued, it is successful because it allows Descartes to suggest a way to reform and, in his estimation, to improve Christianity in a manner that would be appealing to educated modern, Western Europeans. In so doing, it helps to put him in position to attempt to reform not just Christianity but religion, in general.

In Chap. 8, I described some of the fundamental ways in which Descartes's philosophical program is antithetical to traditional Christianity, both in theory and in practice, in the kind of way that Leibniz suggests. In explaining the differences between Descartes's philosophy and traditional Christianity, I made clear why his program is an attempt to influence subsequent scholars not merely to *reform* traditional Christianity but, in fact, to *subvert* both it and other similarly traditional religions.

9.2   Significance

Let me conclude by explaining, briefly, what I have in mind when I claim that Descartes's philosophical program helps to pave the way for subsequent philosophers to make bolder attempts at subverting not only Christianity but traditional religion, in general. My hope is that in so doing I will be able to highlight, more clearly, why Descartes's program is particularly significant to the past four centuries of the history of religion in America and Western Europe. For ease of presentation, I will organize my explanation around two general themes—namely, Descartes's *practical naturalism* and his *religious rationalism*—and simply sketch the trajectory of the impact of his program.

Lacking the metaphysical mindset of the ancient Near East—especially the essence-energies distinction—Descartes commits himself to a conception of God as "transcendent" in such a way that God is, for the practical purposes of daily living, separated from the physical universe. For instance, on his account, although God maintains the universe in existence, He is not active in the lives of particular individuals in such a way that daily petitionary prayers are significant for people's lives. In fact, although he does not make the point publicly, Descartes is committed to encouraging people to abandon traditional Christian prayers of petition and to focus simply on learning to accept whatever God has willed, from all eternity (see CSMK 273; AT 4.316). In so doing, he suggests, they will be better able to regulate their passions for the purpose of attaining the kind of wisdom, or knowledge of first causes and true principles, that is constitutive of natural beatitude, and as a result, they will experience tranquility, or peace of mind. These conceptions of natural beatitude and tranquility constitute the heart of Descartes's conception of morality, which is essentially a conception of ethics in which God—as conceived by traditional Christians and by members of other religions with similar commitments—is,

for practical purposes, irrelevant. In this sense, the metaphysical commitments that serve as the foundation for Descartes's conception of morality—and, hence, his account of virtuous belief formation—entail a kind of practical naturalism.

As a complement to his scholastically influenced metaphysical system, he develops an account of virtuous belief formation that differs from that of traditional Christianity and of similar, traditional religions. His program does—at least publicly and in principle—allow for a kind of religious knowledge by acquaintance, which would include knowledge of truths revealed by God. For instance, in the *Principles of Philosophy*, he says that people "must believe everything God has revealed, even though it may be beyond [their] grasp" (CSM 1.201; AT 8A.14). It focuses principally, however, on the faculty by which people engage in discursive reasoning, and it treats the optimal function of this faculty as that which is most important to human beings, at least in this life. Consequently, his philosophical project seems to rely, implicitly, on a kind of tripartite distinction among propositions regarding religion, like that which Locke describes in his Essay, as follows:[1]

> 1. *According to reason* are such propositions, whose truth we can discover by examining and tracing those ideas we have from sensation and reflection; and by natural deduction find to be true or probable. 2. *Above reason* are such propositions, whose truth or probability we cannot by reason derive from those principles. 3. *Contrary to reason* are such propositions, as are inconsistent with, or irreconcileable to, our clear and distinct ideas. (Essay IV. xvii.23)

With respect to religious knowledge and discourse, Descartes systematically attempts to address propositions that, in Lockean terms, are either "according to" or "contrary to" reason, carefully leaving detailed discussions of those propositions that are "above reason" to theologians. Thus, Descartes's philosophical program encourages a narrow conception of *religious rationalism*, in which virtuously formed religious beliefs are those acquired by an exercise of the faculty by which human beings engage in discursive reasoning.

Those writing in Descartes's wake accept his religious rationalism, but they move, rather quickly, beyond his practical naturalism. Embracing more fully and, perhaps, more consistently his rationalism, they move from merely accepting a form of practical naturalism to advocating various forms of methodological and ontological naturalism. This move is evident shortly after Descartes's death in the publication of Baruch Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1989 [1670]). The trend continues in the following decades. In 1702, for example, John Toland publishes *Christianity not Mysterious*, which is—as the rest of the title of the volume indicates—"a Treatise shewing, that there is nothing in the Gospel contrary to reason, nor above it: and that no Christian doctrine can be properly call'd a Mystery." Anthony Collins is not only influenced by Descartes's project, he regards

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[1] Lest there be any misunderstanding, I am merely claiming that the kind of distinction on which Descartes relies is similar to that which Locke makes in his Essay. I am not claiming that there is a particular historic or causal connection between the two.

Descartes as a kind of model who can rightly be described as a "free-thinker" (Mossner 2006 [1967], 328; Kline 1993, 193). What is more, Descartes's influence is not limited to philosophy, narrowly conceived. By the end of the modern period, religious "faith" comes to be seen, by many in the West, as a species of philosophical "belief," which—if virtuous—is a product of the exercise of discursive reason.[2] This trend is, perhaps, most evident in the publication Immanuel Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1960 [1793]).

In short, Descartes presents his philosophical program as one that attempts to *reform* Christianity from inside the community of professing Christians, and judging by his behavior—both public and private—this seems to be the way he conceived it.[3] What his program actually ends up promoting, however, is a series of attempts—both from inside and from outside the community—to *revolutionize* and, in fact, to naturalize the Christian faith. On the one hand, this development is a possibility that Descartes seems to be able to foresee. He recognizes that to the extent that his project would be successful in finding its way into university curricula, or at least into the hands of the educated public, it could be successful in changing the way that coming generations of Western Christians understand their religious faith (see CSMK 173; AT 3.297-8). On the other hand, there are consequences of his project that he may neither have foreseen nor desired—e.g., that by embracing his practical naturalism and his religious rationalism, his progeny would end up committing themselves to various forms of religion that are little more than simulacra of Christianity, as it was traditionally understood and practiced.

Thus, it is not merely the *Meditations* that function as a "Trojan Horse" by which Descartes could bring about significant pragmatic and social change (see Garber 2001, 223). Rather, it is his broader philosophical program that functions this way, being constructed so that it might help revolutionize both science and religion. Though his commentators seem to be most frequently occupied with the former effect, it is the latter, in the end, that seems to be greater.

The kinds of naturalism and rationalism that emerge from Descartes's understanding of the nexus of nature, virtue, and religion were once a subtle and subversive innovation of traditional forms of religious faith. Today, however, endorsing various forms of naturalism and of rationalism[4] have become widely held norms both in religious discourse and in religious practice, at least in America and Europe. The move to partake of some version of each may not mark a significant divergence from the forms of Western Christianity that (i) have their principal foci in Rome, Wittenberg, and Geneva and (ii) are uniquely and robustly

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[2] In this section, I am merely sketching the significance of Descartes's project as it relates to those who followed him. A number of Orthodox Christian philosophers and theologians contend, however, that this kind of religious rationalism may have begun to take effect much earlier in the Latin-speaking West—see, e.g., Bradshaw (2004), Engelhardt (2000), Popovich (1994), and Romanides (2008) as well as Bradshaw (2006) and Lossky (1976; 2001).

[3] See, e.g., the evidence that Descartes is sincere in his religious convictions in Chap. 7, Sect. 7.2.3.

[4] Or of rationalism's fideistic alter ego.

developed in the second millennium after Christ.[5] It does, however, mark a radical departure from the traditional Christianity that immerses itself in the lifeworld that sustains the theological texts of the first millennium and lives "in the mind" in which the authors of these texts wrote, fully embracing their theological worldview (see Engelhardt 2000, 159–60). Recognizing both that difference and the role that Descartes plays in helping to normalize the innovation is significant because it provides us with a more accurate understanding not only of the history of philosophy but also of the history of religion. In so doing, it provides us with a richer perspective from which we can understand contemporary debates both about the traditional faith and practices of Christianity and about the faith and practices of other religions that have similar philosophical commitments.

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[5] I have not attempted to address this issue. Rather, I attempted merely to explain some of the most significant ways that Descartes's philosophical project both differs from and presents itself as an alternative to traditional Christianity—and, by implication, to those traditional forms of religion with similar philosophical commitments.

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Appendix: A Defense of Descartes's *DDV*

I concluded Chap. 6 with a brief explanation of why Descartes's account of virtuous judgment does not easily fall prey to more nuanced arguments against doxastic voluntarism. Offering this brief explanation allowed me to maintain focus on the fundamental narrative of the text. Recognizing, however, that a more detailed defense of Descartes's view is important for my project, I will now offer such a defense in light of contemporary arguments against doxastic voluntarism.

Let me begin by briefly recapitulating my argument from Chap. 6. I opened the chapter with a pair of important distinctions. One is between *indirect doxastic voluntarism* (*IDV*)—i.e., the thesis that people have the ability to control their beliefs indirectly, by controlling behaviors relevant to belief formation, such as gathering or attending to evidence—and *direct doxastic voluntarism* (*DDV*)—i.e., the thesis that people have the ability to control their beliefs directly, by an act will. Another is the more nuanced distinction between two different kinds of *DDV*. The first is *negative DDV*—i.e., as the thesis that people have the ability to *suspend*, or to *withhold*, *judgment* directly by an act will. The second is positive DDV—i.e., the thesis that people have the ability to *form a judgment* directly by an act will. I then went on to argue for two points. First, I offered evidence suggesting that there is strong textual evidence from the *Meditations*, the *Principles*, the *Discourse*, the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, and his correspondence—specifically, the letter from May 2, 1644—that Descartes endorses a version of negative *DDV*. Second, I noted that there is insufficient textual evidence, at least from the works I analyzed in the chapter, that he endorses any version of positive *DDV*.

If my interpretation is correct, Descartes's critics can show that his account of virtuous judgment is fundamentally flawed by demonstrating that negative *DDV* is false. More specifically, they would need to show that *Descartes's* rather weak conception of negative *DDV* is false. That is, they would need to show that even if a person were to perform an elicited act of the will by which he controls his attention and thus alters the manner in which his intellect perceives a particular idea, causing it not to be clear and distinct, he could not perform a separate, elicited act of the will by which he suspends judgment. In Chap. 6, I noted in passing that

the standard examples of each of the two principal kinds of arguments against doxastic voluntarism—i.e., *conceptual impossibility arguments* and *contingent inability arguments*—target versions of positive *DDV*, rather than versions of negative *DDV*. Therefore, I concluded, the standard arguments in the contemporary debate fail to show that Descartes's conception of *DDV* is mistaken.

In this appendix, I will analyze in detail the most noteworthy arguments against doxastic voluntarism in the contemporary literature. I will begin with three of the more frequently discussed conceptual inability arguments. I will then turn my attention to a series of contingent inability arguments. In each case, I will argue that none demonstrates that Descartes's conception of *DDV* is false. Hence, I will conclude here, as I did in Chap. 6, that Descartes's account of virtuous judgment does not fall prey to the challenge that it requires a commitment to an erroneous version of *DDV*.

A.1   Conceptual Impossibility Arguments

A.1.1   Williams's Argument

The first conceptual impossibility argument that I will analyze is a classic from Bernard Williams (1970). He introduces the argument by reflecting on the nature of belief and asking a rhetorical question. He says,

> If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not; moreover, I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. At the very least, there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event; since I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. something I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will. With regard to no belief could I know—or, it all this is to be done in full consciousness, even suspect—that I had acquired it at will. But if I can acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I am able to do this; and could I know that I was capable of this feat, if with regard to every feat of this kind which I had performed I necessarily had to believe that it had not taken place? (1970, 108)

The goal of the argument is to show that doxastic voluntarism is a conceptual impossibility, but does it succeed?

Critics have identified at least three major flaws with the argument. First, it is at least possible that at one moment a person could will, in full consciousness, to *acquire* a belief that *p* merely for practical reasons, regardless of the truth of *p*. Once the person does this, however, he or she might perceive the evidence for *p* differently than before—such that the person perceives *r*, which previously seemed like terrible evidence for *p*, as conclusive evidence for *p*. In which case, his or her belief would be *fixed* for theoretical reasons that are concerned with the truth of *p*. Thus, the person might perceive his or her previous position as a kind of doxastic blindness, in which he or she failed to recognize *r* for what it is—namely,

a conclusive reason for *p*. Hence, it is possible that at one moment a person could will, in full consciousness, to acquire a belief that *p* regardless of its truth, and in the next moment regard his or her belief as a *belief* and believe that his or her belief was acquired at will a moment before (cf. Winters 1979, 253; Scott-Kakures 1994; Johnston 1995, 438).

Second, one could know, in general, that one had the ability to acquire beliefs at will without knowing that any particular belief was acquired at will. This is the situation in which Bennett's Credamites find themselves. According to Bennett's tale,

> Credam is a community each of whose members can be immediately induced to acquire beliefs. It doesn't happen often, because they don't often think: 'I don't believe that *p*, but it would be good if I did.' Still, such thoughts come to them occasionally, and on some of those occasions the person succumbs to temptation and wills himself to have the desired belief. (Sometimes he merely wants to be the center of attention and to amuse others. Someone who has no skill as an actor can instantly start to behave *exactly* as though he believed that *p*, by coming to believe that *p*. It is fun to watch it happen.) When a Credamite gets a belief in this way, he forgets that this is how he came by it. The belief is always one that he has entertained and has thought to have some evidence in its favour; though in the past he has rated the counter-evidence more highly, he could sanely have inclined the other way. When he wills himself to believe, that is what happens: he wills himself to find the other side more probable. After succeeding, he forgets that he willed himself to do it (Bennett 1990, 93).

Thus, a person could both believe at one moment that his or her belief that *p* was not acquired at will the moment before and know that he or she is able to acquire beliefs at will (see, e.g., Winters 1979, 255; cf. Bennett 1990; Scott-Kakures 1994).

Third, one could possess an ability without knowing that he or she possesses the ability (see, e.g., Winters 1979, 255; cf. Bennett 1990; Scott-Kakures 1994). Thus, a person could have the ability to acquire beliefs at will even if it were impossible for her to know that he or she had this ability. Therefore, Williams's argument has a number of significant shortcomings.

In light of these shortcomings, it might seem tempting to deny that the argument poses a challenge to Descartes's conception of *DDV* and to move on to examine other possible defeaters of Descartes's view. Such a move, however, would be premature since we can reformulate the argument, as follows:

(1) To judge at will that *p* would be to judge that *p* independently of all truth considerations. [Premise]

(2) To judge that *p* is to judge that '*p*' is true. [Premise]

(3) To judge that '*p*' is true is not to judge that *p* independently of all truth considerations. [Premise]

(4) To judge that *p* is not to judge that *p* independently of all truth considerations. [2,3]

(5) If it were possible for a person to judge at will that *p*, then it would be possible for a person, at a given moment, both to judge and not to judge that *p* independently of all truth considerations. [1,4]

(6) It is not possible for a person, at a given moment, both to judge and not to judge that *p* independently of all truth considerations. [Premise]

(7) It is impossible for a person to judge at will that *p*. [5,6]

This reformulated version of Williams's argument avoids the problems of the original version and might appear to succeed in demonstrating that doxastic voluntarism is conceptually impossible. However, given that there is a variety of theses that are referred to as 'doxastic voluntarism', we need to determine which of these theses this reformulated version of the argument targets and whether the argument shows that *Descartes's* conception of negative *DDV* is conceptually impossible.

The reformulated version of the argument does show that certain versions of positive DDV are fundamentally flawed. For instance, it shows that the following four versions of positive *DDV* are conceptually impossible:

- *Strong Positive DDV concerning the Execution of the Will*: For any doxastic agent, S, and any proposition, p; S has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can form a judgment regarding p, regardless of S's evidence for or against p.
- *Strong Positive DDV concerning the Determination of the Will*: For any doxastic agent, S, and any proposition, p; S has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can judge that p or that not p, regardless of S's evidence for or against p.
- *Moderate Positive DDV concerning the Execution of the Will*: There is a doxastic agent, S, such that for some proposition, p; S has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can form a judgment regarding p, regardless of S's evidence for or against p.
- *Moderate Positive DDV concerning the Determination of the Will*: There is a doxastic agent, S, such that for some proposition, p; S has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can judge that p or that not p, regardless of S's evidence for or against p.

It does not, however, demonstrate that the following weaker versions of positive DDV are conceptually impossible:

- *Weak Positive DDV concerning the Execution of the Will*: There is a doxastic agent, S, such that for some proposition, p; S has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can form a judgment regarding p, provided that S's evidence regarding p is inconclusive.
- *Weak Positive DDV concerning the Determination of the Will*: There is a doxastic agent, S, such that for some proposition, p; S has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can judge that p or that not p, provided that S's evidence regarding p is inconclusive.

The reason the argument does not succeed in showing that these theses are fundamentally flawed is that according to each, the epistemic agent does not make a judgment "independently of all truth considerations," as (1) of the reformulated version of the argument requires.

More importantly, for present purposes, the argument does not show that any of the following versions of negative *DDV* is conceptually impossible:

- *Strong Negative DDV*: For any doxastic agent, S, and any proposition, p; S has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can suspend judgment regarding p, regardless of S's evidence for or against p.

- *Moderate Negative DDV*: There is a doxastic agent, S, such that for some proposition, p; S has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can suspend judgment regarding p, regardless of S's evidence for or against p.
- *Weak Negative DDV*: There is a doxastic agent, S, such that for some proposition, p; S has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can suspend judgment regarding p, provided that S's evidence regarding p is inconclusive.

The reason the argument fails to show that these theses are fundamentally flawed is that it focuses on making a judgment rather than on refraining from making a judgment. Perhaps we could reformulate the argument in such a way that it could show that both *Strong Negative DDV* and *Moderate Negative DDV* are false, on the grounds that suspending judgment is not possible regardless of one's evidence. Even such an argument, however, would fail to show that *Weak Negative DDV* is conceptually impossible. Given that Descartes's conception of *DDV* is something akin the version of *Weak Negative DDV* that I have presented above, even the more charitable versions of Williams's argument would not pose a threat to Descartes's position.

A.1.2   Scott-Kakures's Argument

The second conceptual impossibility argument that I will analyze is from Dion Scott-Kakures.[1] It is as follows:

(1) S's cognitive/desiderative perspective, at t_1, from which S's intention to believe that p is generated, is incompatible with believing that p. [Premise]
(2) So long as S inhabits the cognitive/desiderative perspective from which S's intention to believe that p, is generated at t_1; it is not possible for S to believe that p. [1]
(3) If it is possible for S to acquire at will the belief that p at t_2, then sometime between t_1 and t_2 S must abandon the intention to believe that p, formed at t_1. [2]
(4) If, sometime between t_1 and t_2, S abandons the intention to believe that p, formed at t_1; then S's intention, formed at t_1, does not guide or monitor the acquisition of S's belief that p at t_2. [Premise]
(5) If it is possible for S to acquire at will the belief that p at t_2; then S's intention, formed at t_1, does not guide or monitor the acquisition of S's belief that p at t_2. [3,4]
(6) For every action; x, if x is a basic intentional action, then x is guided or monitored by one's intention to x. [Premise]
(7) It is possible for S to acquire at will the belief that p at t_2 only if S's acquisition of the belief that p at t_2 is not a basic intentional action. [5,6]

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[1] I would like to thank Dion Scott-Kakures for taking the time, in private correspondence, to offer some clarifications regarding my outline of his argument.

(8) It is possible for S to acquire at will the belief that p at t_2. [Assumption for Reductio]

(9) S's acquisition of the belief that p at t_2 is not a basic intentional action. [7,8]

(10) It is possible for S to acquire at will the belief that p at t_2 only if S's acquisition of the belief that p at t_2 is a basic intentional action. [Premise]

(11) S's acquisition of the belief that p at t_2 is a basic intentional action. [8,10]

(12) It is not possible for S to acquire at will the belief that p at t_2. [8,9,11]

This argument fails to pose a serious threat to Descartes's conception of *DDV* for at least four reasons. First, the argument attempts to establish that a person cannot *acquire* beliefs at will. Hence, like Williams's argument, if it were to succeed, it would show that certain versions of positive DDV were fundamentally flawed. It would not follow, however, that *Descartes's* view is conceptually impossible since, as I noted above, he is committed to a weak version of negative *DDV*.

Second, Scott-Kakures's account of belief is fundamentally different than that of Descartes. Scott-Kakures conceives of beliefs as *commanded* acts of the will, like raising one's arm. Descartes, on the other hand, conceives of beliefs as *elicited* acts of will, like choosing to raise one's arm.[2] So, suppose the argument were to succeed in showing that beliefs are not 'basic intentional actions' and that it could be reformulated to target some version of negative *DDV*. Since that version of *DDV* would employ a conception of belief that Descartes does not hold, the reformulated version of the argument would not show that *Descartes's* conception of *DDV* is conceptually impossible.

Third, even if Descartes were to hold the same conception of belief and there was compelling evidence that he is committed not only to a version of negative *DDV* but also to some version of positive *DDV*,[3] it is not clear that Scott-Kakures's argument would pose a threat to the latter aspect of Descartes's view. According to the argument, S's cognitive/desiderative perspective, at t_1, includes S's intention to believe that p and either a negative epistemic assessment of p or, at least, the absence of a positive epistemic assessment of p.[4] That is, S's perspective either includes a belief that the evidence implies not p or, at least, lacks a belief that the evidence warrants, for S, a belief that p. Thus, if S were to maintain this cognitive/desiderative perspective and believe at will that p, then S would believe that p and either believe that the evidence implies not p or fail to believe that the evidence warrants, for S, a belief that p, which is not possible. Thus, S's cognitive/desiderative perspective, at t_1, from which S's intention to believe that p is generated, is incompatible with believing that p. Hence, (1) is true, but is a lack of a positive epistemic assessment for p incompatible with the belief that p (cf. Radcliffe 1997, 145–51)? Consider the case of Bennett's Credamites. One of the Credamites might be ignorant of the intricacies of Middle East affairs and, hence, lack a positive epistemic

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[2] I introduced this distinction in the introduction of Chap. 6.

[3] This is a possibility that I acknowledge in Chap. 6.

[4] I would like to thank Dion Scott-Kakures for his attempt to clarify, in private correspondence, this aspect of his argument.

appraisal of the proposition *there will be peace in the Middle East*. Nonetheless, she might understand the proposition and desire to believe that there will be peace in the Middle East, say, for the purpose of helping ease her depression. From this cognitive/desiderative perspective, she might form the intention to acquire at will the belief that there will be peace in the Middle East; however, nothing in the perspective that generates her intention is incompatible with believing that there will be peace in the Middle East. Hence, S's cognitive/desiderative perspective, at t_1, which generate S's intention, at t_1, to believe that p need not be incompatible with believing that p. Thus, (1) is true only of those cognitive/desiderative perspectives in which S believes that the evidence supports not p. Hence, even if Scott-Kakures's argument adequately addressed the issue in question and it was sound, it would show only that it is impossible for people *in certain cognitive/desiderative perspectives* to will to believe *some* propositions. Therefore, even if the argument were to succeed, it is not clear that it would pose a threat to a Cartesian conception of positive DDV, let alone to *Descartes's* conception of negative DDV.

Fourth, and more fundamentally, the argument is invalid since (2) does not imply (3). The cognitive/desiderative perspective that *generates* a person's intention to act need not be identical with the perspective that *sustains* that intention. So, even if the cognitive/desiderative perspective that *generates* S's intention to believe that p were incompatible with believing that p, it would not follow that the cognitive/desiderative perspective that *sustains* S's intention to believe that p is incompatible with believing that p. Hence, even if it follows that S cannot believe at will that p while maintaining the cognitive/desiderative perspective that *generates* S's intention to believe that p, it does not follow that S must abandon her *intention* to believe at will that p. Consider, for example, the following case. At t_1, S's cognitive/desiderative perspective is as follows: S believes that the evidence is insufficient to warrant, for S, a belief that p; S believes that it would be good to believe that p; and S desires to believe that p. From S's perspective at t_1, S generates the intention to believe that p. Due to S's belief that it would be good to believe that p and S's desire to believe that p, S begins to view the evidence for p differently such that at t_2 S's cognitive/desiderative perspective is as follows: S believes that the evidence is sufficient to warrant, for S, a belief that p, S believes that it would be good to believe that p, and S desires to believe that p. Subsequently, S's intention to believe that p is sustained by S's perspective at t_2. Hence, S could abandon the cognitive/desiderative perspective that generates the intention to believe at will that p without abandoning the intention itself, provided that S adopts a cognitive/desiderative perspective that could sustain the intention. Therefore, it is the cognitive/desiderative perspective that generates the intention to believe that p that S must abandon in order for S to acquire at will the belief that p, not the intention itself, as the argument requires. Thus, (2) does not imply (3). Hence, the argument is invalid. Therefore, neither Williams's argument not Scott-Kakures's argument poses a serious threat to Descartes's conception of *DDV*.

A.1.3   Alston's Argument

The third conceptual impossibility argument that I will analyze is from William Alston and attempts to establish that doxastic voluntarism is conceptually impossible under certain conditions. The argument is as follows (cf. Alston 1989, 131; Steup 2000, 48–9):

(1) For any person, *S*, if epistemic deliberation enables *S* to exert voluntary control over *S*'s doxastic attitudes, then it enables *S* to exert voluntary control over what doxastic attitude *S* takes up. [Premise]

(2) For any person, *S*, if epistemic deliberation enables *S* to exert voluntary control over what doxastic attitude *S* takes up, then *S* can undertake an episode of epistemic deliberation with the intention to take up a particular doxastic attitude. [Premise]

(3) For any person, *S*, *S* cannot undertake an episode of epistemic deliberation with the intention to take up a particular doxastic attitude. [Premise]

(4) For any person, *S*, epistemic deliberation does not enable *S* to exert voluntary control over what doxastic attitude *S* takes up. [1,2,3]

(5) For any person, *S*, epistemic deliberation does not enable *S* to exert voluntary control over *S*'s doxastic attitudes. [4]

(6) For any person, *S*, epistemic deliberation does not enable *S* to exert voluntary control over *S*'s beliefs. [5]

Like both Williams's argument and Scott-Kakures's argument, Alston's argument focuses on the role of the will in belief acquisition, or "what doxastic attitude *S* takes up." Hence, like both of the arguments previously considered, if it were to succeed, it would show only that certain versions of positive *DDV* were fundamentally flawed. Hence, it fails to pose a serious threat to *Descartes's* conception of *DDV*.[5]

A.1.4   Summary of Conceptual Impossibility Arguments

Therefore, drawing on the most frequently discussed conceptual inability arguments, one could formulate an argument that demonstrates that certain versions of positive *DDV* are conceptually impossible—e.g., *Strong Positive DDV concerning the Execution of the Will*, *Strong Positive DDV concerning the Determination of the*

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[5] There is an additional, and more fundamental, problem with the argument. A person can undertake an episode of doxastic deliberation with the intention to take up a particular doxastic attitude if, for instance, he or she expects the evidence to weigh heavily in favor of that attitude and he or she is committed to taking up doxastic attitudes in accordance with evidence. Hence, (3) is false. Thus, the argument is unsound. We could reformulate the argument to take into consideration this kind of counter-examples to (3)—e.g., by stipulating that the intention was neither revisable nor sensitive to the evidence. As noted, however, even this reformulated version of the argument would not pose a threat to Descartes's conception of *DDV*.

Will, *Moderate Positive DDV concerning the Execution of the Will*, or *Moderate Positive DDV concerning the Determination of the Will*. Similarly, one might be able to formulate an argument that demonstrates that certain versions of negative *DDV* are fundamentally flawed—e.g., *Strong Negative DDV* or *Moderate Negative DDV*. None of these arguments, however, would demonstrate that *Descartes's* conception of *DDV* is conceptually impossible. Therefore, none of the most noteworthy conceptual inability arguments pose a threat to Descartes's conception of virtuous belief formation.

A.2   Contingent Inability Arguments

To pose a threat to Descartes's position, however, one need not show that his account of *DDV* is *impossible*; one only needs to show that the view is *false*. In this section, I will analyze a series of contingent inability arguments that have this more modest goal and evaluate whether these arguments show that Descartes's conception of *DDV* is false.

A.2.1   Pojman's Argument

I will begin by examining argument offered by Louis Pojman. It is as follows (Pojman 1999, 576–9):

(1) Acquiring a belief is typically a happening in which the world forces itself on a subject. [Premise]
(2) A happening in which the world forces itself on a subject is not a thing the subject does (is not a basic act) or chooses. [Premise]
(3) Therefore, acquiring a belief is not typically something a subject does or chooses. [1,2]

There are a number of reasons why this argument fails to show that Descartes's conception of *DDV* is false. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on just two. First, like the conceptual impossibility arguments examined in the previous section, Pojman's argument focuses on the role of the will in belief acquisition. Hence, even if it were to succeed, it would show only that certain versions of positive DDV were false, not that *Descartes's* view is false.

Second, the evidence Pojman provides for (1) is too weak to establish (3). The evidence Pojman offers for (1) is, essentially, that it "appeals to our introspective data and assumes that acquiring a belief has a spontaneous, unbidden, involuntary, or forced aspect attached to it" (Pojman 1999, 576). A detailed study of the question would be preferable. Lacking such a study, however, let me at least call to mind some evidence, offered by Pojman himself, to suggest that (1) is not adequately supported by "our introspective data." According to Pojman, Descartes, Aquinas,

Locke, Newman, James, Pieper, and Chisholm all defend some version of doxastic voluntarism (cf. Pojman 1999, 574). Suppose that he is correct and that the philosophers he identifies do defend some version of doxastic voluntarism. They do so, one would assume, because they have phenomenal experiences that are *inconsistent* with (1). If we take their phenomenal experiences as normative, then we should regard (1) as false. If we merely regard them as one set of phenomenal experiences denying (1), alongside another set of phenomenal experiences affirming (1), we should regard (1) as in need of further evidential support. Pojman, however, does not provide such support. In fact, he offers no compelling reason to think that many people—perhaps the majority of people—experience the formation of judgments as something they do, not as something that happens to them. Hence, (1) provides inadequate evidence to help establish (3). Therefore, Pojman's argument is not cogent.

A.2.2   The Counter-Example Strategy: First Argument

One common argumentative strategy for those offering some type of contingent inability argument is to try to show that doxastic voluntarism, or some version of doxastic voluntarism, is false by appealing to counter-examples (see, e.g., Curley 1975, 178). Such arguments usually have the following form:

(1) If x, then version n of doxastic voluntarism is false. [Premise]
(2) x. [Premise]
(3) Therefore, version n of doxastic voluntarism is false. [1,2]

Arguments of this form are valid, and the first premise is usually plausible. Hence, if there is a problem with such an argument, it is with the alleged counter-example to which the argument appeals in (2).

Let us consider a number of arguments that utilize this strategy, beginning with the following:

(1) If there is a person, S_1, and a proposition, p_1, such that S_1 does not have direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S_1 can form a judgment regarding p_1, provided that S_1's evidence regarding p_1 is inconclusive; then it is not case that for any doxastic agent, S, and any proposition, p; S has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can form a judgment regarding p, regardless of S's evidence for or against p. [Premise]
(2) There is a person, S_1, and a proposition, p_1, such that S_1 does not have direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S_1 can form a judgment regarding p_1, provided that S_1's evidence regarding p_1 is inconclusive. [Premise]
(3) Hence, it is not case that for any doxastic agent, S, and any proposition, p; S has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can form a judgment regarding p, regardless of S's evidence for or against p. [1,2]

In defense of (2), Curley notes that he does not have voluntary control over his will such that he can form a judgment regarding the proposition *it rained three hours ago on Jupiter*. According to Curley, he can neither affirm nor deny the proposition *it rained three hours ago on Jupiter* (Curley 1975, 178). Hence, provided that Curley's introspective assessment is accurate, there is at least one case that confirms (2). Thus, the first argument using the counter-example strategy demonstrates that certain versions of positive doxastic voluntarism are false—e.g., *Strong Positive DDV concerning the Execution of the Will* and *Strong Positive DDV concerning the Determination of the Will*. Therefore, the first argument using the counter-example strategy is similar to Williams's argument, considered above: it shows that certain positive versions of *DDV* are false, but fails to show that *Descartes's* conception of *DDV* is false.

A.2.3   The Counter-Example Strategy: Second Argument

Let us consider a second argument using the counter-example strategy, and see if it helps advance the debate. The argument is as follows:

(1) If for every person, S, and every proposition, p, S does not have direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can judge that p or that not p, provided that S's evidence regarding p is inconclusive; then it is not case that there is a doxastic agent, S_1, such that for some proposition, p_1; S_1 has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S_1 can judge that p_1 or that not p_1, provided that S_1's evidence regarding p_1 is inconclusive. [Premise]

(2) For every person, S, and every proposition, p, S does not have direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S can judge that p or that not p, provided that S's evidence regarding p is inconclusive. [Premise]

(3) Hence, it is not case that there is a doxastic agent, S_1, such that for some proposition, p_1; S_1 has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that S_1 can judge that p_1 or that not p_1, provided that S_1's evidence regarding p_1 is inconclusive. [1,2]

Like the other arguments considered thus far, the second argument using the counter-example strategy shows, at most, that certain positive versions of *DDV* are false, not that *Descartes's* conception of *DDV* is false. Does it, however, even succeed in demonstrating that certain positive versions of *DDV* are false?

Ginet suggests (2) is false and, thus, that the argument fails. According to Ginet, there are a number of cases in which a person has direct voluntary control over his or her will such that the person can form a judgment regarding a proposition, provided that his or her evidence regarding the proposition is inconclusive. He offers a number of examples. Let me cite two. The first is as follows:

> Before Sam left for his office this morning, Sue asked him to bring from his office, when he comes back, a particular book that she needs to use in preparing for her lecture the next day. Later Sue wonders whether Sam will remember to bring the book. She recalls that he has sometimes, though not often, forgotten such things, but, given the thought that thought that her continuing to wonder whether he'll remember it will make her anxious all day, she decides to stop fretting and believe that he will remember to bring it.

The second involves a road trip taken by Ginet and his wife. He says,

> We have started on a trip by car, and 50 miles from home my wife asks me if I locked the front door. I seem to remember that I did, but I don't have a clear, detailed, confident memory impression of locking that door (and I am aware that my unclear, unconfident memory impressions have sometimes been mistaken). But, given the great inconvenience of turning back to make sure the undesirability of worrying about it while continuing on, I decide to continue on and believe that I did lock it (Ginet 2001, 64).

According to Ginet, a person decides to believe a proposition when he or she stakes something on the truth of the proposition, where to 'stake something' on the truth of a proposition is understood as follows:

> In deciding to perform an action, ϕ, S staked something on its being that case that p if and only if when deciding to ϕ, S believed that ϕ-ing was (all things considered) at least as good as other options open to him or her if and only if p. (cf. Ginet 2001, 65)

Thus, on Ginet's account, in deciding not to remind Sam to bring the book she needed, Sue staked something on the truth of the proposition *Sam will bring the book* and, hence, decided to believe that Sam would bring it. If Sue had decided to remind Sam to bring the book she needed; Sue would have staked something on the truth of the proposition *Sam will not bring the book* and, hence, decided to believe that Sam would not bring it. Hence, on Ginet's account, Sue could have decided to believe that Sam will bring the book or that Sam will not bring the book. Similarly, in deciding to continue on his road trip without worrying, Ginet staked something on the truth of the proposition *I locked the door* and, hence, decided to believe that he locked the door. If Ginet had decided to pull off the road to call and ask his neighbor to check Ginet's front door; then Ginet would have staked something on the truth of the proposition *I did not lock the door* and, hence, decided to believe that he did not lock the door. Therefore, on Ginet's account, he could have decided to believe that he did lock the door or that he did not lock the door.

Notice, though, that Sue attends to the proposition *Sam will bring the book* and decides to act as if it were true, regardless of whether it really is, so that she can avoid the inconvenience, to her, of getting in touch with him and of worrying all day, as well as the inconvenience, to him, of interrupting his work. Similarly, Ginet attends to the proposition *I locked the door* and decides to act as if it were true, regardless of whether it really is, so that he can avoid the inconvenience both of turning back to make sure and of worrying. Thus, the kind of cases to which Ginet appeals involve an agent who attends to a proposition and decides to act as if the proposition were true, regardless of whether it actually is, for the purpose of some project. Hence, the kind of cases to which Ginet appeals involve an agent who *accepts* a proposition, not an agent who *judges* the proposition to be true.[6] Therefore, the examples that Ginet cites do not demonstrate that (2) is false.

His conclusion, however, is correct: (2) is, in fact, false. We can see this if we clarify an ambiguity in the premise. The term 'inconclusive' in (2) may be read in

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[6] I described this distinction, briefly, in Chap. 3, Sect. 3.2.2. For further details of the distinction, see, e.g., Bratman 1999, 15–34; Cohen 1989, 367–89.

either of two senses. First, to say that the evidence for a proposition is inconclusive may be equivalent to saying that the proposition cannot be established with demonstrative certainty. For instance, the evidence for the proposition *the future will resemble the past* is inconclusive in so far as the truth of the proposition cannot be established with demonstrative certainty. Second, to say that the evidence for a proposition is inconclusive may be equivalent to saying that the evidence for proposition is exactly as compelling as the evidence against the proposition. For instance, suppose that the only evidence to which Curley has access regarding the proposition *it rained three hours ago on Jupiter* is that which he can gather by staring, unaided, into the night sky. In such a case, Curley's evidence for the proposition *it rained three hours ago on Jupiter* is exactly as compelling as his evidence against the proposition.

Is (2) false, if it employs the term 'inconclusive' in the first sense? Consider the following scenario. A man with a gun approaches a woman and demands that she hand over the money in her pocket. Her fear of being shot activates a survival mechanism that influences, but does not compel, her to comply with the mugger's demand. Consequently, she hands over the money voluntarily—in the sense that she had control over her action and could have done otherwise. Consider the following analogous case. *S*'s evidence for *p* fails to establish *p* with demonstrative certainty. It is, however, rather compelling, such that *S* would describe it as favoring *p*. Moreover, if asked to describe his or her assessment of the evidence in numeric terms, *S* would describe it as 70–30 in favor of *p*. Nonetheless, *S* is very troubled that *p* might be true—so troubled, in fact, that *S*'s profound fear that *p* is true activates a survival mechanism that influences, but does not compel, *S* to judge that not *p*. In this case, even though *S*'s will is coerced, *S* forms his or her judgment voluntarily—that is, *S*'s belief is an act of will over which *S* had control such that he or she could have done otherwise. Hence, (2) is false, if the term 'inconclusive' is understood in the first sense.

Is (2) false, if it employs the term 'inconclusive' in the second sense? Consider the following case. *S*'s evidence for *p* is exactly as compelling as *S*'s evidence against *p*. Nonetheless, *S* is very troubled that *p* might be true—so troubled, in fact, that *S*'s profound fear that *p* is true activates a survival mechanism that influences, but does not compel, *S* to judge that not *p*. Hence, *S*'s belief is an act of will over which *S* had control such that he or she could have done otherwise—for instance, if she had feared that *p* were false. Hence, (2) is false, if the term 'inconclusive' is understood in the second sense.

Therefore, were the second argument using the counter-example strategy to succeed, it would show merely that certain positive versions of *DDV* are false, not that *Descartes's* conception of *DDV* is false. Since it is unsound, however, it fails to demonstrate that any version of *DDV* is false.

A.2.4   The Counter-Example Strategy: Third Argument

There is at least one way we could compensate for some of the shortcomings of the foregoing contingent inability arguments and block the kinds of counter-examples

used above in arguing against the second premise of the second argument. We could make a distinction between mere voluntary control and voluntary *rational* control. The principal difference between these types of control is that the latter, unlike the former, entails a requirement for the will to be properly responsive to truth considerations, rather than merely to pragmatic considerations or to psychological influences.[7] With this distinction in mind, we can use counter-example strategy to formulate a third argument that is successful in showing that certain versions of *DDV* are false. The argument is as follows:

(1) If for every person, S, and every proposition, p, S does not have direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that S can judge that p or that not p, provided that S's evidence for p is exactly as compelling as S's evidence against p; then it is not case that there is a doxastic agent, S_1, such that for some proposition, p_1; S_1 has direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that S_1 can judge that p_1 or that not p_1, provided that S_1's evidence for p_1 is exactly as compelling as S_1's evidence against p_1. [Premise]
(2) For every person, S, and every proposition, p, S does not have direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that S can judge that p or that not p, provided that S's evidence for p is exactly as compelling as S's evidence against p. [Premise]
(3) Hence, it is not case that there is a doxastic agent, S_1, such that for some proposition, p_1; S_1 has direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that S_1 can judge that p_1 or that not p_1, provided that S_1's evidence for p_1 is exactly as compelling as S_1's evidence against p_1. [1,2]

This third argument demonstrates that the following, qualified version of *Weak Positive DDV concerning the Determination of the Will* is false:

> There is a doxastic agent, S, such that for some proposition, p; S has direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that S can judge that p or that not p, provided that S's evidence regarding p is inconclusive—that is, exactly as compelling as S's evidence against p.

Since this qualified version of the weak thesis regarding doxastic voluntarism with respect to the determination of the will in judgment is false, it follows that similarly qualified versions of *Moderate Positive DDV concerning the Determination of the Will* and *Strong Positive DDV concerning the Determination of the Will* are false as well.

Moreover, every judgment is a judgment about something. So, if it is not within a person's power, in a certain context, to judge that p and it is not within that person's power, in that context, to judge that not p, then it is not within that person's power, in that context, to form a judgment. Hence, this third argument also demonstrates

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[7] This strategy is like that of the conceptual impossibility arguments considered above insofar as it postulates that certain kinds of evidential sensitivity are essential to the very concept of 'belief'.

that the following qualified, version of *Weak Positive DDV concerning the Execution of the Will* is false:

> There is a doxastic agent, *S*, such that for some proposition, *p*; *S* has direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that *S* can form a judgment regarding *p*, provided that *S*'s evidence regarding *p* is inconclusive—that is, exactly as compelling as *S*'s evidence against *p*.

Since this qualified, weak version of the positive thesis regarding doxastic voluntarism with respect to the exercise of the will in judgment is false, it follows that similarly qualified versions of *Moderate Positive DDV concerning the Execution of the Will* and *Strong Weak Positive DDV concerning the Execution of the Will* are false as well.

The argument does not show, however, that the following, similarly qualified version of *Weak Negative DDV* is false:

> There is a doxastic agent, *S*, such that for some proposition, *p*; *S* has direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that *S* can suspend judgment regarding *p*, provided that *S*'s evidence regarding *p* is exactly as compelling as *S*'s evidence against *p*.

Nor does it show that similarly qualified versions of *Moderate Negative DDV* or *Strong Negative DDV* are false. Hence, it does not pose a threat to *Descartes's* conception of *DDV*.

A.2.5   The Counter-Example Strategy: Fourth Argument

There is, however, a fourth argument using the counter-example strategy that does show that a version of *Strong Negative DDV* is false. The argument is as follows:

(1) If there is a doxastic agent, S_1, such that for some proposition, p_1; S_1 does not have direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that S_1 can suspend judgment regarding p_1, regardless of S_1's evidence for or against p_1; then it is not case that for any doxastic agent, *S*, and any proposition, *p*, *S* has direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that *S* can suspend judgment regarding *p*, regardless of *S*'s evidence for or against *p*. [Premise]

(2) There is a doxastic agent, S_1, such that for some proposition, p_1; S_1 does not have direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that S_1 can suspend judgment regarding p_1, regardless of S_1's evidence for or against p_1. [Premise]

(3) Hence, it is not case that for any doxastic agent, *S*, and any proposition, *p*, *S* has direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that *S* can suspend judgment regarding *p*, regardless of *S*'s evidence for or against *p*. [1,2]

There is at least one person—namely, me—who lacks voluntary control over his will such that he can suspend judgment regarding the proposition *the number seven*

is equal to the number seven. Thus, (2) is true. Hence, the following qualified version of *Strong Negative DDV* is false:

> For any doxastic agent, *S*, and any proposition, *p*; *S* has direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that *S* can suspend judgment regarding *p*, regardless of *S*'s evidence for or against *p*

Thus, we have found an argument that comes closer to threatening Descartes's view. Can we formulate a similar argument, using the same strategy, to show that a version of *Moderate Negative DDV* or of *Weak Negative DDV* is false and, perhaps in so doing, demonstrate that Descartes's view itself is false?

A.2.6   The Counter-Example Strategy: Fifth Argument

Consider the following argument, which targets *Moderate Negative DDV*:

(1) If for every doxastic agent, *S*, and every proposition, *p*; *S* lacks direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that *S* can suspend judgment regarding *p*, regardless of *S*'s evidence for or against *p*; then it is not the case that there is a doxastic agent, S_1, and a proposition, p_1, such that S_1 has direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that S_1 can suspend judgment regarding p_1, regardless of S_1's evidence for or against p_1. [Premise]
(2) For every doxastic agent, *S*, and every proposition, *p*; *S* lacks direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that *S* can suspend judgment regarding *p*, regardless of *S*'s evidence for or against *p*. [Premise]
(3) Hence, it is not case that there is a doxastic agent, S_1, and a proposition, p_1, such that S_1 has direct voluntary *rational* control over his or her will such that S_1 can suspend judgment regarding p_1, regardless of S_1's evidence for or against p_1. [1,2]

Making a case for (2) of this argument is rather difficult. It is not as if we can appeal to a particular case to settle the issue, as with (2) of the fourth argument. Hence, the fifth argument is inconclusive. A similar, also inconclusive, argument could be constructed regarding a qualified version of *Weak Negative DDV*. Thus, there is—as far as I can tell—no contingent ability argument that demonstrates that either the moderate or the weak version of the negative thesis regarding doxastic voluntarism with respect to the exercise of the will in judgment is false. Hence, there is—as far as I can tell—no contingent ability argument that demonstrates that *Descartes's* conception of *DDV* itself is false.

A.2.7   Summary of Contingent Inability Arguments

In summary, there are contingent inability arguments that demonstrate that certain qualified versions of positive *DDV* are false, including strong, moderate, and weak

versions both of *DDV* concerning the *execution* of the will and of *DDV* concerning the *determination* of the will, as noted above. Moreover, there is at least one such argument that demonstrates that at least one strong version of negative *DDV* is false; however, none of the arguments examined above shows that *Moderate Negative DDV* or *Weak Negative DDV* is false. Since Descartes's conception of *DDV* is a weak version of negative *DDV*, the arguments examined in this section pose a threat neither to Descartes's conception of *DDV* nor, consequently, to his account of virtuous belief formation.

A.3   Conclusion

In short, participants in the contemporary debate about doxastic voluntarism offer two types of arguments against *DDV*. These arguments tend to focus on the possibility of people choosing to acquire beliefs without proper—perhaps without any—regard to the evidence. Neither the most noteworthy arguments in the debate nor reformulated versions thereof, however, show that *Descartes's* conception of *DDV* is false. Therefore, as I noted at the end of Chap. 6, Descartes's account of virtuous judgment does not easily fall prey to the challenge that it requires a commitment to a false version of *DDV*.

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