Descartes on Virtue*

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1. Introduction

In letters to Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia and Queen Christina of Sweden, as well as in parts of the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes provide at least the outlines of an ethical theory.[1] Most energy is devoted to the characterization of an ideal of moral virtue, which according to Descartes constitutes the supreme good and as such is "the thing we ought to set ourselves as the goal of all our actions" (CSMK, p. 261), and to showing how the pursuit of virtue on its own is sufficient to make our lives happy. Descartes argues that while it is commonly assumed that there are a number of different moral virtues, all of

* We wish to express our sincere gratitude to the editors of this *Festschrift* for kindly extending the deadline in order for us to be able to finish this contribution (which is intended as the first small step towards a more extensive work, entitled "A Design for Life – Descartes on Virtue and Happiness", which we hope to have ready in the not too distant future.) The following abbreviations of sources are used in the text: CSM 1, which refers to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes vol. 1* (trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch), Cambridge University Press, 1985; and CSMK, which refers to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes vol. 3* (trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny), Cambridge University Press, 1991.

[1] In most of his works intended for publication Descartes is indeed rather silent on ethics. What perhaps used to be the most famous exception to this is found in the *Discourse on Method* (published in 1637) where Descartes writes that "lest I should remain indecisive in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgments, and in order to live as happily as I could during this time, I formed for myself a provisional moral code [*une moral par provision*] consisting of just three of four maxims, which I should like to tell you about" (CSM 1, p. 122). Though some of the things Descartes has to say about the content of these maxims turn up once again in the later letters on ethics to Princess Elizabeth, we shall not be directly concerned with the *Discourse* in this paper; for discussion of the morality of the *Discourse* we refer the reader to Marshall (1998), Part One, and Santilli (1992). The letters to Princess Elizabeth which are relevant for this paper were all written in 1645 (summer and fall), while the one letter to Queen Christina on ethics is of 20 November 1647; the *Passions of the Soul*, finally, was first published in 1649.

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these virtues are in fact ultimately reducible to a matter of using one's free will as well as possible. In a letter to Queen Christina, Descartes explicates what it means to use one's will in this way in terms of "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" (CMSK, p. 325).[2] It is our aim in what follows to shed some light on what this Cartesian explication of the nature of virtue more specifically entails. As for Descartes' attempt to prove that a life of virtue is a guarantee for happiness, where the latter is taken by Descartes to consist "in a perfect contentment of mind and inner satisfaction" (CSMK, p. 257), we will leave that aside for another occasion.

2.

The "firm and constant resolution" mentioned in the letter to Queen Christina, we suggest, may be thought of as an *unconditional commitment* to direct one's will towards that which, after careful consideration of the circumstances that one is in, one judges that it would be best to do. In order to bring out the crucial point in this, we may consider the following example. Imagine a person whose ends in life are constituted by the possession of such things as an education, a job, a family, a house, and so on. Assume furthermore that this person characteristically makes sure in each and every situation to thoroughly examine her circumstances and then to carry out whatever is in accordance with the best judgment that she is capable of coming up with concerning how to promote her possession of the relevant things in the most efficient way. She defends this way of going on in life by referring to her experience of this as indeed the most efficient way of

[2] Very similar explications are found also in earlier letters to Princess Elizabeth; see CSMK, p. 258 and p. 262. Cf. also CSM 1, p. 384 (article 153).

actually attaining the things the possession of which she values for its own sake. Of course, sometimes even her best judgments may fail her and the outcomes of her behavior turn out to be different from what she expected them to be. But overall she thinks there is no alternative way of life that will be more advantageous with respect to the fulfillment of her basic aims.

On the Cartesian picture this person does not manifest virtue. The reason for this is that her commitment to directing her will towards acting in accordance with the best judgment that she is capable of about what to do in particular situations is conditional on her conviction that acting in this way is the best means to achieve separate ends. If she were to become convinced that in many cases the attainment of the relevant ends is better promoted by her *not* being so careful about forming and adhering to judgments about what to do, based on thorough examination of the circumstances that she is in, then she would aim to change her way of life and instead try to make sure to follow some other procedure of decision making, producing what she perceives of as more advantageous outcomes. According to Descartes, however, in order to manifest virtue one must rather be unconditionally committed to the aim of carrying out what one judges to be the best itself, including to do all that one can in order to find out what this may be. This must be done for its own sake, as it were, independently of whether one actually succeeds in bringing about the best outcome (objectively speaking) or not. Even if the external consequences of acting on the best judgment that one is capable of would turn out to be bad that does not in any way diminish the virtuousness of what one did. Descartes puts it thus: “virtue consists only in the resolution and vigour with which we are inclined to do the things we think good – this vigour, of course, must not stem from stubbornness, but

from the knowledge that we have examined the matter as well as we are morally able. What we do after such examination may be bad, but none the less we can be sure of having done our duty" (CSMK, p. 325).[3]

To manifest this kind of unconditional commitment – that is to say, to manifest virtue – in one's behavior constitutes the supreme good for each human being. Nothing, Descartes argues, counts as a good for humans "unless it somehow belongs to us and our having it is a perfection" (CSMK, p. 324). Now the only thing that entirely belongs to us is the freedom to use our wills well or badly. This freedom, furthermore, "makes us in a way equal to God and seems to exempt us from being his subjects" (CMSK, p. 326). Because of these things there can be no greater or more important perfection with respect to human beings than using our freedom of will as well as we can. To do that is the most fitting end for us to pursue "in all the circumstances of life" (CSMK, p. 257). Indeed, to put up some other end for our actions would even be "a waste of time" (ibid.), due to the fact that its attainment is not entirely up to ourselves, but rather depends on the providence of God.

3.

The following question could be raised with respect to what we have been saying so far. Perhaps Descartes does think that virtue is a matter of being unconditionally committed to directing one's will towards acting in accordance with a judgment about what it would be best to do, which one has reached by careful examination of one's circumstances, but is that really all of it? Clearly, in order for the practice of Cartesian virtue to have any real content it is required that a person take there to be other ends besides that of virtue itself;

[3] See also CSMK, p. 259, for a similar statement.

otherwise there would not be anything much for the person's virtuously formed judgments regarding what it would be best to do to be about.[4] Because of this, however, one may wonder whether Descartes does not put any restrictions on what a person might take these other ends to consist in, and perhaps on how she ranks their importance, if the person is to count as virtuous.

Now Descartes indeed represents a kind of objectivism about goods (or ends). He believes that there are many things which are objectively good for human beings, something which, as we saw in the previous section, means that human beings are in some sense able to acquire them and that their having them would constitute perfections.[5] In the great chain of being, furthermore, some of these perfections are certainly more noble or great to be in possession of than others. With the exception of virtue, however, it is striking how little Descartes in fact has to say regarding the correct value of different things, even though he clearly holds that the attainment of objective goods truly enrich our lives and therefore are worthy of our attention.[6] Still, the question above could now be reformulated in terms of whether the content of someone's judgments about what it would be best to do, according to Descartes, must not be restricted to concern such things

[4] Since virtue, according to Descartes, also is what constitutes the supreme good, it will obviously not do here to suggest that a judgment about what it would be best to do should be understood in terms of what is most conducive to the supreme good; that, as Santilli (1992), p. 362, puts it, would be "to go around in a circle, for spelled out that would mean 'Follow the path you think will best contribute to your following the paths you think best'". Cf. also Marshall (1998), pp. 115 – 118.

[5] Williston (2003) characterizes Descartes' position as an "egoistic cognitivist" one; it is egoistic in the sense that "a good is only revealed as such through the perceived self-interest of individual rational agents" (p. 307), while cognitivist in the sense that there are truths to be known about what "*truly* express" (ibid.) an agent's self-interest which the agent may "neglect or perhaps simply misinterpret" (ibid.).

[6] See, for instance, CSMK, p. 257, 261, and 264f. It deserves to be noted that Descartes at different places offers at least some brief remarks about what things other than virtue that he believe to be truly good for us; these things include, for instance, health, knowledge, joy, and friends. Descartes also claims that goods (or perfections) of the mind are generally greater than goods of the body, even though our passions tend to represent the latter "as being much greater than they really are" (CSMK, p. 267), which is why we often find people inclined to opt for what is in fact a lesser good than what is actually available to them. Marshall (1998), chapter 8, contains an admirable (though explicitly somewhat speculative) attempt to actually construct a more robust Cartesian theory of value.

(whichever they may be) that it would be truly or objectively good for her to attain, in order for the person to count as virtuous?

The response to this question is that there are no such restrictions on the Cartesian practice of virtue, except for what is already inherent in the requirement "to employ all the powers of one's mind" (CSMK, p. 325) in order to find out what would count as the best thing to do. That requirement, on the other hand, seems to entail quite a lot. Virtue – the unconditional commitment to use our freedom of will as well as possible – is assumed to be the only thing entirely within our power. Hence its practice cannot, on Descartes' picture, be dependent on the possession of moral wisdom of a kind that is only found in a certain group of people; that would make virtue inaccessible to the rest of us. However, Descartes appears to hold the view that human beings are by nature endowed with the ability to perceive what is good for them. What is represented as good for us in these perceptions is bound to actually be so, lest we are to think of God, our creator, as a deceiver (a possibility which must be excluded, according to Descartes, since it would imply ascribing an imperfection to God). Because of this it seems as if deliberation about what it would be *best* to do in a particular situation necessarily will proceed from perceptions of what is objectively good for us; such perceptions belong to the powers of our mind that we need to employ in order to reach a judgment on that matter. Furthermore, the "true function of reason", Descartes writes to Princess Elizabeth, "is to examine the just value of all the goods whose acquisition seems to depend in some way on our conduct, so that we never fail to devote all our efforts to trying to secure those which are in fact the most desirable" (CSMK, p. 264). That is, by our nature as rational beings we are in fact also equipped with the ability to ascertain the correct value of

different things in particular contexts, on the basis of which we can then go on and try to determine the most efficient way of attaining what is best.

The practice of virtue, according to Descartes, is nevertheless a very hard thing. It is only all too easy for us to give in to what he in the *Passions of the Soul* refers to as *lacheté*, cowardice or negligence.[7] Virtue requires constant attention and commitment to examine one's circumstances as well as possible. Relaxing just for a while, pretending that one understands, or knows what is best, when one has not searched enough is not unnatural, yet it is cowardly and/or negligent given the power one has been endowed with to refrain from assenting to certain perceptions of what is good, or giving in to pressing inclinations too early, before full or sufficient clarity has been reached. In addition, despite one's efforts with respect to forming and adhering to judgments about what is best, one will occasionally fail to fulfill one's plans. While this is something that many people often will have a hard time accepting, a virtuous person will not be let down by it since she rests assure in her awareness of having done all that she morally could.[8]

4.

Even though Descartes, as we have just seen, does not suggest that the practice of virtue is easy, his notion of virtue is inherently egalitarian. The prerequisites for practicing virtue are indeed to be found in all persons at any time.[9] There is no room therefore within the Cartesian framework (unlike, for instance, within that of Aristotle's) for thinking that some people are more virtuous than others; each individual is assumed to be

[7] See, for instance, CSM 1, p. 384 (article 152). (The translation of *lacheté* in the CSM 1 is in fact timidity; however, we find cowardice or negligence better suited.)
[8] See, for instance, CSMK, p. 264.
[9] Cf. Santilli (1992), p. 356f.

endowed with the same basic freedom to use his or her will well or badly in every situation. In the *Passions of the Soul* Descartes furthermore argues that since how we dispose of our volitions in fact is the only thing that is entirely up to us, using this freedom well, or to be virtuous, in fact constitutes the only ground for legitimate esteem of people in general, and for legitimate self-esteem in particular.[10]

It may be instructive at this point to at least briefly contrast Descartes' view on this last matter with the view expressed in the Aristotelian account of magnanimity or greatness of soul (*megalopsychia*). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argues that magnanimity is "a sort of adornment of the virtues" (Aristotle (1999), 1124a1-2) in that it presupposes all the other moral virtues and renders them even greater.[11] It is also the virtue belonging to people entitled to the greatest esteem:

> The magnanimous person, then, seems to be the one who thinks himself worthy of great things and really is worthy of them. For if someone is not worthy of them but thinks he is, he is foolish, and no virtuous person is foolish or senseless; hence the magnanimous person is the one we have mentioned. For if someone is worthy of little and thinks so, he is temperate, but not magnanimous; for magnanimity is found in greatness, just as beauty is found in a large body, and small people can be attractive and well proportioned, but not beautiful (Aristotle (1999), 1123b3-8).

[10] See, for instance, CSM 1, p. 384 (articles 152 and 153). It is unclear, however, whether a virtuous person according to Descartes actually experiences such legitimate self-esteem. In the *Passions of the Soul* Descartes claims that what causes legitimate self-esteem in oneself is the possession of what he refers to as "true generosity" (CSM 1, p. 384, article 153). Now true generosity is in fact characterized as having two different components: "The first consists in his [that is, the generous person] knowing that nothing belongs to him but … 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 what he judges to be best. To do that is to pursue virtue in a perfect manner" (ibid.). This may seem to suggest the possibility of someone who is virtuous, something which seems to correspond primarily to the second component of true generosity, while lacking the knowledge constituting the first component. If this indeed is a genuine possibility (something which we are not entirely sure about), then, as is argued by Marshall (1998), p 151, virtue is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for experiencing legitimate self-esteem.

[11] While Aristotle, unlike Descartes, indeed distinguishes between many different moral virtues (including that of practical wisdom), he ends up defending at least a version of the thesis that there is a unity of the virtues. On Aristotle's account, it is impossible to have one moral virtue in full without having all of the other moral virtues as well; see Aristotle (1999), book VI, chapter 13.

Now the greatness in which magnanimity is said to be found by Aristotle certainly owes a lot to circumstances beyond one's control. A magnanimous person is disposed to do great deeds, to actually bring about results which stand out as much superior in importance for his society and country than anything that can be expected of ordinary men. For this, however, the magnanimous person needs to have been raised in noble and wealthy circumstances, providing him with the suitable upbringing and education, as well as ensuring him of material prosperity in the future to an extent that is sufficient for him to remain completely unconcerned about how to get by in life; he needs to have been born with whatever physical and intellectual prerequisites that may be required in order to develop into a person characteristically capable of great achievements; and, of course, he needs to have been successful in developing the rest of the other moral virtues as well.

None of this Aristotelian elitism remains in the Cartesian notion of virtue.[12] According to Descartes we are indeed God-like just by virtue of possessing the power of free choice of the will, and that is a power equally present in any human being. Of course, people may very well be unequal in a number of other respects, including intelligence, level of education, strength, upbringing, wealth, etc. But while one's share in these other things reasonably affects what one is capable of achieving in one's life, neither the share nor the achievements are entirely due or up to oneself. And because of this, Descartes claims, they do not provide proper grounds for esteem. The only proper ground for that is virtue, which is equally available to us all.[13]

[12] It is sometimes argued that the elitism of Aristotle's own substantive ideal of a morally virtuous person is somehow bound to also infect contemporary forms of so called neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics; for an attempt to show that this need not be the case, see Svensson (2006), chapter 4.

[13] However, it is worth noting that Descartes also seems to suggest that some form of basic respect is in fact owed to each and every person simply in virtue of their having an absolute freedom of will (which in itself

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is characterized by Descartes as "the noblest thing we can have" (CSMK, p. 326)), constantly providing us with the very possibility of practicing virtue if we only choose to do; cf. Marshall (1998), p. 152.