

2. DESCARTES

Descartes is usually taken for a libertarian, and it is true that his writings are full of professions of freedom, human as well as divine. 'That there is freedom in our will', he writes in the *Principles*, 'is so evident that it must be counted among the first and most common notions that are innate in us' (AT VIII A 19). And a bit further on in the same work he says that 'we have such a close awareness of the freedom ... which is in us, that there is nothing we can grasp more evidently or more perfectly' (AT VIII A 20). Notwithstanding his emphasis upon our freedom, however, Descartes clearly held that everything apart from God is caused by factors other than itself. He was therefore a determinist with respect to the created universe, the universe within which human wills are exercised and actions performed. Descartes must, therefore, have been a compatibilist, despite the libertarian flavor of many of his pronouncements. And indeed, there are passages in which he appears explicitly to take the compatibilist's position. Since his accounts both of freedom and causal determination are quite complex, however, his view of the relation between these two is complex as well.

We begin with Descartes' view of freedom. In stating his position, Descartes applies the term 'free' not only to actions but also to the agents who perform actions - the substances of which the actions are modifications. (Sometimes it is the performance that is said to be free, whence the agent is said to act or to do something freely.) An agent may be called free with respect to a particular action, in which case she is free if and only if the action is free. Or she may be called free without qualification, in which case her being free consists in her ability to perform free actions. It is in this latter sense that Descartes speaks, as he sometimes does, of freedom as a power or faculty of agents (AT VII 56; AT VIII A 19; AT IV 116).

Descartes frequently characterizes the actions and the agents which have freedom as 'human' - they are 'human actions' and 'human beings', or 'men'. But this is a loose way of speaking. A man on the Cartesian view is not a single agent or substance but a composite of two distinct substances, a mind and a body. As for the actions ascribed to a man, these fall into three distinct groups. First are those that the mind performs by itself: these are volitions. Second are the purely corporeal operations which belong to the body: these are mere bodily motions, such as the free fall of one's arm, or the beating of one's heart. And third is a class of mixed or composite actions each of which has both a mental and a corporeal part, a volition followed by one or more bodily motions: examples are the voluntary raising of a man's arm and his running in order to catch the bus. It is only the actions in this third category that can properly be said to belong to the whole man, the composite of body and mind.

Sometimes Descartes says that volitions are actions, not of the mind, but of the will, and in this vein he ascribes freedom to the will as well. This is also loose talk on his part. His position is not, as might be supposed, that the will is a substance or agent distinct from the mind. Rather, the will is one of the mind's powers, one of its two principal capacities - the other being the intellect or power of perceiving. Volitions are the will's actualizations, not its properties: they are in fact occasional or episodic properties of the mind, the very mind to which the will itself belongs as a permanent property. So when Descartes says that the will acts, what he means is that the mind exercises its power of willing, thereby performing volitions; it is the mind that is the agent of these performances.

In strict speech, the only actions that are free for Descartes are volitions, and the only free agents are the minds that perform these volitions. Not only is no purely corporeal action ever free; but no composite action is properly said to be free either, even if its mental component, the volition that prompts one to run for the bus for example, is free, strictly speaking.

But volitions are not merely the only free actions for Descartes. It is also his view that every volition is free, and that it is so, furthermore, of necessity. For it is the essence of the will, as he puts it, to act freely: willing is free by nature (AT VII 166; AT XI 359). Indeed at several places in his text, Descartes uses the expression 'free decision' (*liberum arbitrium*) as the name of the faculty of will (AT VII 56, 57, 59; AT XI 445; AT V 85). It is not that men have the power of willing, some of whose exercises are free and some not. Rather they have just the power of free-willing, or willing-freely. Given merely that a man has a will, it follows logically that he has the capacity for free action.

The scope of freedom, however, is not as narrow for Descartes as this restriction of it to volitions might suggest. According to the traditional view, there are only two things that the will does (or rather two things that the mind does by willing). It either determines in favor or it determines against some action distinct from its own action of willing - it wills to perform or wills not to perform the action in question. For Descartes, by contrast, willing is a general type of mental activity of which there are a number of different species: 'desire, aversion,

assertion, denial and doubt are various modes of willing', he says in one place, noting that judging too, since it just consists in affirming or denying, is an act of the will (AT VIII A 17-18; AT VIII B 363). Elsewhere he says that all of the soul's 'appetites' are volitions (AT XI 364), although other passages make it clear that he wants to distinguish volition not only from bodily appetite but also from that desire which is one of the six primitive 'passions of the soul' (see, e.g., AT XI 387). On the traditional view, a man can will to affirm some proposition or to deny it (or will not to do either), and his affirming and his denying are actions - actions, indeed, on the part of the intellect - which are distinct from the action of willing itself: as some scholastic philosophers put it, the affirming etc. are acts 'commanded' by the will, whereas the willing is an act 'elicited' from it. Descartes' position, however, is that affirming and denying and such are among the will's elicited acts; they are its very performances and not merely distinct actions commanded by it. Indeed, for Descartes, there is no generic action of willing, no action that is merely a volition and not also something more specific such as a judgement or appetite (AT VIII A 17; AT XI 343). The variety of actions, therefore, that count as free on his view is actually quite wide.

What *is* freedom as Descartes conceives it: wherein does it consist? In several passages, he equates being free with being voluntary (VII 191; AT VIII A 18; AT IV 116). To be voluntary is simply to depend on the will; and depending on the will is usually taken to mean being caused by it - that is, being caused by a volition or action of willing. This cannot be Descartes' understanding of voluntariness, however, since on his view it is volitions themselves that are free. Not only are volitions not caused by volitions, but the only things that are caused by volitions are perceptions and motions of bodies, and none of these is free. Hence when Descartes says (by implication - he never does so directly) that a volition is voluntary he must mean that it depends on the will, not as one event depends on a second event by which it is caused to occur, but as a modification depends on the substance to which it belongs, or in this case, more specifically, as an action depends on its agent. Volitions are voluntary in the sense that they are the will's, or rather the mind's, own performances.

That this is indeed Descartes' meaning is confirmed by the fact that he also identifies freedom, on occasion, with spontaneity (AT VII 59; AT IV 175). An action is spontaneous if it is performed by its agent entirely on its own, without being forced or helped or affected by any external factor, or by anything other than its very self. By this definition, to be sure, only the actions of God are spontaneous, properly speaking. So when Descartes attributes spontaneity to the actions of created agents he must be using the word in a qualified or restricted sense, in the way that he uses the word 'substance' when he says that not only God but certain creatures are substances (AT VIII A 24). The actions of creatures, therefore, are spontaneous if they depend on no created entity apart from the agent who performs them. Now the agent by which a human volition is performed is just the human mind; there is neither any need nor any room for any other agent or cause, other than God, to take part in the action of willing. Furthermore, in performing volitions the mind uses only its own power of willing. Whatever, therefore, depends on the will in the way that a volition must do, is bound to depend on the mind to which that will also belongs. In the case of volitions, voluntariness and spontaneity coincide.

Unfortunately, there is a third notion that Descartes appeals to in his efforts to explicate freedom, namely, indifference (AT VIII A 20; AT IV 173). An action is indifferent if its agent is able, on the point of performing it, not to perform it, or to perform some other action instead. It is understandable that Descartes should refer to this notion, as well as to spontaneity, in his discussions of freedom. Spontaneity is the essence of freedom according to certain influential thinkers of his time; whereas the Jesuits, following Molina, chose to define freedom in terms of indifference. (A proponent of spontaneity whom Descartes knew was Guillaume Gibieuf; Descartes refers to his *De libertate dei et creaturae* (1630) in a letter to Mersenne dated 21 April 1641 (AT III 360). A Jesuit with whom Descartes corresponded on the subject of freedom was Denis Mesland (see AT IV 111ff. and AT IV 173ff.) Since Descartes wished to find favor with both parties he often stressed the similarity of his views to theirs, to the point of using their preferred language when he felt it appropriate to do so. The difficulty is that the notions of spontaneity and indifference appear to yield two different conceptions of freedom.

The situation is complicated by the fact that Descartes uses the word 'indifference' with two distinct meanings. Besides indifference in the sense used by the Jesuits, he introduces his own sense, according to which an action is indifferent only if its agent has no reason to perform it, or the reasons for and against it are evenly balanced (AT VII 58; AT VII 59; AT VII 432-3; AT IV 173). It is obvious that an action may be indifferent in the one sense without being indifferent in the other; and Descartes says explicitly that a free action need not be indifferent as *he* uses the word (AT VII 58; AT VII 433; AT IV 118). But there also are passages in which Descartes maintains that actions that are not indifferent in the Jesuits' sense are nonetheless free, owing to their spontaneity. Such actions are those by which a proposition clearly and distinctly perceived is affirmed or assented

to; for it is impossible, Descartes contends, for the mind not to assent in such cases, and yet its action is free. In speaking of the *cogito*, for example, he declares that he ‘could not but judge that something so clearly understood was true’ (AT VII 58). And more generally he says, ‘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 [sc. volition]’ (AT IV 116). This is not a point of minor significance in Descartes’ philosophy; on the contrary, it is crucial to his epistemological project. For the inability of the mind to be mistaken when it affirms what it clearly and distinctly perceives is the ultimate basis of secure human knowledge.

There are free actions, therefore, which are not indifferent (in the Jesuits’ sense): in their case spontaneity is sufficient for freedom. On the other hand, in one of his last pronouncements on the nature of freedom (in a letter dated 9 February 1645, presumably to Mesland - who was, of course, a Jesuit), Descartes explicitly says that the free mind is always indifferent in the sense of being able not to perform any action that it does perform. ‘I do not deny’, he declares,

that the will has this positive faculty [and that] it has it ... with respect to all ... actions; so that [even] when a very evident reason moves us in one direction, although morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction, absolutely speaking we can. For it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing’. (AT IV 173)

There is no consensus among Cartesian scholars as to how this difficulty ought to be dealt with.⁹ One obvious strategy is to read the qualification expressed by the phrase ‘morally speaking’ back into Descartes’ earlier statements. The trick is to do this without undermining his entire epistemology. I do not know if this strategy can be made to succeed, but to pursue it would take me away from my chief business in this paper. In any case, the remaining main tenets of the Cartesian view of freedom are clear: that all and only volitions are free actions, that (apart from God) all and only minds are free agents, and that actions and agents are free if and only if they are spontaneous.

Descartes’ understanding of freedom is fairly explicit in his works. Not so his conception of causation, however. He does affirm a number of quite general propositions about causal relationships: that ‘something cannot arise from nothing’ (AT VII 40); that ‘there must be at least as much <reality> in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause’ (ibid.); that everything depends on God (AT IV 332); that corporeal events are governed by laws (AT VIII A 61-3); that souls and bodies act on one another (AT XI 354); and that some of our actions depend on our free will (AT XI 445). But though it seems clear that causation is not the same thing in all of these relationships, Descartes says almost nothing about the differences between them. Nor does he do much to explain what causing, or being the cause or a cause of something, or depending on, amounts to in any one of these cases. So an account of Descartes’ determinism must of necessity be somewhat speculative.

Since the precise subjects of Cartesian freedom are actions of willing, it is the causal relationships involving these in particular that pertain to the concerns of this article - that is, the relationships in which volitions are determined by or depend upon something other than themselves. Volitions, according to Descartes, are subject to three sorts of causes.

First, they are caused by God, in common with everything else in the universe. Descartes distinguishes two aspects of God’s causation of things. On the one hand, God is the original creator of substances, and thus of the minds possessing the wills from which volitions are elicited. On the other hand, God concurs in all the operations of substances, including those ascribed to the will. Thus, not only is God the cause of ‘all effects’, including those that ‘depend on human free will’, but ‘the slightest thought could not enter into a person’s mind without God’s willing, and having willed from all eternity, that it should so enter’ (AT IV 314). So God is causally responsible for every mind with its power of willing by having created it; and he is responsible for every volition by concurring in all of the actions of minds.

Second, volitions depend on the minds whose actions they are. This dependence is partly a matter of simply belonging to a substance, in the way that any property does. Since volitions, however, are not merely properties but actions, and therefore events, there is more to their dependence than this. They owe not only their being but their occurrence at particular times to the minds they belong to: minds produce or perform their volitions as agents, besides possessing them as substances. Furthermore, each volition is produced solely by its own mind (leaving God out of account): this is what makes it a spontaneous and hence a free action. This means not only that no other (created) agent takes part in performing it, but that no (created) factor outside its own mind even affects it.

Cartesian minds are thus (God aside) wholly autonomous in performing their volitions. Descartes puts this by saying that the will - that is, the mind - has 'a real and positive power to determine [it]self' (AT IV 116).

Finally, volitions are determined by other thoughts that occur in the minds that perform them. The thoughts in question are perceptions, since Descartes does not allow volitions to be caused by other volitions. But not all perceptions are equally effective in causing volitions. Those that are perfectly clear and distinct make it impossible (at least 'morally speaking') for the minds in which they occur not to assent to what they contain, assent being an act of the will. Obscure perceptions, by contrast, may have no effect on the will whatsoever; or if they do affect it they merely incline or dispose the will in one direction or the other, without necessitating its movement (even 'morally speaking') in either. In both of these cases the causal factor, the perception, is an event, whereas the causes of the other two sorts we have noted, God and the mind, are agents. For it is not merely the content of a perception I have, it is also my having it, that either makes me perform a volition or inclines me to do so. But Descartes shows no reluctance in general to count events, as well as agents, as causes. It is true that he never explicitly calls a perception the 'cause' of a free volition. But he regularly uses causal locutions in characterising this relationship. Thus, clear perceptions are said to 'impel' us or the will to perform volitions (AT VII 433; AT IV 173), as well as to make us incapable of not doing so. And even the passions, which are obscure perceptions and hence merely 'incline' the will without necessitating it, are said to 'incite' and to 'dispose' the soul to this or that action of willing (AT IV 295; AT XI 359; AT XI 392).

It might seem perplexing that perceptions should have causal roles in willing for Descartes, given his doctrine that volitions are spontaneous actions on the part of the minds they belong to. For a spontaneous action is one that its agent performs all by itself, and a volition is spontaneous just because the mind that produces it is not only not compelled to do so by any external agent, it is not even assisted by anything other than its very self. Such perplexity, however, can be dispelled by recalling that Cartesian perceptions are properties of minds, just as volitions are, and that while no perception is identical with the mind in which it occurs - it is not that very thing - neither is it really distinct from it. In every case in which a perception has any effect on a volition, the perception and the volition are modifications of the same mind, and their interaction takes place entirely within it. Neither, therefore, is an external factor with respect to the other, let alone with respect to the one mind in which both occur.

It is true that minds are not fully responsible, causally, for all their perceptions, in the way that they are for all their volitions. Perceptions are passive states, not actions; and though perceptions need minds to possess and sustain them as properties, they often owe their occurrence to the actions of entities outside the mind, to corporeal agents. But a perception that is caused by an external agent is an obscure perception, and at best it merely inclines the mind in which it occurs to perform a volition. If such a perception were to cause a volition in the sense of (morally) necessitating its occurrence, then Descartes might have to grant that the external cause of the perception was the cause - or at least a partial or contributing cause - of the resulting volition, owing to the transitivity of this kind of causal relation; in that case the volition would not be spontaneous. But no such perception does cause a volition in this sense. And the perceptions that do cause volitions in the sense of (morally) necessitating their occurrence - namely, the ones that are clear and distinct - are none of them caused, even partly, by any external or corporeal factor. They are the productions wholly and solely of the minds they belong to: and that is why the volitions they cause, even though necessitated, are nonetheless spontaneous, and so free.

More needs to be said about how the mind works, on the Cartesian theory, when it performs a volition because of some perception it has, whether clear or obscure. Not much of this, unfortunately, is made explicit by Descartes himself, at least not in any systematic way. But the main lines of what he would or ought to have said on this subject can be worked out from some of his scattered remarks, especially in his last major work, *Les passions de l'âme*.

It is a fundamental principle for Descartes that the human will is naturally oriented towards goodness and truth: the mind has a natural tendency to perform a positive volition when presented with an instance of goodness or truth (AT I 366; AT VII 166; AT VII 432; AT XI 464). This is part of the 'institution of nature' which Descartes appeals to on several occasions (AT VII 87; AT XI 361-2; AT XI 368-70; AT XI 399-400; AT XI 430). What I call an instance of truth is provided by any proposition which is represented to the mind: the positive volition is one to affirm or assent to the proposition in question. An instance of goodness is provided by any proposition in which an object or situation is represented as being good in some way: the positive volition is one to pursue the object or to realize the situation in question. Mental representations are just perceptions in Descartes' ontology, whether or not they take the form of propositions; and they are formed in the mind by the intellect, which is its perceptive faculty. Perceptions may be generated by corporeal objects outside the mind, including the body

with which the mind is united; or they may be produced by the mind itself acting alone, merely in consequence of an act of willing (so that we have one volition causing a perception which in turn causes another volition, even though Descartes does not permit one volition to be caused by another directly) (AT XI 344). It is another one of Descartes' fundamental principles that the will cannot act except in response to an exercise of the intellect - some perception or representation or idea - so that willing presupposes perceiving: no volition without representation (AT VII 60; AT VII 377; AT VIII B 363).

When any (propositional) perception is clear and distinct, then the institution of nature is such that the will moves immediately to affirm - that is, to judge to be true - the perception in question. We then say that the perception makes the will act (although strictly speaking, of course, it is the mind that acts). It is, however, only in conjunction with the will's (or the mind's) natural tendency to act, when presented with an instance of truth, that the perception is able to bring about the action of willing. So the institution of nature has to be recognized as a causal factor in such situations as well, a factor deriving ultimately, no doubt, from the creative or concurring action of God.

The situation is more complicated when the perception which 'incites' a volition is obscure, and here the most interesting case to consider is that in which the obscure perception is a 'passion of the soul', in Descartes' special use of that term. For these passions are powerful motivators of human actions, especially those having to do with our bodies: it is their function, Descartes says, 'to dispose the soul to will the things that nature tells us are useful, and to persist in this volition' (AT XI 372). 'Useful' here means 'useful for the purpose of preserving our bodies' (AT XI 430), usefulness in this sense being one species of goodness. And nature tells us that something is useful by representing it as good in this way, that is, by arranging for us to perceive it as good. Because this perception is obscure, the soul does not respond immediately by willing to pursue the thing perceived as good. What happens rather is that a passion is produced in the soul, the passion of desire in particular: though other passions such as love and joy and hope and courage may be aroused as well (AT XI 374-8), these are effective in moving the will only 'by means of the desire they produce' (AT XI 436). It is then this passion that causes the appropriate volition, not by necessitating its occurrence, but by disposing the soul to perform it.

Note that the institution of nature is invoked by Descartes at two points in the process just sketched. For nature first operates by causing a perception of a thing's usefulness to be produced in the soul. And it is by nature's doing again that the passion roused by this perception influences the will. Of course nature is at work also in the intervening process by which the perception gives rise to the passion, for this involves actions on the part of corporeal agents - sense organs, nerves, and brain - all of which are governed by natural laws, the laws of physics in fact. This part of the story is told by Descartes in considerable detail (AT XI 331-42 et seqq.), more detail, certainly, than he provides in the case of the parts dealing specifically with volitions.

We can now address the question of Descartes' compatibilism, the logical consistency of his position that volitions are free with each of his claims regarding their determination by causes. Since he explicitly makes each of these claims - that volitions are caused by God, by the minds in which they occur, and by clear perceptions - while remaining committed to the freedom of every volition, it *follows* that Descartes is a compatibilist with respect to each of these relationships. But his compatibilism is not merely implicit in his writings, as a logical consequence of his express statements. Descartes also explicitly says, with respect to two of the three ways in question, that there is no conflict between a volition's being free and its being caused. With respect to God, there is, for example, his statement to Elizabeth that 'the free will [or] the independence which we experience and feel in ourselves ... is not incompatible with a dependence of quite another kind, whereby all things are subject to God' (AT IV 333). With respect to clear perception, we have the testimony of the Fourth Meditation that 'neither divine grace nor natural knowledge [sc. both of which are sources of clear perception] ever diminishes freedom; on the contrary, they increase and strengthen it' (AT VII 58); and Descartes' declaration in the Sixth Replies that 'not only are we free when ignorance of what is right makes us indifferent [sc. in the Cartesian sense of the word], but we are also free - indeed at our freest - when a clear perception impels us to pursue some object' (AT VII 433). As for the remaining way in which volitions are caused, namely by depending on a mind, being so caused is not only not in conflict with, it actually constitutes the freedom of volitions, according to Descartes' equation of freedom with spontaneity: being free entails being caused in this way. In this case, therefore, that freedom is compatible with causal dependence is a consequence *a fortiori*.

Of course it is one thing for a philosopher to say that there is no incompatibility between two apparently contrary claims in his system, and quite another for his saying this to be justified, or even intelligible. Two problems remain in connection with Descartes' professions of compatibilism in the two cases just noted. How can

a volition be free if a clear perception *impels* its performance? And how can a volition be free if, as Descartes says in another letter to Elizabeth, everything that happens comes *entirely* from God, and God is not just the ‘universal cause’ but ‘the *total* cause of everything’ (AT IV 314; emphasis added)?

The first of these problems is solved if we understand clear perceptions to impel volitions only ‘morally speaking’ and not absolutely. Alternatively, we could define freedom wholly in terms of spontaneity and give up the requirement of (Jesuitical) indifference. There are difficulties consequent upon both of these alternatives: the one places Descartes’ epistemology in jeopardy, the other flies in the face of clear textual evidence. But either or both of these difficulties could, perhaps, be resolved, without doing major damage to the Cartesian system.

The second problem, however, is harder to deal with. For even if we identify freedom with spontaneity, eschewing indifference, we still have to understand how a volition which depends wholly on the mind that performs it can also come entirely from God. Earlier, we set God aside, and defined spontaneity in terms solely of created agents; but now it looks as if that stipulation was illegitimate. For it now looks as if we have two distinct conditions for the performance of any volition, each of which is sufficient as well as necessary: on the one hand that some created mind produce it, on the other that it come from God. Furthermore, it must have looked so to Descartes himself on occasion. For in the *Principles* he notes the ‘great difficulties’ we get ourselves into ‘if we attempt to reconcile ... divine preordination with the freedom of our will’, and suggests that the proper response to these difficulties is simply to give up the attempt (AT VIII A 20).

A more satisfactory response, however, would be to consider the action of God to be not sufficient for the performance of any volition, but only necessary therefor. There is some textual basis for thinking that this was in fact Descartes’ considered position. For example, in the letter to Elizabeth just cited, he immediately glosses his remarks that everything comes ‘entirely from’ God and that God is ‘the total cause of everything’ by saying, in the one case, that ‘the slightest thought could not enter into a person’s mind *without* God’s willing ... that it should so enter’; and, in the other, that ‘nothing can happen *without* His will’ (AT IV 314; emphasis added). In both instances the original remark connotes sufficiency on the part of God’s action, but the gloss implies only its necessity. On the other side, however, these are not the only passages in which Descartes uses the language of sufficiency in speaking of God’s causal relation to created things, including free human volitions (AT VII 191; AT VIII A 14; AT VIII A 20). It may be that such usages can all be dismissed as rhetorical exaggerations, which Descartes was in general not loath to indulge in. But this would have to be shown in detail before this way of solving the problem could be adopted with confidence.¹⁰

⁹ The matter is discussed by, *inter alia*, Kenny 1972, Marlin 1985, Moyal 1987, Beyssade 1988, and Petrik 1982.

¹⁰ A longer version of this section on Descartes, written by Chappell solo, was delivered at a British Society of the History of Philosophy conference held at Reading University in October 1991 and subsequently published, under the title 'Descartes's Compatibilism', in the conference proceedings, *Reason, Will, and Sensation: Studies in Descartes's Metaphysics*, edited by John Cottingham, and published in 1994 by Oxford University Press.

