

## RESEARCH

## Descartes as an Ethical Perfectionist

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My main concern in this paper is to develop and defend an account of why we ought to devote our lives to virtue—of the ground or reason for why we ought to do so—according to René Descartes. On my account, the answer is that we thereby, and indeed only thereby, do everything in our power to promote our own degree of intrinsic perfection or goodness (Descartes uses these terms interchangeably). Descartes’s moral philosophy, as I understand it, thus constitutes a form of ethical perfectionism. While I am not the first to interpret Descartes as an ethical perfectionist, there is as of yet no detailed account in the literature of what his particular form of ethical perfectionism would then entail. This is something that I hope to remedy here.

**Keywords:** Descartes; ethical perfectionism; virtue; perfectionism about value

## Introduction

In book I of Plato’s *Republic* we find Socrates telling Trasymachus, ‘the argument concerns no ordinary topic but the way we ought to live’ (352d5–6, G. M. A. Grube’s translation; see also *Gorgias* 487e7–88a2). The question of how we ought to live, often regarded as the fundamental question of ethics, is a practical one. It concerns what we ought to make of our lives: whether we ought to devote them to, say, politics, pleasure, contemplation of the basic laws of the universe,<sup>1</sup> or perhaps to one or another combination of these or other things.

René Descartes’s response to the question just above is most succinctly put forward in his letter of 20 November 1647 to Queen Christina of Sweden. After having made clear that he thinks nothing but the use that we make of our free will is up to us, and that nothing can be more important to us than to use that freedom well or correctly, Descartes writes that he does ‘not see that it is possible to dispose it 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’, he continues, ‘by itself constitutes all the virtues’ (CSMK 325/AT 5:83; see also, e.g., letter of 4 August 1645 to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, CSMK 257f./AT 4:265; letter of 18 August 1645 to Elisabeth, CSMK 262/AT 4:277; Dedicatory letter to Elisabeth in *The Principles of Philosophy*, CSM 1:191/AT 8A:2f.; *The Passions of the Soul*, art. 153, CSM 1:384/AT 11:446).<sup>2</sup> Virtue, in the sense just specified, is therefore the end that we ought to set for ourselves in everything that we do.<sup>3</sup>

There has recently been a considerable growth in interest in Descartes’s conception of virtue among scholars.<sup>4</sup> As has become clear, the conception is quite interesting in its own right, and it constitutes an important part of Descartes’s general philosophical project. I will have at least a few things to say about this conception in what follows (especially in section 2). My main concern in this paper, however, is to develop and defend an account of why we ought to devote our lives to virtue—of the *ground* or *reason* for why we ought

<sup>1</sup> The distinction between these three kinds of lives is due, of course, to Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* 1.5.

<sup>2</sup> The following abbreviations of sources will be used throughout the paper: AT: *Oeuvres de Descartes* (12 vols.), ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery, rev. edn. (Paris: VRIN/CNRS, 1964–76); CSM: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (2 vols.), trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); CSMK: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Descartes’s letter of 18 August 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 261/AT 4:275.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Alanen (2003: chap. 7), Brown (2006: chap. 8), Frierson (2002), Marshall (1998), Morgan (1994: chaps. 4 and 6), Naaman-Zauderer (2010: chap. 6, 2018), Normore (2019), Rodis-Lewis (1970), Rutherford (2014), Santilli (1992), Shapiro (2007), Svensson (2010, 2011, 2015, 2019a), Viljanen (forthcoming), Wienand (2012), Youpa (2013).

to do so—according to Descartes. On my account, the answer is that we thereby, and indeed only thereby, do everything in our power to promote our own degree of intrinsic perfection or goodness (Descartes uses these terms interchangeably). Descartes's moral philosophy, as I understand it, thus constitutes a form of ethical perfectionism. While I am not the first to interpret Descartes as an ethical perfectionist,<sup>5</sup> there is as of yet no detailed account in the literature of what his particular form of ethical perfectionism would then entail. This is something that I hope to remedy below. I will begin in section 1 by presenting a Cartesian account of value or perfection. On this account, intrinsic perfection should be understood in terms of the degree of being or reality that a thing contains in itself. For something to count as good *in relation to ourselves*,<sup>6</sup> according to Descartes, it must be such that we either have it or have the power to acquire it, and it must itself contain some degree of being or reality in virtue of which *our* intrinsic perfection then increases if we were to have it. Against this background I will then, in section 2, spell out the details of the form of ethical perfectionism that I propose we ascribe to Descartes. This will also include an explanation of why his ethical perfectionism recommends that we strive for virtue in everything that we do. Sections 3 and 4 contain critical examinations of what I take to be the two main alternative interpretations of Descartes's moral philosophy currently available in the literature. According to the first, happiness-based alternative to my ethical perfectionist interpretation, each person ought to strive for virtue, in the Cartesian picture, because they will thereby obtain happiness for themselves, which is our final end or good.<sup>7</sup> According to the second, virtue-based alternative, it is instead virtue itself, in Descartes's view, that constitutes the good for humans, and which we therefore ought to pursue for its own sake alone.<sup>8</sup> I will argue that neither of these two alternative interpretations stand up to scrutiny as well as my own preferred interpretation does. The paper ends with a short summary and a couple of questions for future research.

The Cartesian texts that I will primarily rely on below belong to the later part of Descartes's philosophical career. They include a series of letters on ethics to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, written in 1645, as well as the letter, quoted above, of 20 November 1647 to Queen Christina of Sweden.<sup>9</sup> The texts furthermore include parts of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (published in 1641, and then in an extended version in 1642), *The Principles of Philosophy* (published in Latin in 1644, and in French in 1647), and of his final work, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). There are admittedly a few passages in Descartes's earlier works as well where he touches on ethical issues,<sup>10</sup> but they will not be relevant in the present paper.

## 1. Value

According to the interpretation of Descartes that I wish to develop here, the ground or reason for why we ought to live the life of virtue is that we thereby promote our own degree of intrinsic perfection as far as we can. How, then, should we understand the notion of intrinsic perfection within the Cartesian framework? Notice that without an answer to this question, Descartes's ethical perfectionism (assuming that that is his position) would be seriously incomplete. It would fail to specify how we are to understand that which we are fundamentally directed to promote in ourselves, and it would thereby also fail to provide a clear ground for any more concrete guidelines regarding how our lives should be lived.

Now, some interpreters, even some who conceive of Descartes's ethics as constituting a form of ethical perfectionism, hold that we actually cannot find much of an account of perfection or value in Descartes's

<sup>5</sup> See in particular Schneewind (1998: 184–93), to which I will return in section 1 below. Cf. also, e.g., Brassfield (2012: 461), and Faye (2016).

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes Descartes talks about what is fitting or agreeable to human nature instead of what is good in relation to ourselves.

<sup>7</sup> See in particular Gueroult (1985: chap. 19) for such an interpretation of Descartes.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Naaman-Zauderer (2010: chap. 6, 2018), and Shapiro (2007), defend an interpretation of this kind.

<sup>9</sup> The correspondence on ethics between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth resulted from an attempt on Descartes's part to divert Elisabeth's attention away from the depressive thoughts that she was suffering from at the time. Descartes suggested that they together should read and discuss Seneca's *De vita beata* (On the happy life), but he soon grew tired of Seneca's text and instead began to present on his own ideas about virtue and the happy life. The letter to Queen Christina was written in response to a request from the Queen (mediated by the French ambassador in Stockholm, Pierre Chanut) to learn about his views about the highest good. Besides the letter, Descartes also enclosed copies of his letters on ethics to Princess Elisabeth, as well as an early draft of *The Passions of the Soul*, for the Queen to read.

<sup>10</sup> The most famous example of this is presumably Descartes's account in the *Discourse on the Method* of the *morale par provision*, 'consisting of just three or four maxims', which he had decided to follow 'in order to live as happily as [he] could' during the time of his radical doubt (CSM 1:122/AT 6:22). Descartes later referred to the rules of the *morale* also in one of the letters on ethics to Elisabeth (letter of 4 August 1645); see CSMK 257f./AT 4:265f. For further discussion of the *morale par provision*, see, e.g., Cimakasky and Polansky (2012), Marshall (1998: pt. 1), Morgan (1994: chap. 2), and Rodis-Lewis (1970: chap. 1).

writings. J. B. Schneewind, for example, while concluding that 'self-perfection', in Descartes's view, 'is the key to all of morality' (1998: 193), writes that Descartes 'nowhere gives a clear account of what makes something good, nor does he explain the term "perfection", which he treats as its equivalent' (1998: 191). At most Descartes 'says that we call something good or ill if we think it agreeable or contrary to our nature; but it is not clear that he is endorsing what we commonly say' (Schneewind 1998: 191fn36). In a similar vein, Ferdinand Alquié suggests that Descartes oscillates between two different views about perfection or value.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand the view hinted at in the quotation from Schneewind just above, that is, that it should be understood in terms of what is appropriate or agreeable to our nature (*ce qui nous convient en propre*); and on the other hand the view that it should be understood in terms of degree of being or reality (*degré d'être*). In contrast to Schneewind and Alquié, however, I believe we can actually extract a coherent account of perfection or value from Descartes's writings. In that account, both of the views referred to by Alquié in fact fit consistently, and the account provides a clear ground for why the life of virtue, as Descartes conceives of it, is both necessary and sufficient for promoting one's own degree of intrinsic perfection as far as one can.

### 1.1. The great chain of being

In his letter to Queen Christina, Descartes distinguishes between two different ways in which 'the goodness of each thing can be considered':

- (a) 'in itself without reference to anything else';
- and
- (b) 'in relation to ourselves' (CSMK 324/AT 5:82).

We shall start here with (a), and then return to (b) in subsection 1.2.

In Descartes's view, the goodness of a thing 'in itself without reference to anything else'—the thing's intrinsic goodness, as it were, or, equivalently in the Cartesian picture, its intrinsic perfection—corresponds to, and, I take it, is determined by, the degree of being or reality that the thing contains in itself.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the higher the degree of being or reality that a thing has in itself, the better or more perfect it is intrinsically.<sup>13</sup> Now, if we consider 'the goodness of each thing' in this way, then 'it is evident', Descartes writes to Christina, that God must be the highest or 'supreme good, since He is incomparably more perfect than any being' (CSMK 324/AT 5:82). God contains in Himself complete being or reality, and consequently the highest possible degree of intrinsic perfection.<sup>14</sup>

For a statement of the attributes in virtue of which God, in Descartes's view, is such 'that nothing can be added to His perfection' (CSM 2:32/AT 7:47), we must turn to the Third Meditation. 'By the word "God"', Descartes writes there, 'I understand a substance that is infinite, <eternal, immutable,> independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else ... that exists' (CSM 2:31/AT 7:45). Because of these attributes, God is thus at the top in the great chain of being. At the furthest remove from God in the hierarchy, is located the world of purely physical or material objects, which are finite and mutable, as well as without any intelligence or power of their own (they are subject to changes determined entirely by general laws of nature that are, in turn, created and upheld ultimately by God). Specifically *human* being is located in between these two extremes.<sup>15</sup> As mind-body unions, humans partake, as it were, both in the world of finite and mutable physical objects, and in the world of eternal and immutable immaterial things such as knowledge and power. And while the former, physical side of human

<sup>11</sup> Alquié (1989: 601fn2). I should say that Alquié, as far as I can tell, does not take a stand on whether Descartes's ethics constitutes a form of perfectionism or not.

<sup>12</sup> This kind of metaphysical theory of value can arguably be traced back, via, e.g., Augustine and Plotinus, all the way to Plato. I will not pursue the historical origins any further in this paper, however; nor will I pause to consider in what respects Descartes's version of it differ from the versions held by his predecessors. For a masterful treatment of the similarities and differences between the philosophies of Descartes and Augustine, see Menn (1998).

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., the Third Meditation: 'what is more perfect ... contains in itself more reality' (CSM 2:28/AT 7:40).

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., article 23 of Part I in *The Principles of Philosophy*: 'There are many things such, although we recognize some perfection in them, we also find in them some imperfection or limitation, and these therefore cannot belong to God' (CSM 1:200f./AT 8A:13).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., the Fourth Meditation: 'I find that I possess not only a real and positive idea of God, or a being who is supremely perfect, but also what may be described as a negative idea of nothingness, or of that which is farthest removed from all perfection. I realize that I am, as it were, something intermediate between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being' (CSM 2:38/AT 7:54).

being places important limits on the degree of intrinsic perfection that humans can ever obtain (we can never come anywhere near God's degree of intrinsic perfection!), the latter, immaterial side nevertheless entails that human being is far superior to that of merely physical objects.<sup>16</sup>

Humans are not all located at the exact same place in the hierarchy of being or intrinsic perfection, however. Descartes clearly thinks that some people are higher up in the hierarchy than others are.<sup>17</sup> In the light of this, we may then ask which things that determine our different degrees of intrinsic perfection, in the Cartesian picture, as well as to what extent, if any, our possession of the relevant things are up to us or in our power. These questions take us to the second part of Descartes's distinction earlier, that is, to 'The goodness of each thing ... considered in relation to ourselves'.

### 1.2. Descartes on goodness in relation to ourselves

As I read Descartes, considering the goodness or value of a thing in relation to ourselves is more specifically a matter of considering the contribution that our possession of the thing would make to our degree of intrinsic perfection. In order for a thing to be good in relation to ourselves—or, equivalently, in order for a thing to be agreeable or fitting in relation to human nature—it must meet two conditions, according to Descartes. Firstly, it must be such that 'we either possess it or have the power to acquire it' (letter to Queen Christina, CSMK 324/AT 5:82). Secondly, the thing must itself be intrinsically good; it must contain in itself some degree of being or reality that we then can come to have or partake in through possessing it.<sup>18</sup> And the higher the degree of intrinsic goodness or perfection that the thing has, the greater its contribution to our degree of intrinsic goodness or perfection if we were to have it.

Among the things that Descartes suggests are good in relation to ourselves are bodily goods such as physical health and beauty; external goods such as material wealth and friends; and intellectual goods such as knowledge, free will, and virtue. We must notice, however, that our possession of these things, and consequently our individual degrees of intrinsic perfection, is with but one exception 'determined from all eternity' by Providence (*The Passions of the Soul*, art. 145, CSM 1:380/AT 11:438).<sup>19</sup> Our possession of these things thus cannot be any different from what it actually is. The exception to this, according to Descartes, is virtue. Virtue depends only on our free will, 'which is absolutely in our disposal' (letter to Queen Christina, CSMK 325/AT 5:83; cf. *The Passions of the Soul*, art. 144, CSM 1:379/AT 11:436f.).<sup>20</sup> Virtue is therefore the one respect in which our degree of being or intrinsic perfection is really in our own power to determine.

As we saw earlier, 'it is evident', according to Descartes, that God is the highest or supreme good 'considered in itself without reference to anything else'. With respect to what is good in relation to ourselves, however, Descartes distinguishes between many different highest goods. For the purposes of this paper, we need to mention only two of these.<sup>21</sup> To begin with, Descartes suggests that the highest good in relation to ourselves may refer to the sum of all the things that are such that we either have them or can acquire them, and whose possession would increase our degree of intrinsic perfection.<sup>22</sup> This is, Descartes suggests, the highest good 'which can belong to any human being' (letter to Queen Christina, CSMK 324/AT 5:82; cf. letter of 18 August 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 261/AT 4:276). It needs to be distinguished, however, from 'the supreme good of each individual' (same letter, CSMK 324/AT 5:82), which consists instead in virtue. As we have seen, virtue is the only good that is up to us (assuming, at least, that we have access to free will, which is *not* up to ourselves). For each person, in the Cartesian picture, it therefore holds that insofar as one

<sup>16</sup> It should perhaps be noticed here that humans are certainly limited creatures, according to Descartes, also with respect to, e.g., knowledge and power. Human wisdom is quite a different thing than the supreme intelligence and knowledge that God has, and our power is (as I will return to in the main text) limited to the use that we make of our free will.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., letter of 4 August 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 257/AT 4:264f.; letter of 18 August 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 261/AT 4:276; the letter to Queen Christina, CSMK 324/AT 5:82.

<sup>18</sup> This is what I think Descartes must have in mind when he (a bit cryptically) writes to Queen Christina that the thing must be such that 'our having it is a perfection' (CSMK 324/AT 5:82).

<sup>19</sup> 'Providence', Descartes continues, 'is, so to speak, a fate or immutable necessity, which we must set against Fortune in order to expose the latter as a chimera which arises solely from an error of our intellect', namely the error of 'not knowing all the causes which contribute to each effect' (CSM 1:389/AT 11:380).

<sup>20</sup> This is in fact a bit too strong. When pressed on the issue by Princess Elisabeth, Descartes acknowledges that people do not always have access to free will: sometimes 'a bodily indisposition prevents their will from being free' (letter of 1 September 1645, CSMK 282/AT 4:282).

<sup>21</sup> We will have reason to come back to these also in section 4. For further discussion, both of the two highest goods mentioned here in the main text and of the many other highest goods distinguished by Descartes, see my (2019b).

<sup>22</sup> See letter of 18 August 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 261/AT 4:276; and the letter to Queen Christina, CSMK 324/AT 5:82.

has virtue, one will indeed exhibit the highest degree of intrinsic perfection that is possible in one's own particular case. One will then have whatever goods or perfection (whether they be many or few) that one is forever determined to have by Providence, as well as the one and only good that is in one's own power.

## 2. Ethics

Descartes insists repeatedly that each human being ought to live the life of virtue—that is, a life where they show 'a firm and constant resolution' to first form the best judgment that they are themselves capable of about what to do in a particular situation, and then choose to comply with that judgment in their conduct.<sup>23</sup> But why is that the way that we ought to live, according to Descartes? The answer that I want to propose is that we thereby—and only thereby—do everything in our power to promote our own degree of intrinsic perfection. What I want to propose is thus a reading of Descartes according to which his ethics constitutes a form of ethical perfectionism, that is, a form of ethical theory that fundamentally directs us to promote and/or protect human perfection.<sup>24</sup> In the previous section, I presented a Cartesian, perfectionist account of value. In the present section, my concern will be to show how that account of value informs Descartes's view of how we ought to live.

### 2.1. Descartes's ethical perfectionism: consequentialist and egoistic

As I understand it, Descartes's particular form of ethical perfectionism is both consequentialist and egoistic. It is consequentialist in the sense that it fundamentally directs each human being to *promote* their own intrinsic perfection or goodness. It is egoistic in the sense that it is *one's own* intrinsic perfection or goodness that each person is fundamentally directed to promote.

Now, some readers of Descartes may immediately want to protest the suggestion that there is an important consequentialist element present in his ethics. Such critics may want to point out that Descartes after all insists that we devote ourselves to virtue, that is, to using our free will well or correctly, and in the letter to Queen Christina, he writes that

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 325/AT 5:83f., emphasis added; see also Descartes's letter of 6 October 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 269/AT 4:307; The Fourth Meditation, CSM 2:106/AT 7:149; and *The Principles of Philosophy*, Part 1, art. 3, CSM 1, 193/AT 8A:5)<sup>25</sup>

This is in fact quite compatible, however, with Descartes's ethics being consequentialist in the sense suggested above. Cartesian virtue constitutes what we, following John Marshall, may call a *second-order* good.<sup>26</sup> It is a good that consists in responding in a certain way to other, *first-order* goods such as knowledge, health, and friendship. The response in question is then a matter of first forming, and then choosing to act in accordance with, the best judgments that we are capable of about how to promote the presence of first-order goods in our lives as far as possible. Now, one consequence of responding in the relevant way—of using our free will well or correctly, as it were—is that our lives will exhibit virtue, something which, as we saw in section 1, in Descartes's view entails that our lives will be as intrinsically good or perfect as it is in our power to make them. The results of using our free will well or correctly are in all other respects forever determined by Providence and therefore beyond our power to control. Thus, even if what we do through the virtuous use of our free will would turn out to be bad, in the sense that we either lose or fail to obtain something that is good in relation to ourselves (besides virtue, which, again, is in our own power), we can still rest assured that

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., the letter to Queen Christina, CSMK 325/AT 5:83; letter of 18 August 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 262f./AT 4:275ff.; letter of 6 October 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 268/AT 4:305.

<sup>24</sup> There are arguably many examples of perfectionist thinkers in the history of moral philosophy, including many ancient and medieval philosophers, as well as, e.g., F. H. Bradley (1927), T. H. Green (1907), Karl Marx (1977: e.g., chaps. 8 and 14), and, in our own day, Thomas Hurka (1993).

<sup>25</sup> For an excellent discussion of how the limits of our intellectual powers matter in Descartes's ethics, see Shapiro (1999: 263–69). Cf. also, e.g., Morgan (1994: e.g., 204–11), and Rutherford (2004).

<sup>26</sup> See Marshall (1998: 117). For two interesting (and closely related) contemporary accounts of virtue as a second-order good, see Hurka (2001) and Adams (2006).



we have done everything that is *up to us* to promote our own intrinsic perfection.<sup>27</sup> And *that*, I take it, is our fundamental duty, according to Descartes.

One question that perhaps will be raised in relation to this picture, however, is why, then, the good or correct use of free will would be a matter of responding to first-order goods in the way suggested just above. Why would 'a firm and constant resolution' to first form, and then choose to act in accordance with, our best judgments about how to promote the presence of such goods in our lives, be the good or correct way of using free will, if it is anyway settled for all eternity by Providence which first-order goods that our lives will contain? In response to this question, we should notice, first of all, that our free will, according to Descartes, is an incredible power: it is, he writes, 'itself the noblest thing we can have, since it makes us in a sense equal to God and seems to exempt us from being His subjects' (letter to Queen Christina, CSMK 326/AT 5:85; see also, e.g., *Olympian Matters*, CSM 1:5/AT 10:218; *Principles of Philosophy*, Part One, art. 37, CSM 1:205/AT 8A:18f.; the Fourth Meditation, CSM 2:39f./AT 7:56ff.; and *The Passions of the Soul*, art. 152, CSM 1:384/AT 11:445). Our freedom of the will is unlimited in its scope, and as I read Descartes, we can thus choose to embrace or reject any objects, whether they be good or bad, true or false.<sup>28</sup> However, since such things as knowledge, health, and loving relationships, are indeed good in relation to ourselves—that is, are things such that we either have them or have the power to acquire them, and whose possession would increase the degree of intrinsic perfection of any human being—they constitute the most fitting or appropriate objects for practical deliberation and decision-making with respect to ourselves. Even if we are not ultimately in control of which first-order goods our lives will contain, being concerned with them in the way suggested above is still an expression of getting on well as a human being.<sup>29</sup>

Regarding the second important feature of Descartes's ethical perfectionism—that it is egoistic—it should be noticed that that does not entail that Descartes's ethics directs us to be concerned only with our own narrow self-interest, as it were, in our thoughts, feelings, and decisions about how to act. Descartes is on the contrary quite clear that being concerned with other beings—and not just with other people, but also, and perhaps especially, with God—for their own sake, is part of perfecting ourselves intrinsically.<sup>30</sup> Among 'the truths most useful to us' with respect to the practice of virtue, Descartes thus includes, for example,

<sup>27</sup> This is thus quite different from, e.g., Noa Naaman-Zauderer's suggestion that 'Descartes speaks of one single virtue, which he identifies with the good use of free will, *from which all other perfections proceed*' (2010: 180, emphasis added). I do not think that any particular first-order goods or perfections *proceed* from virtue, in Descartes's view. In the case of free will, e.g., it seems even impossible: virtue presupposes free will (it consists in the good or correct use of free will), and so free will cannot proceed from virtue. Furthermore, since virtue, in the Cartesian picture, does not require success, but only doing one's best with respect to promoting such goods as health, knowledge, friendships, etc., in one's life, it seems Descartes cannot reasonably think that such goods would proceed from virtue. Nevertheless, by devoting ourselves to virtue, we promote our intrinsic perfections *as far as we can*. We thereby secure for ourselves the one good or perfection that is in our power, in addition to the goods or perfections that we are determined to have by Providence. (In relation to what I have just said here, one anonymous referee stressed that in the letter to Queen Christina, Descartes writes that, with the exception of virtue, 'All other goods deserve ... to be honoured or praised [only] in so far as they are supposed to have been acquired or obtained from God by the good use of free will [i.e., by virtue]' (CSMK 325/AT 5:84). According to the referee, what Descartes says here suggests that the value of first-order goods in relation to ourselves depends on the manner by which they are acquired by us. I disagree with the referee on this. As far as I can tell, the question of the extent to which we are praiseworthy for having the first-order goods or perfections that we do have is, in Descartes's view, separate from the question of the value of first-order goods or perfections in relation to ourselves. I do not see any ground for thinking that Descartes would say that the value in relation to oneself of possessing, say, knowledge of geometry, would be different depending on whether one had come to possess that knowledge after having virtuously decided to pursue it, or if one had rather come to possess that knowledge anyway. All he says in the passage from the letter to Queen Christina is that one would be praiseworthy in the former case, but not in the latter. And if one is praiseworthy, then that entails that one also has another good or perfection, namely virtue.)

<sup>28</sup> I thus read Descartes as endorsing the view that our freedom of will (or freedom of choice, as he also calls it) is *absolute*—that we indeed have the power to reject what the intellect presents to us as good (and embrace what it presents as bad), as well as 'not to embrace the truth even when perceiving it clearly and distinctly' (Alanen 2003: 242). The most important source of support for such a reading is presumably Descartes's letter of 9 February 1645 to Mesland, CSMK 244ff./AT 4:173ff. However, this is a contentious reading, to say the least, which I cannot unfortunately pursue further here. For excellent discussions, which take up the textual evidence both for and against, but in the end point in the direction of the position that I am inclined to accept, see, e.g., Alanen (2003: chap. 7), Ragland (2005), and Shapiro (2008).

<sup>29</sup> This account, it may be noticed, also fits quite well with Descartes's conception of the vice that he calls *lâcheté*, which is manifested by people who are not concerned with first-order goods enough to first form the best judgments that they are capable of about these things, and then choose to act accordingly. See *The Passions of the Soul*, art. 152, CSM 1:384/AT 11:445, and arts. 174–75, CSM 1:392/AT 11:462f. (It is quite difficult to find apt English translation of *lâcheté*. E.g., *timidity* and *laziness* have been used in translations of *The Passions of the Soul*, but neither seems quite accurate.)

<sup>30</sup> Parvizian (unpublished manuscript, 2019), e.g., highlights this aspect of Descartes's ethical thinking in an interesting way. For an excellent discussion of egoism in *The Passions of the Soul*, see Frierson (2002).

that there is a God on whom all beings depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immense, and whose decrees are infallible. This teaches us to accept calmly all the things which happen to us as expressly sent by God. Moreover, since the true object of love is perfection, when we lift up our minds to consider Him as He is, we find ourselves naturally so inclined to love Him that we even rejoice in our afflictions at the thought that they are an expression of His will. (Letter of 15 September 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 265/AT 4:291f.; see also letter of 1 February to Pierre Chanut, CSMK 311/AT 4:612f.)

And

that though each of us is a person distinct from others, whose interests are accordingly in some way different from those of the rest of the world, we ought still to think that none of us could subsist alone and that each one of us is really one of the many parts of the universe, and particularly a part of the earth, the state, the society and family to which we belong by our domicile, our oath of allegiance and our birth. And the interests of the whole, of which each of us is a part, must always be preferred to those of our own particular person—with measure, of course, and discretion, because it would be wrong to expose ourselves to a great evil in order to procure only a slight benefit to our kinsfolk or our country. (Same letter, CSMK 266/AT 4:293).<sup>31</sup>

The life of virtue is thus not at all wholly self-centered in its concerns, according to Descartes. However, to what extent our concern for others will actually be successful—whether it will have good results or outcomes, besides the virtue that we ourselves exhibit—is not up to us or in our power. As before, what matters ethically is that we continuously use our free will to first form, and then choose to comply with, the best judgments about what to do that we are capable of.

## **2.2. Why we ought to live the life of virtue**

We should now be able to see clearly why Descartes, in view of the form of ethical perfectionism that I have been ascribing to him, would insist that we devote ourselves to the life of virtue. To fulfill our fundamental ethical duty, that is, to do everything in our power to promote our intrinsic perfection, it is necessary that we devote ourselves to virtue. If we do not, there will be something left for us to do—something that is up to us—to increase our degree of intrinsic perfection. It is furthermore sufficient that we devote ourselves to virtue, since by doing so we ensure that we promote our degree of intrinsic perfection as far as we possibly can. To devote ourselves to anything other than virtue, no matter how much it would increase our degree of intrinsic perfection if we were to keep or acquire it, ‘would be a waste of time’ (letter of 4 August 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 257/AT 4:265), as Descartes puts it, since whether we will have it or not is not in our own control but instead determined for all time by Providence. According to Descartes’s ethical perfectionism, the life of virtue is therefore indeed the life we ought to live.

## **3. Critique of Alternative Interpretations I: Happiness as the Ground**

In the previous two sections, I have presented an interpretation of Descartes as an ethical perfectionist with respect to why each human being ought to live a virtuous life. In the present section and in the next, I will instead offer a critique of two alternative interpretations regarding why we ought to live the life of virtue, according to Descartes, that have been proposed in the literature.

### **3.1. Gueroult’s interpretation**

In the second volume of his classic study, *Descartes’ Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons* (1985) Martial Gueroult argues that the ground or reason for why one ought to live the life of virtue, in Descartes’s view, is that a virtuous life is the means to obtain happiness for oneself.<sup>32</sup> By ‘happiness’,

<sup>31</sup> See also, e.g., Descartes’s letter on love to Pierre Chanut (letter of 1 February 1647): ‘when two human beings love each other, charity requires that each of the two should value his friend above himself; and so their friendship is not perfect unless each is ready to say in favour of the other: “It is I who did the deed, I am here, turn your sword against me.” Similarly, when an individual is joined willingly to his prince or his country, if his love is perfect he should regard himself as only a tiny part of the whole which he and they constitute. He should be no more afraid to go to certain death for their service than one is afraid to draw a little blood from one’s arm to improve the health of the rest of the body. Every day we see examples of this love, even in persons of low condition, who give their lives cheerfully for the good of their country or for the defence of some great person they are fond of’ (CSMK 311/AT 4:612).

<sup>32</sup> See Gueroult (1985: esp. chap. 19). Gueroult (1985: 178f.) argues that virtue (or *morality*, as he often calls it), according to Descartes,

Descartes intends ‘that supreme felicity’, which consists in a state of complete contentment and satisfaction with what one has and what one does (letter of 21 July 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 256/AT 4:252; see also, e.g., his subsequent letter to Elisabeth, of 4 August, CSMK 257/AT 4:264). In Gueroult’s account, Descartes follows Epicurus both in understanding happiness as constituted by a kind of contentment or satisfaction, and in subscribing to the view that happiness is the only thing that is good or valuable for its own sake, whereas all other things—including virtue—matter to us only insofar as they contribute to our happiness.<sup>33</sup> According to Gueroult’s reading of Descartes, virtue is both necessary and sufficient for obtaining happiness for ourselves. It is necessary because aiming for other things in our conduct—things that are, in contrast to virtue, beyond our own power to control—will inevitably lead to negative feelings or emotions such as frustration, regret, and sadness, when we fail to keep or acquire the things we aim for. Such feelings or emotions upset our contentment and therefore destroy our happiness. Virtue is sufficient for happiness, because by restricting our aims to virtue, which is up to us or in our power, we will never suffer from any frustration, regret or sadness, but instead remain entirely content with what we have and what we do.

### 3.2. Critical discussion

The main problem with Gueroult’s interpretation is that happiness, in Descartes’s view, quite clearly is *not* the only thing that is good or valuable for its own sake, neither when ‘considered in relation to ourselves’ nor when ‘considered in itself without reference to anything else’.<sup>34</sup> As we saw in section 1, there are, in Descartes’s picture, many different things that are good—that contain in themselves some degree of being or reality—and insofar as these things also are such that we either have them or have the power to acquire them, they constitute goods in relation to ourselves. Things that are good in relation to ourselves, in the relevant sense, include, for example, health, loving relationships, knowledge, free will, and virtue. Now, insofar as one has such things, and one in addition grasps their correct value, then they do indeed give rise to contentment or satisfaction in us, according to Descartes.<sup>35</sup> Notice, though, that part of the Cartesian explanation for why this is so, is precisely that the relevant things are good in themselves. Hedonism about value (that is, the view that happiness is the only thing that is good or valuable for its own sake) is thus inconsistent with Descartes’s own view of how contentment or satisfaction comes about in us.<sup>36</sup>

In my view, Gueroult is furthermore mistaken regarding the relation between virtue and happiness within the Cartesian framework. To begin with, if we take seriously, as indeed we should, Descartes’s characterization of virtue in the letter to Queen Christina, according to which virtue is constituted ‘by a firm and constant resolution [in the will] 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’, then virtue is not plausibly sufficient for happiness, in Descartes’s view.<sup>37</sup> Even though it may be very unlikely to happen, it certainly seems perfectly conceivable that a person could show ‘a firm and constant resolution’ to use her free will in the relevant way, while at the same time (mistakenly, in Descartes’s view) believe that she, through her own efforts, could have been in possession of more goods or perfections than she currently is, and as a consequence suffer from feelings of frustration, sadness, etc., that prevent her from being happy in Descartes’s rather demanding

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is analogous to medicine in the respect that they both constitute techniques: in the one case for obtaining happiness, and in the other for obtaining health.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Gueroult (1985: 184f.).

<sup>34</sup> Descartes in fact never quite says that happiness is a good at all. He does think, though, that happiness is something each human being desires or wants to obtain. I shall return to this in the main text below.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., letter of 1 September to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 263/AT 4:283f.; and the letter to Queen Christina, CSMK 325f./AT 5:84f. Descartes even suggests that the degree of contentment—or pleasure, as he sometimes calls it—should correspond or be proportional to the value of the things giving rise to it. Here he presumably has in mind contentment in the sense of a certain *positive feeling*, which can be felt more or less intensely. Happiness, as Descartes conceives it, does not require that we experience such feelings as often or as intensely as possible. In Descartes’s conception, as we saw earlier, happiness is rather a state of complete contentment with what one has and what one does (‘it is not always the most cheerful who has the most satisfied mind’, as he writes to Princess Elisabeth; letter of 6 October 1645, CSMK 268/AT 4:305).

<sup>36</sup> John Marshall brings this point home quite effectively; see Marshall (1998: chap. 6).

<sup>37</sup> There has been some debate in the literature about whether virtue, in Descartes’s view, is sufficient for happiness. Among those who have argued that it is, are, e.g., Brown (2006), Rutherford (2004, 2014), Youpa (2013), and, I must admit, earlier versions of myself (see my 2011 and 2015). Those who reject such an interpretation include Alanen (2009), Viljanen (forthcoming), and Svensson (2019a). (In that last paper, I argue that we should in fact acknowledge a distinction in virtue in Descartes’s ethical thinking. On the one hand, there is what I there call *moral* virtue, which consists simply in the firm and constant resolution in the will judge and act as best one can. On the other hand, there is what I call *perfect* virtue, which consists in moral virtue *plus* the knowledge that everything but the use that we make of our free will is forever determined by Divine Providence. While moral virtue is not sufficient for happiness, according to Descartes, perfect virtue is indeed so. Since it is the former sense that most scholars seem to have in mind when discussing Cartesian virtue, this is the sense that I am restricting myself to throughout the present paper.)



sense. Secondly, in his letter of 6 October 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, Descartes acknowledges the at least theoretical possibility of a person who does not use his will virtuously, but who nevertheless has his every desire fulfilled while remaining 'so continually diverted' (CSMK 268/AT 4:306) in his mind that he never quite realizes that he is not himself in control of this.<sup>38</sup> In the light of this, virtue is not, strictly speaking, necessary for happiness either, in the Cartesian picture.<sup>39</sup>

One thing that at first may seem to provide at least some support for Gueroult's interpretation, however, is that Descartes, especially in his letters on ethics to Princess Elisabeth, on some occasions suggests that the prospect of happiness plays an important role for motivating people to pursue virtue. Consider, for example, the following, often cited passage:

Suppose there is a prize for hitting 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. (Letter to Princess Elisabeth of 1 September 1645, CSMK 262/AT 4:277)

In the light of what Descartes says here, someone could perhaps be inclined to think that virtue, in Descartes's view, is really just the means to obtaining happiness, which is the end or prize. That would be much too quick, however. Descartes's claim in the quotation concerns motivation, not value or ethics. What the passage suggests is at most that in order to turn people towards the life of virtue—to the life that they ought to live, in Descartes's view—it is helpful to make them see how such a life may help to obtain happiness. This is perfectly compatible with it being the case that the ground for why they ought to live virtuously is that they will thereby do everything in their power to promote their intrinsic perfection. It should furthermore be noticed that Descartes is not at all consistent in his view of the role of happiness in human motivation. In particular, it seems clear that he does not think of a virtuous person as someone who is motivated by happiness in her conduct. Her aim is rather to show or express virtue in everything that she does, that is, to show 'a firm and constant resolution' to first form, and then choose to act in accordance with, her best judgments about what should be done in the circumstances.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Critique of Alternative Interpretations II: Virtue as the Ground

Noa Naaman-Zauderer and Lisa Shapiro have suggested another interpretation of why we ought to live the life of virtue, according to Descartes.<sup>41</sup> In their reading of Descartes, virtue is itself the good for humans. Virtue is 'not merely the means to happiness', as Naaman-Zauderer puts it, 'but our supreme good (*summum bonum*)', and as such virtue 'ought to be the ultimate end for which we should strive in all our actions' (Naaman-Zauderer 2010: 179, emphasis in original). The reason why we ought to devote ourselves to virtue is thus that virtue is our highest or supreme good.<sup>42</sup>

##### 4.1. Critical discussion

Now, it is not quite correct that virtue, in Descartes's view, is our supreme good. As we saw in section 1, virtue is *a* supreme good in relation to ourselves, according to Descartes, but it is not the only one. Descartes refers to virtue as 'the supreme good of each individual', which he contrasts with 'the supreme good of all men together', something that is constituted by 'the total or aggregate of all the goods—those of the soul as well as those of the body and of fortune—which can belong to any human being' (letter to Queen Christina,

<sup>38</sup> It is perhaps worth noticing that even though Descartes writes that 'that would not amount to the enjoyment of happiness that we [i.e., he and Elisabeth] are discussing' (CSMK 268/AT 4:306), this does not plausibly mean that such a person would not enjoy genuine happiness at all. What it means is rather, as Descartes goes on to say, that what he and Elisabeth are discussing is the enjoyment of happiness that depends 'on our conduct' (CSMK 268/AT 4:306).

<sup>39</sup> I have made this point also in my (2015, 2019a).

<sup>40</sup> Similarly in, e.g., the Fourth Meditation, it seems clear that Descartes thinks we can be motivated to do things (or form desires for things) because of their being (or presenting themselves to us as) good.

<sup>41</sup> See Naaman-Zauderer (2010: chap. 6, 2018), and Shapiro (2007). Even though I will criticize their interpretation of Descartes regarding the ground for why we ought to live the life of virtue, I should say that they, in my view, have contributed some of the most interesting work on Descartes's ethics to date.

<sup>42</sup> It may be noted that Naaman-Zauderer also writes that by developing and practicing virtue, 'we situate ourselves', in Descartes's view, 'at the highest level in the hierarchy of perfections' (2010: 201). On my preferred interpretation of Descartes, this is indeed the reason or ground for why we ought to pursue virtue, whereas Naaman-Zauderer (if I understand her correctly) rather takes the reason or ground to be that virtue is our supreme good.

CSMK 324/AT 5:82f.); and on another occasion as ‘the supreme good which each person in particular can possess’, which is contrasted with ‘the supreme good of the whole of human nature in general—that is to say, the good which may be possessed by the most accomplished of all men’ (letter of 18 August 1645 to Princess Elisabeth, CSMK 261/AT 4:276; in this letter, Descartes suggests that the latter is what, e.g., Aristotle is primarily concerned with in his ethics).<sup>43</sup> In the light of this, it seems clear that the ground for why we ought to pursue virtue cannot simply be that virtue is our highest or supreme good. There is at least one more supreme good in relation to ourselves, in Descartes’s view, so why ought we to devote ourselves to virtue rather than to that other supreme good? At first glance, one may indeed wonder why it is not the second, more inclusive good that we ought to strive for in our conduct, according to Descartes. A life containing that good would be the intrinsically best or most perfect life for a being with specifically human nature. And most people do really want to obtain as many goods or perfections as possible (and thus achieve the highest degree of intrinsic perfection conceivable). In his letter of 25 December 1639 to Marin Mersenne, Descartes refers to ‘The desire that everyone has to possess every perfection he can conceive of, and consequently all the perfections we believe to be in God’ (CSMK 141/AT 2:628).<sup>44</sup> However, the mistake that these people make, in Descartes’s view, is that they fail to distinguish between the highest degree of intrinsic perfection that is possible for any being with specifically human nature, and the highest degree of intrinsic perfection that it is possible for each individual to secure for herself through her own efforts.<sup>45</sup> In Descartes’s picture, it holds for each person that she cannot herself affect her degree of intrinsic perfection in any respect other than virtue. In order to make sure that she does everything in her power to promote her intrinsic perfection, she must therefore devote herself to virtue. To aim for anything else would really just be ‘a waste of time’.

## 5. Summary

I began this paper by showing that Descartes’s response to the question, “How ought we to live?”, is: virtuously. I then spent two sections developing an interpretation according to which Descartes’s answer to the further question of *why* we ought to devote ourselves to the life of virtue is that we will thereby do everything in our power to promote our intrinsic perfection. I then considered two alternative interpretations of why one ought to live virtuously, according to Descartes. On the first, the answer was that one thereby secures happiness for oneself. On the second, the answer was that one ought to pursue virtue for virtue’s own sake. I argued that neither of these alternative interpretations was as attractive as my own ethical perfectionist interpretation.

Now, scholarship on Descartes’s ethics is arguably still in its early stages. There are several questions that still call for further investigation, including, for example, Descartes’s view of moral motivation, the details of his metaphysical perfectionism about value, and his conception of the relation between virtue and happiness. Future investigations into these (and other) aspects of Descartes philosophy may reveal new perspectives on the Cartesian answer to the question of why we ought to pursue the life of virtue. As things currently stand, however, the interpretation of Descartes’s view on this matter that I have presented in this paper is, I submit, the most attractive one.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Two things may be worth noticing here. Firstly, the passages quoted in the text from the letters to Queen Christina and Princess Elisabeth respectively, are in fact even closer than the CSMK translation suggests. To the Queen Christina, Descartes refers to all the goods or perfections ‘qui peuvent être en quelques hommes’, i.e., to all the goods or perfections that can belong to *some* or *a few* men (rather than to ‘any human being’)—to ‘the most accomplished of all men’, perhaps, as the letter to Princess Elisabeth has it. (I am grateful to an anonymous referee for alerting me to this point.) Secondly, as I hinted at in section 1, Descartes in fact distinguishes between even further highest goods in relation to ourselves. For my purposes here, however, it should be enough to distinguish between the highest good of each individual, and the highest good that can be possessed by ‘the most accomplished of all men’. Of the highest available in relation to ourselves, it is no doubt the highest good of each individual that Descartes is primarily concerned with. On my reading, though, the reason for this is not that that is in the end what Descartes *really* considers the supreme good in relation to ourselves, but instead that it is the good that we, in his view, ought to set up as the goal for all our actions.

<sup>44</sup> By ‘everyone’ I take Descartes here to mean all people who have not learned to restrict their desires to the one thing that they ought desire (since it is the only good in our power), namely virtue.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *The Passions of the Soul*, art. 144: ‘the error we commit most commonly in respect of desires is failure to distinguish adequately the things which depend wholly on us from those which do not depend on us at all’ (CSM 1:379/AT 11:436). The idea, then, is that to have the highest good that is possible for *any* human being, it is required that one is forever determined by Providence to have *all* the first-order goods or perfections that human nature is susceptible of. That is not, however, anything that one can oneself affect through one’s conduct. For each individual, it instead holds that the best one can do is to pursue virtue, since virtue is the only good or perfection in relation to ourselves that is in our power.

<sup>46</sup> I would like to thank Ylwa Sjölin-Wirling and two anonymous referees for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this paper. Thanks also to the editor, Antonia LoLordo, for her help with various practical matters.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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