Introduction

One of the most challenging tasks that Descartes' philosophical corpus poses to interpreters is that of explaining the kind of responsibility we bear for our judgments and actions. This book offers a new way of approaching the issue of responsibility by bringing to light a *deontological* and *non-consequentialist* dimension of Descartes' later thinking, which credits the proper use of free will with a constitutive, evaluative role. The book explores prominent manifestations of Descartes' deontological approach, an aspect of his thinking that current interpretations have largely overlooked. Relying on a close reading of the *Meditations* and subsequent writings, I propose a new interpretation of several of Descartes' key epistemological doctrines and of the sense in which he considers human reason to be autonomous. Without denying the centrality of the intellect in the search for truth, or Descartes' deep interest in establishing the foundations of his science, I argue that he sees the right use of free will not merely as a means to some other, superior end but as an end in its own right. I claim, moreover, that Descartes views the will rather than the intellect as the most significant mark of human rationality, both intellectual and practical. I will then rely on this reading to interpret his statement that the human will constitutes the most prominent manifestation of our similitude to God.

The title, *Descartes' Deontological Turn*, alludes to the new sense that this book offers for Descartes' innovative "turn to the self." In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor aptly characterizes the "turn inward" taken by the father of modern philosophy as the conversion of a "substantive" notion of reason – consisting in a proper understanding of the ontic *logos* – into a "procedural" notion defined by the standards used to construct internal orders between ideas in our minds (Taylor 1989: 143–58). While embracing this general perspective, my suggestion in this work is to view Descartes' turn inward as primarily rooted in the constitutive role he assigns to the duty to use free will correctly. My intention is to

show that the conception of reason that Descartes' later writings portray, both in the speculative and practical domains, is deontological and non-consequentialist, placing at its very center the *pragmatic* distinction between the "right use" and the "misuse" of free will. This distinction, I suggest, depends exclusively on features pertaining to the process of deliberation that eventuates in an operation of the will, not on our power to distinguish truth from falsity. The rightness or wrongness of our judgments, as this book aims to substantiate, does not hinge on our power to distinguish the true from the false, which Descartes identifies in his earlier writings with human reason or *bon sens*.[1] Moreover, despite his reiterated proclamations, Descartes provides no conclusive criterion of falsehood, hence no conclusive criterion for discriminating the true from the false. The method exemplified in the *Meditations* enables us to discriminate only between what we perceive clearly and distinctly (which is undoubtedly true, given divine veracity), and what we perceive only confusedly or obscurely (which might be either true or false). The confusion or obscurity of an idea does not, in Descartes' thinking, entail its falsehood. The Cartesian method is therefore marked by an asymmetrical feature: it provides a conclusive means for the *verification* of ideas but no conclusive means for identifying falsehood. This feature must be taken into account when explaining several fundamental notions in Descartes' epistemology, of which the most notable are material falsity and error. Through the interpretation of these and other related epistemological notions, I show that the absence of a conclusive criterion for falsehood constitutes neither a deficiency nor a limitation of Descartes' system. Such a criterion is not needed for the main ends of his inquiry – from the search for truth, through the right exercise of free will, and up to the attainment of virtuousness and happiness in life.

The crux of the book is a new interpretation of Descartes' concept of error. Considering the wide variety of current views about Descartes' theory of error, I was surprised to learn that the meaning of the term "error" in his usage does not seem to be in dispute. Addressing various aspects of Descartes' theory of error, scholars appear to assume, explicitly or implicitly, that he considers error to be an affirmation of falsehood or a denial of truth. While acknowledging that Cartesian error can arise only

[1] *Discourse on the Method*, Part One (AT VI 1–2: CSM I 111). In Part Three of this treatise, Descartes argues that "God has given each of us a light to distinguish truth from falsehood" (AT VII 27: CSM I 124). This statement appears in later writings as well. In the Second Replies, for instance, Descartes writes that "we have a real faculty for recognizing the truth and distinguishing it from falsehood" (AT VII 144: CSM II 103).

when we let ourselves assent to matters we do not perceive clearly and distinctly, scholars tend to assume that error cannot occur unless the resultant judgment affirms what is false or denies what is true. My approach in this book takes a different course, claiming that Descartes equates not only the cause but the very essence of error with what he calls the "incorrect use of free choice" (*liberi arbitrii non recto usu*) (AT VII 60: CSM II 41). Any *act* of judgment that is not based on clear and distinct perception, regardless of whether the *content* being judged is true or false, is deemed a misuse of free will, hence an instance of error. In affirming or denying a confused or obscure idea, then, we are liable for a genuine, culpable error, regardless of whether the *content* to which we give credence is true or not. In establishing this reading, I inquire into Descartes' understanding of error as a *privation*. This notion, which has received relatively limited attention in the literature, proves to be crucial for our understanding of Descartes' position on the essence of intellectual error and its close affinity to moral wrong.

This reading invites the question as to what Descartes would count as an instance of "misuse of free will," and hence as an instance of error, when discussing speculative and practical issues that may not admit our clear and distinct apprehension. I show that when dealing with matters often precluding clear and distinct perception, Descartes "tempers" the content and scope of the duty to make "right use" of the will, but still retains his pragmatic and non-consequentialist conception of error as a misuse of free will.

Focusing on Descartes' account of intellectual error in the Fourth Meditation, I argue that rather than identifying error with a failure to discriminate the true from the false, he views error as a failure to comply with the precept dictated by the natural light of reason – never to make judgments unless on the basis of clear and distinct ideas. Any violation of this rational duty constitutes an instance of error, irrespective of its ensuing results. On these grounds I argue further that when Descartes speaks of erroneous (formally false) judgments, he does not confine himself to judgments whose propositional content fails to represent real objects or "things," as is usually maintained. Instead, I suggest that by "formally false judgment," Descartes denotes any *act* of judgment applied to matters we do not understand clearly and distinctly. This reading has important implications for the coherence of Descartes' position on the locus of falsity and truth. When he claims that "falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can occur only in judgments" (Third Meditation, AT VII 43: CSM II 30), he does not deny that ideas can be bearers of truth or falsehood, nor does he mean that ideas are inherently true. Since formal falsity is a

characteristic of voluntary *acts* of judgment rather than of the *content* to which these acts apply, it is not a feature of our ideas when "considered solely in themselves."

Descartes' "non-substantive"[2] notion of error provides an important insight into a deontological and non-consequentialist dimension of his thinking. The constitutive role he assigns to the duty to "use free will correctly" (or, in its negative form, to avoid misusing the will), clearly indicates that he considers compliance with this duty an independent end and not only a means of reaching other ends, even one as worthy as attaining true cognitions about reality. The boundary separating the right and the wrong, the rational and the irrational, overlaps the split between those circumstances where we refrain from misusing the will and those where we do not.

The principal merit of this deontological approach, as this study seeks to establish, is that of freeing rationality from "substantive" or extrinsic standards of falsity and truth without thereby abandoning the uncompromising commitment to truth. Descartes no doubt holds that insofar as we limit our judgments to clear and distinct perception, we not only avoid the guilt of error but also cognize the true nature of things. Yet, even if our clear and distinct ideas might ultimately be, absolutely speaking, false (AT VII 145: CSM II 103), we would still not be considered *irrational* for assenting to them. Indeed, through the correct use of our free will we become virtuous, despite the alleged possibility that the beliefs we are holding are false from an "absolute" (divine) point of view. In creating a new meaning and a new place for autonomous subjectivity, this conception entails crucial implications for the kind of responsibility we bear for our judgments and actions, independently of our prospects of attaining absolute truths.

The independent value of limiting our judgment only to clear and distinct ideas (in pure inquiry), or to the recommendations of reason (in the practical domain) lies in the very exercise of self-mastery, in judging and acting according to our internal standards rather than being activated from outside. By opting for an active stance toward the world while doing our utmost to reach the best (truest) judgment possible, we actualize in the fullest and most significant manner our rational essence, as well as our similitude to God.

[2] I borrow this expression from Charles Taylor (1989: 156). I consider "substantive" any conception or explanation that regards the standard for epistemic evaluation as depending on the conformity between the content of our mental states and the nature of their objects in reality.

Though I discuss some of Descartes' writings prior to the *Meditations*, I focus mainly on his later writings, from the *Meditations* onward. My main reason for this approach is that neither the conception of judgment as an operation of the will nor its underlying metaphysical doctrine of human freedom are expressly present in works that precede the *Meditations*. In the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes speaks of errors arising from conjoining things without being certain of their truth. He states that "it is within our power to avoid this error, *viz*. by never conjoining things unless we intuit that the conjunction of one with the other is wholly necessary …" (Rule 12, AT X 425: CSM I 48). Yet this early work refers the faculty of eliciting judgments to the intellect, as evidenced by its distinction "between the faculty by which our intellect intuits and knows things and the faculty by which it makes affirmative or negative judgments" (AT X 420: CSM I 45). In the *Discourse on the Method*, the first rule of method prescribes "never to accept anything as true if [we] did not have evident knowledge of its truth" (AT VI 18: CSM I 120). But this work does not expressly articulate a view of judgments as voluntary operations of the will either.[3] It is not until the *Meditations*, then, where Descartes sets his mature conception of judgment and his metaphysical doctrine of free will, that he assigns this precept its constitutive standing as a binding duty on which our rationality depends. On these grounds, I assume that the *Meditations* marks a genuine change in Descartes' conception of reason, though confirming this assumption is not part of my endeavor in this book.[4]

[3] See also the discussions in Beck (1952: 18–20) and references therein; Kenny (1972: 1–7); Rodis-Lewis (1998: 130); Curley (1978: 41–51); Menn (1998: 325–26); Alanen (2003: 29). For different interpretations of this issue see, for instance, Van De Pitte, (1988: 462 n. 40); Vinci (1998: 15–18); Davies (2001: 79, 87–91).

[4] My position on this issue is also inspired by Daniel Garber's analysis of the fundamental transformation that the *Meditations* and subsequent writings prove in Descartes' conceptions of method, of how knowledge is to be grounded, and of the order of reasons (Garber 1992, ch. 2, and 2001: 33–51). According to Garber, the *Meditations* and subsequent writings do not resort to the earlier method as outlined in both the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* and the *Discourse*. Garber introduces two main changes in Descartes' thought that have made the earlier method largely inapplicable to his envisaged new system of knowledge. The first is "the change from a problem-solving conception of scientific activity to a system-building conception," and the second is "the adoption of the idea that intuition cannot be taken for granted and must be validated" (2001: 50). As Garber emphasizes (1992: 56–57), rather than merely reducing a given problem to simple intuitions, as suggested in the *Rules*, the first stage of the later program essentially involves *validation* of those intuitions (or clear and distinct perceptions) by the metaphysical doctrines of the soul and God. For different interpretations of the place assigned to the method of the *Rules* and the *Discourse* in Descartes' later writings see, for example, Gewirth (1943: 267ff.); Beck (1952: 272–307) and the references there given; Vinci (1998); Smith (2001: 280–91).

My general strategy in the present study is to explore the central motivations and doctrines – epistemological, metaphysical, theological, and ethical – that lie behind Descartes' pragmatic and non-consequentialist conception of error. This strategy enables me to show that his conception of error, over and above its intrinsic innovative value, has significant elucidatory force. The reading offered here seeks to open up a new way of approaching a wide cluster of long-debated issues in Descartes' epistemology and ethics. I believe it may provide a distinctive key for acquiring a better understanding of some of his views and of his main motivations for holding them.

This strategy structures the general framework of this book. Chapter 1 focuses on Descartes' theory of ideas, setting the stage for the discussion of error and rationality in Chapter 2. The four subsequent chapters inquire into some of the main doctrines and motivations that lie behind Descartes' deontological approach: his notion of free will (Chapter 3), his conception of our similitude to God (Chapter 4), and his ethical thinking (Chapters 5 and 6).

Chapter 1 explores the notion of clear and distinct perception and the nature of true and false ideas. My intention in this opening chapter is to expound and substantiate my understanding of several key notions in Descartes' theory of ideas, locating myself within the wide spectrum of current interpretations. In particular, I seek to make sense of Descartes' crucial, yet often neglected distinction between confused or obscure ideas on the one hand, and false ideas on the other – a distinction that lies at the core of his philosophy in general, and specifically of his conception of error. My interpretation follows and reinforces Martha Bolton's thesis (1986) that an idea, however confused or obscure, cannot exhibit the thing it represents to immediate awareness as other than it is. Whether an idea is confused or obscure is a function of how the mind *regards* the content it exhibits (and represents). Through a close examination of the texts, I show that conformity between the idea's immediate content and the thing of which it is the idea is, for Descartes, an essential component of representation. All and only ideas that, however confusedly, represent "things" (real objects) satisfy the "conformity" condition and are therefore *true* representations of the things of which they are ideas. A false idea, by contrast, is one that fails to represent a thing or, in Descartes' wording, represents a non-thing (AT VII 43–44: CSM II 30). Clarity and distinctness, in my reading, are features of the *act of perceiving* (of the "idea" taken in the *material* sense), not features of the idea's *content*. A perception being more or less clear and distinct does not affect the immediate content that the idea passively exhibits to the mind. An idea becomes clearer inasmuch as

the mind's *attention* is directed to more of its elements, recognizing their interrelations when the idea is complex. The idea's distinctness depends on the extent to which the intellect, while immediately and involuntarily *interpreting* the idea's content *as* being such and such, recognizes the relations between the idea and other ideas (for instance, on whether the mind interprets pain *as* a mode of thinking or *as* a quality of the body). I conclude that the method of the *Meditations* for attaining clear and distinct perceptions, by withdrawing the mind from the senses and eliminating prejudice, is intended to remove various kinds of "disturbances" that may prevent us from "seeing" the true nature of things as they passively "reside in us," so to speak, in an "objective" mode of being.

On the basis of this reading, I analyze Descartes' notion of *material* falsity.[5] While many scholars hold that in the Third Meditation he equates materially false ideas with those representing non-things as things, I hold with others who claim, on various grounds, that he ascribes material falsity to sensory ideas on account of their inherent and irremediable obscurity and confusion. I further argue that Descartes' account of material falsity implies two senses in which ideas might be false. The first is the "ontological" sense mentioned above, which signifies the ideas' failure to represent "things," meaning *real* objects, but is still not the same as the *formal* falsity of judgments. The second sense, material falsity, is an *epistemic* category to which Descartes consigns ideas that are confused and obscure to such an extent that they do not enable him to judge *whether they are true or false* in the first, ontological sense. The chapter closes with a discussion of how confused and obscure ideas of sense provide "subject-matter for error."

Chapter 2 offers my reading of Descartes' concept of error and its implied deontological conception of rationality, whose essential features I have outlined above.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the privileged status that Descartes assigns to the will as the most prominent manifestation of our likeness to God. As a first step, Chapter 3 analyzes Descartes' position on the essence of human free will, a topic which is the focus of a serious interpretive debate. While it is widely agreed that the spontaneity of the will is essential to our freedom, scholars disagree on whether Descartes also considers the positive two-way power of the will (the ability to do or not to do something) to be essential. Confronting several apparent inconsistencies in Descartes' writings on the topic, I argue that he consistently holds that

[5] Descartes discusses this issue both in the Third Meditation (AT VII 43–44: CSM II 30) and in the Fourth Replies (AT VII 231–35: CSM II 162–64).

only spontaneous self-determination is essential to our free will. I further show that Descartes' non-consequentialist notion of error rules out any interpretation that views him as a radical voluntarist, admitting the power of the Cartesian will to resist a clearly perceived truth or goodness while the mind's attention is directed to it.

Relying on these conclusions, Chapter 4 seeks to make sense of Descartes' doctrine, reiterated in various forms, that it is above all by dint of the will rather than the intellect that we understand ourselves to bear the image and likeness of God.[6] In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes goes so far as to claim that the will of God "does not seem any greater" than the human will "when considered as will in the essential and strict sense" (AT VII 57: CSM II 40). The essential similarity that this statement suggests between divine and human free will appears to be at odds with Descartes' celebrated doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths, to which he remains faithful throughout his life. My endeavor in this chapter is to resolve the tension between the two fundamental doctrines by developing a coherent account of Descartes' position on the relation between divine and human free will. Prompted by Michael Della Rocca's reading of the Cartesian circle (2005), I suggest that the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God allows Descartes to assign normative status to our *experience* of freedom, regarding it as an independent source of moral agency and responsibility. I conclude that although the human will is essentially different from the divine will, when our will's functioning is fully harmonious with its nature and optimally spontaneous and free, we *experience* it as unified with our intellect, thereby recognizing in ourselves "some trace" of the individual attributes of God.

Chapters 5 and 6 integrate some of the key themes developed in previous chapters by concentrating on Descartes' ethical thinking. These chapters highlight the deontological and non-consequentialist character of Descartes' view of practical reason, whose core merit is the duty to make right use of the will.

Recent years have exposed a growing interest in the writings on ethics that occupied Descartes toward the end of his life. The recent significant contribution of scholars such as John Cottingham, Lilli Alanen, Deborah Brown, Susan James, and Lisa Shapiro on the convergence of Descartes' epistemology and his ethics has enriched our vision of his

[6] See, for instance, the Fourth Meditation (AT VII 57: CSM II 40); letter to Mersenne, December 25, 1639 (AT II 628: CSMK 141–42); letter to Queen Christina, November 20, 1647 (AT V 83, 85: CSMK 325, 326); *Conversation with Burman* (CB 31 = AT V 159: CSMK 342); *Passions*, art. 152.

entire philosophical edifice. Building on these foundations, Chapters 5 and 6 proceed to articulate a new perspective on the deep connection between Descartes' views on practical and speculative reason. Chapter 5 concentrates on Descartes' initial steps toward his more developed conception of practical reason: his non-consequentialist outlook on religious activity and faith that appears in writings dated around 1641, and his early conception of moral action – the *morale par provision* – presented in the Third Part of the *Discourse on the Method*. This conception lays the foundations of what will later evolve into Descartes' mature morality of virtue, which is the focus of Chapter 6. In this final chapter, I show that Descartes' later ethical writings (notably his 1645–49 correspondence and the *Passions of the Soul* published in 1649) are intended to guide us on the correct use of our free will under conditions of imperfect knowledge. In order to judge well in the conduct of life, we are not obliged to judge indubitably and infallibly. Even when we fail to choose the best option, we shall still be virtuous and avoid the charge of error if, when deciding, we endeavor to use our reason as best we can and act resolutely according to our best judgment.

Descartes' ethical writings do not include an extensive set of first-order rules for action intended to govern particular decisions. Instead, Descartes sets at the core of his later morality a single, second-order duty to practice virtue, namely, to resolutely and constantly carry out whatever reason *recommends*. The practice of virtue, which Descartes reduces to the good use of the will, must not be taken merely as a means to happiness but as an independent end. In identifying virtue with our supreme good (*summum bonum*), Descartes equates it with "the final end or goal toward which our actions *ought* to tend" (AT IV 275: CSMK 261; my emphasis). The practice of virtue *qua* the good use of the will thus constitutes the highest good that we *ought* to set ourselves as the ultimate end of all our actions. On these grounds, I argue that the practice of virtue constitutes for Descartes a moral imperative and not something we are only recommended to pursue.

In considering moral action to emerge from our understanding of the good, Descartes is indeed to be seen as a virtue ethicist.[7] And yet, the most remarkable feature of his ethical reasoning, as this closing chapter aims to substantiate, is that he defines virtue in deontological terms. On these grounds, I suggest that no tension or self-contradiction is involved in the claim that Descartes' ethics of virtue is deontological.

[7] See Shapiro 2007: 32–34; and 2008.

CHAPTER 1

Looking inward: truth, falsehood, and clear and distinct ideas

In the *Meditations on First Philosophy* published in Latin in 1641, Descartes aims to lay the metaphysical foundations of his science. To use his later "tree of philosophy" metaphor, he intended the *Meditations* to provide the metaphysical roots for the trunk of physics and for all the other sciences – the branches emerging from the trunk – which he reduces to medicine, mechanics, and morals.[1] In the waning days of 1640, Descartes writes to his friend Marin Mersenne that he meant the title of this work, *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*, to indicate that it deals "not just with God and the soul, but in general with all the first things that can be discovered by philosophizing in an orderly way."[2] For this purpose, as he later writes to the same correspondent, "we have to form distinct ideas of the things we want to judge about, and this is what most people fail to do and what I have mainly tried to reach by my *Meditations*" (AT III 272: CSMK 165).

The *Meditations* offers a new method for acquiring clear and distinct perception by withdrawing one's mind from the senses and eliminating prejudice.[3] The First Meditation exemplifies the method of doubt, whose greatest benefit, Descartes contends, "lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses."[4] The first item of knowledge emerging from the method of doubt is the certainty of the Cogito – the paradigm of a clear and distinct perception. To validate the normative status of clarity

[1] Preface-Letter to the French edition of the *Principles* (AT IXB 14: CSM I 186).
[2] November 11, 1640 (AT III 239: CSMK 158). See also AT III 235: CSMK 157.
[3] As Daniel Garber points out (1992: 55), although the idea that we must reject our past beliefs in order to ground knowledge is a central theme of the earlier *Discourse on the Method*, the *Meditations* advances a new device for eliminating prejudice – the contemplation of skeptical arguments – and presents it as "a necessary first step in first philosophy." Garber's interpretation is to be viewed in the wider context of his perspective concerning the change that the *Meditations* and later writings display in Descartes' conceptions of method, of knowledge, and of order. See Garber (1992 ch. 2; 2001: 33–63).
[4] *Synopsis* of the *Meditations* (AT VII 12: CSM II 9).