

Descartes's Moral Theory: DRAFT

Despite once claiming that he “does not like writing on ethics” (Burman 16 April 1648, V:178/3:352) and insisting that “only sovereigns have the right to concern themselves with regulating the morals of other people” (To Chanut 20 Nov. 1647, V:87/3:326), Rene Descartes reflected on ethical themes from his earliest known writings to the closing days of his life. The first of his early *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* exhorts us to “seek the truth of things ... in order [to] show [the] will what decision it ought to make in each of life’s contingencies” (X:361/1.10).ⁱ The *morale par provision* of the *Discourse* lays out “moral rules ... derived from this method” (VI:1/1.111). *Meditations* is explicitly oriented towards “demonstrative proofs” of the “two truths” without which there can be “practically no moral virtue” (VII:1-2/2:3). And in the dedicatory letter to the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes describes a “most perfect morality” as the “the ultimate level of wisdom,” the “principle benefit of philosophy,” and the ultimate “fruit” of that tree whose “roots are metaphysics [and] trunk is physics” (IXB:14-15/1.186). Much of the correspondence of his later years, particularly with Princess Elizabeth, Hector-Pierre Chanut, and Queen Christina, focuses on ethical themes. And *Passions of the Soul* – Descartes’s final published work – describe both the “true generosity” by which one can “pursue virtue in a perfect manner” (XI:445-6/1.384) and the “chief use of wisdom” on which “alone all the good and evil of this life depends” (XI:488/1.404).

Despite its importance, ethics was not Descartes’s major focus until relatively late in life (starting in 1645),ⁱⁱ and what he did write on ethics fared poorly in Descartes scholarship until recently, when a host of recent studies have investigated various aspects of it.ⁱⁱⁱ In this essay, I consider four issues of central importance to Descartes’s ethics for which there are significant disagreements within the secondary literature: the status of the *morale par provision* of Descartes’s *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*; the relationship between virtue, happiness, and the “highest good” in Descartes’s ethics; the role of love in Descartes’s mature moral theory; and Descartes’s (shifting) approach to “first-order” moralizing.

1. Descartes’s “morale par provision”

Descartes’s first clear articulation of moral principles comes in his *Discourse on Method*, where he presents what he calls a “*morale par provision*” (hereafter “*morale*”) consisting of “three or four maxims”:

[F]irst ... to obey the laws and customs of my country, and govern myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions – the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible....

[S]econd ... to be as firm and decisive in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if I had been quite certain....

[T]hird ... to try always to master myself rather than the world, and change my desires rather than the order of the world....

Finally, ... [w]ithout wishing to say anything about the occupations of others, ... [to] devote my whole life to cultivating my reason and advancing as far as I could in the knowledge of truth.
(IV:23-7/1:122-4)

The status of this *morale* is hotly debated amongst contemporary scholars of Cartesian ethics. Until recently, the dominant view was that it consisted of a set of temporary maxims useful to one engaging in the kind of scientific enterprise Descartes proposes in his *Discourse*, maxims that would be replaced if and when a final moral theory was worked out in accordance with strict principles of reason: “the first three maxims of the provisional moral code are just that – provisional moral rules that Descartes will follow while he carries out his search for certain knowledge” (Rutherford 2013: 7).^{iv} This notion that the “*morale par provision*” was properly a *provisional* morality was challenged on two fronts, first by Michele LeDœuff’s 1989 study, in which she argued on historical grounds that “*par provision* “is a juridical term meaning ‘what a judgment awards in advance to a party’” where this provisional judgment “is not liable to be put in question by the final judgment” (Le Dœuff 1989:62; cf. e.g. Shapiro 2008:450); and second by John Marshall’s philosophical reconstruction of Descartes’s moral theory (Marshall 1994) that treats a “*morale par provision*” as any “morality seen as in some respects doubtful and imperfect” but not “provisional in a pejorative sense” (Marshall 1994:18, 53).

Roughly speaking, commentators can be divided into three major ways of understanding the *morale par provision*. At one extreme lies the traditional view of the *morale* as genuinely provisional, a view that remains widely defended.^v At the other extreme is the view of Shapiro (2008) and Cimakasky and Polansky (2012), all of whom defend the view that the *morale* is “permanent and universal” (Cimakasky and Polansky 2012:353; see Shapiro 2008:450-3; Le Dœuff 1989:62). The views of John Marshall and, in a different way, Noa Naaman-Zauderer, lie in between these. Marshall sees the *morale* as “revisable,” but his conception of its relationship to a final moral theory is one of gradual revision and improvement, rather than temporary place-holding before eventual displacement. And Naaman-Zauderer sees the *morale* as a whole as needed for an “interim period” (160) but adds that “some of the *morale* maxims [are] a source for ‘true and certain’ reasons for action” that will remain part of any eventual moral theory (161).^{vi} Without entering into all of the complicated arguments in support of each commentator’s position, I here lay out what I consider to be the major lines of support for each position before briefly defending my own view (which is somewhere between Rutherford and Naaman-Zauderer).

The primary textual arguments for seeing the *morale* as more than merely provisionary are threefold. First, Descartes claims in his précis of the *Discourse* that in the third part, one will find “some of the moral rules ... derived from [tirée de] this method” (VI:1/1:111), a claim reiterated (albeit obliquely) elsewhere in the *Discourse* (IV:21-2, 29, 61/1:121-2, 125, 142; see Cimakasky and Polansky

2012:354-5). Second, the rules are, as Shapiro points out, “framed as general rules, applicable in all circumstances” and not limited to rules that would be needed during scientific investigation (Shapiro 2008:451; see too Cimasky and Polansky 2012; Marshall 1998). And third, Descartes bases his second rule on the “most certain truth that when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable” and the third in part on the fact, which “is certain,” that “if we consider all external goods as beyond our power, we shall not regret” their absence and thus can become “perfectly convinced” of the importance of self-mastery (IV:25/1:123-4).^{vii} This language suggests that, for these maxims at least, Descartes thinks that he has the “evident knowledge of truth” (xxx) required to accept claims without any possibility of doubt. Beyond these specifically textual arguments, John Marshall defends the revisable but non-provisional status of the *morale* on the grounds that “Descartes decided to embrace this *morale* long before he decided to ... rid himself of his former opinions” (Marshall 2008:12) and that there is no coherent way to *apply* the *morale* without implicitly accepting, as justified albeit revisable, one’s existing first-order moral commitments.

Despite these reasons for thinking that the *morale* is more than merely provisional, the traditional reading also has strong textual (and philosophical) grounds. For one thing, the language of *par provision*, while it *could* refer to technical legal term, can equally well be used as an expression synonymous with *provisoire* (provisional), and Descartes regularly uses it conjunction with other language that makes it sound temporary, such as his claim to use the *morale par provision* because he has “not yet” found a better one (IXB:15/1:186) or his explicit explanation identification of “par provision” with “intending to change ... as soon as I find better” (to Renier for Pollot, 1638, II:35/3:97). More importantly, this traditional reading is grounded on the two main metaphors Descartes uses to discuss this *morale*.^{viii} In the *Discourse*, he introduces it as follows:

Before starting to rebuild your house, it is not enough simply to pull it down, to make *provision* [Fr: *provision*] for materials and architects ..., and to have carefully drawn up the plans; you must also provide yourself with some *other* place where you can live comfortably *while building is in progress*. Likewise, lest I should remain indecisive in my actions *while reason obliged me to be so in my judgments*, and in order to live as happily as I could *during this time*, I formed for myself a provisional moral code [*morale par provision*]. (IV:22/1:122, emphasis added)

Descartes’s description of the *morale* is suffused with language of temporariness, and his language of “provision” in describing the *morale* echoes his early language about providing “materials and architects” for the building. Just as one would not continue to employ architects or live in the temporary dwelling erected during construction, likewise we should not expect this *morale* to retain its action-guiding force once Descartes’s whole philosophical edifice is constructed. This notion that the *morale par provision* will be displaced by a future more perfect moral theory is confirmed by a later metaphor, introduced at the beginning of his *Principles of Philosophy*. Descartes anticipates the fruits of his whole philosophical system and reflects back on his *Discourse*:

The whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principle ones, namely medicine, mechanics, and morals. By morals I understand the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom. Now just as it is not the roots or the trunk of a tree from which one gathers the fruit, but only the ends of the branches, so the principal benefit of philosophy depends upon those parts of it which can only be learnt last of all. (IVB:14-15/1:186)

Here the most perfect moral system comes “last of all” and depends upon the rest of Descartes’s developed philosophy. This coheres with the metaphor in the *Discourse* insofar as the temporary dwelling of the *morale* is replaced with morals solidly grounded, or rooted, in metaphysics and natural philosophy. For not only is there no indication of how the *morale par provision* of the *Discourse* might derive from metaphysics and natural philosophy, Descartes explicitly says in *Principles*, that “I am ignorant of almost all of these [fruits]; but ... [in my] *Discourse* ... I summarized the principle rules of logic and of an *imperfect* moral code which we may follow *provisionally* [*par provision*] while we do not yet know a better one” (IXB:15/1:186-7). Even if one is open to reading “par provision” in the legal terms to which Le Dœuff helpfully draws attention, the context of the phrase – with its reference to what we “do not yet have” – implies that Descartes uses the phrase *here* to refer to a provision that can, like the temporary dwelling during construction, eventually be discarded for something better.^{ix}

Even if there are good reasons to think that the *morale* as a whole is temporary, however, Noa Naaman-Zauderer has rightly pointed out that within the *Discourse*, different elements of the *morale* are expressed and defended in different ways. The second maxim in particular is based on the claim “that when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable,” a claim that is arguably “most certain” even by the strict standard of the first rule of the *Discourse*’s (epistemic) method: “never to accept anything ... [other] than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it” (VI:25, 19/1.123, 120). Even if we are in doubt about (first-order) claims directing us to do this or that, we cannot doubt, if we carefully reflect on it, the (second-order) requirement to do what seems best. As Marshall has elegantly reconstructed it,

If I cannot know for certain that *x* is the best thing to do here and now, yet I reasonably believe that *x* is probably the best thing to do, then I can know for certain that I ought to do *x*. We move from first-order uncertainty to second-order certainty. (Marshall 1998: 40)

Not only is this claim clear and distinct upon careful reflection, but it’s precisely a claim that becomes clear and distinct when (and only when) clearly separated from the first-order claims about which one has doubt – following Descartes’s second epistemic rule “to divide each of the difficulties I examined into as many parts as possible” (VI:18/1:120) – and one that must be carefully enumerated and reviewed (following the fourth epistemic rule). Thus while Descartes doesn’t actually *explain* how, one might reasonably see *this* maxim, at least, as deriving from the method, and one might make a similar case (though this would be more challenging) for the third maxim.

Certain elements of this provisional morality, then, particularly those focused on what John Marshall aptly calls “second-order” moral principles, may be sufficiently clear and distinct that even if they are technically part of a temporary dwelling, they are likely to be incorporated into the finished house. And in fact, these elements of the *morale* remain relatively unchanged in content – though substantially changed in terms of their systematic interconnection and metaphysical context– throughout Descartes’s moral philosophizing. Others, particularly the first, from which come most of the first-order moral principles that would make up Cartesian ethics, are revised throughout Descartes’s reflections, often in significant ways, as he seeks a more coherent metaphysical basis for moral theory. And this brings me to a final point that is central to the issue of whether and how far the *morale* is merely provisional. To some degree, this issue depends on how much – and how – Descartes *changed* his moral philosophy after the *Discourse*. Those who defend the “universal and permanent” reading of the *morale* typically emphasize that Descartes “reaffirms” or even “vaunts afresh” this ethic throughout his later writings (Shapiro 2008:453; Le Dœuff 1989:88; see too Marshall 1998:58; but cf. Cimasky and Polansky 2012:354), while recent defenders of the traditional reading highlight changes in his moral system over time (see e.g. Rutherford 2013: 18). In the rest of this chapter, while discussing various themes in his ethics, I also offer further support to the traditional reading of the *morale* by highlighting ways in which Descartes’s ethics develops. In §3, I consider (but reject) the possibility of a shift from a more hedonistic (Epicurean) moral theory in the *Discourse* to a more Stoic one in later writings. In §4, I point out the important role of “love” in Descartes’s mature moral theory, one absent in his *morale par provision*. In §5 I argue that there is a real and substantive shift with respect to Descartes’s approach to “first order” morals (his first maxim), a shift from a conception heavily influenced by Montaigne and Aristotle to one that is more rationalistic and Stoic.

¹But Descartes’s ethics shifts from the *morale* in many other ways, so I close this section by briefly discussing three of these: the shift towards systematicity and the provision of metaphysical bases for moral claims, reconceptualizing persistence (the second maxim) in terms of “virtue”, and increasingly emphasizing passions as both positive elements of human life and potential threats to virtue. The nature of these changes are not precisely what one would expect from his metaphors of the building and tree, which both suggest deferring revision of moral principles until the final stages of philosophy and then building a new *morale* from the ground up. Instead, Descartes’s relationships – particularly with Elizabeth – led him to develop systematic moral theory prematurely. His revisions are thus less strictly foundationalist than his metaphors suggest, and instead of a provisional moral theory discarded for a “perfect morality,” Descartes revises his ethics throughout his correspondence (and *Passions*), grounding it more and more in metaphysics, physics, and physiology while revising its content and structure and adding (in response to Elizabeth’s critique) discussion of the passions.

First, then, Descartes’s ethics becomes better grounded in his metaphysics and physics. In the *Discourse*, Descartes provides no metaphysical basis for his maxims, and despite calling the second

¹ Should this be a separate section?

“most certain,” the arguments for each maxim are pragmatic or at best prudential. Even if he says that they are “derived from his method,” they hardly show evidence of being the “fruit” of a tree that grows from metaphysics and physics. But in his *Principles*, correspondence, and *Passions of the Soul*, he explicitly grounds his moral claims on metaphysical and physical ones (see, e.g., To Chanut, 26 Feb. 1648, V:290-1/3:368). This increased metaphysical grounding is most explicit in an important letter to Elizabeth, where he shifts from moral “maxims” to a set of truths about “those things that are most useful to us” (To Elizabeth, 15 Sept. 1645, 4:291/Shapiro 111). These truths can be reduced to four that “concern all our actions in general”:

The first and principle one is that there is a God on whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immense, and whose decrees are infallible...”

The second ... is the nature of our mind, insofar as it subsists without the body and is much more noble than it...

[The third is] the vast extent of the universe ...

[The fourth is] that even though each of us is a person separate from others, ... one must ... think that one ... is, in effect, one part of the universe and, more particularly even, one part of this earth, one part of this state, and this society and this family, to which one is joined by his home, by his oath, by his birth.” (To Elizabeth, 15 Sept 1645, IV:291-3/Shapiro 111-2)

Of these, the first two correspond exactly to the “two truths” for which the *Meditations* offers “demonstrative proofs” (VII:1-2/2:3)^x and the third is a claim that he “tried to present ... in the third book of [his] *Principles*,” that is, in his physics (To Elizabeth, 15 Sept 1645, IV:292/Shapiro 112).^{xi} This letter makes clear that Descartes sees his developing metaphysics and physics as providing support for a set of truths that in turn ground his moral theory, a point he makes explicit in his *Principles* and correspondence (e.g. To Chanut 23 Feb. 1649, V:290/3:368). And here, unlike in the *Discourse*, he offers metaphysically-grounded arguments for moral claims. Thus from the first truth (God), he concludes that we should “so ... love him that we ... draw joy even from our afflictions, in thinking that his will is carried out,” and the second (the mind’s nature) “prevents us from fearing death and detaches our affection from the things of this world ... [and] the power of fortune” (To Elizabeth, 15 Sept 1645, IV:292/Shapiro 111-2). Both truths also remain central to Descartes’s developing ethics. Thus the second helps ground his claim, in *Passions*, that because the body “is the lesser part of us, we must consider the passions principally insofar as they belong to the soul” (IX:432/1:377/Voss 93).^{xii 2} The *Passions* itself – within which Descartes analyses “all the good and evil of this life” (§212, XI:488/1:404) and explains “how to pursue virtue” (§153, XI:446/1:384), and which Descartes offers as illustration of his “thinking about particular problems in ethics” (To Chanut 15 June 1646, IV:442/3:289) – is, he claims, written “as a natural philosopher and not ... as a moral philosopher” (XI:326/1:327). Throughout

² Likewise, the first is relevant to the shift, noted by Rodis-Lewis, from a conception of external events in terms of “unpredictable hazard or enchainment” to one of “divine Providence” (Rodis-Lewis 1957:23, 32-35; cf. VI:25 and §146, XI:439/1.380).

his later moral philosophy, moral claims are often defended in terms of the key elements of Descartes's metaphysics and physics.^{xiii}

A second shift in his moral theory – towards the concept of “virtue” – follows from this increased metaphysical focus. One of the most important, morally-relevant, metaphysical concepts developed in his *Meditations* is human *free will*.^{xiv} Here Descartes claims that it is “in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God” (VII:57; 1:40).^{xv} This concept of free will provides for reconceiving the second and third maxims of the *morale* more rigorously. The second maxim, to be “firm and decisive” even in following “the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them” becomes, in his correspondence, the essence of *virtue*: “It is the firmness of this resolution that I believe ought to be taken to be virtue, even thou I know of no one who has ever explained it in this way” (To Elizabeth 4 Aug 1645, IV:265/Shapiro 98). As his concept of virtue develops, Descartes explicitly identifies it with the proper use of free will: “virtue” is “the same thing” as “the possession of all the goods whose acquisition depends upon our free will” (IV:522/Shapiro 146). In his Fourth Meditation, Descartes made clear in the epistemic context that the proper use of free will – in which “man’s greatest and most important perfection is to be found – requires that one “restrain [one’s] will so that it extends to what the intellect clearly and distinctly reveals” (VII:62/2:43). In his writings on ethics, he similarly identifies virtue with “a firm ... will to execute all that we judge to be best and to employ all the force of our understanding to judge well” (To Elizabeth 18 Aug 1645, IV:277/Shapiro 105; cf. IV:265, 519/Shapiro 98, 146^{xvi}). The second maxim was, even from the start, a way of mitigating the strict demands of his epistemology – to assent only to what is clear and distinct – in the light of practical concerns. But over time, this gets reconceived in terms of his *metaphysical* account of error, and virtue as the right subordination of the free will to judgments of the intellect rightly comes to assume central place in his ethics. This new metaphysical basis in the concept of free will better integrates the various maxims of the *morale*. In the *Discourse*, these were presented as separate maxims for action. But in the new set of rules he presents to Elizabeth (IV.265-6/Shapiro 98), the “third” rule *explicitly depends upon* the second: “The third is that, *while he so conducts himself as much as he can in accordance with reason*, he keep in mind that all the goods he does not possess are ... entirely outside of his power” (To Elizabeth 4 Aug 1645, IV:265-6/Shapiro 98). And both of these principles now explicitly depend upon a revised version of what had been the first and fourth maxims; in its new formulation, Descartes explains that one “should always try to make use of his mind ... to know what must be done ... in all the events of life” (ibid.). Rather than the *morale*’s distinct maxims, Descartes now offers three fully integrated principles: one uses reason to figure out what’s best, resolves to implement what reason decides, and keeps in mind that all else is beyond one’s power.

Both trends – the shift towards “virtue” and the better integration of what had been distinct moral maxims – are brought together in Descartes’s account in the *Passions* of “that true generosity,” whereby one “pursue[s] virtue in a perfect manner,” and which “has two components” (§153, XI:445-6/1:384).

The first consists in his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him but this freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using his freedom well or badly [principle 3]. The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use [this freedom] well [principle 2] – that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best [principle 1]. (§153, XI:446/1:384; cf. To Elizabeth 4 Aug 1645, IV:265-6/Shapiro 98).

As has been widely noted,^{xvii} this notion of generosity, developed in what is arguably Descartes's most mature ethical reflection, reiterates central claims of Descartes's *morale*, but the maxims are now two aspects of a single coherent passion, the value of which is explicitly grounded on the metaphysics of free will developed in the *Mediations* (VII:57/2:40) and *Principles* (§6, VIIIA:6/1:194). Lest one miss this connection, Descartes prefaces his account of generosity by reminding readers of a key insight from his *Meditations*, that "free will ... renders us in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves" (§152, XI:445/1:384; cf. VII:57/2:40; Naaman-Zauderer 2010). "Virtue," in Descartes's mature moral philosophy, is the metaphysically-grounded integration of what had been disparate maxims in the *morale*.

And this integration in generosity brings us to a third important shift from the *morale*: Descartes's increasing emphasis on the passions. Generosity itself is not *merely* that by which we "pursue virtue in a perfect manner" (§153, IX:446/1:384), but also a *passion*. Descartes does not discuss passions in his *Discourse*.^{xviii} Even in his *Meditations*, it is the "senses" and "habitual opinions," rather than the passions, that threaten to undermine clear reasoning (VII:22/2:15). And when Descartes begins to lay out his own moral theory in his correspondence with Elizabeth, he initially seems to see control of the passions as a relatively straightforward – albeit extremely important – affair (To Elizabeth, 18 May 1645, 2:202/Shapiro 87). But as Elizabeth challenges Descartes's optimism about reason's power over passions (e.g. 22 June 1645, IV:234/Shapiro 93), Descartes comes to see the "regulat[ion] ... [of] passions" as a central task of ethics (IV:267/Shapiro 99)^{xix} and eventually to claims that "above all we must seek acquaintance with the passions if we are to attain the sovereign good as I have described it" (To Chanut 20 Nov. 1647, V:87/3:327).

2. Virtue, Happiness, and the Highest Good: Is Descartes Epicurean or Stoic?

Against both Gueroult's classic treatment of Descartes as attempting an Epicurean ethics (see Gueroult 1952/1985) and the contemporary consensus that his ethics is "obviously Stoic,"^{xx} Noa Naaman-Zauderer has recently defended the possibility of a revision in Descartes's overall orientation in moral theory:

Whereas the *morale par provision* of *Discourse* does not introduce a definite outlook on the hierarchy between virtue and happiness, the later moral writings are unequivocal on this point. Although happiness is the natural outcome of our virtuous behavior, Descartes insists that the practice of virtue itself, which he reduces to the good use of our will, *ought* to be the ultimate end for which we should strive in all our actions. (Naaman-Zauderer 2010:179)^{xxii}

The issue here is not whether or not Descartes is a *thoroughgoing* Stoic, whatever that might mean, but specifically whether, with respect to the specific issue of whether virtue or pleasure is the highest good for human beings, he adopts the Stoic view (prioritizing virtue and seeing pleasure as a bonus) or the Epicurean one (prioritizing pleasure and seeing virtue as a means to pleasure). And there are three possible readings of Descartes's attitudes towards virtue, happiness, and the highest good.

- (1) Descartes is fundamentally Epicurean in seeing happiness as the highest good, with the pursuit of virtue as merely a means, or "technique" (Gueroult 1985:177f.), for acquiring happiness.
- (2) Descartes is consistently Stoic in seeing virtue as the highest good, an end in itself (see Marshall 1998:45, 89).
- (3) Descartes shifts from an early position that is at least potentially Epicurean to a later one that is essentially Stoic (Naaman-Zauderer 2010).

In this section, I briefly lay out evidence for each of these positions, ultimately defending a version of the first reading.

To start with the *Discourse*, defenders of position (1) noted the clear influence of Stoicism on Descartes's third maxim, which could have been lifted almost directly from Epictetus, who exhorted, "Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well" (cited in Marshall 1998:48).^{xxiii} Marshall has argued that the second maxim, too, is fundamentally about a focus on virtue – "act[ing] as well as we possibly could" – for its own sake (Marshall 1998:45). However, those defending positions (2) and (3) rightly note that even while the *content* of the third maxim is Stoic, on the particular issue of the relative priority of virtue and happiness, the text is at best ambiguous. As Naaman-Zauderer puts it, "what the third maxim, and the *morale* as a whole, leave undetermined, is whether the merit of self-mastery has an independent value of its own ... or rather constitutes a mere means for precluding distress, remorse, or regret, and their resultant unhappiness" (Naaman-Zauderer 2010:174). In fact, *all* of the maxims in the *Discourse* appeal to happiness in their justification. Descartes justifies the third maxim on the grounds that "This alone ... would be sufficient ... to make me content" and that "In this ... lay the secret of those philosophers who in earlier times were able to escape from the dominion of fortune and, despite suffering and poverty, rival their gods in happiness" (AT VI:25-6; CSM1-123-4).^{xxiv} The first maxim is justified as "most useful" (IV:23/1:122), the second as a means to be "free ... from ... regrets and remorse" (IV:25/1:123) and the fourth as a way to continue experiencing "such extreme contentment that ... one could [not] enjoy and sweeter or purer one in this life" (IV:27/1:124). Given its focus on happiness and contentment, the strong tendency of the *Discourse* is towards a neo-Epicurean moral theory.^{xxv}

Even if the *Discourse* is plausibly Epicurean, one might reasonably think that Descartes's mature moral theory is "explicit" and "unequivocal" about the priority of virtue (Naaman-Zauderer 2010:174, 179). In the last section, we saw that Descartes made significant revisions to his moral theory after the *Discourse*, and the new emphasis on free will might justifiably lead to an ethics within which virtue is good in itself rather than merely a persistence conducive to happiness. And Descartes, in fact, *explicitly*

says that “true happiness is not the sovereign good” (To Elizabeth 18 August, 1645; 4:275/Shapiro 103), that “Zeno ... was right to say that the sovereign good consists only in virtue” (To Elizabeth 18 August, 1645; 4:276/Shapiro 104) and that “the supreme good of each individual ... consists only in a firm will to do well” (To Christina, 20 Nov. 1647; V:82/3:324). And he seems to quite explicitly reject any sort of priority of happiness over virtue when he considers “whether it is better to be gay and content, in imagining the goods one possesses to be greater and more valuable than they really are ... or to have more consideration and knowledge in order to know the just value of the one and the other and to become sadder” and concludes that “it is a greater perfection to know the truth, even though it is to our disadvantage, than not to know it,” so “it would be better to be less gay and to have more knowledge” (IV.305/Shapiro 115-6). The generosity of the *Passions*, too, focuses solely on virtue and even involves the recognition that one “ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using his freedom well or badly” (§153, XI:446/1:384). Arguably, the shift from a basically Epicurean approach in the *Discourse* to a clearly Stoic one in the correspondence and *Passions* shows an important moral “fruit” of the metaphysics developed in the *Meditations* and *Principles*.

In fact, however, the evidence for the shift to a Stoic prioritization of virtue over happiness is less clear than commentators imply. In two of the central, apparently-Stoic passages from his correspondence, Descartes’s goal is a *reconciliation* of Stoicism with Epicureanism. Thus his claim to Christina that “the supreme good of each individual ... consists only in a firm will to do well” continues “and the contentment which this produces,” and he goes on later in the letter to say, “In this way I think I can reconcile the two most opposed and most famous opinions of the ancient philosophers – that of Zeno, who thought virtue ... the supreme good, and that of Epicurus, who thought the supreme good was contentment, to which he gave the name of pleasure” (To Christina, 20 Nov. 1647; V:82-3/3:324-5). Likewise his claim that “true happiness is not the sovereign good” is quickly followed with both a very specific and technical definition of “sovereign good” and with the claim that “contentment of mind ... is also rightly called our end” (To Elizabeth 18 August, 1645; 4:275/Shapiro 103) and with a claim that the “three opinions” of “Epicurus ..., Zeno ..., and Aristotle” can “be received as true and in accord with one another, provided they are interpreted favorably” (To Elizabeth 18 August, 1645; 4:275/Shapiro 104). To discern the full import of these letters requires understanding precisely how Descartes wants to endorse *both* Stoicism and Epicureanism.

Naaman-Zauderer presents what has come to be a standard way of reading this very important letter. On her account, Epicurus rightly describes the “the natural outcome of our virtuous behavior” (Naaman-Zauderer 2010:179) and even a motive that “might” lead “an agent to aspire to virtue” (Naaman-Zauderer 2010:188; cf. Marshall 69-70, where this motivational import is limited to “agents who lack virtue”), but the true “end” for human beings is what we ought to aim at, virtue as such. Thus Descartes is a Stoic who recognizes the (unfortunate) fact that most of us are hedonistically motivated but who also (optimistically) claims that the pursuit of virtue for its own sake will lead to the highest contentment we can have in this life. He is fundamentally Stoic and incidentally Epicurean. But one might also read the letter quite differently, as emphasizing that the only way to be truly happy is to pursue

virtue as our highest end. Descartes strongly suggests this reading with a metaphor to describe the relationship between virtue and happiness:

Then there is a prize for hitting a bull's-eye, one makes people want to hit the bull's-eye by showing them the prize. Still they cannot win the prize if they do not see the bull's eye. And those who see the bull's eye cannot be induced to aim for it if they do not know that there is a prize to win. Similarly, virtue, which is the bull's-eye, does not come to be strongly desired when it is seen on its own; contentment, which is the prize, cannot be acquired unless it is pursued. (To Elizabeth 18 August, 1645; 4:277/Shapiro 104)

While this metaphor is often interpreted either to mean that one ought to *aim* for virtue (the bull's eye), while happiness can be a nice after-effect, or that morally speaking, virtue *ought* to be the highest good, but psychologically, people are typically motivated by happiness; it is better interpreted to say that in our actions, we aim (and ought to aim) for virtue, but the underlying reason for aiming at virtue is that only by aiming for virtue can we get happiness. Insofar as we *directly* aim for happiness, we make something our aim that is not really within our control, which is problematic because we shouldn't set as an aim something that we cannot actually achieve through our own effort (see IV:264-5/Shapiro 97-8)^{xxvi} and because insofar as we set aims we cannot achieve, we make our happiness makes more fragile than it needs to be. To the extent that we can focus desire on goods we can achieve ourselves, we can become fully happy *without* depending upon fickle Fortune. That is, we should set virtue as our supreme goal because that is the best means for achieving our ultimate end (happiness).^{xxvii}

Even on this more Epicurean reading, however, there is an important place for Descartes's metaphysical account of the value of the free will. The bull's eye can't just be *defined as* whatever gets one the prize. The prize is awarded for something defined independently as prize-worthy, and this is where Epicurus errs. By focusing exclusively on pleasure, Epicurus fails to see that the reason virtue *gives* pleasure is that we recognize it as *good*. For Descartes, the soul has a natural tendency to take pleasure in perfection or goodness,^{xxviii} so we find happiness only in what we perceive as good in some way. But this goodness cannot in turn be defined as what gives pleasure, at risk of vicious circularity. The danger of such circularity is particularly acute because, for Descartes, among the primary threats to contentment are remorse and repentance: "there is nothing but desire and regret or repentance that can prevent us from being content" (IV:266/Shapiro 98; see too VI:25/1:123; §63, IX:377/1:351/Voss 55). We feel remorse and repentance only when we find ourselves to have done evil, so there must be some independent way to define that evil. Put more broadly, one must set goals other than contentment in order to attain contentment, and these goals must be seen as good in ways that are not derived from their role in bringing about contentment. And for Descartes, "all our contentment consists only in our inner testimony of having some *perfection*" (IV:283-4/Shapiro 107). Perfection, or goodness defined by some standard independent of pleasure itself, is that the consciousness of which gives the most supreme contentment. Moreover, while there is a sort of metaphysical goodness grounded in the degrees of "reality" or "perfection" a thing has (e.g. VII:40-41/2:28), this "goodness of each thing ... considered in itself without

reference to anything else” is distinct from the “goodness ... in relation to ourselves” that should be the focus of our desire.^{xxix} While in theory “God is the supreme good since he is incomparably more perfect than any creature” (V:82/3:324), in practice “we should not consider anything as good unless we either possess it or have the power to acquire it” (ibid.). But because what is “entirely within each man’s power” is only “a firm will to do well and the contentment which this produces” (ibid.), the “the supreme good” for us is “a firm and constant resolution to carry out ... those things which one judges to be best and to employ ... one’s mind in finding out what these are” (V:83/3:325). This disposition of will, which “constitutes all the virtues,” should be the ultimate object of our desires and the goal of our will because this is the only good that relates to us and is wholly within our control. In contrast to brute Epicureanism, then, Descartes has a metaphysically loaded conception of the good, rooted in the perfections of things, and a principled argument for narrowing the *human* good to the exercise of virtue as the perfection of that capacity (the will) over which we have control. Thus there is truth to the Stoic reading according to which we pursue virtue for its own sake because we recognize that it is the only good that lies within our power. But as the archery metaphor shows, this Stoicism is situated within a broader Epicureanism. We pursue virtue as our supreme good *because* that pursuit is the best way to win the prize. As he puts it in his letter to Christina, it is “finally [*enfin*]” because “[virtue] alone produces the greatest and most solid contentment in life” that we should make it our “supreme good” (V:83/3:325).^{xxx} By situating the Stoic emphasis on the virtue within an Epicurean framework, Descartes allows agents to pursue virtue in a genuinely whole-hearted way, while also providing reasonable explanations for people’s deviations from strict virtue; and he avoids “represent[ing] virtue as so severe and so opposed to pleasure” that “only melancholic people or minds entirely detached from bodies” can bring themselves to pursue it (IV: 276/Shapiro 104).

3. Love

It is the nature of love to make one consider oneself and the object loved as a single whole of which one is but a part; and to transfer the care one previously took of oneself to the preservation of this whole. One keeps for oneself only a part of one’s care, a part which is great or little in proportion to whether one thinks oneself a larger or smaller part of the whole to which one has given one’s affection. So if we are joined willingly to an object which we regard as less than ourselves – for instance, if we love a flower, a bird, a building or some such thing – the highest perfection which this love can properly reach cannot make us put our life at any risk for the preservation of such things. For they are not among the nobler parts of the whole which we and they constitute any more than our nails or our hair are among the nobler parts of our body; and it would be preposterous to risk the whole body for the preservation of the hair. But 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 favor of the other, “it is I who did the deed, I am here, turn your swords 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 that 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 defense of some great person they are fond of. From all this it is obvious that our love for God should be, beyond comparison, the greatest and most perfect of all our loves.

I have no fear that these metaphysical thoughts hold any difficulty for your mind, ... but I must confess that my mind is easily tired by them. (3.311; IV:612-13)

Love for an unimportant object, if immoderate, can cause more evil than hatred for another more valuable ... [because] the evil arising from hatred extends only to the hated object, whereas immoderate love spares nothing but its object, which is commonly very slight in comparison with all the other things which it is ready to abandon and destroy to serve as seasoning for its immoderate passion ... [T]he love of a single object can give rise in this way to hatred for many others. (IV.616/3.313)

Despite an interest in love in his earliest writings, where Descartes describes "love" or "charity" as the "single power active in things" (X:218/1:5), love does not appear in the *morale*, and even in his correspondence with Elizabeth, it plays no role in his revised "rules of conduct" (4 Aug. 1645, IV:265/Shapiro 98). But in his explanation of truths "most useful to us" (IV:490/Shapiro 111), Descartes introduces – seemingly out of the blue – the truth that that "one must ... think that one ... is, in effect, one part of the universe and, more particularly even, one part of this earth, one part of this state, and this society and this family" (To Elizabeth, 15 Sept 1645, IV:291-3/Shapiro 111-2). He later roots this claim in "metaphysical thoughts" and identifies it with "the nature of love" (To Chanut 1 Feb. 1647, IV:612-13/3.311; see too IV:308/Shapiro 117). In his *Passions*, too, this consideration of oneself as part of a whole is identified as the essence of love:

Love is an excitation of the soul, caused by the motion of the spirits, which incites it to join itself in volition to the objects that appear to be suitable to it ... I do not intend to speak here of desire ... but of the consent by which we consider ourselves from the present as joined with what we love in such a way that we imagine a whole of which we think ourselves to be only one part and the thing love another. (§§79-80, IX:387/1:356/Voss 62)

Love is not only in itself a source of great joy but also generates that benevolence by which one is willing to make sacrifices for others. From "consider[ing] oneself and the object loved as a single whole of which one is but a part," one comes "to transfer the care one previously took of oneself to the preservation

of this whole. One keeps for oneself only a part of one's care, a part which is great or little in proportion to whether one thinks oneself a larger or smaller part of the whole to which one has given one's affection" (To Chanut 1 Feb. 1647, IV:612-13/3.311). "The most lovable virtue of all" and the essence of those "good actions" from which interior satisfaction "principally" comes is precisely this willingness of a person to be "nowhere near as affected by that which regards her personally as by that which regards the interest of her house and the persons whom she cares about" is (18 May 1645, IV:202/Shapiro 87; IV:308-9/Shapiro 117). As his ethical thought develops, then, Descartes increasingly comes to see the importance of *love*, conceived of as a way of joining oneself with another into a greater whole, or, more generally (e.g. in the context of love of one's state or family), a way of conceiving of oneself as part of a greater whole.

Within this general conception of love, Descartes makes two important distinctions, getting clear on which will illuminate the ethical importance of love in Descartes's thought.³

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4.1. Degrees of Love

The most widely noted distinction within Descartes account of love is his tripartite division between affection, friendship, and devotion:

We may . . . distinguish kinds of love according to the esteem which we have for the object we love, as compared with ourselves. For when we have less esteem for it than for ourselves, we have only affection for it; when we esteem it equally with ourselves, that is called 'friendship'; and when we have more esteem for it, our passion may be called 'devotion'. Thus, we may have affection for a flower, a bird, or a horse; but unless the mind is very disordered, we can have friendship only for persons . . . As for devotion, its principle object is undoubtedly the supreme Deity . . . In all [three kinds of love] we consider ourselves as joined and united to the thing loved, and so we are always ready to abandon the lesser part of the whole that we compose with it so as to preserve the other part. In the case of simple affection this results in our always preferring ourselves to the object of our love. In the case of devotion, on the other hand, we prefer the thing loved so strongly that we are not afraid to die in order to preserve it. (§ 83, XI.390/1.357)

I will return to this passage in §5.2, but here two points are noteworthy. First, by linking love with esteem, which is based on the "greatness [*grandeur*] of an object," Descartes provides a way to introduce

³ Here I focus only on these two basic distinctions, but there are others that are also very important for a full understanding of the role of love in Descartes's ethics. For example, Descartes distinguishes between "intellectual love" and the passion of love (see e.g. §18, IX.343/1.335/Voss28; To Chanut, IV.601-3/3.306). He discusses the importance but also dangers of partial love and personal friendship (e.g. at xxx, xxx, xxx). And he specifically discusses the role of the love of God, both as a consequence of his overall theory of love and as a ground for love of other finite beings (see e.g. xxx, xxx, and discussion in Wee 2002 and Frierson 2002).

objective judgments of value into love, which is purportedly focused on what is “good with regard to us” or “suitable [*convenable*] to us” (§ 54, 56, IX:373, 374/1:350). This is consistent with his exhortation in his letter to Elizabeth to join oneself to greater bodies to “participate in the goods held in common” (IV:308/Shapiro 117). Second, Descartes here makes his earlier and less formal exhortations to see oneself as part of greater wholes into a systematic distinction, and even ranking, of kinds of love based on the objective (metaphysical) greatness of the objects of love. As we will see in §5.2, this provides a principled basis for first-order ethical judgments.

4.2. Love, Desire, and Generosity

A second distinction, however, is arguably even more important for the role of love within Descartes’s overall ethics. When introducing his concept of love in the *Passions*, Descartes notes that “a distinction is commonly made between two sorts of love, one called ‘benevolent love,’ which prompts us to wish for the well-being of what we love, and the other called ‘concupiscent love,’ which makes us desire the things we love” (§81, IX:388/1:356/Voss 62-3). But while this introduction may make it seem as though he is going to reject this distinction, in fact he *endorses* it, but with the caveat that “this distinction concerns only the effects of love and not its essence” (ibid.). He goes on to make the distinction his own:

As soon as we have joined ourselves in in volition to some object, whatever its nature may be, we feel benevolent towards it ... And if we judge that it would be beneficial to possess an object or to be associated with it in some manner other than in volition, then we desire it. (ibid)

In one sense, all love is always accomplished in the present. As soon as I love something, my love is complete in itself and I can *immediately*, by considering myself joined to another thing, share in the goods of that thing. But in another sense, there are two quite different ways to join oneself volitionally to an object. One way is through pure love, as in the case of the (idealized) parent who joins himself to his child:

The love of a good father for his children is so pure that he desires to have nothing from them He regards them . . . as other parts of himself, and seeks their good as he does his own, or even more so. For he imagines that he and they together form a whole of which he is not the better part, and so he often puts their interests before his own and is not afraid of sacrificing himself in order to save them. (§82, XI:389/1:357)

Here the father can immediately experience the joy of being united with his child, and insofar as this love gives rise to any desires at all, the desires are for the well-being of the *object* of love rather than for himself. But another sort of love is for possession of a thing, which always leads to desire to have that thing. The love of “an ambitious man ... for glory, a miser for money, [and] a drunkard for wine” are loves of possession that are “merely desires” for the objects themselves. Thus in the absence of real possession, the ambitious man, the miser, and the drunkard experience no joy at all; they do not conceive of themselves as joined with their objects, but only – occasionally – with their possession of the objects.

This distinction is of central importance for understanding the role of love in Descartes's ethics. For Descartes, the fundamental category by which we unite volitionally with something good is love. But "the chief utility of morality" lies in controlling "desire" (§144, IX:436/1:379), so much of Descartes's ethical theory, and all of the early *morale* is focused on what we should or should not desire. As he comes to appreciate the importance of love for extending the scope of happiness, however, this focus on desire is too narrow. Moreover, the rules for directing and controlling desire simply do not apply to the case of love. One ought only to desire what is good *and within one's control*, but one can *love* all things that are good. And since all things are good – since evil is only a privation – one should extend one's love as widely as possible: "Love ... cannot be too great, and it never fails to produce joy" (§139, IX:432/1:139), and though "less beneficial," love is to be preferred even when it "rests on a bad foundation" (§142, IX:435/1:378). Strikingly, even the warning that "a love which is unjustified serves to join us to things that may be harmful" (§142, IX:435/1:379) seems to apply only insofar as one considers the effects of the passion of love for our embodied soul: "if we had no body, ... we could not go too far in abandoning ourselves to love" (§141, IX:434/1:378) and "whatever we go through for the sake of love is pleasant – so much so that even those who are ready to die for the good of those they love seem to me happy to their last breath" (to Huygens 20 May 1637, I:632/3:54). The more one can love, the happier one will be since considering oneself as joined with something good brings immediate joy; and while one should seek to love in accordance with the true merits of the objects of love, it is better – as long as one avoids bodily injury – to love too widely than to love too little. But desire brings joy only when the object of desire is possessed, and because there is one object of desire – the right use of the will – that is wholly within one's power to possess, one should limit desire accordingly.

This point is crucial for understanding the nature of that "generosity" by which one "pursues virtue in a perfect manner" (§153, IX:446/1:384). Generosity involves using well one's "freedom to dispose one's volitions" (*ibid.*), and given Descartes's emphasis on regulation of desire and his insistence that "the chief utility of morality" lies in controlling "desire" (§144, IX:436/1:379), one might read generosity as primarily focused on using freedom to control one's *desires*. The similarity between generosity and the third rule of the *morale* – "to change my *desires* rather than the order of the world" – further lends support to this reading. But not all volitions are desires. Love involves joining oneself *in volition* to some good, so generosity is not merely about rightly controlling desire, but also about rightly shaping and applying *love*. Thus those who are generous "esteem nothing more highly than doing good to others" and "the more ... generous our soul is, the more we are inclined to render to each person that which belongs to him; thus not only do we have a very deep humility before God, but also we are not reluctant to render to each person all the ... respect due to him" and "part of generosity is to have good will towards everyone" (§§156, 164, 187, IX:448, 455, 470/1:387, 389, 395). The best use of freedom is joining oneself to others who are in some way good, and in that condition, one wants good to accrue in the best way to the whole of which one judges oneself a part. There is no room for inappropriate envy or anger (§§183, 199/IX:467, 477-8/1:394, 399) and much room for benevolence (§81, IX:388/1:356/Voss 62-3), pity (§ 187, IX:469-70/1:395), and humility (§155, IX:447/1:385).

Moreover, even though Descartes recognizes that “sharing in the ills of those we are fond of is one of the duties of friendship” (To Mersenne 23 Nov. 1646), the sadness that necessarily accompanies love is mitigated in those who are generous. Partly this is due to the fact that the ills that cause sadness are mere privations, so that sadness cannot but be accompanied by some joy in what good remains (see IV:308/Shapiro 117). This consideration is heightened in the case of our fellows. The generous person rightly attends more to the goods of soul than those of body, and through frequent “consideration of the nature of our souls” and particularly “that they last longer than our bodies” and “are destined for greater pleasures,” we can further cultivate that “strength of mind” that can “lessen sorrow” (To Huygens, 10 Oct. 1642, III:798/3:215-6; see too To Pollot Jan. 1641, III:278-80/3:167-8; To Elizabeth IV: 292/Shapiro 112). And through her focus on true goods, for the generous person, “the sadness of pity is not bitter: like that caused by the tragic actions ... on the stage, it is more external, affecting the senses more than the interior of the soul” (§187, IX:470/1:395). In that way, love is of all passions that for which it can be most true that “the evils which [it] cause[s] are quite bearable, and even become a source of joy” (§212, IX:488/3:404).

4.3. Intellectual Love and the Passion of Love

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Intellectual vs. passionate

We can better see Descartes’s point here by noting a distinction he drew earlier between “two sorts” of “volitions ... For the first are actions of the soul which have their terminus in the soul itself, as when we will to love God ... The others are actions which have their terminus in our body ...” (§18, IX:343/1:335/Voss 28).

I make a distinction between the love which is purely intellectual or rational and the love which is a passion. The first ... consists simply in the fact that when our soul perceives some present or absent good, which it judges to be fitting for itself, it joins itself to it willingly, that is to say, it considers itself and the good in question as forming two parts of a single whole ... All these movements of the will which constitute love ..., in so far as they are rational thoughts and not passions, could exist in our soul even if it had no body ... But while our soul is joined to the body, this rational love is commonly accompanied by the other kind of love, which can be called sensual or sensuous. This ... is nothing but a confused thought, aroused in the soul by some motion of the nerves, which makes it disposed to have the other, clearer, thought which constitutes rational love. (III.306; AT IV.601-603)

4.4. Personal Friendship

Asdfxxx Love in general vs. Friendship in particular.

D is torn, never quite makes clear what he has in mind, but I think the best reconstruction would say that we should intellectually love all things in the proper order, and we should seek to conform our passionate love towards those things with which we have the most to deal (our state, our family, etc)...note that D explicitly thinks that we should have a passionate love for God. But among those who surround us, we cannot have strong passionate love for each individual who is worthy of being loved intellectually. So we should favor some. As long as our favor is consistent with the others' intrinsic perfections, it doesn't matter that much *who* we favor, but friendship is valuable. (Note too D's claim in a late letter that it's easy to make fast friends with those who are seeking the truth xxx)

"sharing in the ills of those we are fond of is one of the duties of friendship" (IV:565, 3.301, to Mersenne 23.11.1646)

V.57-8/3:323 cf. Marshall, argue vs. Marshall's exclusive emphasis on friendship

Note that the danger of partial love is not sadness (though see IV:565) but excessive devaluing of everything else (IV 616/3:313). The problem is not loving partially too much, but loving too little because too partially.

4.5. Love of God

Asdf xxx Descartes's emphasis on the love of God is explicit. From the first truth "that there is a God (discussed above in §2), Descartes argues that "since the true object of love is perfection, when we elevate our mind to consider God as he is, we will find ourselves naturally so inclined to love him that we will draw joy even from our afflictions, in thinking that his will is carried out as we receive them" (to Elizabeth, 4:290-1/Shapiro 111).

"when we love God and through him unite ourselves willingly to all the things he has created" (To Chanut, 6.6.1647; V.56/3:322)

See too IV:607ff, 1:308-10.

One way to ground this love of others is *through* the love of God. As Wee argues,

the Cartesian ethical agent sees the agent as embodying a God-enacted order. Far from being alienated from the universe, she recognizes herself to be a part of this wider order, fulfilling a specific function within the overall whole. (Wee 2002:262-3)

Drawing from Descartes's discussion of error in the Fourth Meditation, in which he argues that "whenever we are inquiring whether the works of God are perfect, we ought to look at the whole universe, not just at one created thing" (VII:55-56/2:39), Wee argues that the Cartesian agent who understands that the universe is God's creation "accepts that the good of the larger whole must take precedence over his own good" (Wee 2002:264). Likewise, I have argued elsewhere that once "Descartes ... establish[es] that a rational individual will love God, he has an independent basis for loving others" because, as Descartes puts it to Elizabeth, "abandoning himself altogether to God's will, he strips himself of his own interests and has no other passion than to do what he thinks pleasing to God" (To Elizabeth, 15 Sept 1645, IV:294/3:267; see too V:56/3:322).

5. Descartes's first order morals

In *Descartes's Moral Theory*, John Marshall makes a distinction between what he there calls "first-order and second-order evaluation," a distinction that has been adopted in many recent discussions of Descartes's ethics:

A first-order question might be: Should I eat this food? ... If I cannot attain certainty at this level, I can attain certainty at a higher level. If I cannot know for certain that x is the best thing to do here and now, yet I reasonably believe that x is probably the best thing to do, then I can know for sure that I ought to do x . (Marshall 1998:39-40)

Relatedly, Marshall points out that Descartes's "moral theory is incomplete" because it fails to give a "careful and systematic account" of the "theory of the right and the good without which it would be empty" (Marshall 1998:115-6). The basic idea is this. Most of the work of Descartes's ethics is spent on what, in the *morale*, are the second and third maxims, which enjoin agents to change their own desires (that is, to pursue what is within their own direct control, or, in later works, pursue virtue) and commit firmly and decisively to whatever seems most likely to be the best course of action (that is, express virtue). But both of these maxims are second-order in that they depend upon some antecedent way of determining what is best to choose (or desire). If I consider honor-loaded codes of vengeance to be appropriate, then Descartes's second and third maxims enjoin me not to focus specifically on the destruction of those who offend me, but rather to focus on having sufficiently strong desires for their destruction, committing to those firmly and resolutely, and then leaving the rest to Providence. If I am a utilitarian, then these principles enjoin me to focus on resolutely pursuing what seems to me most likely to bring happiness to the most people but to desire only that resolute pursuit, not basing my ultimate

happiness on actual consequences. The point here is that there needs to be some antecedent basis for deciding the first-order questions about what I should do, before I can put into practice the second-order maxims to do what my first-order morals requires resolutely and without regard to matters external to our good willing.

Typically, commentators on Descartes's ethics emphasize, as Marshall does, the thinness of Descartes's first-order morals. Gueroult, even before Marshall, went so far as to call such morals "impossible" (xxx 197). And no recent commentators emphasize changes in this first-order morals. But arguably it is precisely in terms of this first order morals that one would most expect Descartes's "most perfect moral system" (IXB:14/1:186) to differ most from his *morale par provision*. As noted above, it is only the second and third maxims (those most clearly second-order) that Descartes sees as "most certain" (IV:25/1:123), and it seems *prima facie* likely that it would be with respect to what one actually ought to do (first-order) that the developed and systematic morals promised in the *Principles* would be most useful. In this section, then, I trace the development of Descartes's first order morals. In my view (contra Marshall), Descartes provides criteria that individuals can use to decide first-order moral questions throughout his moral theorizing. He never arrives at the final and perfect moral system that would definitively set the parameters for answer these questions, but he moves towards that system, in fits and starts. The result is a loss of pragmatic and default deference to law and custom in favor of principled and critical commitment to the good of the communities of which one is a part, and a shift from an Aristotelian emphasis on moderation and imitation of moral exemplars to an insistence on the importance of reason, conscience, and following one's well-regulated (but not necessarily "moderate") passions, particularly love.

5.1. First-order ethics in the *Discourse*: Conservative Aristotelianism

To start with the *Discourse*, the maxim for deciding first-order moral questions is the first, and this maxim has three distinct elements:

[1] obey the laws and customs of my country...,^{xxxi} and [2] governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions – [3] the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live ... [by] attend[ing] to what they did rather than what they said. (IV:23/1.123)

This maxim has often been criticized for being overly conservative or deferential, but for our purposes, what is most important is that it lays out a method for deciding what to do. To take Marshall's example, "Should I eat this food?" can be answered, first, by considering whether consumption of the food is prohibit (or required) under the laws and customs of one's country. An Indian (in certain parts of India) would not eat beef; an American (in most parts of the United States) would not eat cockroaches, and if she is a child, she will not eat anything offered by strangers without consulting her parents. I will generally eat food in restaurants or purchased from a reputable vender or given by an acquaintance not known to be my enemy. These are the customs of my country. Of course, there are a wide variety of eating practices in the United States, from vegans and vegetarians to Adkin's- or "paleo"-dieters. But

these are not the most moderate attitudes, so (by [2]) I will not follow them, unless (by [3]) I see that all or most of those I deem most sensible adhere to them (in practice).

This maxim does not, as Marshall argues, require that I ultimately follow my “pre-doubt moral opinions” in order, for example, to “determine who the sensible people are” (Marshall 1998:27), and it does (or at least may) require that I act in ways that I would not independently consider to be the best. It is not a maxim of first-order autonomy, where I make every decision in the light of what I personally judge about the matter at the time. I might think that societal prohibitions on cannibalism are fetishistic taboos,^{xxxii} but according to this third maxim, I will not eat the bodies of my relatives, since this is neither lawful nor customary in my society, and even if practiced by some, it is not the “least extreme” nor practiced by the “most sensible.” I need not judge someone less sensible than another merely because they differ with me on a particular moral judgment, so I can suspend my pre-doubt moral opinions in particular cases, preferring to follow the examples of others rather until I have solid grounds for alternative moral judgments.

Moreover, this maxim is not simply what Descartes, in a state of doubt, could “hardly do better” than to follow (Cimakasky and Polansky 2012:356). It is not at all obvious that one should follow laws and customs of one’s country rather than, say, those of one’s upbringing or those of the country that seems best based on one’s prereflective moral convictions. And it is not obvious that one should follow the example of sensible people rather than one’s own (albeit fallible) conscience or even one’s own whims and desires (within the bounds of the law). And it is not obvious that one should pursue the most moderate opinions. And finally, Descartes seems to *equate* what is “most moderate” with what is “accepted...by the most sensible people,” but this seems at best to be a tendentious empirical claim, and likely to be false for many particular courses of action. Instead of a flaccid appeal to the prima facie plausibility of this maxim, I suggest that Descartes is adopting and defending a broadly Aristotelian approach to first order morals, one enriched by an understanding of the role of local custom on moral life (one shared by, for instance, Montaigne). The strongest evidence for this Aristotelian heritage comes from the appeal to what is “moderate” combined with the identification of “moderate” with what “sensible people” do. As Aristotle insists, “Virtue ... lies in ... the mean relative to us, this being determined by ... that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1107a1-3).^{xxxiii} While there are strong Stoic resonances to his later maxims, the emphasis on moderation and the identification of this with “sensible people” rings most strongly of Aristotle. And as in the case of Aristotle, this maxim provides the framework for a general first-order moral theory. Descartes does not lay out all of the details of such a theory, but his appeal to Aristotle could be seen as an implicit reference to virtue-theories of broadly Aristotelian sorts. At the level of first order morals, what Descartes recommends in the *Discourse* is an Aristotelian virtue ethic bounded by the laws and customs of the place in which one finds oneself.

Descartes does not, of course, *simply adopt* Aristotle’s first-order ethics; his own differs from Aristotle’s in three important respects. First, Descartes does not commit himself to the particular virtues

that Aristotle endorses. The framework for doing ethics will be similar: one should seek to find the mean with respect to any course of action by considering what those with practical wisdom do. But there's no reason to think Descartes will be bound by the specifics of any particular Aristotelian ethical code. Second, Descartes offers arguments for his choice of sensible people and moderation that are different from Aristotle's. Aristotle explicitly sees the focus on the mean as a way of governing oneself by reason, but Descartes explicitly sees his deference and his focus on moderate views as ways of mitigating the damage of acting *without* clear rational grounds for one's actions. This is clearest in the case of his choice of what's moderate, where he chooses these courses of action because they "are the easiest to act upon" and "so that if I make a mistake, I should depart less from the right path than I would if I chose one extreme rather than the other" (VII:23/1:122-3). And finally, Descartes's Aristotelian first-order morals is explicitly culturally relative. This is most evident in his deference to laws and customs, but even his turn to the most sensible people is a turn to the "most sensible *of those with whom I should have to live*" (VII:23/1:122). Here Descartes adopts a relatively common modern response to the problem of cultural pluralism, one evident, for instance, in Montaigne's exhortation, after laying out in detail all the variety and arbitrariness of custom, that

There is a vast difference between the case of one who follows the forms and laws of his country, and of another who will undertake to regulate and change them; of whom the first pleads simplicity, obedience, and example for his excuse, who, whatever he shall do, it cannot be imputed to malice; 'tis at the worst but misfortune: "Quis est enim, quem non moveat clarissimis monumentis testata consignataque antiquitas?" besides what Isocrates says, that defect is nearer allied to moderation than excess: the other is a much more ruffling gamester; for whosoever shall take upon him to choose and alter, usurps the authority of judging, and should look well about him, and make it his business to discern clearly the defect of what he would abolish, and the virtue of what he is about to introduce. (*Essays*, Essay 1: Of Custom)^{xxxiv}

Montaigne's recommendation and justification for it are echoed in Descartes's own first maxim, which we might thus legitimately see as a combination of Aristotelian deference to the moderation of wise fellows and Montaignean deference to local law and custom.

Particularly when combined with a deference to law and custom, Descartes's Aristotelianism provides a good general framework for first-order moral decision-making. In any given case, we are to obey laws, follow customs, and where these underdetermine what to do, we are to do what is "moderate," where this is based on what we see the most admirable among us doing. As it turns out, however, Descartes quickly abandons key elements of this first-order ethics, diminishing the degree of deference to law and custom while replacing an Aristotelian emphasis on moderation and following wise exemplars with Stoic emphases on conscience and our membership in a spheres of affinity.

5.2. The role of love

One crucial shift in Descartes first-order moral theory arises from his emphasis on love, an emphasis that he introduces in strikingly Stoic terms. The “truth” that “one is, in effect, one part of the universe and, more particularly even, one part of this earth, one part of this state, and this society and this family, to which one is joined by his home, by his oath, by his birth” immediately gives rise, for Descartes, to a first-order moral principle: “It is always necessary to prefer the interests of the whole, of which one is a part, to those of one’s person in particular” (To Elizabeth, 15 Sept 1645, IV:293/Shapiro 112; compare Diogenes xxx). And even as this preference should take place “with measure and discretion,” Descartes does not leave this discretion to an Aristotelean deference to the mean or the wise man; rather, he gives a determinate *formula*^{xxxv} for determining the relative weight of interests. He explains this in the letter by means of an example that sets a limit on self-sacrifice: “If a man is worth more on his own than all the rest of his city, he would not be right to sacrifice himself to save it” (ibid., IV:293/Shapiro 112), but in his *Passions*, he makes the point more general:

when we esteem the object of our love less than ourselves, we have only a simple affection for it; when we esteem it equally with ourselves, this is named friendship; and when we esteem it more, the passion may be named devotion ... Now the difference between these three sorts of love becomes apparent principally through their effects, for inasmuch as in all of them we consider ourselves as joined and united to the thing loved, we are always ready to abandon the lesser part of the whole we compose with it in order to preserve the other. (§ 83, IV:390/1:357/Voss 64)

Because esteem is based on the “greatness” of its object (§54, IV:373/1:350/Voss 52), this provides a framework for making first-order moral decisions. If I am trying to decide whether or not to eat beef, for example, I no longer look only to the laws and customs of my country. I can also consider the cow itself, for whom I should rightly feel some affection, as well as the people whose lives are wrapped up in the industry of providing beef, and those who might otherwise eat food grown on land presently devoted to feed for beef. On the basis of such considerations, one can “*examine* in particular all the mores of the places where one lives in order to know just how far they should be followed” (To Elizabeth, 15 Sept 1645, IV:295/Shapiro 113). Rather than a deference to the wise amongst whom one lives, or even to some Aristotelian ideal of moderation, Descartes suggests a standard – one that in principle could even be quantified – for deciding between one’s own interests and those of others.^{xxxvi}

5.3. Reason and conscience.

See IV:316-17, Shapiro 121-2

Perhaps also tie to perfectionism IV:283-4, 284-5, 287.

See too to liz 4:411-12, 4:529-30

Tie to Shapiro 1999 article, also Gueroult p. 196.

In response to Descartes's earliest articulation of this Stoic first-order ethics of love, Elizabeth raises a pressing problem:

How is one to measure the evils that one brings upon oneself for the sake of the public against the good which will accrue to the public, without the evils seeming greater to us inasmuch as our idea of them is more distinct? And which measure will we have for comparing those things that are not known to us equally well, such as our own merit and that of those with whom we live? A naturally arrogant person will always tip the balance in his favor, and a modest one will esteem himself less than he is worth. (30 Sept. 1645, IV:303/Shapiro 115)

There are several dimensions to Descartes's response here, including an invocation of his Augustinian metaphysics of perfections (IV:308-9) and a very interesting proto-Smithian claim that in practical terms in a well-ordered society, there will be little conflict between pursuing the good of the whole and seeking one's own good because "God has so established the order of things and conjoined men together in so tight a society that even if each person related himself wholly to himself, and had no charity for others, he would not ordinarily fail to work for them in everything that would be in his power, so long as he used prudence" (IV:316/Shapiro 122). But the essence of his answer is an appeal to *conscience*: "I confess that it is difficult to measure exactly just to what degree reason ordains that we be interested in the public good. But this is not a matter in which it is necessary to be very exact. It suffices to satisfy one's conscience [" (IV:316/Shapiro 121). Combined with his claim that "only the weak and base esteem themselves more than they ought [and] I know that your Highness is not among these" (IV:317/Shapiro 121), this might seem like merely a patronizing dodge of Elizabeth's question. But in fact, the appeal to conscience and its related invocation of reason is an important shift in first-order morals from an Aristotelian moderation to Stoic and late medieval autonomy.

Within the ancient Stoics, the notion of conscience involved a capacity for self-regulation through the law of nature (see xxx), and later medieval philosophers enriches this account through a distinction between two closely related concepts of "conscience and "synderesis," which provides general principles of morals, and "conscience" proper, which is the "application of knowledge to activity."^{xxxvii} Lisa Shapiro has elegantly shown that rather than being a mere dodge, this appeal to basic capacities for discerning right from wrong is consistent with Descartes's overall approach to knowledge throughout his philosophy. As she explains, "discerning what we perceive clearly and distinctly, so that we might affirm these ideas, is analogous to judging a course of action to be the best," and while we "whether our perceptions are clearly or not ... is something we know perfectly well from our own inner awareness," still "in order to perceive an idea clearly and distinctly [one] must first put himself in the proper position" (Shapiro 1999:264). The *Meditations* is a careful exercise in freeing oneself from the domination of the senses that make certain truths *seem* clear when in fact they are obscure – and, upon careful reflection,

obviously obscure. And most of the work of the *Discourse* and *Meditations* is spent not cataloguing clear and distinct truths but setting out a method and a meditative practice that will enable readers to discover and identify those clear and distinct truths through the use of their own reason. Likewise in the case of conscience, Descartes does not list out all of the first-order moral truths discernable through conscience. But he does emphasize a few general and important such truths, such as that we should, in deliberation about what to do, distinguish what depends upon us from what is due to Fortune. But more importantly, he sets about to provide guidance for the control of the passions that “[mis]represent the goods the incite us to seek as much greater than they actually are” (IV:295/Shapiro 113). Just as, in the epistemic context, the main task is to free oneself of the enticements of the senses in order to focus on what is given clearly and distinctly by reason, so in the ethical context freeing oneself from the illusions of the passions will enable one to recognize the required course of action through conscience.

Often, the emphasis on conscience takes the form of a direction to heed *reason*. Thus xxx reason paragraph xxx. asdf

Sometimes, however, Descartes emphasizes having trust in something like conscience even when reason is insufficient. Thus Descartes can say that for one who is properly focused on what belongs to her and who has freed herself as much as possible from the exaggerations of the passions,

Concerning the important actions of life, when they present themselves so unclearly that prudence cannot teach us what we ought to do, it seems to me that we have good reason to follow the advice of our “daimon” and that it is useful to have a strong belief that the things we undertake without repugnance and with the freedom which ordinarily accompanies joy will not fail to succeed for us. (To Elizabeth November 1746, 4:530/Shapiro 149).

There is room for general “prudence,” that thoughtful common sense that thinks through the implications of actions, but then there is often also a need to listen to what we might call a voice of conscience, the daimon within that directs us to particular courses of action even without providing the conviction provided by reason. To best understand this advice, it’s useful to remember the Epicurean point that the pursuit of virtue is ultimately grounded in the need for a goal that prevent excessive desire and avoid unnecessary regret and repentance (see §3). Within the limits set by reason, we should trust even our hunches about what to do and pursue the courses of actions suggested by these hunches. In cases that are otherwise unclear, even an imperfect conscience provides us with a goal towards which we can aim to win the ultimate prize of happiness.

5.4. Law and Custom Revisited

Asdfasdf Ther

Xxx“Whereas in the *Discourse* deference to the laws and customs of one’s country is presented as the first rule of provisional morality, to Elisabeth it is offered as a fallback position, acknowledging that while we do indeed possess certain knowledge of good and evil, there are limits to this knowledge” (Rutherford 2013:10xxxfix).

1. Not so conversative. Argue vs. secondary lit that obscures the differneces here...note how radical a shift this is.
2. Remains deferential to law and custom, church and state as proper loci of concern
 - a. Note that this is *not*, at least not in letters, a social contract theory; rather, it’s holistic! (contra Marshall) This is also why friendship is important, but not as important as membership in larger communities.

Descartes also enriches this account with an implicit appeal to the different *roles* that different parts of a whole can play in the good of that whole. xxx

Striking that this doesn’t come up *at all* in the *Passions*.

Note more metaphysically grounded, not as Marshall thinks (social contract) but in terms of wholes. This is also, I think, the best way to read his political theory, infatuation with Hobbes, etc. What Descartes appreciates in Hobbes is his holism, not his social contract theory. This also explains his deference to kings and principles as the head of the whole...it’s simply not his place, and not a well-operating whole, if subjects dictate morals to the whole.

But it *is* up to each individual to figure out for herself what it is conducive for *her to do* to benefit that whole. *This* is a huge shift from the *morale*, one that reflects increased confidence in his moral theory, but also a fundamentally individualist view of agency and responsibility, even while shifting to a holistic theory of the good/value. xxx

Note the continued insistence that it’s up to kings and principles to decide on morals for others.

- (1) Each individual has a responsibility for himself. Our primarily responsibility towards the wholes of which we are parts is (a) identification through love, (b) addressing those ills that we can do something about (e.g. D’s lifelong interest in furthering medicine).

- (2) The king is the part of the body that has responsibility for ethical direction, so (a) and (b) have implication for him that are different...he needs to set good ethics.
- (3) But Descartes (and the rest of us) can *support* the king by doing all of the physics necessary to get good morals. Hence the *Passions*, as offered for public consumption, has two audiences:
 - a. Individuals trying to live as best as they can for themselves. D doesn't tell them what to do, but only gives the physics for them to decide for themselves.
 - b. Sovereigns trying to set ethical laws and policies, where again D doesn't tell them what to do, but only gives the physics for them to decide on the best (most happiness-conducive) laws.

6. Conclusion

Never get a final moral theory...he had to do morals too early.

Much of *morale* remains, and basic epicurean structure remains, but changed in basis (better grounded) and sometimes in substance (first order, emphasis on free will, love of God and others).

Increased emphasis on disciplines for *coming to be* moral (even in Meditations!) rather than just on what to do.

ⁱ Throughout, references are to the volume and page number in Adam and Tannery's edition of Descartes's Oeuvre, following by the volume and page number in Cottingham, Stoothof, and Murdoch's (and Kenny's) *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. For the correspondence with Elizabeth, references are given to the Shapiro edition of *The Correspondence between Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia and Rene Descartes* rather than to the Cottingham, Stoothof, Murdoch, and Kenny edition.

ⁱⁱ Even the most important moral writing prior to this, the *morale par provision* of the *Discourse*, was written because Descartes "was compelled to include these rules because of people like the Schoolmen" who "otherwise would have said that he was a man without any religion or faith and that he intended to use his method to subvert them" (Conversations with Burman, V:178/3:352-3). The ethical correspondence with Elizabeth starts in earnest with his letter of the 21 July, 1645, in which he proposes reading Seneca's *De vita beata* with her. The best edition of this correspondence is Lisa Shapiro's *The Correspondence between Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia and Rene Descartes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Only in that edition are Elizabeth's insightful letters included with Descartes's responses.

ⁱⁱⁱ In French, the engagement with Descartes ethics goes back at least to xxx give secondary sources footnote xxx.

^{iv} For similar accounts of the *morale par provision*, see too Espinas 1925:16-18; Gilson 1947:81, 231-4; Rodis-Lewis 1957: 20; Sorell 1993:286-8; Williston 2003:12; and Ariew 2010:173-4. For a much more complex account that nonetheless sees the *morale* as provisional, see Cummings 1955.

^v See Rutherford 2013 and references in note 1.

^{vi} Rodis-Lewis 1957:21-22 makes a similar point about the second maxim. Le Dœuff 1989 offers yet a third kind of intermediate reading, a more pessimistic one according to which Descartes's "discourse can never be a simply and univocal one" because (among other reasons) while the phrase *par provision* clearly (on her reading) indicates that the *morale* is meant to be permanent, the metaphoric "imagery plainly suggests a duality concerning morality," whereby the *morale* is merely provisional, awaiting a finished moral theory with solid foundations (Le Dœuff 1989:97, 93).

^{vii} Most of Cimaskasy and Polansky's article is devoted not to these proof-texts but to a detailed analysis of the four maxims in terms of the four rules from Discourse Part Two and the four cardinal virtues. As I note below, I find the analysis of the connection to the rules of the part two to point in precisely the opposite direction from what they suggest. In every case, the connection between the relevant rule and the corresponding maxim is *not* a matter of showing how the maxim is arrived at through applying the relevant rule to investigating moral problems, but rather a pragmatic necessity given the nature of the rule.

^{viii} In leaning heavily on his metaphors in order to bolster the case for the traditional reading, my interpretation of Descartes is basically in line with Le Dœuff 1989:91-99.

^{ix} To these arguments, I would add the well-laid out set of connections that Cimaskasy and Polansky draw between the epistemic rules of *Discourse* Two and the maxims of *Discourse* Three (cf. too Cumming 1955). While they employ these connections in order to defend their strong reading of the permanence of the moral, most of the connections they actually draw are clearly pragmatic, connections that reinforce rather than challenge the interpretation of "derived from the method" offered by Rodis-Lewis (and others): "It is not 'derived from the method' as a consequence of the four rules of the second part, but rather applies in order to permit their rigorous application" (Rodis-Lewis 1970:18). Thus, for instance, they show that "the reason for this [first] moral maxim is the doubt enjoined by the first rule of the method," but the *way* that this doubt provides a reason is not through being the first step in a proof of the legitimacy of the maxim but rather because "while doubting ..., because he lacks certainty, he can hardly do better than to hold to those customs and conventions unanimously accepted by those among whom he lives" (Cimaskasy and Polansky 2012: 356). This shows only that the first maxim is a necessary *expedient* given the scientific project derived from the rules; it gives no reason to think that the maxim must outlive that project. In general, most explanations of how the maxims are "derived" from Descartes's method tend to support the traditional reading, according to which they are temporary pragmatic measures needed while carrying out the method. Comparing the justifications of them offered in the *Discourse* to the philosophical arguments in Part Four (where he proves that he exists, that there is a God, and so on) and to the treatises accompanying his *Discourse* (the *Optics*, *Meteorology*, and *Geometry*), it strikes me as implausible that he intended these maxims to be permanent first fruits of his method rather than temporary structures by which to live until he realized the true first fruits. The arguments in favor of reading the *morale* as a truly provisional morality, one meant to be replaced with a final morality, are compelling. And against Marshall's conception of this replacement as a gradual response to objections, there are good reasons to think that Descartes, from the start, saw his ultimate morality as ultimately rooted in a developed metaphysics and natural science.

^x *Meditations*, note the importance of that work for the discipline of moral formation...we need to meditate on these truths to keep them in mind...note parallel of freeing from senses in *Med* and freeing from bad desires in morals (cf. Cumming 1955).)

^{xi} The fourth is more tenuously grounded in metaphysics and will be discussed below. See §4, and see too Frierson 2002.

^{xii} Rutherford points out that these truths "do not consist of discoveries original to his philosophy. Rather, they reflect a general outlook on the world that could be embraced by someone without Cartesian sympathies" (2013:17). But that's beside the point. As Descartes emphasizes in an early letter to Beeckman, the fact that one shares an opinion with others does not imply that one has adopted it from them, nor that one's knowledge of it cannot be better (and different in kind) than theirs (see To [Beeckman] 17 Oct. 1630, I:158-9/1.27).

^{xiii} Moreover, one of the most important developments in his ethics is the increased centrality of "love," one justified in part through a (broadly Augustinian) concept of evil as privation, a concept developed, among other places, in his *Meditations* (see To Elizabeth, 6 Oct., 1645; IV:308/Shapiro 117; VII:54/2:58; see Naaman-Zauderer 2010 for discussion).

^{xiv} Descartes had discussed human freedom earlier than the *Meditations*, describing it in his earliest writings as one "three marvels" (X:218/1:5), but it comes to have systematic importance and be integrated with ethics only in (and after) the *Meditations*.

^{xv} For a detailed investigation of that claim, see Naaman-Zauderer 2012, especially chapter four.

^{xvi} Though this particularly concise definition was given by Elizabeth, it corresponds perfectly with Descartes's own language in his correspondence with her.

^{xvii} See, e.g., Marshall 1998 and Shapiro xxx.

^{xviii} There is passing mention of passions at VI:11, 55/1:116, 139, but no actual account of them. Likewise, Descartes only barely mentions passions in his *Treatise on Man*, drafted at about the same time as the *Discourse* (see XI:176, 202/1.106, 108).

^{xix} In my view, there is no evidence that this attention to the passions arose *out of* Descartes's philosophical work and every indication that Elizabeth prompted him to examine the ways that the passions affect deliberation and human happiness. But the increasing importance of the passions provided a context within which Descartes could connect his foundationalist approach to philosophy, his interest in medicine, and his moral theory. Once virtue is defined in terms of a self-mastery that is primarily threatened by the passions, a "physics" that examines the nature, origin, and possibility of manipulation of the passions becomes the natural "trunk" from which the "fruit" of morals can grow.

^{xx} Gilson 1962:248. For other Stoic readings of Descartes, particularly on the issue of the priority of virtue over happiness, see, e.g., Marshall 1998; Rodis-Lewis 1962, 1970; Rutherford 2004; Sorell 1993; and Svensson xxxx. See too Wee 2002, which is agnostic towards what she calls EP1 (the priority of personal happiness over altruistic virtue), but leans towards a more Stoic reading.

^{xxi} Importantly, even the most pro-Stoic recent commentators agree that there are several ways in which Descartes's moral theory departs from that of the Stoics. He explicitly espouses a more positive attitude towards the passions than the Stoics (see XI:485-8/1:403-4; To Chanut 1 Nov 1646, IV:538/3:300; and see Rutherford 2004:191-2). Against a Stoic posture of relatively passive resignation vis a vis nature, Descartes explicitly develops a system for "mak[ing] ourselves ... the lords and masters of nature" (IV: 62/1:142-3; and see Cottingham 1996). And unlike the Stoics, Descartes insists that control over passions must often be indirect and non-intellectual (see §2.3). The issue here is not about whether Descartes is Stoic in all of his details, but whether – with the Stoics – he sees virtue as such as humans' fundamental and ultimate end (with pleasure, or what Descartes calls happiness as a frequent added effect), or whether – with Epicurus – he sees pleasure as humans' ultimate end (with virtue as the effective means to that end). In this context, Rutherford and Marshall advocate a Stoic reading, while Gueroult advocates an Epicurean one.

^{xxii} Gueroult also presents a developmental view, but one in which Descartes is consistently Epicurean.

^{xxiii} For discussion of Descartes's relationship to ancient stoicism and modern neo-stoicism, see Ariew 2010; D'Angers 1974; and Rutherford 2004.

^{xxiv} "Those philosophers" are consistently described as Stoics, but there is no reason not to include Epicurus (or Lucretius), who emphasized that "The study of nature does not create men who are fond of boasting and chattering or who show off the culture that impresses the many, but rather men who are strong and self-sufficient, and who take pride in their own personal qualities not in those that depend on external circumstances." (Vatican Sayings, #44; see too Principle Doctrines #16)

^{xxv} I have not yet addressed Marshall's philosophical argument for prioritizing virtue. I deal with that below.

^{xxvi} Here I pass over Descartes's metaphor of two vessels. For discussion, cf. Svensson xxx, xxx.

^{xxvii} I here merely offer this Epicurean reading of Descartes's mature moral philosophy. A full defense requires a more extensive argument. See Frierson, under review.

^{xxviii} This could, presumably, be justified in terms of divine goodness, though Descartes also entertains the possibility that God could have created us differently (see *Conversations with Burman*, V:160/3:343).

^{xxix} There are other important distinctions in this letter as well, such as between "the supreme good of all men together" and "the supreme good of each individual" and between those goods that "deserve only to be esteemed" and those that deserve to be "honored and praised" (V:82, 84/3:324, 325), but these are unnecessary in the present context.

^{xxx} Admittedly, in the letter to Christina, this is one of *three* reasons that we should make virtue the sovereign good; I have been arguing here that it is the most fundamental, at least from a first-person point of view, but one might reasonably push this point.

^{xxxi} For the purpose of this discussion, I ignore his additional clause – "holding constantly to the religion in which ... I had been instructed since my childhood."

^{xxxii} Arguably, Montaigne believes this (see xxx), but also – in line with Descartes's third maxim – judges that "xxx."

^{xxxiii} Descartes would almost certainly have read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as numerous commentaries on that work that reiterate this general point. See, for example, Thomas Aquinas's *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, lecture 7, especially §323, available at <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/Ethics2.htm#7>

^{xxxiv} As an educated Frenchman, Descartes had certainly read these *Essays*. See IV:573/3:302 for a specific reference to him.

^{xxxv} See too xxx, who emphasizes a related point (xxx:xxx).

^{xxxvi} One important note about this approach. There is a subtle difference between *Passions* and letter, both are ambiguous but lean in different directions. Letter strongly suggests *holism*, where it is the good of the whole that matter. This is quite different from the way that, e.g., Marshall reads Descartes, according to which his is a proto social contract theory and all about relations amongst individuals. As I read the letter, the point is not that we should prefer particular others but that we should prefer the whole itself. Thus it's not that an individual would have to be more important than each other, or even than all others, but rather that he'd have to be more important than the city as a whole (which might well be more than the sum of its parts). In the passions, the emphasis is more on the object of love as the particular other part, but even there, there is an implicit deference to the whole of which both are parts.

^{xxxvii} Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q19, A5, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2019.htm>. See too *Summa Theologiae*, I Q79, AA12-13; and Langston 2011. A full discussion of the history of the concept of conscience is beyond the scope of this essay. For discussion, see D. Langston 2011 "Medieval Theories of Conscience" *Stanford Encyclopedia* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conscience-medieval/> Sorabji, R. (2014) *Moral Conscience Through the Ages: Fifth Century BCE to the Present*, University of Chicago Press.