Contemporary discussions typically give somewhat short shrift to the theory of judgment Descartes advances in the Fourth Meditation. One reason for this relative neglect is presumably the prima facie implausibility of the theory. It sounds odd to say that, in believing something, one's mental affirmation is an act of free will, on a par with freely deciding what to do. In addition, Descartes advances the theory as a way to explain the possibility of human error, which doubtless strikes many as a rather esoteric undertaking. The need to explain error, moreover, arises because of the divine guarantee, and epistemic theodicy is a project unlikely to interest most contemporary readers. And because the theory of judgment postulates two mental faculties, it very probably evokes the general skepticism, and even hostility, we now have toward faculty psychologies of the sort that flourished in the nineteenth century.

Lack of interest in, and sympathy for, Descartes' theory of judgment is doubtless reinforced by the impression that the theory is relatively independent of Descartes' main position. In broad outline, the central argument of the Meditations consists of a vigorous challenge to all our claims to have knowledge, followed by a systematic reinstatement of much of that knowledge, newly based on solid epistemological procedures and reformulated in clear and distinct terms. Aside from Meditation IV, every Meditation after the First sets out to rehabilitate some area of knowledge that Meditation I had called into question.
Meditation IV, alone, seems to stand apart from this progressive reconstituting of knowledge. The theory of judgment can therefore come across as being relatively inessential for understanding the remaining Meditations.

My aim in this paper is to show that Descartes' theory of judgment and, in particular, his view about the role the will plays in judging, actually give us a satisfactory and penetrating account of the nature of mental acts. And I also argue that, contrary to initial appearances, that theory is an important and integral part of Descartes' overall position, and that we cannot correctly understand his views about mind and methodology without appeal to the theory of judgment.

In section I, I argue that the theory is the natural and inevitable result of conclusions Descartes has reached earlier in the Meditations about the nature of the mind. In section II, I address the role of the will in judging. I argue that whatever initial impression we may have that the will plays no such role is unfounded. I also show how Descartes' appeal to the will fits well with, and even helps explain, our commonsense conception of the nature of mental acts. And I also argue that, contrary to initial appearances, that theory is an important and integral part of Descartes' overall position, and that we cannot correctly understand his views about mind and methodology without appeal to the theory of judgment.

In section III, then, I take up and rebut the most important and penetrating objections to the theory, objections that might keep one not only from accepting it but even from giving it serious consideration. In section IV, finally, I briefly indicate a few of the ways in which it can be shown that the two-faculty theory of judgment helps us understand, and even defend, a number of doctrines Descartes holds about mind and methodology. To illustrate the importance of the theory in Descartes' thought, I discuss some of the consequences the theory has concerning the relation of language to thought, the doctrine of compelled assent, the role of doubt in the Meditations, and the cogito.

I. THE TWO-FACULTY THEORY

The problem that Descartes intends the theory of judgment to solve stems from the divine guarantee of Meditation III. The infinite perfection of his creator leads Descartes to conclude that he could have no "faculty that, rightly used, could lead [him] to err" (AT VII, 53-54; HR I, 172) and, indeed, no "faculty that is not perfect of its kind [in suo genere]" (AT VII, 55; HR I, 173). But errors do occur, and their occurrence "argue[s] that there is some imperfection in me" (AT VII, 56; HR I, 174). The problem is to square the imperfection in my mental nature that my errors indicate with the perfection that the divine guarantee confers on my faculties.

The way Descartes structures the preceding discussion makes this problem especially pressing. For one and the same set of considerations leads both to the discovery of my imperfection and to the divine guarantee. My doubting and desiring of things indicates a lack in me, thereby establishing that I am finite and imperfect. But, Descartes argues, I could not comprehend or recognize my own imperfection and finitude unless I already had, as a standard for comparison, an idea of what it is to be perfect and infinite, that is, an idea of an infinitely perfect being (AT VII, 45-46; HR I, 166). And only such a being could cause in me that idea. Descartes stresses that the conflict that Meditation IV is meant to resolve arises, in this way, from a single set of factors. For, in the opening paragraph of that Meditation, he summarizes the situation by reminding us that "when I direct my attention to . . . my being an incomplete and dependent thing, a clear and distinct idea occurs to me of an independent and complete being . . . " (AT VII, 53; HR I, 171-172).

Accounts of Descartes' solution usually emphasize the obvious analogy with traditional moral theodicy. Only if "rightly used" is it impossible for my faculty of judging to lead to errors. So a satisfactory solution must credit me with sufficient freedom of will in my making judgments to explain my errors as due to the wanton use of my faculty of judging. Difficulties for the theory then seem immediately to arise. Descartes also holds that "it is not possible for [him] not to judge something he apprehends as clearly [as the cogito] to be true" (AT VII, 58; HR I, 176). It seems he must therefore offer a contorted and ad hoc account of our freedom in making judgments, an account that undermines whatever little analogy does hold between judging falsely and wanton wrongdoing. And we do not, in any case, appear actually to have the kind of freedom in making judgments that the analogy requires.

Descartes himself stresses the ways in which his theory of judging relies on analogies with moral behavior (e.g., letter to Mersenne: AT IV, 173; K, 159-160). Indeed, in section II, I exploit such analogies in arguing that the theory is, despite initial appearances, intuitively natural. But the particular analogy with traditional theodicy is highly misleading as a model for understanding the problem Descartes meant his theory to deal with. What is crucial is not the way in which freedom does or does not figure in our judging, but whether the faculty of judging is a single, unified aspect of our mental nature. Descartes' formulation of the problem makes this clear.

At the outset of Meditation IV, just after reviewing his earlier conclusion that deception implies imperfection, Descartes writes that "I
experienced in myself a certain faculty of judging [judicandi facultatem]” (AT VII, 53; HR I, 172). The past tense here presumably refers to the end of Meditation II, where he had used the same phrase, judicandi facultas, to talk about whatever it is in his mind (in mente mei) that enables him to judge, for example, that the things moving in the street are people, and not merely hats and coats. The issue in the earlier passage is whether Descartes knows the wax “by eyesight” or “solely by an inspection of the mind” (AT VII, 32; HR I, 155–156). The faculty of judgment is mentioned there as whatever it is in his mental nature that enables him to make judgments. It is that aspect of his mental nature which makes judging possible.

There is nothing difficult or problematic about Descartes’ notion of a faculty. It is just the power or capacity to do something. Nor is there anything questionable about his inference that a faculty of judging exists. He makes judgments, so he must have the capacity to do so. The reasoning is from the exercise of a capacity to its existence. As he explains to Arnauld:

...we always have actual consciousness of the actions and operations of our mind; but not always of faculties or powers [facultatum, sive potentiarum], except potentially; so that when we turn ourselves to the exercise of any faculty, if that faculty is in the mind, we become actually aware of it. (AT VII, 246–247; HR II, 115) 3

Although it is unproblematic in the Second Meditation, the idea of a faculty of judging leads to difficulties in the Fourth. Errors are just false judgments. So my faculty of judging is that aspect of my mental nature which is responsible for my errors. Since my errors “argue that there is some imperfection in me,” that imperfection must pertain to my faculty of judging. But I can have no faculty that is not perfect of its kind. So, if my faculty of judging is a single, undifferentiated aspect of my mental nature, we have a contradiction. An aspect of my nature that, by the divine guarantee, is perfect of its kind, gives rise to errors and is thus imperfect.

Since my faculty of judging is just whatever aspect of my nature enables me to make judgments, I can hope to learn more about that faculty by examining the character of those judgments. In particular, I may be able thus to learn whether the faculty responsible for my judgments is a single aspect of my nature, as it initially appears to be (AT VII, 32; HR I, 156), or instead involves more than one factor. What it is to be a judgment may help us learn what it is in us that makes them possible. This is clearly Descartes’ strategy. For it is upon

“investigating the nature of my errors [qualesnam sint errores mei]” that he announces his view that they “depend on two concurrent causes”: the faculty of understanding, and the faculty of choosing (eligendi) or free will (AT VII, 56; HR I, 174).

What is it about the nature of his errors that convinces Descartes that they “depend” on the interaction of two distinct faculties? Descartes says nothing about the nature of his errors in or around the passage just quoted. So it is reasonable to conclude that he regards himself as having investigated their nature earlier. And, since errors are just false judgments, he has in fact done so when, in Meditation III, he inquires what it is that truth and falsity, properly speaking, consist in.

In that passage, Descartes “divide[s] all [his] thoughts [cogitationes] into certain kinds.” The division is twofold: ideas, properly so called, and “others,” such as volitions and judgments. Ideas are somewhat like (tangvatim) images, presumably in that they purport to represent things. The “others” share this representative character; they also are always about things. But they have an additional aspect (alias . . . formas), which is exemplified “when I desire, when I fear, when I affirm, when I deny.” Ideas cannot properly be said to be false—nor, presumably, true; the same holds of volitions. Only judgments can be true or false (AT VII, 36–37; HR I, 159–160).

Descartes’ division here is clearly based on the structure of propositional attitudes. Judgments, being true and false, must be propositional. But they also involve an aspect in addition to the representative character they share with ideas, an aspect exemplified by desiring, fearing, affirming, and denying. The additional aspect must therefore be the mental attitude that, together with propositional content, constitutes all mental acts. And, since these mental acts result from adding a mental attitude to an idea, ideas must be just propositional contents. 4 Descartes impatiently explains the passage to Hobbes by an analogy. An idea is like seeing a lion, or seeing a person run, presumably because both involve only a representing of something. Fearing a lion “at the same time,” and affirming to oneself that one sees that person running, are different, since they involve also some mental attitude (AT VII, 182–183; HR II, 69). That the structure of propositional attitudes underlies Descartes’ division of “all [his] thoughts” is also attested by his giving catalogues of propositional mental acts when he explains, in Meditations II and III, what it is to be a thinking thing (AT VII, 28 and 34; HR I, 153 and 157).

There is indirect textual evidence for thinking that Descartes has the division of Meditation III in mind when, in the next Meditation,
he talks of investigating the nature of his errors. In the Third Meditation passage, he begins by considering "all [his] thoughts," and asking "in which of them truth and falsity consist." But having made his division, he then speaks, in the next paragraph, only of judgments being false, and not also of their being true. So that paragraph turns out to be about just those of our judgments which are errors.

In any case, Descartes' division does explain how the nature of errors and, more generally, of judgments, prompts his two-faculty theory. The propositional content of any particular judgment can occur without the mental attitude that goes into that judgment, for it can occur with many other mental attitudes. Similarly, affirming and denying, which are the mental attitudes distinctive of judging, can occur without the propositional content that is involved in any particular judgment. These two aspects of judgments—their attitude and content—are therefore distinct components. In Descartes' technical terminology, they are modally distinct (Principles I, 61: AT VIII-1, 29; HR I, 244). When in Meditation II Descartes takes judgments to be undifferentiated unities, the making of judgments was sufficient to make him aware of a faculty, or power, that makes judging possible. His new awareness in Meditation III of the two distinct components of judgments accordingly leads, in the Fourth Meditation, to his awareness of two corresponding faculties: a faculty whose exercise supplies propositional content, and another whose exercise results in the holding of mental attitudes.

The two-faculty theory of judging, therefore, does not result from any analogy with the role played by free will in traditional theodicy. Rather, the theory is a direct response to the difficulty of conceiving of judgments as being due to a single, undifferentiated aspect of our mental nature. By itself, the idea that more than one cognitive capacity plays a role in our making judgments, and that the interaction of such capacities helps explain how some judgments end up being erroneous, is neither novel nor in conflict with common sense. But one of the factors common sense tends to regard as playing a role in judging is sense perception. This Descartes' dualism does not allow. For he holds that sensory qualities are products of the interaction between body and mind (AT VII, 81; HR I, 192). And, as the wax passage makes clear, he thinks of judging as a purely mental activity. So, if judging is to involve more than one cognitive capacity, the faculties Descartes invokes must all be purely mental.

That judging should involve understanding things is straightforward enough. The problem is about Descartes' deploying the faculty of will as the other factor. If he does not do so because of an analogy with the role free will plays in traditional theodicy, we must ask whether he has any satisfactory reason for claiming that it figures at all in our making judgments, and for giving the account he does of the will and of what it is for the will to be free. It has seemed to most commentators that the role he assigns free will in his theory of judging is both unmotivated and misguided. Thus Zeno Vendler, for example, suggests that Descartes assigned the task of generating mental attitudes to the will only because "nothing but the will is available in the scholastic arsenal besides the understanding to handle the higher functions of man." I want now to argue that far more compelling considerations are available to explain Descartes' appeal to the will.

II. MOTIVATION AND EXPLANATORY VALUE

When Descartes divides all his thoughts in Meditation III, he mentions four mental attitudes: desiring, fearing, affirming, and denying. Affirming and denying are the two kinds of judging that involve opposing mental attitudes one can take toward a proposition. Desiring and fearing also have the structure of propositional attitudes, and again involve opposing attitudes. If we attributed the attitude of desiring to the operation of the will, it would be the will. So it is reasonable to regard fearing, insofar as it is a propositional attitude and not a bodily feeling, as due to an aversive act of the will. That Descartes has these considerations in mind seems clear from the parallel passage in the Principles (I, 32); there, the mental attitudes he lists as due to the operation of the will are desiring (cupere), aversion (aversari), affirming, denying, and doubting (AT VIII-1, 17; HR I, 232). Descartes' aim is to find some faculty whose operation explains the mental-attitude component of these and other mental acts. For it is reasonable to hold that the faculty of understanding explains the propositional content of mental acts; we cannot perform any mental act without understanding its propositional content (letter to Regius: AT VIII, 372; K, 102). The will is the obvious candidate to explain the mental attitudes of two of the most salient mental acts: desire and aversion. It is thus natural to try out the hypothesis that its operation is responsible for all other mental attitudes as well.

This hypothesis is, of course, far from initially compelling. The will's involvement with one pair of mental attitudes does not imply any connection with the other. And the traditional view of the will is that, whatever its role in conative mental acts, it plays none whatever in cognitive acts. Moreover, there seems to be no obvious reason to
take conative acts as paradigms of mental acts generally, especially since they figure far from prominently in the lists of mental acts Descartes gives.

It will help here to see exactly what role the will does appear to play in the conative cases. For only then will it be clear whether parallel considerations apply to cognitive mental acts. The most compelling reason to associate the will with conative attitudes is the connection those attitudes have with action. Though this consideration is of course unavailable in Meditation IV, it is nonetheless central to the way we think about the will and the way it operates. The more intense a desire or aversion is, the stronger we expect its impact on action to be. Moreover, the strength of desires and aversions is at least in part a function of the object of desire or aversion. Highly attractive or repulsive objects prompt powerful conative attitudes—powerful both in their felt intensity and in their probable effect on action. When two incompatible options have us undecided, we may feel torn, or pulled in opposite directions, and the opposing tendencies to affect action may then cancel each other, or come close to doing so.

There is a popular paradigm, according to which we can abstract from the great variety of kinds of mental attitudes we have, and explain behavior as due simply to the combined operation of systems of interrelated beliefs and desires. On this model, beliefs contribute the cognitive content required for behavior, and the impetus for action is due solely to our desires. However useful this model may be as a theory or an experimental paradigm, it is quite misleading when applied to the actual dynamics of our mental lives. Our desires always have cognitive content; they could not be formulated save in propositional or conceptual terms. And beliefs are no less necessary for causing actions than desires. It is common to note that somebody with many beliefs but no desires will presumably do nothing. But a person with desires but no beliefs would be no less inactive, and no less mentally paralyzed.

Once we correct for the distortion the belief-desire model tends to induce, it is clear that the considerations that lead us to associate the will with conative mental attitudes apply as well to mental acts such as judging, doubting, and the like. We experience beliefs, doubts, and affirmative and negative judgments as having different intensities, just as we do with desires and aversions. And the more firmly we believe, doubt, and judge, the stronger the tendency is for us to do whatever, in the context of our other mental states, that belief, doubt, or judgment inclines us to do. A strong desire coupled with a weak belief may well be no more likely to lead to action than a weak desire accompanied by a strong belief.

Do the objects of belief affect the intensity or firmness with which we believe things, in the way that attractive or repulsive objects affect the intensity of our desires or aversions? The answer to this question requires care. For we may slip into thinking that the objects of belief and desire are different sorts of things. What we believe is, of course, propositional; but it is tempting to think that what we desire are the objects, typically extramental objects, whose acquisition would satisfy our desires. The present context, however, plainly requires that we take the objects of desire and aversion to be propositional, just like those of belief. It is not because a particular painting, say, is so attractive that one desires it so strongly; it is because the idea of one’s having it is so attractive. The more attractive the idea, the more intense our desire.

It is clear that parallel remarks apply to belief. The objects of beliefs do affect the intensity with which we believe things in the way the objects of desire do with our desiring. Indeed, this observation is pivotal to Descartes’ view about the role in cognition of clear and distinct perception. When a proposition we believe is cognitively highly attractive—that is, plausible—we believe it with greater conviction than we believe only moderately plausible propositions. Of course, how attractive a proposition is, cognitively, may well be affected by lots of extrinsic factors: our other beliefs, and conative factors such as laziness, habit, or a desire to deceive ourselves. But the same is true of the objects of our desires and aversions. The overall attractiveness of the idea of getting or avoiding something is often a product of factors in addition to how intrinsically attractive that idea is.

Some propositional objects of both belief and desire are, of course, highly attractive in their own right, independent of any such extrinsic factors. Elementary mathematical propositions are cognitively very attractive, regardless of what else we believe or desire. In the conative realm, the propositions that I survive and that I not suffer are intrinsically highly attractive. These propositions, when they enter into suitable mental acts, induce in us very intensely felt beliefs and desires, which have a proportionately powerful effect in determining what we do.

Perhaps there are propositional objects of belief or desire that owe their high degree of attractiveness solely to their intrinsic character. Then, perhaps, when they entered in a clearly recognizable way into our beliefs and desires, their effect on our mental lives would be overwhelming and irresistible, no matter what else we believed and desired. Such is Descartes’ view about the effect some propositional contents have, cognitively, when we distinctly and attentively apprehend them (AT VII, 58–59, 69–70, 144–145; HR I, 176, 183–184, II, 41).
But whatever our verdict about that view, it is reasonable to conclude that the propositional objects of judgments, like those of desires and aversions, do affect the intensity and conviction with which we make our judgments. If so, the principal considerations that lead us to associate the will with our conative mental acts apply equally to our cognitive mental attitudes.

Despite those considerations, however, we feel that what we desire is up to us in a way that what we believe is not (see W, 145 and C, 176–178). And it is likely to strike us that this disanalogy undermines the idea that the will plays any role in our believing things. It is only when the mental attitude we adopt is up to us, one may argue, that the will is operative. But when highly attractive objects are in question, we speak of being gripped or even overcome by desire; the more powerfully an object of desire moves us, the less it is up to us whether or not we shall desire it. The more indifferent we are about such objects, the more control we can readily exert over the relevant desires. Belief behaves similarly. We have little control over whether to believe things when they strike us as obvious or clear. But when there is nothing we understand to be obvious about a matter, one way or the other, we can choose to remain uncommitted, or to hazard a guess about which way things are. The result is not a strongly held belief. But, as noted, strongly held desires are also not readily within our control.

So far, the considerations that lead us to assign some role to the will in desiring have applied equally to believing. We have encountered no disanalogy between believing and desiring that would argue against a parallel role for the will in belief. Moreover, there are positive reasons to conclude that the will does play such a role. The firmness with which we hold some of our convictions and the passion with which we announce and argue for them suggest that the force of will is at work. And people sometimes seem willful in the way they hold onto certain cherished beliefs. We speak of changing our minds both when we change what we believe and when we change what we want. Changing one’s mind in either case suggests some control over our mental lives and, accordingly, the operation of some degree of will power.

In these kinds of cases, it is natural to think of the will as having something to do with the forming of our beliefs. Moreover, our not noticing the will at work in other cases of believing is no reason to conclude that it is not operative there as well. For we typically notice the operation of the will only when we need to exert some effort. And, as noted in section I, Descartes does not hold that we are invariably aware of our “faculties, or powers”; it is only “when we turn ourselves to the exercise of any faculty . . . that we become actually aware of it” (AT VII, 246–247; HR II, 115). The will, whatever else is clear about it, has to do with effecting things in our mental lives. So we would only “turn ourselves to [its] exercise” when some notable effort is called for. Indeed, even with conative mental acts, we do not generally notice the operation of the will unless we must make some unusual effort in connection with those acts. Nonetheless, we regard the will as contributing to all our conative acts, whether or not they require particular effort. The cases just considered in which the will seems to make some contribution to cognitive mental acts—changes of mind, passionately held beliefs, and willful believing—all involve a kind of cognitive exertion usually absent in our believing. If we notice the will only when some special effort is involved, then our noticing it in these cases of believing is good reason to conclude that it is operative, albeit unnoticed, in all other cases, as well.

Part of what leads Descartes to think that the will makes an essential contribution to our judging is the role played in judging by our understanding things. Understanding is not believing. But presumably we cannot believe anything that we do not at all understand (as Descartes notes: letter to Hyperaspistes: AT III, 432; K, 118). One may claim to believe an abstruse mathematical theorem, without understanding it at all. But in such a case one is commonly claiming only imperfect understanding, and not none at all. In the absence of any understanding, one could not actually believe the theorem; one could at best believe only that whatever mathematicians mean by those words is true.

Sometimes, moreover, our understanding something seems to suffice for our believing it. Having been puzzled by something, I may finally say, with an air of achievement, “Now I understand!” We would typically take this to mean that I now also believe it, and do so as the direct result of having come to understand it. This phenomenon may seem most at home in the context of mathematical learning, but it occurs elsewhere as well. When we have strong convictions it is natural to think that others who do not share them simply do not understand. How else, we may ask, could they help but believe as we do? And in any context we can say “I don’t understand” as a way of indicating that I don’t believe, either because the matter seems not to make sense or simply because I do not see what would lead anybody to believe it. These idiomatic ways of speaking suggest that we take it for granted that, although understanding is not, by itself, believing, it can have a powerful effect on what we believe, perhaps sometimes sufficiently powerful to determine singlehandedly what our beliefs are.
These considerations help explain why people sometimes seem willful in believing as they do, and how passions become aroused over beliefs. People appear to us to be willful in believing when we think that an unclouded understanding of things would clearly incline them to believe differently; they seem to be refusing to let their understanding of things so incline them. People become passionate in their beliefs when others disagree with them, and they think an unclouded understanding of things would clearly incline everybody to believe similarly. In these kinds of cases, people sometimes seem almost to be fighting just to fuel and sustain their beliefs. This kind of phenomenon obviously occurs with ideological matters, but it can occur whatever the issue. It occurs whenever we think that somebody’s understanding of things has less influence than it should not only on what that person believes but on how strongly the person believes it. Such occurrences lend additional support to the idea that the will plays a crucial role in forming our beliefs. In these cases, it is the particular way that our believing is affected by how well we understand things that intuitively indicates some operation of will power. Descartes’ theory that the will and understanding collaborate in giving rise to judgments no less than desires is thus far better motivated than most commentators have thought. For it fits strikingly well with, and even enables us to explain, many commonsense observations about the ways we come by and hold onto our beliefs. I therefore turn now to specific objections that have been raised to the theory.

III. MEETING OBJECTIONS

It is tempting to think that the idea that willing plays a role in our believing as we do is tantamount to saying that our beliefs result from decisions we make about what to believe (see W, 145; C, 175–178). But we typically decide things only when they are up to us, or in any case seem to be. And it is not generally up to us what to believe, at least not in any obvious or straightforward way (see W, 149). This is not Descartes’ picture. Decisions are themselves mental acts in their own right, consisting of propositional content and a suitable mental attitude. Descartes’ theory is not that to judge or believe we must first perform some conative mental act. It is that the faculty of will contributes the mental attitudes that enter into judging and believing, just as it contributes the mental attitudes that go into desires, decisions, and the like. On this theory, the will cannot produce desires or decisions on its own, but only in tandem with the understanding.

The will is simply that mental capacity by virtue of which I incline (propendeo), in one direction or another, with respect to various propositional contents (AT VII, 57–58; HR I, 175).

But, if the will is the faculty by virtue of which we incline with respect to propositional contents, does it also supply the special impetus and motive force that accompanies conative mental acts? If not, what faculty does so? And if so, does Descartes’ theory confute two very different tasks: that of providing mental attitudes for mental acts generally, and that of supplying the distinctive impulse to action that characterizes conative mental acts in particular? Descartes’ answers to these questions are clear once we note that, on his view, the motive force that distinguishes conative mental acts is not strictly a function of the mind. It is one aspect of the causal connection between mind and body: the tendency some mental acts have to issue in bodily behavior. Descartes would thus regard no mental faculty as responsible for that motive force. The will functions solely to provide mental attitudes for mental acts of whatever sort.

The two objections just considered both rely on the idea that judging and believing are kinds of actions. In the case of ordinary, nonmental actions, such as walking, the will makes its contribution by way of our decisions to perform those actions, and by seeming somehow to provide the impetus that issues in our actually performing them. Describing judging and believing as mental acts may encourage us to regard them as kinds of actions, though it is probable that calling something a mental act originally meant no more than that it was a mental actuality. In any event, Descartes says things that seem explicitly to invite the assimilation of mental acts to ordinary actions. It is not unusual for him to describe volitions as actions (e.g., letters to Mesland: AT IV, 113; K, 148, and to Elizabeth: AT IV, 310; K, 178). And he goes along with Gassendi (AT VII, 259; HR II, 137) in counting thoughts (cogitationes) as kinds of actions (actiones) (AT VII, 352; HR II, 207).

But Descartes also distinguishes two sorts of action: “actions of the soul, which terminate in the soul itself, . . . [and] actions that terminate in our body,” such as walking (Passions I, xviii: AT XI, 343; HR I, 340). We cannot, accordingly, simply assume that whatever holds of nonmental actions holds also of thoughts. One difference is plain. In the case of bodily actions, we may will some action without that action’s actually taking place. This cannot happen with thoughts; in that context, Descartes is explicit that “we never will anything without at the same time understanding it” (letter to Regius: AT III, 372; K, 10; cf. letter to Hyperaspistes: AT III, 432; K, 118). No more is needed to
have a complete thought than the joint contributions of the will and understanding. Willing, in the case of “actions of the soul,” cannot occur apart from the complete action. This disanalogy suffices to undermine the two objections just raised.

In many cases, what we understand is not the sort of thing that leads ineluctably to any affirmation or denial; in others, our understanding is too confused to have that effect. Margaret Dauler Wilson raises the question of how, in such cases, Descartes can explain our making any judgment at all. Why, in these cases, would the will incline us in any direction at all (W, 144)? Of course Descartes holds that we should, in such circumstances, “abstain from offering any judgment.” As an example, he professes cognitive indifference about whether a thinking nature is the same as or distinct from a corporeal nature, since at that point in Meditation IV he has not yet arrived at a clear understanding of the issue (AT VII, 59; HR I, 176). Wilson’s point is that it is unclear, on Descartes’ theory, why such abstention would not be automatic, since the will is indifferent to what we do not understand. In this light it seems surprising that Descartes holds instead that this indifference actually contributes to our making false judgments (AT VII, 58; HR I, 175–176). False judgments, like any others, require some mental attitude. But if the will is really indifferent, why would it—indeed, how could it—contribute any such attitude?

Wilson suggests that Descartes may have thought that “a kind of lust for knowledge leads us to affirm or deny things we are not justified in believing or disbelieving” (ibid.). And Descartes’ insistence that the scope of the will’s operation greatly exceeds that of the understanding does evoke a picture of the will’s bounding impetuously ahead, heedless of whatever directives do or do not issue from the understanding. The tendency sometimes to regard Descartes’ thought as containing a Platonic strain may reinforce this idea, by calling to mind the Phaedrus myth of the charioteer and horses (246 ff., esp. 253D–254E).

But Descartes actually advances a different explanation of why the will supplies a mental attitude when we understand things imperfectly. Earlier, he had noted that his “principal and most frequent error . . . consists in the circumstance that I judge ideas, which are in me, to be similar or conform to things situated outside me” (AT VII, 37; HR I, 160). In Meditation VI, he explains how such errors arise. Our bodily sensations and the sensory qualities of our perceptions are ordered so as to be most conducive to the conservation of the healthy person (AT VII, 87; HR I, 197). The will thus acts innocently enough when it provides mental attitudes for ideas based on such sensations.

Errors arise, however, when we misinterpret these perceptions. Perceptions are “given by nature for the purpose of signifying to my mind what is favorable or unfavorable to the [mind-body] composite of which my mind is a part.” Errors result when I take my perceptions to indicate, instead, the character of external objects, that is, when “I use [my perceptions] somewhat like rules for immediately discerning what the essence is of bodies situated outside us.” Such misinterpretation constitutes “a new difficulty,” beyond those noted in Meditation IV, which induces a multitude of errors (AT VII, 83; HR I, 194).

Understanding something involves interpreting it, that is, formulating some conception of what it is. Some misinterpreting something implies that one has a faulty understanding of it. Accordingly, when we misinterpret our perceptions, by viewing them as resembling nonmental objects rather than as indicating what favors the preservation of the whole person, we fail to understand those perceptions adequately. Such misinterpreting issues in false judgments. Because misinterpreting is a species of faulty understanding, it is intuitively natural to assign responsibility for those false judgments to the faculty of understanding, rather than to that faculty which provides mental affirmation and denial.7

The process of thus misinterpreting our perceptions leads, on Descartes’ view, to layers of unconsidered judgments—“prejudices [prejudicia]” (e.g., AT VII, 12, 69, 422; HR I, 140, 183; II, 241; AT IX–1, 203–205; HR II, 126–127). Prejudices, Descartes explains to Clerselier, are “all and only [seulement . . . toutes] those opinions which have been given credence by judgments we have previously made” (AT IX–1, 204; HR II, 126). And the power of prejudice is sufficient, Descartes holds, even to prevent some from clearly perceiving the eternal truths themselves (Principles I, 1: AT VIII–1, 24; HR I, 239). To counteract and overcome such layered prejudice would doubtless call for very considerable mental effort. That we must so exert ourselves in order to revise our beliefs helps bolster the intuitive appeal of the claim that the will is implicated in making judgments. It will emerge, moreover, in section IV that the need for such mental exertion is important also for understanding the role of doubting in the Meditations.

Descartes’ theory postulates a division of labor in the producing of judgments. The faculty of understanding supplies the propositional content that the faculty of will affirms or denies. But one might question whether there is any need for the will to act, once the understanding has made its contribution. Propositions, by themselves, are affirmative or negative. So, when the mind has formulated a proposition, one might argue, it has produced an affirmation or denial and, hence,
has affirmed or denied something (see C, 173–174). Descartes denies that the product of the understanding can, on its own, be either true or false. But E. M. Curley urges that we discount that contention. For we can only make sense of ideas if they are propositions, and propositions do have truth values. 8

Several distinct questions are at issue here. For one thing, there is reason to doubt that Descartes did think of ideas quite as propositions, in the modern sense. Ideas, properly speaking, are one of the two kinds (genera) into which Descartes divides his thoughts (cogitationes). We have become accustomed to use “thought” and its cognates equivocally, to refer both to propositional mental states and to propositions themselves, conceived of as abstract objects. And, on some accounts, such abstract objects enter into our mental lives by somehow being directly apprehended by the mind. But there is little reason to think that Descartes held that view of how the understanding operates, at least that he meant to divide his cogitationes into mental acts and abstract propositional objects. Indeed, his definition in the Geometrical Appendix to the Second Replies suggests the opposite: “By the word ‘idea’ I understand that form of thought [cognitionis formam] by the immediate apprehension of which I am conscious of that very thought” (AT VII, 160; HR II, 52). And his speaking of dividing his thoughts suggests the distinguishing of two aspects of mental acts—the attitudinal and the propositional. Ideas are aspects of actual mental acts, not independently existing abstract objects. 9

If ideas were abstract propositions, and the understanding somehow apprehended them, it might be tempting to argue that any other faculty would be superfluous. But, if ideas are aspects of actual mental acts, then the role of the understanding is to do no more than comprehend the content of those acts—to comprehend “that form of thought by the immediate apprehension of which I am conscious of that very thought.” It is then less inviting to think that another faculty would automatically be superfluous. For there is more to thinking than understanding.

A particular propositional content can figure in thinking not only as the content of a complete mental act, but also as part of the content of a compound or complex thought, for example, as the antecedent of a hypothesis one puts forth. This Fregean point suggests the involvement of more than the faculty of understanding, since the same content occurs affirmed or denied in one context, but in another not. Doubtless Descartes was aware of this consideration and doubtless it played some role in motivating his theory. But the point is hardly decisive. For Curley can respond that, in the compound or complex case, the understanding grasps a compound or complex propositional content, of which the simple content is a component. One can draw the distinctions required for the Fregean point by invoking only the understanding, without relying on help from another faculty.

There is, however, another way to meet the charge that another faculty is redundant, a way that connects more immediately with Descartes’ concerns. The understanding is responsible for propositional content. Curley, Anthony Kenny, and Wilson all maintain that Descartes is mistaken when he claims that propositional contents cannot, on their own, be true or false. (See n. 8.) But if Descartes’ claim can be sustained, the understanding alone could not provide bearers of truth values. For that, we would presumably need to invoke another faculty.

The issue of what the bearers of truth and falsity are is, of course, controversial. But well-known problems arise if we take them to be propositions or sentences. Sentences frequently contain token-reflexive components, including the tenses of verbs. Truth values of such sentences are notoriously unstable, altering along with changes in what their token-reflexive components refer to. If propositions can contain token-reflexive components, the same considerations apply. Two standard techniques exist for dealing with this difficulty. One can purge all token-reflexive elements from sentences or propositions, replacing them with words or concepts whose reference is independent of particular circumstances of use. Or one can retain such elements, but index each occurrence to a particular situation, thereby determining their reference.

No such adjustment is needed if particular mental acts or speech acts are the bearers of truth and falsity. Tokens of mental acts and speech acts occur in particular situations, and in connection with particular objects and events. So there is generally no problem about the referents of contained token-reflexive elements. If one regards such elements as ineliminable without loss of meaning or expressive power, one will have good reason to insist that only mental acts and speech acts are nonderivatively true and false. Propositions and sentences could be seen as derivatively true or false once they were suitably indexed or relativized; but such indexing or relativization would serve simply to mimic the characteristics of tokens of mental acts and speech acts.

Descartes’ persistent first-person formulations of the cogito leave little doubt that he regards token-reflexive words and concepts as ineliminable without loss of expressive power. It is unlikely (pace Harry G. Frankfurt: F, 105–106) that Descartes would have accepted any non-token-reflexive way of putting the point he is making in the
cogito. Accordingly, we should expect him to refer to the cogito not as a propositional content—that is, not as an idea—but as a mental act or speech act. This expectation is borne out; to my knowledge Des­
sages it is described in terms that clearly suggest or imply a mental act or speech act. In Meditation II it is a pronouncement or statement (pronuntiatum) (AT VII, 25; HR I, 150); in Principles I, 7, it is a cognition (cognitio) (AT VIII–1, 7; HR I, 221); in The Search after Truth it is a piece of reasoning (rationcinium) (AT X, 523; HR I, 324). 10

By itself, understanding some propositional content does not typically pin down the reference of whatever token-reflexive components are involved. Understanding ‘Theaetetus is sitting’ does not determine the time that the present tense refers to; understanding ‘He gives it to her’ does not suffice to pick out any particular people or gift. To pin down reference in such cases, one typically needs more than an act of understanding; one needs a particular mental act of affirming or denying. A faculty other than the understanding is needed.

Appeal to mental faculties of whatever sort, however, may strike some as suspect. Descartes’ mental faculties may be ontologically innocuous, since they are particular kinds of capacities, but perhaps they are also ineffectual when it comes to explaining anything. If faculties are no more than capacities for certain sorts of mental phe­
nomena to occur, how can they have any explanatory value? Why would it be more fruitful or revealing to say that a mental act is due to some mental faculty than to say, for example, that the effects of opium are due to its dormative power?

Descartes’ purpose in invoking mental faculties, however, is not to explain the occurrence of mental acts, but simply to have a handy way to talk about the abilities that a thinking thing must have. Prior to Meditation IV, he speaks of this ability in a wholly undifferentiated way, as the faculty of judging. Only when he needs to distinguish two components of the capacity to think things does he divide the capacity to think in a way that matches his Third Meditation division of thoughts. Descartes’ appeal to faculties, therefore, is reductive in spirit. 11 A great variety of distinct mental phenomena—all the different kinds of propositional mental acts—results from the smallest number of mental faculties one can make do with. The appeal to faculties involves none of the theoretical prodigality that has given faculty psychologies a bad name.

Moreover, the reductive character of Descartes’ theory does greater justice to the mental data than does the reductive account now in greatest favor, which seeks to reduce all mental acts to just belief and desire. Descartes’ two faculties mark a crucial distinction between two aspects of all mental acts; any adequate theory must somehow reflect that distinction. It is hardly likely, however, that one can, by com­
pounding beliefs and desires that have varying intensity and content, successfully reproduce the vast array of mental attitudes that actually occur.

Descartes constructs his theory of judgment expressly to explain how error can occur. And on his view the occurrence of error is hardly the esoteric epistemic issue it may now strike us as being. As Wilson has usefully emphasized (W, chap. 1), Descartes sees error as occurring in epidemic proportions, principally because we habitually take perceptions to resemble extramental reality. As noted earlier, percep­
tions thus misinterpreted are cases of faulty understanding.

The connection between error and the understanding is illustrated especially vividly by Descartes’ answer, when Gassendi asks him to explain what it is that the will extends to “which escapes the under­
standing.” Descartes replies: “everything in which it happens that we err” (AT VII, 376; HR II, 224). Every false judgment involves the faulty understanding of something that we think we understand satisfactor­
ily. But this reply appears to cause a problem for Descartes, at least if we think of abstract propositions as the objects of the understanding. For, as Wilson notes, it seems natural to suppose that we can clearly and distinctly understand false propositions (W, 141).

What we understand is, of course, propositional, as is what we affirm, doubt, deny, and desire. But it does not follow that what we understand are propositions, whether true or false. What we understand is how things are, and we do so propositionally because how things are is always expressible by a propositional clause. Similarly, what we affirm, deny, doubt, and desire is that things are a certain way, and that too can always be captured by a propositional clause. Once we recast the issue in terms of understanding how things are, rather than understanding abstract propositions, Descartes’ reply to Gassendi accords well with common sense. We would not regard ours­
elves as actually understanding how things are if our understanding of those things could be material for false judgments. 12

The tendency to think of the objects of understanding as abstract propositions, which can be true or false on their own, obscures the way in which understanding resembles knowing. I cannot truly claim to know something if the propositional clause following “know” is false. But it is undeniable that we can understand false propositions. It is therefore tempting to conclude that, whereas ‘know’ is factive, ‘understand’ is not.
But while it is plain that we do understand false propositions, it is far less obvious exactly how such cases should be described. If I understand the proposition that $2 + 2 = 5$, it hardly follows that I understand that $2 + 2 = 5$. Presumably I understand something like what the false proposition amounts to, or means. Like knowing, it seems we cannot truly claim to understand something that we express by means of a false propositional clause. Descartes' insistence that the propositional contents of mental acts are concrete aspects of those mental acts and not abstract objects, and that those contents cannot be true or false independently of any mental act or speech act, helps guard against thinking that we can.

Descartes formulates his two-faculty theory in terms of a view of freedom that may, on its own account, seem problematic. According to Descartes, the more strongly I incline (propendō) toward one of two opposing objects of belief or desire, the greater my freedom. In the case of clear and distinct perception, such as the cogito, it is impossible for me "not to judge to be true that which I so clearly understand." Although there is a great inclination (propensio) of the will in these cases, one is not subject to "the compulsion of an external force [vi externā]." And freedom, on Descartes' conception, occurs in connection with believing and desiring when "we sense ourselves to be determined by no external force"—the phrase is the same: nullā vi externā (AT VII, 57–59; HR I, 175–176). But it may seem that this conception of freedom not only is unduly paradoxical but, in the context of the doctrine of compelled assent, is ad hoc as well.

But the appearance of paradox can be dispelled, and Descartes' conception seen not to be ad hoc, by turning again to some relatively commonsense observations. As noted in section II, the more strongly we believe or desire something, the less control we have over whether to do so. If we accept that the will acts when we desire things, it is natural to suppose that the more strongly we want something, the more powerfully the will acts. A puzzle therefore emerges about where, in this complex set of factors, to locate freedom. Should we say the will is most free when it acts most powerfully? Then it will turn out that the will is most free when we have the least control over our desires. Or should we say instead that we are most free when we have the greatest control over what we want, that is, when the will acts most weakly? Neither option is without its unappealing consequences, but whatever air of paradox there is here results solely from our commonsense views about these things. On Descartes' account, the puzzle applies to believing no less than desiring. But, if the argument of section II is correct, believing contributes no special problems of its own.

We tend today not to regard the concept of a faculty of will as being especially intuitive. So it may seem to us as though Descartes made the wrong choice: Better to talk about ourselves being most free when we have the most control than about the will's being most free when it acts most powerfully. But, as noted earlier, Descartes' talk of faculties is innocuous; to talk of the will is only to talk about a particular capacity. And, in any event, a good commonsense case can be made for Descartes' decision. Our voluntary actions are not necessarily those over which we can exert the most control over whether to perform them or not. They are those whose performance is not due to external factors—those which are self-determined. If we take the voluntary as paradigmatic of freedom, one will conclude with Descartes that the absence of external determination is more important than how much control we have over our mental acts. Indeed, it is doubtful that we do have very much control over our mental acts.

It is evident that Descartes had these considerations in mind: "... the voluntary and the free," he explains to Hobbes, “are one and the same” (AT VII, 191; HR II, 75). And it is equally clear that he regards this point as essentially a matter of common sense. Having written to Mesland that “I call free everything that is voluntary,” he defends his terminological decision by saying that, "concerning names, I desire nothing more than to follow usage and precedent" (AT IV, 116; K, 150).

It may, however, seem that such commonsense usage fits poorly with the rather ambitious claims Descartes makes on behalf of his freedom of will. He "experience[s] it as circumscribed by no limits"; he experiences, moreover, so much free will in himself that he “apprehend[s] an idea of none greater” than his own. Indeed, even God's freedom of will does not seem greater than ours when ours is “regarded formally and precisely in itself” (AT VII, 56–57; HR I, 174–175). The comparison with God is particularly notable given Descartes' view that the eternal truths are themselves products of God's unrestricted free will.

But these claims are rather less extravagant than they may at first sight seem. “[R]egarded formally and precisely in itself,” our will is unlimited simply because it can act with respect to whatever propositional content it may encounter. Descartes' doctrine about God's having created the eternal truths is bound up with his view that, in God, the will and understanding are not distinct (AT I, 149, and IV, 118–119; K, 13–14 and 151). But, whereas God's understanding is infinite, the human understanding is "very small and very finite" (AT VII, 57; HR I, 174). Moreover, "we never will anything without at the same time understanding it" (letter to Regius: AT III, 372; K, 102). Accordingly,
the divine will "extends to more objects" than does ours not because of any inherent limit on what our will can do, but because our faculty of understanding is only able to present the will with far fewer propositional objects with respect to which it can act (AT VII, 57; HR I, 174–175). Indeed, this view accords well with Descartes' conception of freedom as the sensed absence of external determinants. For on that conception, so long as the will can act with respect to any propositional content it encounters, its freedom is unrestricted. It need not also exercise control over how it acts.

IV. MIND AND METHODOLOGY

As noted in section I, Descartes' explanations of what it is to be a thinking thing make it clear that he regards all thinking as the holding of a mental attitude toward some propositional content. Even sensing and feeling, insofar as they are genuinely mental, have the structure of propositional attitudes. They consist of its appearing to me that I sense (AT VII, 33; HR I, 156; cf. the three "grades" of sensing distinguished in the Sixth Replies: AT VII, 436–437; HR II, 251). Because we become aware of faculties only by being aware of their exercise, the two-faculty theory goes hand in hand with the propositional-attitude structure of thinking. And Descartes evidently holds that the two faculties are no less crucial to the nature of the mind itself than mental attitudes and content are to the nature of thinking. Thus he writes to Regius: "Understanding is properly the passive aspect of the mind, and willing its active aspect"; "they differ only as the active and passive aspects of the same substance" (AT III, 372; K, 102).

Descartes' insistence that all thinking has both an attitudinal and a propositional component has noteworthy consequences concerning the importance of language for expressing thought. Nonverbal behavior often indisputably invites interpretation in propositional terms. If thinking involved only a propositional aspect, language would be unnecessary for its expression. Propositional content can be conveyed by nonlinguistic as well as by linguistic means.

Mental attitudes fare far less well with nonlinguistic behavior. Such behavior sometimes does seem to convey some pro or con attitude: frequently desire or aversion, sometimes belief, and perhaps, occasionally, disbelief. But it is usually unclear that the desire or aversion we see in nonverbal behavior is directed at a propositional object. When nonverbal behavior seems to express belief, it is often just that it expresses some propositional content. And nonverbal behavior less obviously indicates mental affirmation or denial than it does desire and aversion. Thus such behavior seldom, if ever, seems by itself to signal mental denial or disbelief.

Moreover, it is plain that nonlinguistic behavior, however subtle, cannot capture the great variety of distinct mental attitudes, such as wondering, doubting, refusing, anticipating, surmising, suspecting, wishing, hoping, contemplating, considering, and a host of others, which differ in ways that are often difficult even to describe accurately. Language is clearly tailored for the task. As Vendler has elegantly shown (Res Cogitans, chap. 3), for virtually every kind of mental attitude, there is at least one distinct kind of illocutionary force, which determines a kind of speech act that can express that mental attitude. Without words for these illocutionary acts, it is doubtful that we could discriminate among so many different kinds. And without a way of readily conveying various propositional contents, which language provides, it is unlikely that such a variety of distinct illocutionary acts could have developed.

In the first paragraph of Meditation III, Descartes announces that, "looking into myself more from within, I shall try to make myself gradually better known and more familiar to myself." And so, in the next paragraph, he examines whether there are things "pertaining to me that I have not yet noticed." It is there that the cogito suggests to him "a general rule . . . that all that I perceive exceedingly clearly and distinctly is true" (AT VII, 34–35; HR I, 157–158). The rule thus emerges as a hypothesis about our nature as thinking things: our nature is such that whatever we perceive thus clearly and distinctly is true.

That the general rule is a hypothesis about our mental nature should be no surprise, given Descartes' representative theory of ideas. Ideas are the propositional contents of mental acts and, thus, the direct objects of mental acts (AT VII, 181; HR II, 67–68); they are what we affirm, suppose, doubt, desire, and so forth. Our access to extramental reality is accordingly indirect, and we cannot establish simply by examination whether our ideas ever correspond to or resemble extramental reality. Our principal error is judging that such correspondence or resemblance obtains. So Descartes needs some way to reach the truth about extramental reality which relies on the nature of the mind. The way (via: AT VII, 40, line 5, 53, line 18; HR I, 161, 172) he proposes is the general rule, validated by the divine guarantee.

Reliance on solely mental factors to reach the truth about extramental objects usually involves a coherence theory of knowledge or of
Moreover, such theories are, on independent grounds, unavailable truth. Such theories would be anathema to Descartes; if coherence no longer exists, why would the demon matter? God could even have made it "not true that ... contradictions cannot exist [be true] together" (letter to Mersenne: AT IV, 118; K, 151). Coherence is presumably the conceptual possibility of a conjunction. Descartes cannot, therefore, rely on coherence in the search for truth, at least not without some independent ratification.

The two-faculty theory of mind, however, enables Descartes to formulate a mind-based procedure for reaching the truth that does not collapse into a coherence theory. Some ideas have no special effect on the will; if we affirm or deny them, it is because of extrinsic factors. But others have a powerful effect, some so much so that simply understanding them makes us affirm them. Descartes' general rule is the hypothesis that, when the understanding irresistibly impels the will, the result is a true judgment. The rule is a mind-based way to reach the truth that avoids coherence theories.16

Such theories would presumably be unavoidable, however, if only the understanding played a role in judging. The role of the understanding is to apprehend things; all it could do to arrive at the truth would be, at best, to determine what is and is not conceivable—that is, what is and is not capable of being understood. If judging were just a matter of understanding, some ideas or judgments could be favored over others only by reason of coherence—that is, by reason of being jointly conceivable. The power that understanding something has in making us believe things, and our seemingly automatic passage from understanding to affirming, may mislead one into thinking that only the understanding is at work. It should thus be no surprise that Spinoza, who rejects Descartes' view that the will plays a role in judging (Ethics, pt. 2, prop. 49), also espouses a coherence theory of knowledge.

Our inability to conceive the contradictories of eternal truths is an example of the finitude of the human understanding. For the will to be infinite means that it can act with respect to any propositional content it encounters. For the understanding to be finite means that there are things we cannot comprehend, though they are in themselves comprehensible and, thus, comprehensible by a less limited intellect. The eternal truths depend on the divine will, and the divine will and understanding are indistinguishable. So on Descartes' view

God clearly can comprehend the contradictories of all eternal truths. These contradictories are thus intrinsically comprehensible.17 Given either that the human understanding is limited, or that the eternal truths could have been different, our ability to gain knowledge must depend on our mental nature somehow incorporating a bias toward the truth. Without such a bias, we could not count on our unaided understanding to reveal accurately what is necessary and possible. And being wrong about that would skew our knowledge about other things as well. The converse also holds. If we must rely on some such built-in bias, our reliance will presumably affect how we understand things, thereby in effect imposing limits on how or what we can comprehend.

But there is reason for skepticism about the idea that the human understanding is restricted in respect of what it can grasp propositionally. For it is reasonable to suppose that, given time to define terms and explain theories, a certain threshold intelligence is all one needs to comprehend any proposition whatever. It is thus arguable that the human understanding is in this way unlimited—as Descartes would put it, infinite; no mental act or speech act is possible whose content could, in principle, elude us. If so, no nativist doctrine that implies limits on the human understanding can be sustained.18

The two-faculty theory is also important for understanding Descartes' procedure in the Meditations. The doubts Descartes invites us to share in Meditation I are so extraordinary that one cannot help wondering whether his invitation can have been serious and, indeed, even whether such doubting is psychologically possible. In the synopsis of the Meditations, moreover, Descartes notes that "nobody of sound mind has ever doubted seriously that there really is a world, and that people have bodies" (AT VII, 16; HR I, 143). And in Meditation I itself he resolves not to doubt in the way insane people do. Perhaps considerations pertaining to dreaming and the demon do provide the reasons Descartes insists on having for his doubts (AT VII, 21; HR I, 148). But it is far from obvious that such reasons suffice to make actual doubting about such matters any less insane.

Doubting is a mental act, and thus on Descartes' view involves an exercise of will. And the exercise of one's will can sometimes cost us very strenuous effort. These considerations point toward a reason for taking Descartes seriously when he enjoins us actually to try to doubt in the way he describes. Meditation I is quite brief. And, unlike the other five, it involves no special difficulty in understanding the argument. Yet at its close Descartes describes this first day's activity as laborious (laboriosum) (AT VII, 23; HR I, 149). Nothing about the length
of, or difficulty in understanding, the Meditation makes clear what has required such laborious exertion. But if we imagine Descartes as having really doubted the things he says he has, the mental exhaustion he avows is readily understandable. Doubting those things would involve the most extreme efforts of willpower. Genuine doubting of that kind could not be merely "routine," as Frankfurt holds it is (F, 17); it would have to be, to use his term, impressively "heroic." To explain Descartes' remarks at the close of Meditation I, we must suppose that he seriously meant for us to try actually to doubt the things he asks us to.

Since the attempts to doubt in Meditation I are made in order to find out whether doubting in particular cases is really possible, success may well be easier than one might have imagined. To show that doubting something is possible, one need not sustain a doubt that actively enters into one's mental economy. Doubting for just a moment will do. In the cases Descartes describes, presumably the most strenuous efforts would still be needed to achieve even a merely momentary doubt. But it is reasonable to think that such efforts can succeed in producing a momentary, but psychologically real doubt. This observation enables us also to resolve the difficulty about sanity. Anybody who doubted the things Descartes asks us to in more than a merely momentary way would certainly be insane, reasons or no. But momentary doubting need not be a sign of madness.

The need to show the real possibility of the various doubts is not the only reason that actual doubting is important. Descartes holds, as noted above, that one is aware of a faculty only when one turns oneself to its exercise. Moreover, to be aware of one's mental faculties is to be aware of oneself. For "the faculties of willing, sensing, understanding, and so forth cannot be said to be parts of [the mind], because it is one and the same mind that wills, that senses, that understands" (AT VII, 86; HR I, 196). To be aware of those faculties is thus to be aware of that mind. The role the will plays in Descartes' theory of mental acts helps us understand both his desire that we engage in psychologically real doubting and his belief that it is possible to. And that doubting, if genuine, makes us in turn aware of the faculty of will.

Descartes' claims about mind and his views about methodology intersect most dramatically in connection with the cogito, and there, again, the two-faculty theory is important for understanding and defending his views.19 Descartes asserts not only that "I am, I exist" is true whenever I say or think it, but that it is necessary as well. And, if truth attaches to mental acts and speech acts rather than to their propositional contents, presumably necessity must as well. But this conclusion may seem problematic. How, exactly, are tokens of mental acts and speech acts supposed to be necessary?

Several passages make clear that Descartes does hold that tokens of mental acts can be necessary and, indeed, that nothing else can be. Eternal truths are not strictly speaking necessary, for they could have been otherwise than they are. Rather, it is just that we have been "given such a mind that" we cannot conceive otherwise (letter to Arnauld: AT V, 224; K, 236). In addition, "All contradiction or impossibility consists in our conception [conceptus; French Version: concept ou pensee] alone." For anything "situated outside the understanding . . . [is] possible" (AT VII, 152, IX-I, 119; HR II, 46). And, if anything outside the mind is possible, nothing extramental can be necessary. Moreover, "my thinking imposes no necessity on things" (AT VII, 66; HR I, 181).

Whenever I attentively and distinctly understand something, it is impossible for me not to affirm it.20 Every such affirmation is a mental act that it is necessary for me to perform; the necessity is hypothetical on my understanding the right way, but it is necessity nonetheless. Speech acts are then derivatively necessary if they express mental acts that are necessary in this way. There is no other way mental acts, or anything else, can be necessary, since nothing "outside the understanding" is impossible.21 The necessity of the cogito is of exactly this kind; it is Descartes' most vivid and revealing case of compelled assent. For it is the cogito that leads to the speculation that whenever understanding something irresistibly leads us to affirm it, that affirmation is true.

Descartes' presentation of the cogito in Meditation II is unusual in that he does not use his celebrated rubric, cogito, ergo sum, which he so often relies on elsewhere. The demon hypothesis has led us at the outset of Meditation II to "set aside as though . . . altogether false" (AT VII, 24; HR I, 149) all logical and conceptual truths. So ergo, in cogito, ergo sum, could not express such a connection; nor can any reasoning that leads to Descartes' conclusion. Moreover, the necessity of my thinking or saying that I exist must, on the foregoing argument, be necessity that derives from compelled assent. Descartes' formulation of the cogito in the Meditations seems designed to reflect these very considerations.

Before Descartes gets to his existence, he rehearses the mental acts of Meditation I, noting that he cannot doubt their occurrence. He then connects his remarks about his mental acts to the certainty that he exists by writing: "having considered all these things satisfactorily, it is thereupon necessary to hold for certain that . . . ." (AT VII, 25;
Willis Doney (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), and F for Harry G. Frankfurt, by my mental act of understanding the idea that I exist.

and chapter 4 of Margaret Dauler Wilson's cited as C); Anthony Kenny's (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) (henceforth cited as W). I owe much to these discussions.


2. I use AT, HR, and K as explained in the General Bibliography at the beginning of this volume. Additional abbreviations are D for Descartes, ed. Willis Doney (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), and F for Harry G. Frankfurt, Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970). Translations are my own, though I provide references where possible to HR and K.

3. These considerations may help resolve puzzles about Descartes' claims concerning our knowledge of our faculties raised by David Fate Norton in “Descartes: An Essential Inconsistency,” Journal of the History of Philosophy 6, 3 (July 1968):244–256.

4. See the Fifth Replies: “The term 'idea' ... I extend to whatever is thought” (AT VII, 367; HR II, 217), and the Second Replies: “I take the term 'idea' to stand for whatever the mind directly perceives” (AT VII, 181; HR II, 67–68). Descartes does say that ideas can be expressed by either terms of propositions (letter to Mersenne, AT III, 395; K, 106). Presumably terms express by expressing some propositional content; thus Descartes writes earlier in the same letter that the idea of God is just “what all people habitually understand when they speak about Him” (AT III, 393; K, 106).


6. I use "belief" here and in what follows as a convenient term to cover both noncognitive mental acts in general and dispositions for such mental acts to occur.

7. On the importance of how we interpret ideas to Descartes' conceptions of clarity and distinctness, see Alan Gwirz, "Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes," in D, 250–277.

8. Curley credits Spinoza (Ethics II, prop. 49) with this line of criticism. Wilson (W, 144) and Kenny (“Descartes on the Will,” 96, and Descartes [New York: Random House, 1968], 117) also insist that, pace Descartes, ideas must be able to be true and false, since they are the propositional contents of mental acts.

9. Descartes' talk of true and immutable natures that “do not depend on [his] mind” (AT VII, 64; HR I, 180) may seem to suggest that he did hold that the mind grasps abstract objects. But, even if the issue of true and immutable natures does have a bearing on the ontological status of propositions, our perception of those natures, Descartes explains, is due to “the nature of [one's] mind” (AT VII, 65; HR I, 180). So it is reasonable to regard them as forms of thought over which we have no control. On Descartes' alleged Platonism with respect to abstract objects, see Gwirz, "The Cartesian Circle Reconsidered," The Journal of Philosophy 67, 19 (October 8, 1970):668–685; Kenny, "The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths," ibid., 685–700; and Gwirz, "Descartes: Two Disputed Questions," The Journal of Philosophy, 68, 9 (May 6, 1971):288–296.

10. The French version of the Meditations has proposition (AT IX–IX, 19), presumably explaining the HR 'proposition.' And the Latin term proposition occurs, e.g., in Principles I, 10 (AT VIII–I, 8; HR I, 222) and in the letter to Reneri for Pollot (AT II, 38; K, 52). But like their English counterpart, the French and Latin terms colloquially refer to a proposal or similar speech act.

11. I am grateful to Sidney Morgenbesser for this observation.

12. Thus, although ideas cannot strictly speaking be true or false, they can, Descartes tells us, be materially false when they "furnish the judgment [judicium] with material for error" (AT VII, 231; HR II, 105), by representing "something that is not a thing as if it were" (AT VII, 43; HR I, 164).

13. See his letter to Mesland of about a year later, in which he explains that "liberty regarded as in the actions of the will" coincides with what is voluntary (AT IV, 174–175; K, 160–161), and the Appendix to the Second Replies, in which "the essence of will" is identified with acting "voluntarily and freely" (AT VII, 166; HR II, 56).

14. This section summarizes some of the results I develop and argue for in my "Will, Mind, and Method in Descartes" (henceforth cited as WMD), forthcoming.


16. For evidence that Descartes regarded his doctrine of impelled assent as a doctrine about our mental nature, see AT VII, 65, lines 6–9 and 69, lines 16–18; HR I, 180 and 183, and Principles I, 43 (AT VIII–I, 21; HR I, 236). For evidence that he also explicitly saw the divine guarantee as bearing on our
17. On the importance of the connection between Descartes' doctrine about the eternal truths and the finitude of the human understanding, see Frankfurt, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," The Philosophical Review 86, 1 (January 1977):36-57, esp. 45-46. I am indebted to Frankfurt's lucid and convincing account of these matters.

In WMMD (sec. 2) I argue that Descartes' doctrines about the eternal truths and the finitude of the human understanding are intimately connected in ways that have not generally been recognized.

18. In Rules and Representations (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) Noam Chomsky explicitly recognizes the connection between nativism and the view that the human understanding is limited, and accepts that limitation as a consequence of nativism (e.g., pp. 33, 46, and 180). Because Chomsky's nativism is biologically based, and operates without benefit of any guarantee of its veracity, it faces the additional difficulty that different cognitive beings could have incommensurable cognitive capacities.

19. In WMMD (sec. 4) I develop a positive account of the cogito based on pragmatic incoherence of the sort encountered in Moore's paradox: 'It is raining, but I don't believe it' (G. E. Moore, "Russell's Theory of Descriptions," in The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp [LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1944], 177-225, p. 204). The account I develop lends itself to being formulated in terms of the two-faculty theory.

20. As Descartes explains in Principles I, 45, perceptions cannot be distinct without being clear (AT VIII–I, 22; HR I, 237).

21. Thus in Meditation V Descartes describes as necessary, some half-dozen times, particular mental acts that we are necessarily led to perform (AT VII, 67; HR I, 182).
The standard edition of Descartes' works is *Oeuvres de Descartes*, publi­
don Press, 1970) are standardly abbreviated as K. The *Discourse on Method; Optics, Geometry and Meteorology* was translated with an intro­