

**Universität
Bielefeld**

**Zentrum für
interdisziplinäre Forschung**

JUDGMENT, MIND, AND WILL

IN DESCARTES

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C-3

No. 29

MIND AND BRAIN

**Perspectives in Theoretical Psychology
and the Philosophy of Mind
1989/90**

Appeared as a preprint, Zentrum für
interdisziplinäre Forschung (ZiF),
Universität Bielefeld, 1990
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I. Introduction

Contemporary discussions generally give short shrift to the theory of judgment that Descartes advances in the Fourth Meditation.¹ One reason for this relative neglect is the apparent implausibility of the theory. It is prima facie highly unintuitive to regard our mental affirmation, when we believe something, as an act of free will, on a par with our freely deciding to do something. What we believe seems not to be up to us in the way in which what we do generally is. Moreover, because the theory postulates two mental faculties, it doubtless evokes the skepticism we now have toward faculty psychologies of the sort that flourished in the nineteenth century.

Another reason why few contemporary commentators have paid serious attention to the theory of judgment is that the theory has seemed to many to be relatively inessential to Descartes's general view. Descartes advances the theory as a way to explain the possibility of error. Whatever the merits of this project for epistemological purposes, we read Descartes today mainly for his theory of mind. And here it may be natural to suppose that the theory of judgment has at best limited significance. And the particular way in which Descartes explains error derives from his reliance on the divine guarantee, and epistemic theodicy is an enterprise unlikely to capture our interest today.

In this paper I argue that this verdict constitutes an important mistake in Descartes interpretation. The theory of judgment and, in particular, Descartes's view about the role of the will in judging give us a useful and credible account of the nature of mental acts. I also argue that, in a number of very specific ways, the theory is both an integral and crucial part of Descartes's general view about mental functioning.

The next three sections set out to defend the theory of judgment. In section II, I argue that Descartes's theory is the natural and inevitable result of conclusions reached earlier in the Meditations about the nature of the mind. In section III, I specifically address the reasons for assigning to the faculty of will a role in our making judgments. I not only dispel the initial unintuitive appearance of doing so, but also show that this proposal helps explain various commonsense aspects of propositional mental states. Section IV, then, considers and answers the standard important objections to the theory.²

I then turn to the broader implications the theory of judgment has for Descartes's views. Section V explores some of the theory's implications for Descartes's view about the nature of mind. In section VI, I use the theory to help explain the role that doubting is supposed to play in the Meditations. In section VII, finally, I take up the cogito, arguing that the theory of judgment can help us develop a satisfactory interpretation of the necessity and certainty Descartes attributed to this first principle.

II. The Two-Faculty Theory

The problem that the theory of judgment is intended 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 53-4)³ and, indeed, no "faculty that is not perfect of its kind [in suo genere]" (AT VII 55). But errors do occur, and their occurrence "argue[s] that there is some imperfection in me" (AT VII 56). The problem is to square the imperfection that my errors in my mental nature reveal with the perfection that the divine guarantee confers on my faculties.

The way Descartes structures the preceding discussion makes the 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). And only such a being could cause in me that idea. Descartes stresses that the conflict Meditation IV is meant to resolve stems, 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).

Accounts of Descartes's 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 of judgments to explain any errors I commit as due to the wanton use of my faculty of judging. Difficulties seem then 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). So it seems he 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 in any case we seem not 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., to Mersenne, AT IV 173, K 159-60). And in section III I exploit such analogies when I argue 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 that Descartes meant the theory of judgment to address. 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's 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 he "experience[s] in himself a certain faculty of judging [judicandi facultatem]" (AT VII 53). Descartes had used the same phrase, judicandi facultas, to refer at the end of Meditation II to whatever it is in his mind [in mente meâ] that enables him to judge, e.g., 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). The faculty of judging is mentioned there as whatever it is in his mental nature that enables him to make judgments. It is whatever in his mental nature makes judging possible.

There is nothing austere or controversial about Descartes's notion of a faculty. It is just the power or capacity to do something. Nor is there anything problematic about his inferring 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).⁴

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. And, 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 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, 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. Plainly this is Descartes's 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).

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 about 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 two fold: ideas, properly so called, and "others," such as volitions and judgments. Ideas are somewhat like [tanguam] 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).

Descartes's division here is clearly based on the structure of the so called 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. So that additional aspect must be the mental attitude that, together with propositional content, constitutes all mental acts. Since these mental acts result from adding a mental attitude to an idea, ideas must be just propositional contents.⁵

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 in addition some mental attitude (AT VII 182-183). That the structure of propositional attitudes underlies Descartes's division of "all [his] thoughts" is also attested by the catalogues he gives of propositional attitudes when he explains, in Meditations II and III, what it is to be a thinking thing (AT VII 28 and 34).

There is indirect textual evidence for thinking that Descartes has in mind this division in Meditation III 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 that division, he then speaks in the next paragraph only of judgments' being false, and not also of their being true. In effect, that paragraph is about only those judgments which are our errors.

In any case, Descartes's division does explain how the nature of errors, and more generally of judgments, prompts his two-faculty theory. It is well known that the

propositional content of any particular judgment can occur without the mental attitude that goes into that judgment, since 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 of any particular judgment. These two aspects of judgments—their attitude and content—are therefore distinct components. In Descartes's technical terminology, they are modally distinct (Principles I lxi, AT VIII-I 29).

When Descartes in Meditation II takes judgments to be undifferentiated unities, the making of judgments was sufficient to make him aware of a single faculty, or power, that makes that 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.

Accordingly, the role played by free will in traditional theodicy plays no role whatever in leading Descartes to the two-faculty theory of judging. 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 some 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 assigns a role in judging is sense perception. And this Descartes's dualism does not allow. For he holds that sensory qualities are products of the interaction between body and mind (AT VII 81). 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 obvious enough. The problem is about Descartes's 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 at all for claiming that it does figures 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."⁶ I want now to argue that more compelling considerations are available to explain Descartes's appeal to the faculty of the will.

III. 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, involving opposing attitudes one can take toward a proposition. Desiring and fearing also have the structure of propositional attitudes, and again involve opposing attitudes. If we were to attribute the attitude of desiring to the operation of any faculty, 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, xxxii). There the mental attitudes he lists as due to the operation of the will are desiring [cupere], aversion [aversari], affirming, denying, and doubting (AT VII 17). Descartes's aim is to find some faculty whose operation explains the mental-attitude component of these and other mental acts. For it is fairly unproblematic that the faculty of understanding explains the propositional content of mental acts; we cannot perform any mental act without understanding its propositional content. 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 seem to play in the conative case; 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 to Descartes until Meditation VI, 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 will 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 repellent 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 attitude 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 solely due to our desires. However useful this model may be as a theory or an experimental paradigm, it is quite misleading about the actual dynamics of our mental lives. Cognitive content is always part of our desires; 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 do nothing; 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 no less 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 experience desires and aversions as having. And the more intensely 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 with which we believe things, in the way that attractive or repellent objects affect the intensity of our desires or aversions? This question requires care, since we may slip into the mistake of thinking that the objects of belief and desire are different sorts of things. What we believe, of course, is propositional; but it is tempting to think that what we desire are the objects, typically extramental objects, whose acquisition would satisfy our desires. But it is clear that our current concerns require 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 point is pivotal to Descartes's view about the role in cognition of clear and distinct perception. For a believed proposition to be cognitively attractive is for it to be plausible. And when a proposition we believe is cognitively highly attractive—i.e., plausible—we believe it with greater conviction than we believe only moderately plausible propositions. Of course, how cognitively attractive a proposition is 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 above and beyond the intrinsic attractiveness of that idea.

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 wholly to their intrinsic character. Then, perhaps, when they enter 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 believe and desire. Such is Descartes's view about the effect some propositions have, cognitively, when we distinctly and attentively apprehend them (AT VII 58-59, 69-70, 144-145). But whatever our verdict about that view, it is reasonable to conclude that the propositional objects of our judgments, like those of our desires and aversions, do affect the intensity and conviction with which we make those judgments. If so, the principle 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 may well seem 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 whether to desire it. Belief behaves similarly. We have little control over whether to believe things when they strike us as utterly 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 actually are. The result is then not a strongly held belief; but, as already noted, strongly held desires are also not readily within our control.

The considerations that lead us to assign some role to the will in desiring have thus far led to no disanalogy between believing and desiring that argue against a parallel role for the will in belief. Moreover, positive reasons exist to conclude that the will does play such a role. The strength 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. Moreover, people sometimes actually 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. We typically notice the operation of the will only when we need to make some effort. And as noted in section II, 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). 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, we do not generally notice the operation of the will, even with conative mental acts, unless we must exert some unusual effort in connection with those acts. Nonetheless, we deem 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, our noticing in these cases of believing is good reason to conclude that it is operative, though 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: 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 be enough for us to believe it. Having been puzzled by something I may finally say, with an air of accomplishment, "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 kind of 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? Regardless of context, moreover, one can say "I don't understand" as a way of indicating that one does not believe, either because the matter seems not to make sense or simply because one simply does not see what would lead anybody to believe it. These idiomatic locutions suggest that we take it for granted that, although understanding is not by itself believing, it can nonetheless have a powerful effect on what we do believe, perhaps sometimes sufficiently powerful to determine singlehandedly what beliefs we hold.

These considerations help explain why people sometimes seem willful in having the beliefs they do, and how passions become aroused about beliefs. People seem to us to be willful in believing what they do when it seems that an unclouded understanding of things would incline them to believe differently. In these cases they seem actually to be refusing to let their understanding of things so incline them. People become passionate in their beliefs when, in the face of disagreement, they think that an unclouded understanding of things would clearly incline everybody to believe similarly. In cases of these sorts, people can even seem almost to be fighting to fuel and sustain

their beliefs. Plainly this sort of thing occurs with ideological matters, but it can occur whatever the topic. For example, it occurs whenever we think that somebody's understanding of things is having less influence than it should on what the person believes, and how intensely.

These phenomena lend additional support to the idea that the will plays a crucial role in forming our beliefs. In these cases, it is intuitively the particular way that our believing is affected by how well we understand things that indicates some operation of will power. Descartes's theory that the will and understanding collaborate in giving rise to judgments no less than desires is thus far better motivated than virtually all commentators have thought. For it fits strikingly well with, and even enables us to predict, 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.

IV. 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 at least 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's picture. Decisions are themselves mental acts on their own right, consisting of propositional content and a suitable mental attitude. Descartes's theory is not that to judge or believe we must 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 that theory, the will could not 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).

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, is there a danger that Descartes's theory conflates two tasks, the task 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's answers 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.

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 D. 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 one way or the other (W 144). Of course, Descartes holds that we should, in such circumstances, "abstain from offering any judgment." As an example of this 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). Wilson's point is that it is unclear, on Descartes's 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 actually holds instead that this indifference contributes to our making false judgments (AT VII 58). False judgments, like judgments in general, require some mental attitude. But if the will is really indifferent, why would it contribute any? Indeed, how could it do so?

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" (W 144). And Descartes's insistence that the scope of the will's operation greatly exceeds that of the understanding does indeed evoke a picture of the will's bounding impetuously ahead, heedless of whatever directives might issue from the understanding. And the tendency to see Descartes's thinking as containing a Platonic strain may reinforce this idea, by calling to mind the Phaedrus myth of the charioteer and horses (246ff., 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). 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). The will acts innocently enough when it provides mental attitudes for ideas based on such sensations.

Error arises, however, when we misinterpret these perceptions. Instead of correctly regarding them as "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," I instead take my perceptions to indicate the character of external objects. "I use them 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, and that difficulty is the source of many errors V (AT VII 83).⁷ This process of misinterpretation leads to layers of unconsidered judgments—"prejudices [praejudicii]" (e.g., AT VII 12, 69, 422, and esp. AT IX 203, 205). To

counteract and overcome such layered prejudice would doubtless call for very considerable mental effort. That we must expend substantial effort in revising beliefs helps bolster the intuitive appeal of the idea that the will is implicated in judging. The need for such effort will figure importantly later in connection with the role of doubt in the Meditations.

Descartes's theory postulates a division of labor in the producing of judgments. The faculty of understanding supplies 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 one might argue that, when the mind has formulated a proposition, it has produced an affirmation or denial and, hence, has itself 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 either to propositional mental states or simply to propositions themselves, conceived of as abstract objects. In referring thus just to propositions, we in effect abstract from the mental attitude of the full propositional state. On some accounts, such abstract propositional objects enter into our mental lives by being directly apprehended somehow by the mind. But there is little reason to think that Descartes held this view of how the understanding operates. Nor is it credible that he meant to distinguish 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 [cogitationis formam] by the immediate apprehension of which I am conscious of that very thought" (AT VII 160). And his speaking of dividing his thoughts suggests that he is 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 we regard ideas as abstract propositions that the understanding somehow apprehended, it might seem tempting to hold that any other faculty would be superfluous. But if instead we see ideas as aspects of actual mental acts, the role of the understanding will just be to 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 plausible to think that another faculty would be superfluous; 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, since 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 a faculty other than the understanding is redundant, a way that connects more immediately with Descartes's concerns. The understanding is responsible for propositional content. Curley, Anthony Kenny, and Wilson all maintain that Descartes is mistaken in claiming that propositional contents cannot on their own be true or false. But if Descartes's claim can be sustained, the understanding alone could not provide bearers of truth values. We would then need to turn for that to 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 those bearers to be propositions or sentences. Sentences frequently contain token-reflexive components, including the tenses of verbs. Truth values of such sentences are generally unstable, altering according to changing circumstances. If it is possible for propositions themselves to 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 the particular circumstance of use. Or one can retain such elements, but index each occurrence to a particular situation, thereby determining its reference.

No such adjustment is needed if particular mental acts or speech acts are the bearers of truth and falsity. Token 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 what contained token-reflexive elements refer to. 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 then be seen as derivatively true or false, once they are 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's first-person formulations of the cogito leave little doubt that he regards token-reflexive words and concepts as ineliminable without loss of expressive power. 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 Descartes never speaks of the cogito as an idea, and in most pivotal passages 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); in Principles I vii it is a cognition [cognitio] (AT VIII-I 7); in The Search after Truth it is a piece of reasoning (AT X 523).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 needs typically more than an act of understanding; one needs a particular mental act of affirming or denying. A faculty other than the understanding is needed.

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 [propendeo] 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 under[stand]." 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 externâ]." And freedom, on Descartes's conception, occurs in connection with believing and desiring when "we sense ourselves to be determined by no external force"—the phrase is the same, nullâ vi externâ (AT VII 57-59). But it may seem that this conception of freedom is not only unduly paradoxical but, in the context of the doctrine of compelled assent, ad hoc as well.

But the appearance of paradox can be dispelled, and Descartes's conception seen not to be ad hoc, by invoking some relatively commonsense observations. As noted in section III, the more strongly we believe or desire something, the less control we have over whether to do so. Since the will indisputably 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? It will then 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 not from theory but from common sense. The problem stems from our folk psychological conceptions of things. On Descartes's account, the puzzle applies to believing no less than desiring. But, if the argument of section III 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 now seem to us that 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 Descartes's talk of faculties is,

as noted earlier, relatively innocuous. To talk of the will is only to talk about a particular capacity.

In any event, a good commonsense case can be made for Descartes's decision. Our voluntary actions are not necessarily those over which we can exert the most control over whether we 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 then conclude with Descartes that the absence of external determination is more important than how much control we have over our mental acts. Indeed, the idea of our having control over our mental acts is itself far from intuitive. It is clear that Descartes had these considerations in mind; "the voluntary and the free," he explains to Hobbes, "are one and the same" (AT VII 191). 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 this terminological decision by saying that, "concerning names, I desire nothing more than to follow usage and precedent" (AT IV 116, K 150).¹¹

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"; moreover, he experiences 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). The comparison with God is particularly notable given Descartes's 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's 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). Moreover, "we never will anything without understanding it" (AT III 372, K 102; cf. AT III 432, K 118).

The divine will "extends to more objects" than does ours, therefore, 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). Indeed, this view accords well with Descartes's conception of freedom as the sensed absence of external determinants. On that conception, the will's freedom is unrestricted so long as it can act with respect to any propositional content it encounters. It need not also exercise control over how it acts.

V. Our Mental Nature

Descartes's two-faculty theory is usually discussed only in connection with his explanation of error. But the theory is also crucial for understanding a number of central aspects of his thought. In this section I turn to the bearing the theory has on Descartes's views about our nature as thinking things. Section VI takes up the topics of doubting and methodology, and section VII the vexed problem of interpreting the cogito.

As noted in section II, Descartes's explanations of what it is to be a thinking thing make 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 something is the case (AT VII 29) or, even more pointedly, of my thinking that I sense (AT VII 33; cf. the three "grades" of sensing distinguished in the Sixth Replies, AT VII 436-437). 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 held that the two faculties are no less crucial to the nature of mind 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).

Arnauld, Gassendi, Bourdin, and the authors of the Sixth Objections all raise Descartes's notorious view, advanced in the Discourse (AT VI 58-59), that nonhuman animals lack souls and thus have no mental nature (AT VII 204-205, 263, 269-71, 413-414, 490). Descartes's replies to them are generally less revealing than the Discourse passage itself, and his letters to Newcastle and More (AT IV 573-576, V 275-279, K 206-208, 243-245). His basic point is that all human behavior except the use of language can be explained physiologically, without appeal to mental activity. Linguistic behavior, he believes, cannot be so explained. Nonhuman animals make no use of language, so there is nothing about their behavior that does not succumb to strictly physiological explanation.

Descartes's view here is not merely a curiosity borne of enthusiasm about the unity of science and pessimism about explaining linguistic behavior. Only a particularly austere and demanding concept of mind could accommodate the conclusion he reaches about nonhuman animals. So we cannot understand Descartes's view about our own mental nature without becoming clear about the austerity in his conception that permitted him to hold this odd and parochial view about nonlinguistic animals.

There are a number of things Descartes says on this issue that occasion comment. For one thing, Descartes finds his position utterly convincing. By implication, he admits to Gassendi that the burden of proof lies not with him, but with those who hold that nonhuman animals do think (AT VII 355). But in the Sixth Replies he writes: "I have proved by the most powerful considerations [firmissimus rationibus ... probavi] ... that no thought exists in nonhuman animals" (AT VII 426). But it is not immediately

obvious why Descartes should have felt so confident, particularly given the stark incredulity his position has provoked, from his contemporaries through the present.

The special importance Descartes attaches to language is also puzzling. As Wilson has observed (W 183), it is unlikely that he had in mind the creativity or innovative aspect of language stressed by Noam Chomsky.¹² Descartes does tell us that "I can express nothing in words, understanding what I say, without that itself making it certain that there is in me the idea of that which those words signify" (AT VII 160; cf. to Mersenne, AT III 393, K 105, where a French version of this sentence occurs transposed into the first-person plural). But the connection he notes here between words and ideas is mediated by the proviso that we understand our words, and whenever we understand anything we have the requisite idea. So his statement does not give us a direct connection between words and thought, nor a reason for inferring one from the other. Nor does his associated-idea theory of meaning (to Chanut, AT IV 604, K 210) help establish the needed connection between thinking and speaking.

Perhaps most perplexing is Descartes's conviction that, if nonhuman animals had any thoughts, they would express them by speaking to us (AT IV 575, K 207). The ordinary view, which Descartes stigmatizes as one of our most deeply engrained prejudices (AT V 275, K 243)—is that such animals do think things, and that they express what they think nonverbally. Why was Descartes so wedded to the idea that thinking can be expressed only by the use of words?

The two-faculty theory helps explain these puzzling aspects of Descartes's view. The reason Descartes's claim calls forth such incredulity is that it seems so obvious that nonverbal behavior, in both humans and nonhumans, often invites interpretation in propositional terms. Nonverbal behavior thus indisputably expresses an aspect of mental acts—their propositional content.

But in humans and nonhumans alike, nonverbal behavior far less clearly reflects mental attitudes. It does sometimes convey some pro or con attitude, frequently desire or aversion, sometimes belief, and perhaps occasionally disbelief. But it is typically unclear whether the desire and aversion we see in nonverbal behavior is directed towards a propositional object. It is less obvious, moreover, that nonverbal behavior ever indicates mental affirmation or denial than it does desire and aversion. And when it does appear to express beliefs, it is unclear what it is in nonverbal behavior that would indicate some particular mental attitude, rather than just a propositional content. It is reasonable to hold that nonverbal behavior seldom, if ever, by itself expresses mental denial or disbelief.

Moreover, nonverbal behavior does not indicate attitudes or propositional content singly or unambiguously, but only in the context of many background assumptions about what else the creature, whether human or not, is thinking. Even more striking, nonverbal behavior cannot capture, even in that imprecise way, the great variety of distinct mental attitudes, such as wondering, doubting, refusing, understanding, recollecting, anticipating, surmising, supposing, suspecting, wishing,

hoping, contemplating, considering, and a host of others, which differ in subtle ways that are often difficult to describe accurately. But, as Vendler has elegantly shown (ch. 3), for virtually every kind of mental attitude, there is at least one distinct kind of illocutionary force, which in turn determines a kind of illocutionary act that can express that mental attitude.¹³

If all thinking has the structure of a mental attitude together with some propositional content, the presence or absence of language is compelling evidence about whether or not thought is occurring. For, even though words are not needed to express propositional content, they do seem required to express, uniquely and unambiguously, the huge variety of mental attitudes that thinking involves. Nonverbal behavior is usually ill-suited to express mental attitudes, since such behavior seldom comes in propositional units, and mental attitudes are propositional. The more we can parse nonverbal behavior into propositional pieces, the more readily we can interpret it as indicating mental acts. We tend to regard propositional-attitude structure as but one of the forms mental activity can take; so, for us, Descartes's point is not well taken. Nonhuman animals can and do have active mental lives. Still, Descartes's two-faculty theory of mind does explain why he held that nonlinguistic behavior cannot express mental states at all, and why he took his view to be based on "the most powerful considerations."

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 at this point which the cogito suggests to him "a general rule ... that all that I perceive exceedingly clearly and distinctly is true" (AT VII 34-35). 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's representative theory of ideas. Ideas are the propositional contents of mental acts, and thus the direct objects of mental acts (AT VII 181); they are what we affirm, suppose, doubt, desire, and so forth. So our access to nonmental reality is indirect, and we cannot establish by examination whether our ideas ever correspond to or resemble extramental reality. Indeed, our principle error is judging that such correspondence or resemblance obtains. Descartes thus needs some way to reach the truth about extramental reality which relies on the nature of the mind. The way (via, AT VII 40, 1. 5; 53, 1. 18) 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 truth. Such theories would be anathema to Descartes; if coherence could enable us to reach the truth, why would the demon matter? Moreover, such theories are on independent grounds, unavailable to him. Conceptual truths cannot, on Descartes's view, be self-certifying; they must at best

play an oblique epistemic role. Conceptual truths are a species of the so-called eternal truths. And these are true due solely to God's agency, and but for the relevant divine act of will they could be different. God could have made it "not true that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or generally that contradictories cannot exist [be true] together." For "God cannot have been determined to make it have been true that contradictories cannot exist together, and consequently he could have done the opposite" (to Mesland, AT IV 118, K 151). Accordingly, if a deceiving deity were possible, I could be deceived even about matters "in which it is clear that I recognize a manifest contradiction" (AT VII 36). Since coherence is the conceptual possibility of a conjunction, Descartes cannot rely on coherence, at least not without some independent ratification, in the search for truth.

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 due to extrinsic factors such as habit and prejudice. But others have a powerful effect, some so much so that simply understanding them makes us affirm them. The effect that understanding something has on our will is a matter of our nature as thinking things. Descartes's 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.

Coherence theories would presumably be unavoidable, however, if nothing but the understanding played a role in judging. The role of the understanding is to apprehend things; all it can do to arrive at the truth is, at best, 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—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 some into thinking that only the understanding is at work. Thus it should be no surprise that Spinoza, who rejects Descartes's view that the will plays a role in judging (Ethics Pt. II, Prop. 49), also espouses a coherence theory of knowledge.

Because the eternal truths owe their status to the divine agency, coherence without independent certification is unavailable to Descartes as a test for truth. But any mind-based epistemology needs independent certification. Descartes sees that certification—the divine guarantee—as operating on the interaction between will and understanding. But why could he not have the divine guarantee apply, instead, directly to the understanding itself? The divine guarantee would then provide that the human understanding simply cannot conceive anything that contradicts an eternal truth—that is, anything that, by the divine will, is genuinely impossible. Thus conceived, the divine guarantee would underwrite a coherence theory of knowledge.

There is some evidence that seems to point to the divine guarantee's operating in this way. Thus Descartes writes to Arnauld,

I would not venture to say that God cannot make a mountain exist without a valley, or that one and two should not be three; I say only that He has given me such a mind that a mountain without a valley cannot be conceived [concipi] by me, nor an aggregate of one and two that is not three, etc., and that such things involve a contradiction in my conception [conceptu] (AT V 224, K 236).

(As Kenny notes, "[b]y a mountain without a valley, Descartes ... meant an uphill slope without a downhill slope" [Descartes, 156]; see to Gibieuf, AT III 472, K 124.) Moreover, in the Second Replies Descartes writes in a way that may seem to invite a coherentist interpretation:

What is it to us if somebody should suppose [ingat] that the very thing of whose truth we have been so firmly convinced appears false to God or an angel, and therefore is absolutely speaking false? What do we care about this absolute falsity, since we in no way believe it, nor in the least suspect it? (AT VII 145)

But Descartes's reason here for dismissing the possibility that truth as we know it might diverge from truth "absolutely speaking" is not that he sees the divine guarantee as applying solely, or even principally, to the understanding by itself. The full paragraph in the Second Replies makes clear that he has in mind the will's being impelled by our clear and distinct understanding of things:

immediately when we deem that something is rightly perceived by us, we freely [sponte] persuade ourselves that it is true. If this persuasion is so firm that we can have no cause ever to doubt that of which we persuaded ourselves in that way, we inquire about nothing further; we then have all that one may reasonably wish for.

After then raising his rhetorical questions, he reinforces the point that the divine guarantee ratifies the connection between the will and understanding: "We suppose a conviction so firm that it can in no way be canceled; accordingly, that conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty" (AT VII 144-145).

But the letter to Arnauld is emphatic and unambiguous that our mental nature is such that we cannot conceive—that is, understand—the contradictories of eternal truths. Why could Descartes not have had the divine guarantee do its work that way, thereby circumventing the need for a faculty other than the understanding?

The inability of the understanding to conceive the contradictories of eternal truths could, presumably, suffice for knowledge of eternal truths—knowledge about what is necessary and impossible. But there is much more truth than that to be had. One could, of course, suppose the human understanding to be so constituted as to be incapable of conceiving the contradictory of any truth we are capable of knowing. But

that supposition clearly does not accurately reflect our ability to understand things. There are lots of truths whose contradictories we can conceive.

Moreover, if we gained all our knowledge by being unable to conceive anything false, we would be incapable of recognizing any distinction between conceptual necessities and contingent truths. Every truth would seem to us to have the status of the eternal truths, and presumably a nondeceptive deity could hardly permit our mental nature to be unable to recognize that not all truths have that status. Spinoza and Leibniz both follow Descartes in holding that we owe our ability to gain knowledge to the way we are mentally constituted, but reject his claim that the will plays a role in judging. It is notable that both find congenial the idea that all truths are necessary.

Although we can conceive the contradictories of contingent truths, we do sense a difference between understanding things well and understanding them poorly. The better we understand something, the more certain we feel about it; when we think we understand something perfectly, we feel completely certain about it. As the Second Replies passage makes clear, it is these observations about understanding and affirming that Descartes exploits in describing how our mental nature enables us to reach the truth in cases of contingent truths.

This model also does greater justice to the way we know necessary truths than a model that appeals solely to the understanding. We may seek to explain, in retrospect, that mathematical and conceptual truths are necessary because we cannot conceive their contradictories. But our knowing that they are true intuitively seems to be direct, and unmediated by such considerations. Psychologically, the doctrine of impelled assent explains more satisfactorily how we think we know such things than an explanation based solely on inconceivability.

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, even 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's view God can comprehend clearly the contradictories of all eternal truths. These contradictories are thus intrinsically comprehensible.¹⁴

Even closer connections obtain between the finitude of the human understanding and the creation of the eternal truths. If God could have made the eternal truths different from what we take them to be, and even could have made contradictories jointly true, there are then things God could have made true whose truth we find literally impossible to conceive. Indeed, there could then have been things we could not comprehend even if we were not trying to understand what it would be for them to be true. Descartes's doctrine about the eternal truths thus implies limits on the human understanding.

Less obvious, perhaps, is that a near-converse also holds. If propositions inaccessible to human understanding can exist, then, for all we know, the eternal truths are actually different from what we take them to be. For, if propositions exist that lie beyond human comprehension, then for all we know they are in fact true. Indeed, for all we know, some or all of them are necessarily true. Though this would be unknown to us, they would be eternal truths, and the eternal truths would in that respect differ from what we take them to be.

What is intuitively hard to accept about Descartes's doctrine about the eternal truths is, for us, not so much God's authorship; few people today take that issue seriously one way or the other. It is rather that Descartes holds that the eternal truths could be different from what we take them to be. But, if propositions exist that we cannot conceive, that may actually be so. The most startling feature of Descartes's view about the eternal truths can thus be seen as due to his doctrine that the human understanding is finite.¹⁵

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. Descartes explains this bias in terms of compelled assent, ratified by the divine guarantee. Compelled assent must clearly be a matter of our mental nature, and Descartes makes that explicit: "I am of such a nature [naturae] that, whenever I perceive something exceedingly clearly and distinctly, I am unable not to believe it to be true" (AT VII 69). Elsewhere, he describes compelled assent as due to "the nature of my mind [natura mentis meae]" (AT VII 65).

Ample textual evidence also exists that Descartes explicitly regarded the divine guarantee of our compelled affirmations as essentially an issue about our mental nature. The doubt that the guarantee is supposed to quell is typically stated as a doubt about our mental nature: a doubt about whether "some God could have put such a nature into me [talem mihi naturam] that I would be deceived even about those things which seem most manifest" (AT VII 36). Cognate passages are easy to find, e.g., Meditation V (AT VII 70), Principles I xiii and xxx (AT VIII-I 9-10, 16), and to Regius (AT III 64-65, K 73). And, in a passage that almost suggests Spinoza's identification of nature with God, Descartes makes clear that he sees no difference between questions about how God has created me and questions about my nature:

by nature, viewed generally, I understand nothing other than either God Himself, or the coordination instituted by God of created things; nor, by my nature in particular, anything other than that total combination of things which God has given me (AT VII 80).

Seeing the divine guarantee as an issue about our mental nature fits nicely with the interpretation developed by Gewirth and Frankfurt, which is independently highly

convincing, of how Descartes avoided Arnauld's charge of circularity in Meditation III. On their account, the reasoning that leads to the guarantee is meant to show that no challenge to the reliability of reasoning can be coherent if it relies, itself, on reasoning.¹⁶ And how we reason must be a matter of our mental constitution if, as Descartes maintains, the human understanding is limited.

Descartes invokes the finitude of human understanding to explain how error can occur. And on his view, the occurrence of error is hardly the esoteric epistemic issue it may strike us as being. As Wilson has usefully emphasized (ch. 1), Descartes sees error as occurring in epidemic proportions, principally because we habitually regard ideas as resembling extramental reality. Ideas thus misinterpreted are clear cases of faulty understanding. Accordingly, most of what we think we understand we understand only poorly; we can avoid error only by adhering to a very stringent conception of what it is to understand something. The faculty of understanding does not on Descartes's view reach as far as we tend, and would like, to think.

The connection between error and the understanding is vividly illustrated by Descartes's answer when Gassendi asks him to explain what it is that the will extends to "which escapes the understanding." Descartes replies: "everything in which it happens that we err" (AT VII 376). Every false judgment involves the faulty understanding of something we think we understand satisfactorily. This raises a problem. Descartes's response may seem odd if we think of propositions as the objects of understanding. 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 is a proposition, true or false. What we understand is how things are, and we do so propositionally since how things are is always expressible propositionally. 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. These commonsense observations reflect Descartes's views about these issues. As argued in section IV, he regards the propositional contents of mental acts not as abstract propositions, but as concrete aspects of those mental acts. Once things are recast this way, Descartes's reply to Gassendi is entirely natural. We would not regard ourselves as actually understanding how things are if our understanding of those things could be material for false judgments.¹⁷

As noted above, if the human understanding is limited, we cannot count on it for accurate information about what is necessary and possible, or even true. To obtain knowledge, we then need some bias toward truth built into some aspect of our mental nature. 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. A theory of innate ideas, therefore, goes hand in hand with the view that there are nontrivial limits on the understanding.

It is worth noting that Chomsky, in a recent statement of his nativist position, explicitly embraces this conclusion: "[T]he very same intrinsic factors that permit [cognitive] achievements also impose severe limits on the [cognitive] states that can be attained."¹⁸ The intrinsic factors Chomsky has in mind are due to our genetic endowment; he believes that in many or most areas of cognition "a central part of what we call learning is actually better understood" as a matter of biological maturation in suitable environmental circumstances (33). As he makes clear, the kinds of states with respect to the attainment of which we are severely limited include many forms of propositional knowledge in areas other than language, such as mathematics and music (180).

On Chomsky's biologically based nativism, it should be possible for cognitive beings to exist whose relevant genetic endowment differs from ours in ways that enable them to have propositional knowledge inconceivable to us, and conversely. Such organisms could be comparable to us in the richness and range of their cognitive capacities. But because of differences between them and us with respect to what propositional content can enter into thought and speech, communication with them, and mutual understanding, would be severely obstructed. Creatures should even be possible that could comprehend all our thoughts but think things literally unthinkable by us.

It is far from obvious, however, that clear sense can be made of this possibility. Claims about incommensurable conceptual schemes are notoriously unyielding in the face of efforts not only to confirm or disconfirm them, but even to give them clear content. We would need some way to tell whether the difference we note in a particular case reflects divergent conceptual schemes, or merely dramatic differences in belief. Given this difficulty, it is natural to be skeptical about claims that the human understanding is limited in ways that allow for other mental creatures whose understanding is limited in different and mutually incommensurable ways.

The divine guarantee allows Descartes to avoid this difficulty. As he tells Arnauld, he has "such a mind that it is impossible for [him] to conceive" those things whose contradictories are eternal truths. Other cognitive beings presumably have the same assurance. So they would not differ from us in incommensurable ways with respect to what they can comprehend. There is still, however, reason to be wary about the idea that the human understanding is limited 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 thus unlimited—as Descartes would put it, infinite. Given enough time and intelligence, we could understand anything intelligible to any being whatever; no mental act or speech act is possible whose content could, in principle, elude us. If so, then no nativist doctrine that implies limits on the human understanding can be sustained.

VI. Doubting and Methodology

The doubts Descartes invites us to share in the First Meditation are so extraordinary that one cannot help wondering whether his invitation can have been serious. Indeed, one can hardly help wondering whether such doubting is genuinely possible at all. Wilson usefully stresses at least one indisputably serious aspect of that doubting. "It is part of Descartes's considered position that our waking experience is never through and through veridical, is always partly dream-like." And "the senses do tend to 'deceive' us very systematically, and this does pose a problem about the nature and good intentions of our creator" (W 34). But even if Descartes describes doubts that reflect and foreshadow his final view, it does not follow that, as psychologically real doubts, they are serious or even possible.

In the synopsis of the Meditations, 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). This observation evokes his expressed desire, in Meditation I, 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). But it is far from obvious that such reasons suffice to make actual doubting about such matters any less insane. And, if we cannot sanely doubt such things, perhaps we must also disregard Descartes's later injunction at the outset of Meditation II to set aside all those things, and more, "as though I had ascertained [them] to be altogether false" (AT VII 24).

Doubting is a mental act, and thus on Descartes's view it 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. It is shorter by one-fourth than the next longer Meditation, and over fifty percent shorter than the average length of the remaining five. And unlike those five the First Meditation involves no special difficulty in understanding the argument. Yet at its close Descartes describes this first day's mental activity as having been laborious. Nothing about the length or the difficulty of understanding the Meditation makes clear what occasioned any laborious exertion.

But if we imagine Descartes as having really doubted the things he says he has, the mental exhaustion he avows is readily understood. Doubting those things would involve the most extreme efforts of will power. Genuine doubting of that kind could not, as Frankfurt holds, be merely "routine," rather than "heroic" (F 17). The mental effort one would have to give to doubting those things would indeed be impressively heroic. Moreover, only by going very slowly and taking care to put oneself in the right frame of mind would those efforts have any chance of succeeding. To explain Descartes's remarks that at the close of Meditation I, we must suppose that he seriously meant for us to try to form psychologically real doubts of the kinds he describes.

In Meditation I Descartes's aim in doubting is simply to see whether it is possible to doubt particular sorts of things. If it is, then in Meditation II he will set aside [removendo] the things he can doubt as though he had shown them to be false (AT VII 24). Such setting aside calls for relatively little mental effort, as he explains to Clerselier (AT IX 204). It is basically a matter of bookkeeping—keeping track of which kinds of things it had proved possible to doubt, and not allowing them to figure in the discussion unless and until they obtain independent ratification. Doubting in Meditation I has, if successful, largely enervated our prejudices, though one must still resist them, and fighting against epistemic akrasia does take some vigilance and will power. But compared to Meditation I, relatively little will power is now needed, and Descartes can afford gradually to make more taxing demands on us with respect to what we must pay attention to and understand.

If the First Meditation attempts to doubt are meant to find out whether doubting in particular cases is really possible, it is crucial that one be prepared to make the most strenuous efforts to doubt. The failure to doubt after any lesser effort would not show that a more fulsome effort could not succeed. Still, if the goal is just to discover whether doubting is possible in particular cases, success may not be quite so hard as one might have imagined. To show it is psychologically possible to doubt something, one need not sustain a doubt that actively enters into one's ongoing mental economy. Doubting just for a moment will do. Any actual case of doubting something, however fleeting, shows that one can doubt that thing. In the cases Descartes describes, presumably the most strenuous efforts would still be needed even to achieve a merely momentary doubt. But it is reasonable to think that such efforts can succeed in producing a momentary, but psychologically real doubt.

Since a momentary doubt is all Descartes needs, we can resolve the difficulty about sanity. Anybody who doubted the things Descartes describes in more than a merely momentary way would certainly be insane, reasons or no. But momentary doubting need not be a sign of madness. Descartes warns us in the Principles (I iii: AT VIII-1 5) not to let our doubting influence our actions. Noting that Descartes's "doubt finds no expression in action," Kenny expresses some concerns about the status and authenticity of such doubt (Descartes 23). But we would not expect momentary cases of doubting to play any role in our behavior, and being thus insulated within our mental lives need in no way count against the doubting's being psychologically real.

The doubting of Meditation I covers matters of elementary mathematics and conceptual truths. And, if we can perceive anything clearly and distinctly, it is presumably such things as those. On Descartes's doctrine of impelled assent, moreover, if one perceives anything clearly and distinctly, one irresistibly affirms it. These considerations do not, however, give us reason to question whether Descartes saw the First Meditation doubts as psychologically possible. An idea that would impel assent when distinctly and attentively perceived, does not do so when one's attention lapses or shifts (AT VII 69-70; to Mesland, AT IV 117, K 150; to Hyperaspistes, AT III 431, K 117). And in Meditation I Descartes explains to Bourdin: "I had assumed I was not attending to anything that I perceived clearly" (AT VII 460). So there is no difficulty

about whether we can doubt such things, as long as we perceive inattentively. This point emerges vividly in connection with the doubting of Meditation III. For the narrative there explicitly describes doubt as arising only when Descartes shifts his attention away from the things that tend irresistibly to impel assent, and onto the apparent possibility of a deceiving deity (AT VII 36).

The need to show the real possibility of the various kinds of doubt 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. "[T]he 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). To be aware of those faculties is thus to be aware of that mind. The mental acts of Meditation I call for such effort that we not only will take explicit note of them, as we might not with more casual mental acts, but also will be sure to recall them the next day. So Descartes can count in Meditation II on our having retained our awareness of those mental acts, and thus our awareness also of the faculties in virtue of which those acts were possible. He can therefore count on our becoming aware of the self. That he has these considerations in mind is evident in the reasoning that leads up to the cogito, in which he runs through the previous days mental acts, stressing his having performed them.

The cogito in turn exemplifies Descartes's general rule, and once again actual doubting turns out to be important. In trying to doubt even those things we can perceive with the greatest clarity and distinctness, we are fighting against the compulsion our understanding exerts on our will. From that mental struggle, we learn a number of things about our mental nature. We learn that we literally cannot doubt such things while distinctly and attentively perceiving them. We also learn that attention itself does not come without effort; it, too, calls for an exercise of will (AT VII 62, 69). And, we discover that by letting our attention lapse we can doubt things we otherwise could not. We thus have occasion to note the shift in our exercise of will power, from paying close attention to doubting. Most important, from these various exercises of will and understanding, we become increasingly aware of the factors that figure in judging, and thus increasingly prepared for the theory of judgment in Meditation IV.

The role the will plays in Descartes's theory of mental acts helps us understand both his desire that we engage in genuine doubting and his belief that it is possible to do so. And that doubting, if it is psychologically real, makes us aware of the faculty of will. There is, of course, no circle here. Our exercise of will proves that the faculty exists, and once we know that the faculty exists we can refer to it to explain the nature of mental acts. The situation is like that which Descartes describes to Morin, in connection with the Discourse. The term 'demonstrate', he explains, has two senses, at least when we use it "in accordance with common usage, and not in the particular signification philosophers give it." It can mean to prove, as when we reason from cause to effect, or to explain, as when one infers from effect to cause (AT II 198, K 57).

All six Meditations can be seen as essentially about my nature as a thinking thing. Meditation I exhibits my mental nature by engaging in doubting and other highly focused mental acts. Meditation II describes that mental nature, and the Third Meditation establishes its reliability with respect to reaching the truth. The importance of the will in the first three Meditations culminates in the two-faculty theory of my mental nature in Meditation IV, which explains how my mental nature operates. In the Fifth Meditation I discover my innate understanding of various true and immutable natures, and in the Sixth that my mental nature is noncorporeal. Before I know that my mental nature is reliable in reaching the truth, and how that reliability operates, only a causal argument is available to learn that God exists. Afterwards, in Meditation V, I can use an ontological argument, which is in effect just a special case of the reliability of my mental nature.

The importance of the operation of the will is helpful also in understanding Descartes's distinction in the Second Replies between the analytic and synthetic procedures of demonstrating [ratio demonstrandi]. In both procedures, one must conform to proper order, and set things out in such a way that what comes earlier can be known [cognosci] without appeal to subsequent material. The synthetic procedure achieves this by proving theorems from axioms, postulates, and definitions. The analytic procedure, which Descartes greatly favors, shows instead the way [via] in which things have been methodically discovered. Moreover, the analytic procedure reasons "as it were from effect to cause [tanquam a posteriori]," whereas the synthetic procedure goes "as it were from cause to effect [tanquam a priori]." Given Descartes's remarks to Morin, quoted above, it is inviting to think of the analytic procedures as engaging in explanation, and the synthetic as setting out proofs. It is the analytic procedure Descartes says he uses in the Meditations (AT VII 155-156).¹⁹

The synthetic procedure has the ability to compel an inattentive or unwilling reader. The step-by-step demonstration of theorems "wrests assent from the reader, however resistant and stubborn the reader is." If we ever forget a point, "even being unwilling we can be led" by using the synthetic procedure to recall it. The analytic procedure lacks the power to compel, and thus requires readers to be cooperative and attentive. But if one is careful and attentive, one "can understand the matter and make it [one's] own no less perfectly than if [one] had discovered it [oneself]" (AT VII 155-156).

These remarks invite once more the application of the two-faculty theory. The synthetic procedure works independently of the will, and can even work against it. Its coercive power is presumably just that which we commonly ascribe to deductive proofs: One "cannot" hold onto the premises and also deny the conclusion. This coercion seems to work in just the way Descartes's doctrine of compelled assent would predict. Once one understands the connection between premises and conclusion, it is no longer possible for one to affirm the premises and deny the conclusion. Understanding determines what we can mentally affirm.

By contrast, the analytic procedure Descartes uses in the Meditations not only works with the will; it actually enlists its aid. Descartes invites us to perform various mental acts, some of which require considerable expenditure of will power. Our mental effort leads to our becoming explicitly aware of aspects of our mental nature we had not previously noticed: That we are essentially thinking things, that we cannot doubt what we distinctly and attentively understand, that the will plays a crucial role in all mental activity. The focusing of attention is important in this procedure, and the will must cooperate in this task.²⁰

The procedure of the Meditations involves the generous use of examples. "[F]or it is certain that, to find [the truth], one must always begin with particular notions, in order afterwards to arrive at general notions" (AT IX 206). Examples can capture attention and interest, making it easier to engage the will. In the synthetic procedure, our goal is to compel agreement; we capitalize on understood connections to force assent. Accordingly, in this procedure the will is led.²¹ The goal in the analytic procedure is to augment understanding. We induce the will into actively participating in an investigation that issues in an increased awareness of our nature.²²

VII. The Cogito

A principle, Descartes tells Clerselier, can be "a common notion so clear and so general that it can serve as a principle to prove the existence of the beings, the entities, that one will know afterwards." Such principles are presumably adapted for use by the synthetic procedure. But a principle can also be "an individual thing, the existence of which may be better known by us than that of any other things, so that it can serve as a principle for knowing them."

Such principles are evidently to be used in the analytic procedure, and the first principle of this sort is "that our soul exists" (AT IV 444, K 197). The cogito is indeed pivotal to the procedure of the Meditations; starting with the Second, every Meditation leans heavily on our clear and distinct idea of the self. And, as Robert McRae has usefully emphasized, the cogito is notably absent from the synthetic presentation in the Appendix to the Second Replies.²³ If the analytic procedure engages the will while the synthetic procedure coerces it, it is reasonable to suppose that Descartes sees the cogito as being especially sensitive to the role of the will in reasoning. It is thus natural to expect the two-faculty theory will help in interpreting the cogito.

It will be useful to begin by noting some ways in which Descartes's views about various issues impose constraints on a satisfactory interpretation. Descartes says that the pronouncement or statement 'I am, I exist' is true "every time it is produced [profertur] by me, or mentally conceived" (AT VII 25). Only tokens of mental acts and speech acts can be true; their propositional contents, in abstraction from any mental attitude, cannot be. An interpretation that does not reflect this claim will not capture Descartes's intentions.

Descartes insistently casts the cogito in token-reflexive terms. It is thus unlikely (pace Frankfurt; F 105-106) that he would have accepted any non-token-reflexive version. The ineliminability of token reflexives is tied up with the view that truth attaches to tokens of mental acts and speech acts since, to tell what token reflexives refer to, we must typically appeal to the particular occasion of use. Moreover, we must generally rely on pragmatic features of the mental act or speech act in question. Strictly semantic or conceptual factors will not tell us what a token reflexive refers to in a particular case. An adequate interpretation of the cogito must thus go beyond semantic and conceptual connections, and invoke pragmatic considerations as well.

The need to invoke pragmatic factors may suggest Jaakko Hintikka's important argument that the cogito involves a performative dimension.²⁴ Hintikka stresses that to do justice to Descartes's insight we must talk about acts of thinking (D 121-122). But the account Hintikka offers relies on his notion of existential inconsistency, which he defines in strictly semantic terms (D 116). It is thus unlikely that this notion can help us interpret the cogito.

Descartes claims not only that 'I am, I exist' is true whenever I say or think it, but also that it is necessary. If truth attaches to mental acts and speech acts rather than their propositional content, presumably necessity must as well. Still, this doctrine may seem problematic. How, exactly, are tokens of mental acts and speech acts supposed to be necessary?

Considerations pertaining to the eternal truths help with this. One might think that Descartes would have regarded those truths as necessary because God so made them. But the letter to Arnauld quoted in section V does not suggest that. When I grasp that something is an eternal truth it is not that I apprehend that it could not have been otherwise, for as the letter makes clear it could have been. It is rather just that I have been "given such a mind that it is impossible for me to conceive" otherwise (AT V 224, K 236).

Indeed, Descartes makes clear in the Second Replies that nothing whatever is impossible except in connection with the mind:

All contradiction or impossibility consists in our conception [conceptu] (the French Version has "concept or thought [concept ou pensée"]) alone, which does not conjoin opposing ideas, one with another; it is not possible for contradiction or impossibility to be situated outside the understanding, since by something's being outside the understanding it is manifest that it is not contradictory, but possible (AT VII 152, IX 119).

If anything outside the mind is possible, nothing there can be necessary. Necessity can only be a matter of what mental acts we can and must perform.

Whenever I attentively and distinctly understand something, it is impossible for me not to affirm it. 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 is impossible "outside the understanding."²⁵ The necessity of the cogito is of just this kind; it is Descartes's most vivid and revealing case of impelled assent. For it is the cogito that leads to the speculation that, whenever understanding something irresistibly impels us to affirm it, that affirmation is true.

A satisfactory interpretation should thus explain why impelled assent is at its strongest in this case, and how the cogito exemplifies an especially intimate connection between the understanding and the will. Since the will is crucial to the cogito, we have independent reason to expect that pragmatic factors will figure centrally. For the will contributes mental attitudes, and it is in virtue of their mental attitude that tokens of mental acts have whatever pragmatic characteristics they have.

A celebrated case in which pragmatic factors are central derives from G. E. Moore's observation that sentences such as 'It's raining, but I don't think it is' are absurd, but not self-contradictory.²⁶ Because such sentences are not self-contradictory, there seems to be no way to explain their absurdity in strictly semantic terms. Pragmatic factors must also figure in the explanation.

It is reasonable to hold that such sentences are absurd because it is impossible to think or say what the sentences purport to express. Such a sentence can have no coherent conditions of belief or assertability. It is impossible to perform a mental act or speech act that has the propositional content indicated by such a sentence. I cannot perform the mental act of thinking that it is raining but I don't think it is; to do so I would have to think something and at the same time deny I am thinking it. Nor, because of the intimate connection between thought and speech, can one perform the corresponding speech acts. Every genuine speech act expresses a corresponding mental act. One cannot meaningfully and sincerely say anything without thereby expressing a thought that has the same propositional content as what one says, and a mental attitude that corresponds to the illocutionary force of the speech act. Insincere speech acts are, at best, degenerate cases of speech acts.²⁷ So to assert that it's raining but I don't think it is, I would have to express a mental act that cannot occur.

In Moore's paradox, I purport to affirm something with one conjunct, while denying with the other conjunct that the requisite mental act occurs. But the two functions can be combined. 'I am not thinking' purports to affirm something and, in the same logical breath, deny that I am mentally affirming anything at all. Similarly, 'I deny that I'm denying' (as opposed to 'I deny that I'm denying that p', which is unproblematic) purports to express a mental act that denies its own occurrence. 'I doubt that I'm doubting' (unlike 'I doubt that I'm doubting that [whether] p') raises parallel difficulties.

The propositional content of such mental acts and speech acts poses no problems if it is considered in abstraction from mental acts or speech acts that purport

to have that content. On its own, the content is readily understandable. If one regarded propositions as the bearers of truth values, we could easily describe conditions in which such propositions would be true.

The problem arises only when one tries to perform a mental act or speech act with the propositional content in question. I cannot truly think that I am not thinking. If I can think it at all, my mental affirmation would automatically be false. But I could hardly think such a thing and be unaware of doing so. And I cannot mentally affirm something, being aware that I am doing so, when I explicitly and consciously know that my affirmation could not help but be false. Accordingly, it is literally impossible to perform the mental act of thinking that I am not thinking. Since the corresponding speech act would have to express that mental affirmation, I cannot perform that speech act either.

The problematic character of mental acts and speech acts of this type has nothing to do with the property of being self-defeating that Hintikka describes. As Hintikka notes, it is self-defeating to utter 'I am not thinking'. My aim in uttering it would be to convince somebody of what I say (D 121, 125), and I could not achieve that goal by uttering 'I am not thinking'. But being self-defeating in this way cannot be central to Descartes's concerns. An utterance's being self-defeating presupposes a possible audience, and thus a possible context of communication. Mental acts could be self-defeating only derivatively, if at all. Descartes's principal concern, however, was indisputably with mental acts, and only derivatively with speech. No account that accords pride of place to speech can do justice to the cogito. On the present account, the difficulty about 'I am not thinking' has nothing to do with whether one can persuade anybody of anything. It is simply that it is impossible to perform the mental act in question, and thus also impossible to perform the corresponding speech act.

These considerations invite being cast in terms of the two-faculty theory. The understanding has no problem with any of the mental acts considered above. I can, for example, readily understand the idea that I am not thinking. What I cannot do is affirm it, mentally or in speech, while understanding what it is that I am affirming. The problem arises only when the understanding has grasped the idea and the will then tries to affirm it. Mentally affirming is a form of thinking. So, to affirm that I am not thinking, the will would have to affirm that it is not doing what it is doing, and thus in effect contradict itself. Similarly, the will would contradict itself by denying that I am denying, or doubting that I am doubting.

The will's contradicting itself, moreover, is not due to semantic or conceptual factors; that kind of contradiction, Descartes tells us, has to do with the understanding. It is rather the kind of contradicting that characterizes activities—intrinsically, and not in connection with goals. Descartes's distinction between the two faculties thus corresponds exactly to the two factors we must distinguish to give an accurate account of these cases: semantic and conceptual factors on the one hand, and the performing of mental acts and speech acts on the other.

If the will were blind to its own operation, perhaps it could affirm that I am not thinking. Evidence exists, moreover, that Descartes allows exceptions to his well-known doctrine that the mind is transparent to itself. As McRae (*op. cit.*) and Wilson (W 150-165) have stressed, Descartes holds that ideas exist in us of which we are only implicitly aware. We achieve explicit awareness of them by following some such process as the analytic procedure that he employs in the Meditations.

But the exceptions Descartes permits to the transparency of the mind to itself involve only ideas, and not also operations of the will. Thus, he tells Arnauld, it is operations of the mind [operationibus intellexi] he means when he says "that nothing can be in our mind of which we are not at that time conscious" (AT VII 232; cf. AT VII 246-247). And he writes Mersenne that "we can will nothing without knowing that we will it," where the context makes it plain that he is using 'will' in the sense of the two-faculty theory. Moreover, he tells Mersenne, we know every act of will because we have an idea of every such act; indeed, the act and the idea are one and the same (AT III 295, K 93; cf. AT VII 181, and Passions I, art. xix, AT XI 343). It is because we cannot be unaware of any operation of the will that Eudoxus can say that "in order to know what doubting is, and what thinking is, only doubting or thinking is needed" (AT X 524). Objects of the understanding—ideas—can occur in us on their own with our being conscious of them, but acts of will cannot. The two-faculty theory is thus crucial for accurately delineating the range of mental phenomena with respect to which Descartes does insist that the mind is self-transparent.

There is nothing special about the proposition that I am not thinking, considered apart from any mental attitude. Similarly, no special status attaches to the proposition that I am thinking by itself. But I cannot raise the question of whether or not I am thinking without its being impossible for me to fail to recognize that I am. Raising the question is a form of thinking; how could I do so and not affirm mentally that I am thinking?

These matters again invite reformulation in terms of the two faculties. In abstraction from any mental act, the idea that I am thinking has no special standing. But attentively understanding that idea leaves me no choice but to affirm it. My attentive understanding makes that affirmation true. And I cannot help but be aware of my act of attentive understanding. So I cannot help but affirm the idea. The mental affirmation is necessitated by my mental nature, and is thus a necessary mental act. And the connection between my acts of will and understanding could not be closer than it is in this case.

We need no special theory to understand how this case of compelled assent operates. Moreover, part of the compulsion is due to the operation of my act of attentive understanding by itself in making my mental affirmation true. So this example of compelled assent is as well suited as any could be to lead to the speculation in Meditation III that, whenever attentive understanding so impels the will to affirm, the resulting affirmation is true.

It is no less impossible to affirm that I do not exist than that I am not thinking. And, if I attentively understand the relevant idea, it is no less impossible for me not to affirm that I exist than for me not to affirm that I am thinking. Descartes actually suggests that my knowing I exist is, in a way, on a par with my knowing I am thinking. For he tells Gassendi that it is impossible to demonstrate either that I am or what I am [qualis sim] without demonstrating the other (AT VII 359). My nature as a thinking thing must somehow be implicit in the way I know I exist. But Descartes also accords a privileged position to my knowing I am thinking. That I am thinking, he tells Gassendi, is metaphysically certain. That is why I can infer my existence from my thinking but not from my walking (AT VII 352). No other item of knowledge is, on its own, metaphysically certain.

The present interpretation helps with these remarks. The absurdity that attaches to my affirming that I am not thinking or do not exist, and the necessary that attaches to my affirming that I am thinking and do exist, are all due to my nature as a thinking thing. So I cannot demonstrate that I exist without implicitly demonstrating that I think. And, of course, walking would not help here at all. The inference from my walking to my existing is a matter of conceptual or semantic connections. It thus succumbs to the demon and, in any case, cannot explain the particular kind of necessity involved in my mental act of affirming I exist.

Moreover, the way my understanding determines my will is just a bit less direct in the case of my existence than in the case of my thinking. When I attentively understand the idea that I am thinking, my mental act makes it true that I am thinking. Attentively understanding the idea that I exist does not, in the same immediate way, make it true to affirm that I exist. Since I perform the mental act of attentively understanding, it is true to affirm I exist; I cannot act without existing. (As Wilson notes [W 65] Descartes and Gassendi share that assumption.) But the extra step is needed to explain the truth of my affirming that I exist, and the necessity I am under to affirm it. The connection between will and understanding is unmediated by any such step when I affirm I am thinking. My knowing that I think thus has a special status shared by no other item of knowledge.

The need for an extra step in the case of my knowing I exist raises the much discussed question of whether the cogito is an intuition—that is, a case of clear and distinct perception—or an inference. A related question is whether the Meditations version of the cogito, in which the celebrated rubric cogito, ergo sum is absent, has the same status as those versions which are cast in terms of that formula.

Descartes explicitly rejects the question about inference or intuition as a false dichotomy. An inference can itself be a "simply intuition of mind," and cogito, ergo sum is just such a case. In any event, the demon hypothesis leads us to set aside, as though altogether false, all logical and conceptual connections. Descartes's parallel doctrine about the eternal truths also precludes taking conceptual or semantic truths as fundamental. So ergo here could not express such a connection; hence Descartes's impatience with the suggestion that the reasoning is somehow syllogistic (AT VII

140).²⁸ Since ergo must express some other sort of connection, one which could figure as part of a simple intuition of mind, the most reasonable interpretation is that it expresses the connection of compelled assent. Attentively and distinctly understanding that I think irresistibly impels me to affirm that I exist.

What is special about the Meditations version of the cogito is not that it contains no inference, but that it is more explicit about the status of cogito, and sum, taken separately. Before Descartes gets to his existence, he rehearses the mental acts of Meditation I, noting that he cannot doubt their occurrence. That knowledge is metaphysically certain. He then connects his remarks about his mental acts to his certainty that he exists by writing: "having considered all these things satisfactorily, it is thereupon necessary to hold for certain that ..." (AT VII 25). Despite the absence of the celebrated formula, Descartes clearly passes from knowing he thinks to knowing he exists.

But the bearing that thinking has on my knowing that I exist is described here in a way that resists interpretation as a matter of logical inference or conceptual connection. The statement 'I exist' is necessarily true every time I say or think it; that is, my mental act is both true and necessitated. It is necessitated not only by my mental act of understanding the idea that I exist; it is necessitated by any mental act I perform that calls attention to the question of my existence. The bearing my thinking has on my existing is that my being attentively aware of my thinking necessitates that I affirm my existence.

Existence is of central importance for Descartes's purposes. Ideas always purport to represent existing objects: "we can conceive nothing except under the notion of existence [sub ratione existentis]" (AT VII 166). But, because ideas do not automatically reveal the nature of extramental reality, we always need independent ratification for inferring from an idea to the existence of its object; hence Descartes's preoccupation, throughout the Meditations, with questions about existence. The cogito is the first case in which he holds we can pass from our being aware of an idea to our knowing that its object exists. But we can explain Descartes's passage from thinking to existing, and the special status that affirming each idea has, only by reference to impelled assent. And we can formulate that doctrine only if we distinguish the two faculties. Even with the cogito, where the two faculties interact most intimately, we must be able to tell the two apart.²⁹

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NOTES

1 Conspicuous exceptions are E. M. Curley's "Descartes, Spinoza and the Ethics of Belief," in Spinoza, Essays in Interpretation, ed. Eugene Freeman and Maurice Mandelbaum (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1975): 159-189 (henceforth "C"); Anthony Kenny's "Descartes on the Will," in Cartesian Studies, ed. R. J. Butler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972 [henceforth "B"]): 1-31; and chapter 4 of Margaret Daulet Wilson's Descartes (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) (henceforth "W").

2 These three initial sections are derived from my "Will and the Theory of Judgment," in Essays on Descartes' Meditations, ed. Amelie O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986): 405-434.

3 I use "AT" to refer to Oeuvres de Descartes, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964-75). References are to AT page numbers throughout; see The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, by Rene Descartes, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (3 volumes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-91), which includes those page numbers. For convenience I provide references to Descartes: Philosophical Letters, tr. and ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970) (abbreviated "K"), though Cottingham et al vol. III includes those translations, with slight revisions. Translations throughout are my own.

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).

4 These considerations help resolve puzzles raised by David Fate Norton about Descartes's claims concerning our knowledge of our faculties. See "Descartes on Unknown Faculties, an Essential Inconsistency," Journal of the History of Philosophy VI, 3 (July 1968): 244-256.

5 See the Fifth Replies: "[t]he term 'idea' ... I extend to whatever is thought" (AT VII 367); and the Second Replies: "I take the term 'idea' to stand for whatever the mind directly perceives" (AT VII 181). Descartes does say that ideas can be expressed by either terms or propositions (to Mersenne, AT III 395, K 106). Presumably terms express ideas 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).

In "Ideas and Judgment in the Third Meditation: An Object Lesson in Philosophical Historiography," Independent Journal of Philosophy (1983) Marjorie Grene forcibly advances an alternative interpretation of these matters.

6 Res Cogitans (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972): 169.

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

8 Curley credits Spinoza (Ethics II, prop. xlix) 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's talk of true and immutable natures that "do not depend on [his] mind" (AT VII 64) 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). So it is reasonable to regard them as forms of thought over which we have no control. On Descartes's alleged platonism with respect to abstract objects, see Gewirth, "The Cartesian Circle Reconsidered," The Journal of Philosophy, LXVII, 19 (October 8, 1970): 668-685; Kenny, "The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths," ibid., 685-700; and Gewirth, "Descartes, Two Disputed Questions," The Journal of Philosophy, LXVIII, 9 (May 6, 1971): 288-296.

10 The French Version of the Meditations has proposition (AT IX-I 19) presumably explaining the translation 'proposition' in The Philosophical Works of Descartes, tr. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1931) I, 150. And the Latin term proposition occurs, e.g., in Principles I x (AT VIII-I 8) and in 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 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 160-1); and the Geometrical Appendix to the Second Replies, in which "the essence of will" is identified with acting "voluntarily and freely" (AT VII 166).

12 Cartesian Linguistics (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), chapter 1, esp. p. 4.

13 That nonverbal behavior often expresses propositional content, but far less obviously and unambiguously expresses mental attitudes, may explain what is so intuitively compelling about Norman Malcolm's distinction between thinking and having thoughts ("Thoughtless Brutes," in Thought and Knowledge [Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977]: 40-57, esp. 49-57). Malcolm urges that many nonlinguistic animals clearly engage in thinking, though we would hesitate, he urges, also to ascribe to them the having of thoughts.

14 On the importance of the connection between Descartes's 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, LXXXVI, 1 (January

1977), 36-57, esp. 45-46. I am indebted to Frankfurt's lucid and convincing account of these matters.

15 In Theodicy (tr. E. M. Huggard [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952]), Leibniz suggests that Descartes's doctrine about the eternal truths was a device to defend his view that "acts of inner judgement ... are operations of the will" simply by adopting a suitable "change in the meaning of terms" (sec. 186, pp. 244-245; I owe my awareness of this passage to W 234-235, fn. 30). The foregoing considerations suggest that the connection between the two positions is far less ad hoc and arbitrary.

16 Gewirth, "The Cartesian Circle," The Philosophical Review L, 4 (July 1941): 368-395; the articles cited in fn. 9 above; and F chapter 15. It is tempting to construe O. K. Bouwsma's well-known argument that the demon hypothesis is incoherent (in "Descartes' Evil Genius," The Philosophical Review LVIII, 1 [January 1949]: 141-151) as in effect an ordinary-language counterpart of the reasoning Gewirth and Frankfurt ascribe to Descartes.

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

18 Rules and Representations (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 46. See my commentary on the The Behavioral and Brain Sciences version of Chomsky's book: "The Modularity and Maturation of Cognitive Capacities," The Behavioral and Brain Sciences 3, 1 (March 1980): 32-34.

19 Daniel Garber and Lesley Cohen convincingly argue that Descartes uses it in the Principles as well, "A Point of Order: Analysis, Synthesis, and Descartes's Principles," Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie, Band 64, Heft 2 (1982): 136-147.

20 That considerable effort is sometimes required may help answer some of Wilson's objections to the idea that no more is needed to make explicit and conscious what we know implicitly than an act of focusing attention (W 162-164). An act of attention is more than mentally looking at a particular thing. It requires careful concentration, and that may in turn call for eliminating distractions due to well-entrenched prejudice.

21 Even Descartes's synthetic presentation in the Second Replies is not a pure case. For his so-called postulates are all actually requests—to doubt, to attend, to examine, and so forth. Indeed, the first postulate exhorts us to engage in particular mental acts until we form new habits, thus testifying again to the strenuous mental effort Descartes asks of us.

22 It is plausible to suppose that Descartes would have regarded Spinoza's failure to recognize the role of the will in judging as responsible for his desire to set his view out in accordance with the synthetic procedure.

23 "Innate Ideas," in B, 32-54, p. 37. For an exceptionally useful discussion of the procedure Descartes follows in the Meditations, see pp. 36-40.

24 "Cogito, Ergo Sum, Inference or Performance?", in D, 108-139.

25 In the Meditations, the concept of necessity emerges most clearly in Meditation V. Descartes tells us that diligent attention makes it clear that the idea of a valley cannot be separated from the idea of a mountain, nor the essence of a triangle from its having angles equal to two right angles (AT VII 66). This discussion plainly evokes the doctrine about the eternal truths, since in subsequent letters he gives exactly those cases as examples of such truths (AT IV 188, V 224, K 151, 236). Descartes takes care to emphasize that the necessity is in the way we conceive things by telling us there that "my thinking imposes no necessity on things," and then saying the very same thing again, in virtually the same words, in the next paragraph (AT VII 66-67). And, in the paragraph after that, he describes as necessary, some half-dozen times, particular mental acts we are necessarily led to perform (AT VII 67).

26 "A Reply to My Critics," in The Philosophy of G. E. Moore, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1942) [2nd ed. 1952]: 533-677, p. 543; "Russell's 'Theory of Descriptions'," in The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1944), 175-226, p. 204.

27 See my "Intentionality," Midwest Studies in Philosophy, X (1986): 151-184, esp. §V; see the postscript accompanying a reprinted version in Rerepresentation: Readings in the Philosophy of Mental Representation, ed. Stuart Silvers (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989): 341-344.

28 Pace Jerrold J. Katz, Cogitations: A Study of the Cogito in Relation to the Philosophy of Logic and Language and a Study of Them in Relation to the Cogito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), who proposes that the cogito is at bottom an matter of semantic connection.

29 This paper was completed while I was a fellow in 1989-90 at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF), University of Bielefeld, Germany. I am indebted to the Center for generous support and exceptionally congenial and stimulating surroundings during that time.