

a cartesian ethical narrative

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The strategy employed by many commentators of Descartes' practical philosophy consists of bringing to light similarities between Descartes' positions and already recognized ethical views, tracing the history of some of Descartes' ethical claims.¹ Lisa Shapiro, for instance, argues that Descartes is a virtue ethicist since he takes the supreme good to be a Stoic-inspired but less demanding notion of virtue,² while John Marshall's close analysis of Descartes' *morale par provision* and *The Passions of the Soul*³ concludes that Descartes proposes a version of Neo-Stoicism that is worth more consideration than it has so far received.⁴ Donald Rutherford brings to light both the similarities and the differences between Descartes' and

the Stoics' ethical views, contending that "[a]lthough Descartes disagrees with the Stoics on key points of doctrine, his broader understanding of the structure of ethical theory and its relation to metaphysics and natural philosophy mirrors that of the Stoics."⁵ Noa Naaman-Zauderer, by contrast, stresses that it is reasons and our attitudes toward reasons that matter, not consequences, in proposing a deontological reading of Descartes' theoretical and practical rationality that reads Descartes' notion of "supreme good" as amounting to the right use of the will.⁶ Deborah Brown sees Descartes' ethics as recommending minimizing regret and maximizing legitimate self-esteem,⁷ while for J.B. Schneewind Descartes holds that "[s]elf-perfection, either through increased knowledge or, lacking that, through constant will, is the key to all of morality. And only seeing for ourselves will give us the knowledge we need."⁸

Despite bringing to our attention important facets of Descartes' ethical thought⁹, these interpretations are, in my view, incomplete because they focus selectively on one or a few moral elements to the detriment of other remarks that Descartes also makes. Indeed, given Descartes' emphasis on unity throughout his work (be it the unity of knowledge,¹⁰ of virtue,¹¹ of prior planning,¹² or of legislative authority, for instance),¹³ we should look for a way of interpreting Descartes' practical philosophy which encompasses his apparently disparate ethical remarks and fits them into one, coherent picture. Informed by Donald Rutherford's claim that Descartes' "ethics" is about living well,¹⁴ and by an understanding of "morality" as "that constellation of beliefs, values, and ideals to which one defers at the most basic level, both in guiding one's choices—choices of individual actions, specific plans, policies, and even styles of life—and in justifying these choices, both to oneself and, where called upon, to others,"¹⁵ this paper goes beyond the strategy adopted by many Descartes scholars to show that it is the *narrative ethics* proposed by Robert Roberts' that provides the framework for a *unified, coherent* approach to Descartes' ethics.

With a focus on ethics' recent emphasis on character, virtues and vices, Roberts spells out the notion of narrative ethics as philosophical analysis of ethical

concepts combined with using stories to illustrate and render ethical concepts more concrete.¹⁶ ‘Narrative’ here refers to illustrating virtues and vices via literary means, thus rendering them more transparent as well as easier for the reader to relate to. Roberts views the combination of ethics so conceived (as providing the subject-matter) and narratives (as supplying the means) as a particularly fruitful one since virtues and vices are dispositions rather than events and, as such, are in need of diachronically-extended descriptions and illustrations. Narratives, on the other hand, are very suitable for describing sequences of connected events. (Virtue) ethics and stories represent, therefore, a perfect match.

There are three main reasons for applying narrative ethics to Descartes’ views, reasons independent of whether one agrees with interpretations of Descartes as a virtue ethicist. Descartes stresses not only the inspiring and motivating aspects of stories, but also their selective and misleadingly idealizing approach thus 1) theorizing (AT VI, 5-8; CSM I, 113-114) and 2) applying the connection between stories and ethics in a way similar to Roberts (AT IV, 221; CSMK 251). Furthermore, 3) expanding on Descartes’ insights on these points is supported by explicit remarks Descartes makes and provides increased clarification of his ethical positions. By drawing on Descartes’ use of stories (e.g. relating Descartes’ attraction to cross-eyed women [AT V, 57; CSMK 322], the story of the voyageur from the *Discourse* [AT VI, 24-25; CSM I, 123], and so on) and using philosophical analysis to supplement the limitations of stories Descartes identifies, I reconstruct his ethical views as treating of childhood, youth and maturity. The connections between these three stages trace the role of emotions, reason and will. This unified Cartesian ethical narrative helps us recover in Descartes’ ethics the unity that he praised in other contexts and remedies the restricted character of many of the already available interpretations of Descartes’ practical philosophy.

This paper is structured in four parts. Parts I-III investigate Descartes’ thinking about moral matters by tracking three stages in the moral development of a fictionalized character modeled on Descartes himself.¹⁷ The character whose development we will follow in this paper is ‘fictionalized’ since the sources

I will draw on below include elements from Descartes' actual life, without being restricted to them.¹⁸ In the opening parts of the *Discourse* Descartes uses autobiographical details but also poetic license.¹⁹ His extended correspondence, upon inspection, offers an image of Descartes closer to the fictionalized portraits of the narrators of the *Discourse* and the *Meditations* than we first expect. This is not surprising in light of the 17th century conventions of epistolary decorum and politesse, conventions including artifice, invention and hyperbole. During the early modern period, in the process of writing letters, one was actively creating a (more or less) public persona.²⁰

The *Discourse* and the *Principles* describe our protagonist's childhood as a time when he receives an education and is trained to obey his teachers.²¹ The *Discourse* follows him during youth when he travels the world, gets acquainted with other peoples and customs, applies himself at getting rid of errors and prejudices and in this way works at establishing the reliability of his reason (AT VI, 1-31; CSM I, 111-126). To facilitate his project of theoretical and scientific inquiry, he also decides to try to get his desires under control (AT VI, 25-27; CSM I, 123-124). Finally, in the 1645-1646 *Correspondence with Elizabeth* and in *The Passions of the Soul*, moral maturity culminates in a harmonious emotional constitution and the corresponding legitimate self-esteem. At this stage, our hero's composure and tranquility are challenged by ongoing accusations of atheism which could end in condemnation and even imprisonment.²² Nonetheless, as indicated by his comments to Mesland that he could live "quite peacefully and happily even if the verdict of the entire learned world were against [him]" (AT IV, 217; CSMK 249), he strives assiduously to acquire and maintain Cartesian generosity.²³

Part IV summarizes the main points of the paper and concludes by stressing the richness of Descartes' views when considered in relation to both his philosophical predecessors and successors.

I. MORALITY FOR CHILDREN

We were all children before being men and had to be governed for some time by our appetites and our teachers, which were often opposed to each other and neither of which, perhaps, always gave us the best advice.... (AT VI, 13; CSM I, 117).

Although Descartes employs the masculine noun “hommes/men,” this passage refers to all human beings, regardless of gender, since Descartes holds that we all are substantial unions of non-gendered immaterial minds²⁴ and material bodies (AT VII, 81; CSM II, 56); (PA, 7, 17). Descartes describes young children as influenced by their mothers’ experiences during pregnancy, affected by early age traumatic events they may not even remember (PA, 133-134) and as having temperaments predisposing them to certain types of emotions (such as anger [PA, 136]). The early stages of a human being’s life involve being physically small, relying on instincts (AT II, 599; CSMK, 140)²⁵ and being dependent on others for survival and instruction.

In our early childhood the mind was so closely tied to the body that it had no leisure for any thoughts except those by means of which it had sensory awareness of what was happening to the body.... It ... merely felt pain when something harmful was happening to the body and felt pleasure when something beneficial occurred (AT VIII A, 35; CSM I, 218, a. 71).

In the *Passions*, feeling pain is described as a passion in the broad sense (PA, 17) and then further specified as a natural appetite (PA, 24). Alongside pleasure, pain is also the cause of the passions of sadness and joy, respectively (PA, 137). Young children’s lives are determined and completely governed by passions. They live in the realm of immediacy and take everything at face value thus acquiring preconceived opinions about external objects. Descartes identifies two stages of children’s relation with the world starting with no distinction between in (sensations) and out (things). Then comes a vague distinction due to automatically pursuing the beneficial and attributing to the outside world characteristics of their own thoughts and sensations. Taking these objects’ secondary properties

to be primary properties, children are “materialists” (AT VIII A, 32; CSM I, 216, a. 66); (AT VIII A, 35; CSM I, 218, a. 71) and Aristotelians²⁶ in the way they grasp and relate to the external world. In the practical sphere, young children simply react to stimuli in the same way animals do. Even though Descartes notices the soul’s consent as the main difference between human passions and the correspondent animal movements (PA, 138), children cannot be seen as genuinely capable of consent since they don’t have the full use of their reason (AT VII, 439; CSM II, 296). We will return to this problem below.

As Byron Williston remarks, “[a] narrowly self-preservative ‘ethic’ can be deduced fairly easily from this picture.”²⁷ This ‘ethic’ is similar in content to elements of Academic Skeptical practical views as described by John Marshall. Marshall mentions Arcesilaus (head of the Platonic Academy from 264 B.C.) who enjoins acting on the basis of “reasonable impressions.” Marshall notes that these recommendations amount to reducing human to animal conduct since impressions and impulses “disconnected from even the barest hint of the thought that the act is appropriate, or probably appropriate or has a good chance of being so” provide all the motivation for action. This, Marshall continues, represents a throwback to the “Pyrrhonian position of simply having a motivational impetus to move in this, that or the other way.”²⁸

Both the Academic Skeptic and very young children react to impressions, impulses and stimuli, but they differ greatly in the way they came to hold this ‘morality.’ The Academic Skeptic endeavored to doubt everything, completely giving up beliefs, including those about good and evil. Young children, on the other hand, are governed by the body’s self-regulatory system which, as Amelie Rorty observes, “operates without long-range memory: its responses are relatively immediate, directed by and to its present condition.”²⁹ Children lack beliefs if we take “belief” to be the equivalent of Descartes’ judgment. Judging is an act of the will (AT VIII A, 18; CSM I, 204, a. 34) but in children, who only gradually get to exercise their abilities,³⁰ the will is activated but the children themselves are not active.

Initially, children act on impulse and even if their behavior is regulated in this way, if we called this regulation of behavior a morality, we would have to extend it to animals. This, in turn, would be unacceptable for Descartes (PA 50; AT IV, 573-576; CSMK 302-304). Nonetheless, the position defended in this paper does not entail such a problematic extension since only very young children are confined to simply reacting to their environment. As they grow up, a commonsense morality is passed on to them by their parents and educators. It is by learning to deliberate and to act appropriately to circumstances that they get close to the Pyrrhonian provisional morality which, as Marshall notes, acknowledges law and custom as binding moral rules.³¹

We can conclude that practical Skepticism (as characterized above) and Descartes' children's guide to behavior are alike in being action-guiding, leading to outwardly similar-looking actions and not being based on belief. Since we are willing to call the former a "morality" we can also extend to the latter the same label. The fact that only practical Skepticism is the result of doubt is a relevant dissimilarity but it is mitigated by the formative role of the views children acquire during childhood and by the continuity between Descartes' children's guide to behavior and his morality for youth (the provisional code). Given these mitigating factors, the dissimilarity does not outweigh the relevant similarities and, as a result, calling Descartes' children's guide to behavior a "morality" is not improper. This conclusion is made possible by our interpreting Descartes' ethical views as amounting to a story covering the whole human life span. By accounting for both commonalities *and* changes the present Cartesian ethical narrative provides a coherent, unified account of Descartes' ethical statements. As a result, new light is shed on Descartes' views and Roberts' requirement of moral clarification is met.

Despite the fact that the very next stage of Descartes' life is marked by a repudiation of information coming from the senses as well as rejection of uncritically following tradition and authority (AT VII, 17-23; CSM II, 12-17), we have good reasons to think that Descartes would *recommend* that every child follow the promptings of their senses and passions together with the advice of their teachers. According

to Descartes, relying on our senses is inevitable during our early years because, as embodied beings, our survival depends on our bodies functioning properly. In order to progress toward an intellect-based cognition we must first make the best use possible of a time during which our senses and passions, as well as our parents and teachers rule us. In the *Discourse*, this recommendation is offered indirectly by means of a personal narrative.

Descartes repeatedly stresses the importance of a good upbringing and education. In the *Discourse*, we learn that it was only luck that made it the case that Descartes received a good education³² and became acquainted with a diversity of views (some of which opposed each other) responsible for opening his eyes to the precarious status of knowledge. This, in turn, prompted him to look for a way to improve his epistemic situation (AT VI, 4-11; CSM I, 112-116) and, subsequently, to find his method (AT VI, 15-17; CSM I, 118-119). In *The Passions*, a good upbringing is characterized as able to compensate for defects and shortcomings of birth (PA, 161). Given these remarks, Descartes would probably also stress the importance of our parents and teachers' endorsing and practicing the recommendations of Descartes' later moralities (which will be discussed below). In this way, adults would increase their chances of nourishing their children on more than letters (AT VI, 4; CSM I, 112-113) and views revealing themselves questionable when scrutinized. Instead, parents and teachers versed in Cartesianism could pass onto their children moral rules and values less in need of revision than those Descartes had received, despite his attending "one of the most famous schools in Europe" (AT VI, 5; CSM I, 113).

II. MORALITY FOR YOUTH

[A]s soon as I was old enough to emerge from the control of my teachers, I entirely abandoned the study of letters. Resolving to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself or else in the great book of the world, I spend the rest of my youth traveling, visiting courts and armies, mixing with people of diverse temperaments and ranks, gathering

various experiences, testing myself in the situations which fortune offered me, and at all times reflecting upon whatever came my way so as to derive some profit from it (AT VI, 9; CSM I, 115).³³

In describing childhood Descartes wants to provide his readers with enough context to justify the urgent need for epistemic reform. Senses are deceptive and relying heavily on them, as children are bound to do, can only lead one astray (AT VIII A, 35; CSM I, 218, a. 71). Upon close inspection, the views Descartes had been taught at school came in conflict with one another and were thus invalidated (AT VI, 5-9; CSM I, 113-115). Later, Descartes will identify sensory information as the root cause of many of these erroneous views (AT VI, 31-32; CSM I, 126-127). For these reasons, a more reliable method is needed to deal with the problem of proper knowledge-acquisition and it becomes necessary to engage in a difficult and protracted process of doubt.

But regarding the opinions to which I had hitherto given credence, I thought that I could not do better than undertake to get rid of them, all at one go, in order to replace them afterwards with better ones, or with the same ones once I had squared them with the standards of reason. (AT VI, 13-14; CSM I, 117)

An important difference between the Skeptic's doubt and Descartes' consists in the fact that Descartes' only goal is to attain certainty and doubt, presented in an autobiographical manner³⁴ is only an instrument in this pursuit of certainty (AT VI, 29; CSM I, 125). Absent, as we noted, from Descartes' "morality for children," doubt is now intended as a gradual and lengthy process, requiring biological development and careful preparation.³⁵ This preparation took the form of the itinerant process of ridding his mind of error while seemingly engaged only in leading a pleasant, blameless life (AT VI, 30; CSM I, 125-126).

With respect to the practical realm, the *Discourse* indicates that the two bases of Descartes' morality for children (reliance on instincts and obedience to teachers)

come under attack. A clash of contrary positions (which later Descartes will trace to an over-reliance on sensory information) and travel-based moral relativity arguments undermine the morality that he had been brought up with (AT VI, 16; CSM I, 118-119). Because some of the physiological processes that cause sensations are also reflected in the soul as feelings and passions, when the young Descartes (he is twenty-three by the time the events recounted in the first parts of the *Discourse* unfold) becomes aware of sensations as occasions for error and therefore in need of scrutiny, he includes in the same category appetites and passions (AT VI, 54-56; CSM II, 138-139). Sensations, appetites and passions occasion not only theoretical doubt but also the need for moral reform. Furthermore, reading and traveling make Descartes realize that the morals and customs of other countries are as effective at supplying the inhabitants of those respective lands with orderly and socially stable lives as the morals and customs he had been brought up to respect. His acquaintance with foreign laws and customs makes him question the adequacy of the French ones, if this adequacy was based only on “example and custom” (AT VI, 10; CSM I, 116).

This, together with his commitment to engage in theoretical doubt,³⁶ forces Descartes to adopt a provisional morality in which appetites (passions in a broad sense) lose their guiding role without disappearing completely. However, for the sake of making progress in the theoretical sphere, Descartes is willing to make compromises in the practical sphere by relying for the time being on other people’s opinions. He is also investing in the future (by curtailing his desires now in hopes of reaping greater rewards later) and hedging his bets (by choosing the most moderate of the available moral positions and examples [AT VI, 27-28; CSM I, 124-125]). To avoid inactivity while engaged in theoretical doubt,³⁷ he formulates a provisional morality preserving aspects of the commonsense morality that he was inculcated with since childhood (AT VI, 22; CSM I, 122).³⁸

Descartes’ provisional moral code was not uncritically or arbitrarily devised. Descartes had a goal (to live happily during theoretical inquiry), was forced to figure things out for himself,³⁹ and thus proceeded to put to use elements he had at

his disposal. He had some acquaintance with prior ethical views (such as ancient ethics and the virtues the ancients praised). These views turned out to be flawed when scrutinized carefully. In the process of making up his own mind about how to live well, Descartes is still drawing on these prior views and using components of some theories to complete and/or correct the gaps and flaws of other theories.⁴⁰ That is why the provisional moral code (and by extension the rules of the final morality) are a collage of diverse elements (Skeptical, Stoic, etc.). In other words, he is not starting from the foundation in ethics since he must live and act while starting from the foundation in theoretical matters. He is also convinced that a better ethics will follow once metaphysics and science are properly grounded and established. Since he is already holding the architectural model of knowledge (AT VI, 14; CSM I, 117) and is optimistic about his chances of gaining true knowledge, he can afford for the time being to make due with an “imperfect” moral code (AT IX B, 15; CSM I, 186-187).

The first maxim of this moral code is to respect the laws and customs of his country and to guide himself by the opinions of the most sensible persons. The second refers to acting resolutely on the basis of the best available opinions, even if these opinions are only probable. The third rule concerns the control and change of his own desires, while the fourth presents Descartes’ decision to continue his quest for truth. The first rule marks the continuity between Descartes’ childhood morality and his current one. It provides Descartes with examples and recipes of right conduct to be applied to particular situations of his everyday life. The fourth rule gives the general context of Descartes’ life at this time (a scholar faces very different challenges than a soldier or a farmer). In turn, the second and third of the four rules composing the Cartesian provisional morality provide the connection between this stage of Descartes’ moral life and the next one, with the final morality intended for mature adults.

In the second moral rule of the *Discourse* Descartes states that if we cannot find what is certain in a given practical situation we have to make do with the most probable (AT VI, 25; CSM I, 123). The same idea is reiterated in the *Principles*:

As far as ordinary life is concerned, the chance for action would frequently pass us by if we waited until we could free ourselves from our doubts and so we are often compelled to accept what is merely probable (AT VIII A, 5; CSM I, 193, a. 3).

Marshall calls Descartes' provisional morality a *probabilism* and identifies similarities with the Academic Skeptical tradition of provisional moralities, specifically with the views of Philo of Larissa (head of the Academy between 110-84 BCE).⁴¹ Although Philo departed from the strict skeptical stance of his Academic predecessors in moving toward a mitigated skepticism in which provisional beliefs which made no claims to certainty were allowed, and although he was viewed by some (such as Sextus) as having sold out to the dogmatists, since he requires less than full-blown cognitive assent for practical matters,⁴² Philo can still claim to be a skeptic.⁴³

If Descartes' provisional morality is not to collapse into Pyrrhonism, the moral agent has to have more than a simple propensity to act in a certain way and must do more than simply react to stimuli. Yet, because of the doubt, he lacks an appropriate moral criterion. Descartes' solution seems to consist in allowing the propensity for action to probably "track the truth." This leaves Descartes open to arguments from moral relativity but he was confident that his morality had at least some antecedent probability of being true. He was convinced that we can make up for our lack of practical certainty, not by suspending belief (as per the Skeptics), but through "robust belief,"⁴⁴ which he will later characterize as an act of will. Indeed, robust belief is exactly what the final part of the second Rule recommends. The second Rule ("when truth cannot be found accept what is probable and act resolutely on the resulting opinion as if it were the most certain"), is an interesting mix of Skeptical-Academic, probabilistic elements and revised Stoic elements.⁴⁵ Combining moral elements from several traditions is an aspect of Descartes' moral philosophy that remains prevalent throughout his entire creative life.

We cannot always find certainty because of the "pressure of things to be done"

(AT VII, 90; CSM II, 62) and of the conflicting reports we get from our senses and our passions. In conditions of uncertainty, passions give us some directions and point the way at least approximately, thus preventing us from being completely incapable of acting. Passions are value-pointers but can also be very unreliable. That is why Descartes' third Rule recommends changing our desires rather than the order of the world. In *The Passions*, it is the passion of desire that leads to action (other passions lead to desire and desire initiates bodily motion (PA, 143-144). When what we are pursuing is in fact beyond our reach (because circumstances make it impossible for us to actually achieve our goal), by desiring and pursuing that goal we are wasting our resources. So, by keeping our desires in check, we prevent such waste from occurring.

This will also, for Descartes, prevent the passions of remorse and regret from affecting us (AT VI, 25; CSM I, 123). In *The Passions*, Descartes will characterize these emotions as species of sadness. They are "bitter" (PA, 59; 60; 67; 209) and thus incompatible with contentment and the happiness he was seeking in 1637 and throughout his whole life (PA, 190). In the *Discourse*, Descartes does not mention that irresolution, remorse and regret are passions but he comes to realize both the breadth and the importance of this problem later on.⁴⁶ At the end of his discussion of Rule four, Descartes notes that the contentment he gets from practicing his method and making new discoveries is so great that any other affections fail to get any grip on him (AT VI, 27; CSM I, 124). Satiety, experiencing a fullness of positive emotions (contentment, proper desires and so on) will appear again in *The Passions* (PA, 144).

Descartes recommends his provisional morality to others seeking the truth and attempting to cultivate their reason. After noting in the *Preface to the French Principles* that the searcher after truth must devise for oneself an imperfect moral code (AT IX B, 13; CSM I, 186), he gives the example of the provisional moral code from the *Discourse* (AT IX B, 15; CSM I, 186). Although the formulation "an imperfect moral code" leaves open the possibility that there may be more than one suitable for the task (a possibility further buttressed by Descartes' mentioning

that truth is one [AT VI, 21; CSM I, 121], while error comes in multiple forms), Marshall's comments that Descartes' *morale par provision* had an antecedent probability for the latter of being true, support the claim that Descartes would have recommended to others the moral code of the *Discourse*, imperfect as it was.

Further support comes from Paul Trainor's argument about the role of autobiography in Descartes. According to Trainor, philosophers such as (Plato's) Socrates, Descartes and Collingwood use autobiography as a special type of philosophical argument, neither deductive nor inductive, but "rhetorical" (since its aim is to persuade the reader) and "performative" (since it reports the actual creation of a new type of agent and the reader is encouraged to follow in the author's footsteps).⁴⁷ Descartes presents himself as an example to be followed starting with the trials and tribulations stemming from following a mistaken method for knowledge-acquisition, through the eye-opening experience of the *cogito* and leading to Descartes' new, intellect-based method.⁴⁸ The autobiographical form of Descartes' message, Trainor continues, depicts Descartes as a "concrete value" for the purpose of persuading the reader that he is dealing with an example worth following.⁴⁹ To that end, the autobiography is carefully balanced, being 'thick' enough for the reader to be able to grasp both the situation and its severity, but at the same time 'thin' enough for the reader to be able to place himself in the picture, to substitute himself for the protagonist.⁵⁰

Descartes also presents himself as guide in the *Meditations* which are intended for those readers who are able and willing to meditate seriously with the text's narrator (AT VII, 9; CSM II, 8). Similarly, the "history or ... fable" of Descartes' progress towards the truth encourages readers to follow those parts of the *Discourse* that they consider worthwhile (AT VI, 4; CSM I, 112). In Part VI,⁵¹ Descartes reports feeling obligated to share his results in order to assist others:

[S]o long as the only fruits I gathered from the method I use were my own satisfaction regarding certain difficulties in the speculative sciences, or else my attempts to govern my own conduct by the principles I learned

from it, I did not think I was obliged to write anything about it. ... *But as soon as I had acquired some general notions in physics and had noticed, as I began to test them in various particular problems, where they could lead and how much they differ from the principles used up to now, I believed I could not keep them secret without sinning gravely against the law which obliges us to do all in our power to secure the general welfare of mankind.* (AT VI, 61; CSM I, 142; emphasis added)

The same concern for helping others is found in *The Passions* where absolute mastery over the passions is thought achievable by everyone if “we” took care to instruct and train them (PA, 50). The narrative about moral stages we are piecing together in this paper brings to light another way in which Descartes could be conceived as engaging in instructing and training his readers.

The starting point of our ethical story in this paper has been Descartes’ own epistemic and ethical story of *Discourse*, Parts I-III. As we have seen, the *Discourse* covers youth explicitly and childhood implicitly. In both stages, “living well” is emphasized (happiness, for youth and self-preservation^[AT VIII A, 36; CSM I, 219 a. 71], later coupled with obedience to authority figures such as parent and teachers, for childhood^[AT VI, 22; CSM I, 122]). Since happiness is also valued during maturity (PA, 148) and there are other common elements as well (for example, ‘acting resolutely’ appears both in the *Discourse* and in the 1645-1646 *Correspondence* and the *Passions*), we are justified in adding a third stage to our Cartesian ethical story.

III. MORALITY FOR MATURE ADULTS

At the end of the *Discourse* (published in 1637), Descartes promised to continue his scientific work and requested financial support for his experiments and studies.

Intending as I did to devote my life to the pursuit of such indispensable knowledge [knowledge of the causes of innumerable diseases and of all the remedies that nature has provided], I discovered a path that would, I thought, inevitably lead one to it, unless prevented by the brevity of life or

the lack of observations. (AT VI, 63; CSM I, 143)

As a result of his subsequent publications, accusations of atheism are brought against Descartes at Utrecht in 1642 (AT III, 821-824); (AT IV, 750-753).⁵² To deal with the problems he is encountering, he updates his moral code. Descartes stated that he accepted his provisional moral code which relied on other people's views only for the time being, intending to review it when the time was right (AT VI, 27-28; CSM I, 124-125). The commonalities but also the differences between the *morale* of the *Discourse* and the comments that Descartes makes to Elizabeth in 1645-1646 show that he kept his word and scrutinized his initial moral maxims. These revisions reflect the new status of reason (by this time more developed and securely validated due to completion of the meditating process outlined in the *Meditations* [AT VII, 62; CSM II, 43]),⁵³ as well as the more prominent role he assigns to the passions and the will in practical matters.

CORRESPONDENCE WITH ELIZABETH 1645-1646

The content of the new moral code changes from Descartes' 1645-1646 epistolary exchange with Elizabeth to the publication in 1649 of *The Passions of the Soul*. In the 1645-1646 letters we find rules similar to the ones from the *Discourse*. Descartes notes this connection⁵⁴ without drawing attention explicitly either to the changes in the order of specific requirements or to the different weights given to these requirements by comparison with the provisional moral code. The moral rules of the correspondence can be summarized as follows: 'Use your mind as well as you can' is listed first, stressing the role and importance of reason.⁵⁵ 'Act resolutely' comes second, and 'change your desires' is listed third (AT IV, 265-266; CSMK 257-258). Rule one from the *Discourse*, 'Follow the most moderate examples ...; obey the laws ...' is mentioned only in a latter letter and is given a less prominent role (AT IV, 295; CSMK 267). In 1645, Descartes emphasizes the importance of using one's own discernment to critically assess examples of moderate behavior and moderate advice and thus corroborate them (AT IV, 295; CSMK 267); AT IV, 272; CSMK 259). The probabilism of Rule two of the *morale par provision* is also

mentioned only in passing (AT IV, 295; CSMK 267). A new element appears in the letter of 4 August 1645 where Descartes explicitly links his three moral rules to the passions in general:⁵⁶ “The second [condition for making oneself content by oneself without any external assistance] is that he should have a firm and constant resolution to carry out whatever reason recommends *without being diverted by his passions or appetites*” (AT IV, 266; CSMK 257-258; emphasis added).⁵⁷ Moral matters are closely connected with our passions which are obscure and confused ideas and can only be rendered sufficiently clear for practical purposes but not for metaphysical ones (AT VII, 89; CSM II, 61; PA 28). The passions now become the focus of Descartes’ natural philosophical (i.e. scientific) and more broadly philosophical analysis as well as of his moral recommendations. During the 1645-1646 period, while writing to Elizabeth, Descartes is also working on putting together a complete treatment of the passions, the result of these efforts being the treatise *The Passions of the Soul*. He attempts to define the passions (AT IV, 310-313; CSMK 270-271) and acknowledges that, although “[he] was [planning to add a detailed explanation of all the passions], “[he] found it difficult to list them,”⁵⁸ (AT IV, 313; CSMK 272).⁵⁹ Some of the remedies against the disorders of the passions (such as waiting until they subside, then considering positions opposed to the one presented by the passion [AT IV, 295; 220; 237; CSMK 267; 250; 253]) are also touched on in these letters. Descartes distances himself from the Stoics by stressing that our goal should be bringing the passions under the rule of reason, not their eradication. Aristotle’s reliance on the mean is also implicitly opposed when Descartes states that “once [passions] are thus tamed they are sometimes the more useful the more they tend to excess” (AT IV, 287; CSMK 265).⁶⁰

In these letters Descartes points out that passions are obstacles to our obeying the three moral rules. Passions cloud our judgment by presenting things in a far brighter light that they really are, so they interfere with ‘using our minds as well as we can’ (the first Rule). To meet the requirements of this rule the agent must curb the idealizing tendency of some of his passions, specifically those emotions which make their objects appear far more valuable or pleasurable than they

actually are.⁶¹ Passions can influence the will and prevent us from accomplishing what reason tells us is best under the circumstances, thus making us irresolute (in contravention to Rule two). To control the passions we need to gain as much knowledge as possible about them. Since Descartes' correspondent, Princess Elizabeth, was a very educated person who kept current on a variety of subjects, the moral code outlined in their 1645-1646 epistolary exchange appears addressed to searchers after truth, to those committed to cultivating their reason. Even if this commitment is not presupposed, it is arrived at by following the three new rules since the search after truth is singled out as the best way to satisfy the rules.⁶²

THE PASSIONS OF THE SOUL (1649)

The three rules appear in the *Passions* but, by contrast with both the *Discourse* and the letters of 1645-1646 to Elizabeth, they are not listed together. Instead, the three rules are scattered throughout the treatise. 'Judge as well as you can' appears in article 138. 'Act resolutely' is implicitly referred to in article 170.⁶³ 'Change your desire rather than the order of the world and reflect on divine Providence when things don't turn out the way you wanted' are treated in articles 145 and 146. Descartes' main emphasis is on defining the passions, classifying them, identifying their causes as well as their external signs and supplying recipes for controlling them (PA, 211). The one overarching recommendation of this work can be understood as harmonizing one's passions so as to enjoy "the sweetest pleasures of this life" (PA, 212). Moral maturity takes the form of self-creation.⁶⁴

The first Rule's requirement to 'judge as well as you can' is met by using

the forethought and diligence through which we can correct our natural faults by striving to separate within ourselves the movements of the blood and spirits from the thoughts to which they are usually joined. But I must admit that there are few people who have sufficiently prepared themselves in this way for all the contingencies of life. (PA, 211)

Using "forethought and diligence" means getting one's value hierarchy in order

(settling on true judgments about good and evil [PA, 48-49]), acquiring actionable information (joining desire to assent [PA, 144]) and putting oneself in a situation of action preparedness by rewiring one's brain [PA 211, 50, 203]). Among the most important pieces of information the agent acquires is the superlative perfection of one's free will, that "nothing truly belongs to him but this freedom to dispose his volitions." To the extent to which he is successful at inducing in himself a feeling of "firm and constant resolution to use [this freedom] well" (PA, 153), he is in the process of acquiring generosity, the key to all the other virtues and a general remedy against the disturbances of the passions (PA, 161).

Conformity to the second rule of 'acting resolutely' presupposes a coherent identity because action, as contradistinguished from events and "mere behavior" (which includes reflex motions as well as instinctive reactions), has to spring from the identity of an agent seeing that action as up to him, not as just something that happens to him.⁶⁵ First, by means of 'forethought and diligence' irresolution is warded off since the agent has no doubt about what goal is worth pursuing in a given situation (PA, 170). This prevents passional tugs-of-war as the one described in article 48 where ambition and fear pull the agent in different directions making him unable to engage in any action. With vacillation ruled out, desire may then be generated and action becomes possible (PA, 47). To 'act' one must 'regulate one's desires' because only in this way will the body move in a deliberately goal-directed way as opposed to aimlessly or automatically (PA, 144). The morally mature agent is one who self-motivates and is able to sustain his motivation over the long term.

A mature moral agent encodes true moral judgments in his brain (by connecting certain movements of animal spirits, tiny particles rushing through our veins and arteries, with certain thoughts)⁶⁶ and subsequently externalizes these brain-encoded judgments into efficient and effective external actions. A precursor to this prophylactic strategy for controlling the passions is the notion of practical judgment mentioned in the *Correspondence*. Practical judgments are true judgments about good and evil which have become ingrained via habituation accomplished by means of repeated meditation (AT IV, 295-296; CSMK, 267). To

this *The Passions* adds an account of the physiological bases of habituation (animal spirits moving through the same channels [PA, 34-46]), a physiological feedback mechanism (animal spirits forming loops which ensure the continuity of motion while also signaling to the agent how well or poorly his attempts to move his body or control the passions are going [PA, 106]) as well as an early version of the theory of conditioned response. The latter constitutes “the perspective of the behavioural and physiological scientist who is able to investigate the physical causes of our emotional patterns of response, and in time learn to manipulate and ‘reprogram them.’”⁶⁷

Then, to ensure the ‘resolute’ quality of action, we must limit our desires to what is in our power, thus channeling (rather than dispersing) our energy and resources. The success we will have when pursuing achievable goals will fill us with a satisfaction that will not leave room for wayward desires to be formed (PA, 144). Moral maturity involves enhancing the benefits of our emotions, harnessing their motivational force for the purpose of achieving worthy goals. The sustainability of motivation is also connected with a self-reward system being in place and working reliably in the case of the morally mature agent (PA, 144).⁶⁸ Additionally, since desire comes in so many varieties (hope, anxiety, jealousy, confidence, despair, irresolution, courage, boldness, emulation, timidity, terror, remorse [PA, 57-60]), by regulating its various species we actually shape ourselves as persons, we self-create.

Self-creation captures the fact that the morally mature agent is proactive rather than reactive with respect to his passions.⁶⁹ Being proactive, by using “forethought and diligence,” amounts to being constructive, deliberately arousing passions in oneself, rather than restrictive, setting bounds to already formed passions that come over one (e.g. focusing on training oneself to desire virtue rather than on stopping oneself from desiring riches, fame, and so on). To be proactive and constructive, the agent must put in place an overarching policy for generating self-perfecting, pleasurable passions (rather than proceeding only on a case-by-case basis, for instance by “considering and following reasons which are opposed

to those presented by the passion, even if they appear less strong” [PA, 211]). To be generous is to have a self-devised master plan, to have “prepared themselves in this way for all the contingencies of life.”⁷⁰ The master plan that the Cartesian agent works to establish with regard to his passions constitutes what Byron Williston has called an “*affective repertoire*”, “that set of desires and emotional dispositions that pattern the agent’s moral attention in specific ways”⁷¹ The generous person described in the *Passions* is the example of the most successful such endeavor.⁷²

The *affective repertoire* of Descartes’ generous person includes a stable idea of his self-worth (PA, 159), no contempt for anyone (PA, 155) and viewing everyone as equally endowed with free will (PA, 156). By means of a true judgment of value related to himself (the realization that his greatest perfection is the correct exercise of his free will [AT V, 85; CSMK, 326) and a strong argument from analogy (extending this realization to other people), Rule one (‘Judge as well as you can’) is satisfied. The generous person also knows what resources he has at his disposal and only undertakes those actions of whose results he is defeasibly certain while managing to accomplish “great deeds” (PA, 156). Correctly assessing one’s resources amounts to judging accurately what one can and cannot do and being ready to act on it.

The generous one also desires with passion only what depends on himself (PA, 146), experiences neither the improper type of jealousy (PA, 156) nor envy of the improper kind (PA, 156). These are species of desire that have now been properly regulated. The generous agent acts and does so energetically since he has no doubts about what is worth pursuing under the circumstances (PA, 170), is not conflicted about what means to use (PA, 59), is not stunned by surprise (PA, 73) and is not afraid (PA, 156). Fear is a combination of timidity (“cowardice,” which is a type of desire [PA, 59]), wonder and anxiety (another species of desire [PA, 176]). These aspects of generosity cover Rules two and three from the 1645-1646 letters.

Having an altruistic mind set, disregarding one’s own self-interest (echoing the commitment to benefiting others in Part VI of the *Discourse*) and being always

polite and obliging are also features of the generous person (PA, 156). Furthermore, he does not hate other people (PA, 156), is free from anger (PA, 156), feeling “contempt, or at the most indignation, for the wrongs at which others usually take offence” (PA, 203).⁷³ Compassion (PA, 185; 187), cheerfulness (which is a sign of virtue [PA, 180]) and a sound psychic equilibrium resulting in tranquility (both a virtue and a passion [PA, 190]) round up the portrait of Descartes’ generous person. Tranquility and self-satisfaction are the successors of the contentment mentioned in Rule four of the *Discourse* and singled out as the goal of the three rules of the 1645-1646 letters.

Generosity, unpacked above as a stable psychic order translating into deliberate and efficient actions, depends on identifying with one’s free will (PA, 153). This makes prominent another element only implicitly present in the 1637 provisional code. Since 1637, the will’s role in the theoretical sphere was dealt with in the *Meditations*⁷⁴ and the Latin *Principles*.⁷⁵ The *Dedicatory Letter* of the Latin *Principles* included references to the will’s function in the practical sphere (AT VIII A, 3-4; CSM I, 191-192). There, having a powerful resolve is mentioned first (as in the *Discourse*), but it is a resolve “always to use his reasoning powers correctly, as far as he can,” followed by “to carry out whatever he knows to be best” (AT VIII A, 2; CSM I, 191). Later in this letter, the resolve in question is connected with the will (AT VIII A, 3; CSM I, 191). The 1645-1646 correspondence also contains discussions of free will and its relation to divine omnipotence (AT IV, 314; 332-333; 353; CSMK, 272; 277; 282), but also its connections with virtue and achieving happiness (AT IV, 267; CSMK, 258). In the *Passions*, willing well in practical matters is explicitly stressed and recommended to all readers in the form of generosity.

Descartes’ notion of generosity bears similarities to Aristotelian *megalopsychia* (‘great soulness’), although Descartes contrasts the elitist, hereditary bent of the Aristotelian notion with the egalitarian strand of his concept (PA, 161).⁷⁶ A common element of Stoic *apatheia* and Cartesian generosity consists in rising above hardships (as Descartes mentions in the *Discourse*, in the 1644 *Dedicatory Letter* and articles 147-148 of the *Passions*). Deborah Brown notes the connection

between heroic virtues (such as Machiavelli's *virtu*)⁷⁷ and Descartes' insistence on "swift and ardent action" (AT IV, 411; CSMK, 287). Charron's *preud'hommie*⁷⁸ and Balzac's and Corneille's *gloire*⁷⁹ are also similar to generosity, although, as Shapiro notes, there is no evidence that Descartes and Corneille would have read each other's works.⁸⁰

In this section we saw that Descartes proposes a morality of self-creation since the rules composing his final morality are internalized by the agent and their requirements are automatically met when the more immediate goal of harmonizing the passions is attained. Descartes' moral theory combines an internalist theory of motivation (since the agent apprehends the good as *his* good by way of what he can control) with an objectivist view of moral value (because the agent's good depends on God-instituted natural facts and is thus prior to the agent's desires and preferences). The examples of generous persons Descartes gives (Guez de Balzac,⁸¹ Elizabeth,⁸² Christina of Sweden,⁸³ and others) demonstrate that many harmonious emotional compositions are possible depending on one's natural endowment, education, circumstances, and so on.

Alongside expository components (perspicuous in the treatment of the physiological underpinning of the passions, for instance), Descartes' final morality includes invitational and advisory elements⁸⁴ as well as autobiographical ones. The recommendations from the *Passions* are addressed to everyone who wants to make themselves happy by using tools exclusively in their power, reason and free will. Descartes advises *all* his readers to control and harmonize their emotions in order to live tranquil, content and happy lives.⁸⁵ He also mentions that the generous person esteems everyone who possesses a free will, the implication being that all possessors of free will have a right to such esteem (PA, 154).

Aiming to draw the readers in, to enlist their engagement, Descartes' final morality, read as a morality of self-creation, meets Roberts' condition of moral edification and eliciting motivation.⁸⁶ One of Descartes strategies for enlisting the readers' engagement is the use of self-observation and autobiographical details.

Descartes notes that “everyone feels passions in himself and so has no need to look elsewhere for observations regarding their nature” (PA, 1). He also writes Elizabeth:

And I have no doubt that the distractions of study, which would be quite arduous for other people, might sometimes provide her [Highness] with relaxation. I should count myself extremely fortunate if I could help facilitate her studies; and I would much rather go to The Hague to learn about the power of the waters at the Spa than gain knowledge here about the plants in my garden – the more so because I do not care what happens at Groningen or Utrecht, whether to my advantage or not. (AT IV, 238; CSMK, 254)

In this passage Descartes describes himself as possessing several traits pertaining to generosity. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which Descartes, in accordance with the 17th century rules of epistolary decorum, was presenting himself to Elizabeth in a positive light while also “render[ing] to [the Princess] all the honor and respect due to [Her] position and authority in the world” (PA, 164).

He tells Elizabeth he is diligently pursuing his scientific work (which at the time involves experiments with plants,⁸⁷ despite the accusations of atheism and the legal proceedings against him happening at Groningen and Utrecht. Toward those slandering and persecuting him Descartes seems to display the same lack of feelings expressed earlier (in May 1645) to Mesland. By contrast, he is taking a keen interest in Elizabeth’s troubles. Showing deep concern for her ill health, he is trying to help Elizabeth overcome it by keeping their correspondence going and discussing with her Seneca’s philosophical views. Commitment to doing his duty, ability to distinguish between wrong-doings and wrong-doers coupled with refrain from hating the latter, willingness to help his friends and even sacrifice for them are features that come through in the above lines. They are also part of being a generous person.

Cartesian generosity is difficult to achieve and difficult to maintain (AT IV, 411; CSMK, 287). At the end of *The Passions*, we read:

persons whom the passions can move most deeply are capable of enjoying the sweetest pleasures of this life. It is true that they may also experience the most bitterness when they do not know how to put these passions to good use and when fortune works against them. (PA, 212)

In 1650, Descartes seems to be experiencing “fortune working against [him]” and he writes Brégy from Sweden:

I have not made any other visits, nor have I heard about any. This makes me think that during the winter men’s thoughts are frozen here, like the water. ... I fear only that if I am still here when [M. Salvius] comes, he will find me very different from the man you described that he will be able to see my faults more easily. But I swear to you that my desire to return to my solitude grows stronger with each passing day, and indeed I do not know whether I can wait here until you return. ... I am not in my element here. I desire only peace and quiet, which are benefits that the most powerful kings on earth cannot give to those who are unable to acquire them for themselves. (AT V, 467; CSMK, 383-384)

We have no other letters to inform us whether Descartes was able to recover the inner balance and the accompanying peace and quiet he was seeking. Less than a month after writing the above lines, he died of a flu-like infection.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that Descartes’ ethical views evolve over time (from the *Discourse*, through the *Principles* to the 1645-1646 *Correspondence* and *The Passions*) and deal with all stages of human life from childhood, through youth to maturity. The goal pursued remains the same (living well, leading a comfortable and happy life) while the means considered appropriate for reaching it vary. Following the

role and importance Descartes gives to the passions during his creative life, we divided his moral views into three stages and witnessed the Cartesian concept of morality evolving from an instinctual guide to behavior (not spelled out and not theoretically justified during childhood) through a clearly delimited morality having as its declared goal ensuring the smoothness of everyday life during theoretical inquiry (during youth), to a morality for mature adults, a morality that would still guide behavior but emphasize the coherence of one's selfhood.

A Cartesian morality for children is close in content to Pyrrhonism and, as children grow up, evolves toward obedience to parents and teachers. The Cartesian morality for youth is a combination of Academic Skeptical, Stoic but also Epicurean elements (such as the stress on contentment which later Descartes himself identifies as Epicurean [AT IV, 276-281; CSMK, 261-262]) and Aristotelian ones (for instance, following a moderate position rather than extreme ones [AT VI, 23; CSM I, 122-123]). The Cartesian morality for mature adults stresses the harmony of the passions, culminates in generosity and lends itself well to interpretation in terms of self-creation.

In light of the narrative ethics approach to Descartes' ethics proposed in this paper, what original contributions can we say Descartes made to ethics? After all, a first-person account was used long before Descartes, most notably by Marcus Aurelius and Augustine. Furthermore, the scheme of moral development from infancy and childhood to youth and adult life, which I associated with Descartes' autobiographical narrative, parallels prior Stoic developmental remarks (for instance in Cicero and Seneca). In my view, standing at a crossroads between the old and the new not only in metaphysics and epistemology but also in ethics, Descartes is both eclectic and visionary. His views count as visionary because his considered ethical standpoints are seminal, containing aspects that will be fully spelled out by later thinkers.⁸⁸ His eclecticism is key to the wide applicability and adaptability of his ethical views. And this, in turn, was usefully illuminated by the unifying story put together in this paper.

Descartes' ethical position is eclectic since from different, already established moral views he chooses certain elements, adjusts them for his own purposes and fits them into combinations that suit his own theoretical as well as practical needs. Such procedures are well represented not only in his provisional moral code but also in instances where Descartes avails himself of Galenic positions,⁸⁹ combined with Aristotelian⁹⁰ and Epicurean⁹¹ ones. Rather than a sign of disparate, incoherent and insufficiently digested viewpoints, we should view this combinatory stance as an example of Descartes' applying his own advice to Elizabeth regarding putting our own mark on the views of our predecessors, thus making it more likely that we will follow these pronouncements (AT IV, 252; CSMK, 256).

The unifying story pieced together in this paper aimed at convincing Descartes' readers not so much to follow a particular set of recommendations (the provisional moral code or Descartes' morality of self-creation, for instance), but rather that there are good reasons for attentively looking to Descartes' writings for moral guidance in the first place. Descartes' ethical views conceived as a unified life narrative are multifaceted enough to offer something for everyone whether young or old, engaged in doubt or trusting one's senses, high or low born, intellectually very gifted or only moderately so, and so on. Barring extraordinary bad luck (which could diminish one's chances),⁹² Descartes assures us that every one of us is able to live happily. The first step of doing so in a Cartesian fashion consists in identifying under which category we fit (children, youth or adults), followed by applying Descartes' recommendations for that category. This also means that a disconnect between one's biological age and one's 'moral' category is possible and that some of us will not make it to the youth or mature moral stage. There is no linear progression and one will not advance to the next moral level simply in virtue of aging biologically.

Being governed by parents and teachers (as in Descartes' morality for children) is preferable to relying exclusively on instincts as animals do, because parents and teachers can supplement and correct the shortcomings of information coming from sensations and passions and steer us clear of acting in sub-optimal ways (PA,

134). As we grow up, instinct alone would not be enough for smooth and peaceful coexistence in communities (AT IV, 316-317; CSMK, 273). The social aspect of human life adds further support to the superiority of a morality of obedience.

Someone finding himself in the grips of very strong and continuously shifting passions, maybe during adolescence, fits well Descartes' description of weak souls, enslaved and miserable. Once the strong passions tormenting him subside (adolescence comes to an end due to our bodies' achieving hormonal balance), such a person could go back to being ruled by teachers (or pastors, gurus, influencers, and so on). Alternatively, since instinct and obedience to others have a high susceptibility to error and abuse, he could seek a better way to guide himself. Descartes' provisional morality proposes such a way.

Even someone who has no interest (or no means to engage) in inquiry could still avail himself of at least some of the maxims of the provisional moral code. He would still follow a morality of obedience, obeying more abstract entities (such as laws and customs) as opposed to individual authorities (parents, teachers, and others).⁹³ He would also find it useful to try to get his desires in check. This is in keeping with his more developed reason (he is biologically older and, barring impediments preventing the full use of his reason, he reasons more and maybe better). The provisional moral code, in other words, can be beneficial to a larger number of people than intellectuals (for example, academics so caught up in their research that they view anything else as secondary).

Those who come to notice the limitations of social conformism, of piecemeal desire regulation or both, have the option of going through the other steps Descartes mentions in *The Passions*. They could use some passions (for example, that of pride) to keep other passions (such as fear) in check, or they could use a judgment-based method for controlling the passions. The latter may be rule-based ('judge as well as you can', 'act resolutely', and so on) or be self-creative in nature, aimed, as I've argued, at acquiring Cartesian generosity.⁹⁴

Generosity counts as moral maturity since it involves being inclusive (rather than repressive), prophylactic rather than reactive toward one's emotions. Adopting such a stance also allows and even calls for appropriating the available moral recommendations by adapting⁹⁵ and modifying them to suit one's personality and circumstances. In *The Passions*, Descartes does not explicitly discuss the main truths which in the 1645-1646 correspondence he had indicated we need to know in order to lead happy lives.⁹⁶ These truths do appear in this work (PA, 145-146; 207) but their necessity for achieving contentment is not emphasized to the same extent as in the prior letters. Instead, Descartes notes only the need for true and determinate judgments. This leaves it up to the agent which judgments he forms, meditates on, inscribes on his brain and trains oneself to follow. This goes hand in hand with assuming personal responsibility for one's value judgments, actions as well as for oneself as a person.

Even agents who reject some of the necessary truths on Descartes' list (atheists or physicalists or both) could still benefit from applying some of his moral recommendations. Atheists would lack a source of consolation in the form of reflection on divine providence when things do not go the way they hoped and physicalists would need to establish and justify their own hierarchies of values. Nevertheless, Descartes' views could still contain valuable moral advice (for example, 'get your desires under control', 'use positive emotions to fight off negative ones', 'harmonize your emotional constitution', and so on).⁹⁷

I conclude that Descartes is instructing us to come up with our own life story following the template he has provided for us. The possible sources of diversity and agent-specific differences mentioned in the previous section of the paper are indications that we should follow Descartes' example by customizing his recipe for controlling the passions so that it fits our own situation and personality. So the end of the story we found in Descartes could be seen as an injunction to start our own moral story⁹⁸ (leaving open the possibility that it might not include all three chapters starting with childhood, through youth, followed by maturity.⁹⁹

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NOTES

1. Parenthetical references to Descartes' collected works in what follows use the following abbreviations:

Oeuvres de Descartes. Eds. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. 2nd ed., 11 vols. Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1974-86. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text thus: (AT volume number, page number).

The Philosophical Writings of Descartes. 2 vols. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-85. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text thus: (CSM volume number, page number). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Vol. 3. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Anthony Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text thus: (CSMK, page number).

2. Lisa Shapiro, "Descartes's Ethics". *A Companion to Descartes*. Eds. Janet Broughton, John Carriero. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2011, 445.

3. René Descartes, "The Passions of the Soul." *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 325-404. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text thus: (PA, article number).

4. John Marshall, *Descartes' Moral Theory*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998, 8.

5. Donald Rutherford "On the Happy Life: Descartes vis-à-vis Seneca." *Stoicism: Traditions and Transformations*. Eds. Steven K. Strange, Jack Zupko. Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 189.

6. Noa Naaman-Zauderer, *Descartes' Deontological Turn Reason, Will and Virtue in the Later Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 185.

7. Deborah Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 165-209. The expression "maximization of self-esteem" is mine but I think it aptly captures Brown's intentions.

8. Jerome B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 193.

9. In this paper, for stylistic reasons, I will use interchangeably the terms "ethical" and "moral" in order to avoid over repeating Descartes' own notions, "moral" and "morality".

10. AT X, 360-361; CSM I, 9-10.

11. AT IX B, 14; CSM I, 186.

12. AT VI, 11-12; CSM I, 116

13. AT VI, 12-14; CSM I, 117.

14. Rutherford, "On the Happy Life".

15. Marshall, *Descartes' Moral Theory*, 16.

16. Robert Roberts, "Narrative Ethics." *Philosophy Compass* 7:3 (March 2012, 174-182).

17. Since the character whose development we will follow in this paper is modeled on Descartes himself the masculine pronouns he/his/him are used throughout the paper. As noted later in the paper, Descartes conceived of the mind as non-gendered and directed his ethical recommendations to everyone.

18. See Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997 and Desmond M. Clarke, *Descartes: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

19. In a Letter of 1628 Guez de Balzac urges Descartes to write his life story showcasing his battles against "the giants of the Schools" (AT I, 570-571). Although Balzac was notorious for the use of hyperbole and irony, the *Discourse* which does recount "the history of [Descartes'] mind" has, like stories of Christian salvation and quest romances, something paradigmatic and heroic

- about it. It describes a character type engaged in an exemplary type of epistemic and practical pursuit. See Thomas Pavel, "Literature and the Arts," *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. David Weissman, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, 349-370.
20. See Gabriela Del Lungo Camiciotti, "Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern Culture: An Introduction". *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, 3, (2014 17–35) and Lawrence D. Green, "French Letters and English Anxiety in the Seventeenth Century". *Huntington Library Quarterly* 66: ¾ (2003). For a close analysis of one of Descartes' letters see Jean-Vincent Blanchard, "De quoi donner une jaunisse à Richelieu. Autour d'une lettre de Descartes à Guez de Balzac". *Littératures classiques* 82 (2013/3). For Stoic antecedents of Early Modern letter-writing see Catherine Edwards, "Self-Scrutiny and Self-Transformation in Seneca's Letters", *Greece & Rome*, 44: 1 (Apr., 1997).
21. Descartes says very little about the role of parents. *Meditation III* notes that parents implant certain dispositions in the matter that will become their children's bodies but they have no role in the creation of their children's immaterial minds (AT VII, 50-51; CSM II, 35). Descartes' remarks about education mention "teachers" and in his 1644 letters to Jesuits (while seeking their endorsement of the *Principles*) he thanks Grandamy (AT IV, 121) and Charlet (AT IV, 140) for the time spent at La Flèche when the seeds of what he later came to know were implanted in him.
22. For treatments of the Utrecht crisis, see Theo Verbeek, "Descartes and the Problem of Atheism: the Utrecht Crisis," *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis / Dutch Review of Church History*, 71:2 (1991, 211-223) and Andrea Strazzoni, *Dutch Cartesianism and the Birth of Philosophy of Science: From Regius to 's Gravesande*. Boston: de Gruyter, 2019.
23. For treatments of Cartesian generosity along narrative ethics lines (without the label), see Lisa Shapiro, "Cartesian Generosity," *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 64 (1999: 249-276) and Andreea Mihali, "Descartes's Ethics: Generosity in the Flesh," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 271 (2022: 51-95).
24. Darren Gobert, *The Mind-Body Stage: Passion and Interaction in the Cartesian Theater*. Stanford University Press, 2013, 18.
25. In this letter Descartes distinguishes between two kinds of instinct: the light of nature (which should always be followed) and an impulse towards the preservation of the body and enjoyment of bodily pleasures (which should not always be trusted). It is the latter type of instinct which governs a child's life, at least in its early stages.
26. Since children later come to (mistakenly) hold that nothing is in the intellect that has not first been in the senses (AT VII, 75-76; CSM II, 52).
27. Byron Williston, "The Cartesian Sage and the Problem of Evil." *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*. Eds. Byron Williston, André Gombay. Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003, 304.
28. John Marshall, "Descartes's Provisional Morality". *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*. Eds. Byron Williston, André Gombay. Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003, 200. p 138-484) and Devin Sanchez Curry, "Cabbage à la Descartes". *Ergo* 3: 24, 2016.
29. Amelie Rorty, "Cartesian Passions and the Union of Mind and Body." *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*. Ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, 522.
30. "[H]ence I thought it virtually impossible that our judgments should be as unclouded and firm as they would have been if we had had the full use of our reason from the moment of our birth, and if we had always been guided by it alone" (AT VI, 13; CSM I, 117).
31. Marshall, "Descartes's Provisional Morality", 198.
32. Although Descartes criticizes what he learned at La Fleche and concludes that "there was no knowledge in the world such as I had previously led to hope for" (AT VI, 5; CSM I, 113), his criticisms are directed at the disciplinary boundaries that formed the foundation of the whole

educational system of the period. For details, see Denis Kambouchner's *Descartes n'a pas dit*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2015 and *Le Style de Descartes*, Paris: Manucius, 2013.

33. For discussion see Dan Arbib, "Le moi cartésien comme troisième livre. Note sur Montaigne et la première partie du Discours de la méthode". *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 74:2 (2012, 161-180).

34. "For I had begun at this time to count my own opinions worthless, because I wished to submit them all to examination" (AT VI, 22; CSM I, 122).

35. "And since this is the most important task of all, and the one in which precipitate conclusions and preconceptions are the most to be feared, I thought that I ought not try to accomplish it until I had reached a more mature age than twenty-three, as I then was, and until I had spent a long time in preparing myself for it" (AT VI, 22; CSM I, 122).

36. Whether we are talking about methodical doubt or doubt resulting from the traditional Skeptical arguments, is not important for my argument here.

37. For Descartes, inactivity refers to time spent in deliberation instead of in action, where the latter would have been appropriate (AT VIII A, 5; CSM I, 193, a.3).

38. Marshall, "Descartes's Provisional Morality", 220.

39. "I was, then, unable to choose anyone whose opinion struck me as preferable to those of all others, and I found myself as it were forced to become my own guide" (AT VI, 16; CSM I, 119).

40. In one of the letters to Elizabeth, Aristotelian, Stoic and Epicurean views are mentioned and Descartes states that all these views "can ... be accepted as true and as consistent with each other, provided they are interpreted favorably" (AT IV, 276-277; CSMK, 261-262).

41. The similarities Marshall identifies are: commitment to a correspondence theory of truth, vulnerability to the objection against a subjective moral criterion that is supposedly connected to objective truth, etc. We will return to the objectivity of the true and the good in the next part of this paper.

42. Marshall, "Descartes's Provisional Morality", 206.

43. Marshall, "Descartes's Provisional Morality", 205.

44. Marshall, "Descartes's Provisional Morality", 226. See also AT VIII A, 3; CSM I, 191.

45. "revised" since the Stoics recommend resoluteness only with respect to guaranteed truths

46. Irresolution (PA, 170); desire (PA, 141-146); remorse (PA, 177) and regret (PA, 209).

47. Paul Trainor, "Autobiography as Philosophical Argument: Socrates, Descartes and Collingwood." *Thought* 63:251 (December, 1988, 381). For a discussion of philosophical autobiographies, see *Autobiography as Philosophy: The philosophical uses of self-presentation*. Eds. Thomas Mathien, D. G. Wright. London: Routledge, 2006.

48. Trainor, "Autobiography", 388-389.

49. Trainor, "Autobiography", 381-384; 395.

50. Trainor, "Autobiography", 385; 392-393.

51. An objector might point out the different tone and attitude by comparison with the *morale* of Part III. There Descartes appeared to recommend acceptance and resignation ('change your desires rather than the order of the world') while here he seems to champion technological innovation and development in the service of bringing about progress. In answer to this objection, Cottingham aptly notes that in Part VI Descartes is still recommending the acceptance of what we cannot alter but is convinced that, due to technological developments, that sphere has shrunken and will continue to do so. John Cottingham "Cartesian ethics: reason and the passions", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 50:195 (1996, 1).

52. Verbeek, "Descartes"; Strazzoni, *Dutch Cartesianism*.

53. Although the certainty achievable in matters related to the conduct of life is only moral, not metaphysical (AT VIII A, 327; CSM I, 289-290, a. 205).
54. "It seems to me that each person can make himself content by himself without any external assistance, provided he respect three conditions, which are related to the three rules of morality which I put forward in the *Discourse on the Method*" (AT IV, 265; CSMK, 257).
55. The French term Descartes uses is "esprit" (mind) which in the *Discourse* was used alongside "raison" (reason). For the distinction between these terms in the *Discourse*, see Roger Ariew, "The Nature of Cartesian Logic." *Perspectives on Science* 29:3 (2021, 275-291). In the very next lines of this letter, when dealing with Rule two ('Act resolutely') Descartes mentions "reason."
56. Not just to specific ones (irresolution, remorse, regret and desire, for example), as was the case in the *Discourse*, Part III.
57. See also (AT IV, 267; CSMK, 258).
58. In 1649, in the *Passions*, Part II, Descartes lists forty passions (PA, 53-68).
59. "These last few days I have been thinking about the number and order of all the passions, in order to examine their nature in detail. but I have not yet sufficiently digested my opinions on this topic to date to tell them to your highness, I shall not fail to do so as soon as I can" (AT IV, 332; CSMK 277).
60. Prompted by Elizabeth's comments, in a subsequent letter Descartes will draw a distinction between excess that changes the type of action (e.g. from brave to reckless) and excess that remains within the limits of the virtuous (e.g. an action that remains brave while displaying an excess of lack of irresolution and fear) (AT IV, 332; CSMK, 276-277).
61. "The same is true of the other passions. They all represent the goods to which they tend with greater splendour than they deserve, and they make us imagine pleasures to be much greater, before we possess them, than our subsequent experiences show them to be" (AT IV, 285; CSMK 263). See also (PA, 138).
62. "So we must conclude that the greatest felicity of man depends on the right use of reason; and consequently the study which leads to its acquisition is the most useful occupation one can take up. Certainly it is the most agreeable and delightful" (AT IV, 267; CSMK 258).
63. "But when it [the soul's remaining balanced, as it were, between several actions] lasts longer than it ought, making us spend in deliberation the time required for action, [irresolution] is extremely bad" (PA 170).
64. See Mihali, "Descartes's Ethics" for a comparison of Descartes' generosity with Nietzsche's notion of self-creation.
65. See Kristine Korsgaard, "Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant". *Journal of Ethics* 3:1 (1999, 1-29) and Kenneth Baynes, "Self, Narrative and Self-Constitution: Revisiting Taylor's 'Self-Interpreting Animals'. *The Philosophical Forum*, 41:4 (2010, 441-457).
66. "[A]lthough nature seems to have joined every movement of the gland to certain of our thoughts from the beginning of life, yet we may join them to others through habit. [...] It is also useful to note that although the movement (both of the gland and of the spirits and the brain) which represent certain objects to the soul are naturally joined to the movements which produce certain passions in it, yet through habit the former can be separated from the latter and joined to others which are very different" (PA, 50).
67. Cottingham, "Cartesian ethics", 209.
68. "But the fresh satisfaction we gain when we have just performed an action we think good is a passion – a kind of joy which I consider to be the sweetest of all joys, because its cause depends only on ourselves" (PA, 190).

69. That Descartes envisages moving from a reactive to a proactive stance toward the passions, from reacting to passions already underway to proactively arousing passions in ourselves, becomes clear in articles 48 and 49 of the first part of the *Passions* where a ranking from low to high is provided. Souls led around by their passions are described as enslaved and as miserable. Then come souls who enlist the help of previous passions that proved effective in order to control present passions. Finally, Descartes mentions strong souls guided by true judgments about good and evil (PA, 48-49).
70. In a 1646 letter to Elizabeth, Descartes had qualified this by saying that it is enough “to have imagined circumstances more distressing than one’s own and to be prepared to bear them” (AT IV, 411; CSMK, 287).
71. Williston, “The Cartesian Sage”, 304.
72. For a detailed treatment of the emotional make-up of the generous person, see Mihali, “Descartes’s Ethics”.
73. Contempt is a species of wonder involving brain states (PA, 70-71) and an accurate judgment about the gravity of a certain evil or vice (PA, 198). Both indignation and anger are species of hatred (PA, 195; 199) but anger is more violent, involving more agitation of the blood as a result of combining desire for revenge with self-love (PA, 199). This means that the person who trains himself to experience contempt or indignation rather than anger will be affected by different physiological processes, including brain states, due to the different trajectories followed by the animal spirits coursing through his body. The more certain trajectories are used, the more likely it is that they will be used again in the future (PA, 42), thus turning contempt or indignation into a habit.
74. Especially in *Meditation IV* (AT VII, 53-62; CSM II, 37-43).
75. Especially articles 32-45 (AT VIII A, 17-22; CSM I, 204-207).
76. See also James Stover and Ronald Polansky, “Moral Virtue and Megalopsychia,” *Ancient Philosophy* 23 (2003, 351-359) and Alexander Sarch, “What’s Wrong with Megalopsychia?” *Philosophy* 83:324 (April 2008).
77. Brown, *Descartes*, 191-197.
78. Marshall, “Descartes’s Provisional Morality”, 216-219.
79. As Williston (“The Cartesian Sage”, 302-303) notes in passing.
80. Shapiro, “Cartesian Generosity”, 271fn3.
81. In a letter from 1631 and addressed to Guez de Balzac, Descartes characterizes Balzac as “generous” (AT I, 202; see also the discussion in Blanchard, “De quoi donner”). In another letter from 1628 Descartes praises Balzac for having found the proper way to criticize those in power without fear of reprisals but also without the resentment preventing one from noticing any virtues whatsoever (AT I, 7-11). Lack of servility, courage, a balanced, open-minded attitude combined with commitment to the truth are facets of Balzac’s generosity.
82. In the 1644 *Dedicatory Letter*, Elizabeth is described as having proven able to rise above hardships and reversals of fortune without becoming embittered or broken (AT VIII A, 4; CSM I, 192). The 1645-1646 exchange links altruism and esteeming oneself at one’s proper value to nobility of spirit (AT IV, 317; 308; CSMK, 273; 269). Additionally, a letter from 18 May 1645 to Elizabeth (AT IV, 200-204) contains a description of noble souls along lines and even using formulations that will later be applied to generosity and used again in *The Passions*.
83. See Mihali, “Descartes’s Ethics”.
84. Throughout his creative life, Descartes had a circumspect attitude regarding moral commands and who has the authority to issue them (AT VI, 14-15; CSM I, 118; AT V, 86-87; CSMK 326). For this reason, in this paper I refer to his moral claims as recommendations, injunctions, and pieces of advice while also acknowledging the fact that it is likely that in the *Passions* Descartes thought he

had provided sufficient grounding for claiming that the use of our will is the only thing for which we can be justifiably praised or blamed (PA, 152).

85. “These things [i.e. how even animals devoid of reason can be trained] are worth noting in order to encourage *each of us* to make a point of controlling the passions” (PA, 50; emphasis added).

86. Roberts, “Narrative Ethics”, 179.

87. Another letter from the same period (AT IV, 204-205) mentions chemical experiments on liquids.

88. Kantian respect (André Gombay, *Descartes*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), psychoanalysis techniques ([AT V, 57; CSMK 322] and André Gombay, “Sigmund Descartes?” *Philosophy* 83:325 [Jul., 2008]), self-creation ethics (Mihali, “Descartes’s Ethics” and Baynes, “Self, Narrative and Self-Constitution), regret minimizing decision theories (Brown, *Descartes*), etc.

89. For discussion of how Descartes reworked aspects of Galen’s theory of the four humors into his own doctrine of “animal spirits,” see Carole Talon-Hugon, *Les Passions Rêvées par la Raison*. Paris: Vrin, 2002.

90. See Descartes’ (PA, 211) recommendations for considering things diametrically opposed to the current passion in hopes of countering it.

91. See Descartes’ (AT IV, 277; CSMK, 261-262) emphasis on the importance of satisfaction and contentment.

92. Such as not having the full use of one’s reason due to some illness (AT IV, 281-283; CSMK, 262-263) or maybe being born in a country that lacks a system of education (AT VI, 16; CSM I, 118-119).

93. In the 17th century, the ultimate source of law in many European countries was an absolutist monarch so an agent obeying the law of such countries would ultimately be obeying the king or queen qua head of state.

94. As argued in Mihali, “Descartes’s Ethics”, for present-day readers seeking to acquire Cartesian generosity, Nietzsche’s comments about Goethe who harmonized the different aspects of his personality, “reason, sensibility, emotion, will” can be both illuminating and inspiring. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, and the Anti-Christ*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, IX §49.

95. Adaptability was singled out by Descartes as a sign of rationality in Part V of the *Discourse* (AT VI, 57-59; CSM I, 140-141).

96. These truths were: there is an omnipotent God, our souls are immaterial, the universe is vast, we are part of communities (AT IV, 291-295; CSMK, 265-267). .

97. For the potential limitations of Descartes’ notion of generosity see Williston, “The Cartesian Sage” and Brown, *Descartes*, 188-209.

98. This may bring to mind contemporary views of the self as narrative. On this point I follow Robert Roberts who argues that “my identity has a ‘narrative structure’, not in the sense that it is itself a narrative, but in the sense that it is in part a history that can be properly displayed only in narrative” (Roberts, “Narrative Ethics”, 175-176). For other treatments of the narrative self, see Attila Németh, “Seneca and the narrative self”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 31:5 (2023, 845-865) and Samantha Vice, “Literature and the Narrative Self”. *Philosophy* 78:1 (January 2003, 93-108).

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