The Will in Descartes' Doctrine of Error

William A. Schock

Loyola University Chicago

Recommended Citation

http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/1273

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 1956 William A. Schock
THE WILL IN DESCARTES' DOCTRINE OF ERROR

by

William A. Schock, S.J.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

May 1956
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter                                                                                          Page

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

  Purpose—Procedure—Summary of Cartesian doctrine orientated to the problem of error—Why error was a great problem for Descartes.

II. DESCARTES' DOCTRINE OF ERROR: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS ........ 17

  The nature of error—The four remote sources of error—The proximate causes of error—How Descartes removes blame for error from God—Conclusion.

III. THE WILL, UNDERSTANDING, AND JUDGMENT ...................... 33

  Thought—Modal distinction—The will: its existence; its nature as a power of affirming and denying, as a perfect power, and as an unlimited power—The understanding: passive, imperfect because limited, yet in some way perfect, and somehow having primacy over the will—The judgment: in the will, different from the understanding, and differing from the intellectualist type of intuition of the Regulae.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE WILL IN ERROR ................................. 53

  Truth—Where error is not found—Material and formal error—Confused ideas—The will as unlimited and free explains error—Omissions in doctrine—Two general sources of error caused by the unlimited and free will—Summary.

V. CRITICISM ................................................................. 70

  Omissions in doctrine—Two internal difficulties—Seven external difficulties—Conclusion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................................. 84
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an analysis of Descartes' doctrine on the role of the will in his solution to the problem of error. In general, we intend to give a sympathetic analysis of his position, and then to consider its difficulties, both internal and external. There seem to be two internal difficulties in his explanation of error. (1) Descartes' purpose in bringing the will into the question of error was to avoid placing the blame for error on God. The question, however, is whether or not he accomplished his purpose. (2) The second difficulty is whether or not error is actually kept out of the intellect, although Descartes continually states that the will and not the intellect is the cause of error.

In considering the external difficulties of his position, we shall find it necessary to evaluate Descartes on the following points of his doctrine: (1) Descartes holds that the understanding is passive. (2) Although he places truth in judgment, judgment is for him primarily an act of the will. (3) He holds that error is in judgment and, hence, primarily an act of the will. For Descartes' theory of judgment states that the will
judges (affirms or denies) what is presented to it by the understanding. (4) He bases his explanation of judgment on clear and distinct ideas. (5) He sees no difference between consent and assent. (6) Descartes says that the will is most free when it is compelled, by God or by a clear and distinct idea, to assent. (7) And finally, he denies that God concurs in a mistaken judgment because error is a privation and not a real being.

In general, our procedure will be as follows. In what remains of the introduction we shall present a brief summary of Descartes' philosophy. This summary will be necessary for three reasons. First of all, such a summary will tie together the three main works of Descartes which will be used in this thesis: Discours de la méthode, Meditationes de Prima Philosophia, and Principia Philosophiae (Pars Prima, De Principiis Cognitionis Humanae).\footnote{We shall also make use of the Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii, Objectiones, and Norae in Programma.} The summary, therefore, will tend to give greater unity to the presentation, and will help us avoid the necessity of starting in medias res. Secondly, many basic points of Descartes' general doctrine will be explained in the summary, which will be referred to but not explained in the thesis itself. This will help make the presentation more intelligible. And finally, this summary will be a Cartesian introduction to the problem of error, since we shall try to orientate it to the question of error. From this summary one will be able to see...
clearly why error was such a problem for Descartes. In the last part of the introduction, after the summary is completed, we shall refer to the opinions of three commentators who also point out why Descartes was driven, by the foundations of his philosophy, to explain error, and why his philosophy made it a difficult problem to solve.

Chapter 2 will contain a general textual analysis of what Descartes proposes in the *Meditatio Quarta* and *Principia* (Pars Prima) on the solution to the problem of error. This will be followed in chapter 3 by a closer analysis of his notions of the understanding, will, and judgment. A clear knowledge of these three concepts is necessary to properly locate the will in the question of error. Although the matter for the second chapter will be taken exclusively from the works of Descartes, we shall, in the third and fourth chapters, also use the various commentaries on Descartes whenever they are helpful. Chapter 4 will contain a further analysis of error over and above the textual analysis of chapter 2. In this chapter we shall see clearly how Descartes explains an erroneous judgment as an act of the will. Then in chapter 5 we shall end with an evaluation of the external and internal difficulties of Descartes' doctrine.

In the body of the thesis, chapters 2, 3, and 4, as well as in the introductory summary, we shall try, as far as possible, to let Descartes speak for himself. For it seems that if we did not allow Descartes to present his own doctrine as he saw it,
the reader would not be able to understand very clearly what was Descartes and what was our interpretation of him. So perhaps it will be better to lend a sympathetic ear to the French philoso-
pher, omitting any criticism as we go along, except in a footnote or two when it seems advisable. Once we understand clearly what he was actually trying to say, we can criticize him in a separate chapter (5) concerning those points which seem to need criticism.

In his youth Descartes found that only mathematics gave him real satisfaction because of the certitude which he distinctly and clearly found in it; and as for the philosophy he learned from his Jesuit teachers, his comments are anything but favor-
able. He wondered that such a vast superstructure of knowledge was built by men of the schools on such a weak and invalid set of postulates, while there was no superstructure built upon the sound postulates of mathematics. So he decided to start from the bottom, for how can he take anything for granted that he has

\[\text{\smaller 2René Descartes, Discours de la méthode, Oeuvres de Des-}\]
\[\text{\smaller cartes, trans. Adam & Tannery (Paris, 1904), VI, 7. "Je me}\]
\[\text{\smaller plaisirois surtout aux Mathématiques, à cause de la certitude & de}\]
\[\text{\smaller l'évidence de leurs raisons."}\]

\[\text{\smaller 3Ibid., pp. 8-9. "Je ne diray rien de la Philosophie, sinon}\]
\[\text{\smaller que, voyant qu'elle a este cultiueée par les plus excellens es-}\]
\[\text{\smaller prits qui ayent vescu depuis plusieurs siecles, & que neanmoins}\]
\[\text{\smaller il ne s'y trouve encore aucune chose dont on ne dispute, & par}\]
\[\text{\smaller consequent qui ne soit douteuse....C'est pourquoi, sitost que}\]
\[\text{\smaller l'âge me permit de sortir de la sujection de mes Precepteurs, je}\]
\[\text{\smaller quittay inteirement l'estude des lettres."}\]

\[\text{\smaller 4Ibid., p. 7. "...je m'estonnois de ce que, leurs fondemens}\]
\[\text{\smaller estans si ferme & si solides, on n'aucit rien basti dessus de}\]
\[\text{\smaller plus releue."}\]
yet learned, since these principles have led him and others into all sorts of false conclusions? He decided, therefore, to discard all opinions, even his own, and to start from things that are clear and distinct. The method he chooses to follow is formed upon the firm and solid model furnished by mathematics. He claims, moreover, that his method is superior to Aristotelian logic, including even the time-honored syllogism, since this tool does not help him to acquire any new knowledge. From the very start, therefore, Descartes has found grounds demanding an explanation of error. Since error is manifestly prevalent in philosophy, he immediately, although implicitly, must ask himself: What is the nature and cause of error?

He explicitly concerns himself with error in his logical rules, which are means of avoiding error in his investigation. His principles of logic are: (1) to receive nothing as true which is not evidently known to be such, by its presenting itself to the mind with a clearness and distinctness which exclude all doubt; (2) to divide, as far as possible, every difficult problem into its natural parts; (3) to conduct one's thoughts in due order, advancing gradually from the more simple and easy to the more complex and difficult, and to suppose a definite order.

---

5Ibid., p. 16.

6Ibid., p. 17. "...ie pris garde que, pour la logique, ses syllogismes & la pluspart de ses autres instructions servent plutost a expliquer a autrui les choses qu'on scait, ou mesme... sans jugement, de celles qu'on ignore, qu'a les'apprendre."
for the sake of orderly progress of the investigation, even when none such is supplied in the nature of the subject to be investigated; and (4) by completeness in enumerations and completeness in reviews to make sure that nothing has been overlooked.\(^7\)

Descartes goes on to enumerate certain ethical rules, adopted by him provisionally, that is, until he could work out a satisfactory moral philosophy. The first is to follow the laws and customs of his country, to hold fast to the religion in which he has been educated, and always in practical life to follow the most moderate and most generally received maxims. The second requires consistency in action; and the third, moderateness in his demands in respect to external goods. By the fourth he resolves to dedicate his life to the cultivation of his reason, and to the discovery of scientific truths.\(^8\) The first moral maxim, although it will not solve the problem of error from the speculative standpoint, will help him avoid error in practical everyday living.

In the fourth and fifth sections of the *Discours de la Méthode* Descartes presents outlines of the doctrine which he develops in the *Meditationes* and *Principia*. In the *Meditationes* he seeks to demonstrate the existence of God and the existence of the soul as an independent entity, separable from the body.

\(^7\)Ibid., pp. 18-19.

\(^8\)Ibid., pp. 22-28.
Although these two points seem to be his main purpose in writing the *Meditationes*, it is worthy of note that a whole meditation (IV) is devoted to the question of truth and error.

In the first meditation he shows us that all things may be doubted, except the fact that we doubt. And since doubting is a kind of thinking, we cannot doubt that we think. He must have all his principles on a secure basis, but, since the opinions he has already accepted have at times led him astray, since his senses have at times deceived him, and since dreams deceive him as well, he must doubt of all these things until he has proved them true or false. He even says that his imperfection might be so great that he is always deceived. But since he does think, and since he is able to doubt, he must at least exist. Therefore, "I exist" is always true. And with this we have entered

---


10 Ibid., p. 18. "Nempe quidquid hactenus ut maxime verum admissi, vel a sensibus, vel per sensus accipi; hos autem interdum fallere deprehendi, ac prudentiae est nunquam illis plane confidere qui nos vel semel deceperunt."

11 Ibid., pp. 19-20.

12 Ibid., p. 21.

the second meditation.

This process of methodical doubt is, indeed, radical. But it certainly shows us to what extreme lengths Descartes was willing to go in order to achieve certitude, to avoid error.

In the third meditation Descartes treats the subject of our knowledge of God. He thinks that he can first formulate a principle which will assure him of the certainty of things. It is the principle which he derived experimentally from the process of asserting his own existence. Since he has clearly and distinctly conceived that he truly exists, he can now lay down the general rule for asserting the certainty of any idea; if the conception is clear and distinct, it is true. This rule would be false only if there were some powerful being, superior to himself, who deceives him in all things. So he must destroy the possibility of such a deceiver. Again we see Descartes obsessed with a quest for certitude, with an attempt to avoid error, which, we might add, is altogether praiseworthy. Although he has not yet explicitly explained the nature and cause of error, we can see that he must. And in treating of the cause of error he must show how this cause can be overcome so that he can avoid error.

Descartes begins his investigation of the knowledge we pos-

14 Med. III, A.T., VII, 35. "...ac proinde jam videor pro regula generali posse statuere, illud omne esse verum, quod valde clare & distincte percipio."

15 Ibid., p. 36. "...quamprimum occurrat occasio, examinare debeo an sit Deus, & si sit, an possit esse deceptor; hac enim re ignorata, non videor de uilia alia plane certus esse unquam posse
possess of God by considering his own mind. His thoughts are either images of things, acts of the will of judgments. Ideas, moreover, are innate, or they come from without, or they are found as formed by the thinker himself. But how do we know whether an idea represents a real thing external to us? His answer is that different ideas have a different measure of objective reality, that is, they participate as representative images in higher or inferior degrees of being or perfection.

With this as a background, Descartes can now prove the existence of God. For him the idea of substance has more reality than the idea of accident; and the idea of an infinite, eternal, unchangeable, omniscient, omnipotent being, the creator of all finite things, has more ideal reality than the ideas that represent substances. Now there can be no more reality in the effect than in the complete cause; the cause must contain the same realities or realities superior to those that are in the effect. Since I am finite, the idea of an infinite substance could not be in me, if this idea did not come from a really existing infinite substance. Descartes gives other arguments for the existence

---

16 Ibid. p. 37. "...quibus solis proprie convenit ideae nomen."
19 Ibid. pp. 40-41.
of God, but it will not serve our purpose to go into them all here.

But this presents Descartes with a rather difficult problem. As we shall see in the next chapter, he shows that God is veracious, and that all our faculties come from the God whose existence he has just proved. But if our faculties come from God, it would seem that he deceives us by allowing our faculties to err. And so, Descartes must somehow reconcile our God-given faculties, which sometimes err, with the veracity of God.

We shall not discuss the fourth meditation here since this is the subject matter for a large part of the next chapter. The fifth meditation takes up the nature of material things and proves once more the existence of God; so we need not go into this meditation either.

In the sixth meditation Descartes concludes from the clear and distinct knowledge we have of extension and of bodies, and from our distinct consciousness of ideas determined by an external and material cause, that bodies really exist, and that we are not deceived in our idea of a material world. For, if this were not the case, the ground of our deception would be God. On the other hand, the sensations of color, sound, taste, etc., and also pain and pleasure, are viewed by him as merely subjective. Yet, from the fact that we have a clear and distinct idea of

\[\text{Med. VI, A.T., VII, 79-80.}\]
ourselves as a thinking substance,\textsuperscript{21} and since in this idea no representation of anything material is contained, Descartes infers the independent existence of our mind from the body.\textsuperscript{22}

In the \textit{Principia Philosophiae} there is a treatment in successive sections of the principles of human knowledge, the principles of material things, the visible world, and the earth. The first part, which is the part most important for our consideration, is a recapitulation of the principles laid down in the \textit{Meditationes}, though Descartes is more explicit on many points in this work than he was in the former (\textit{Meditationes}).

In \textit{Pars Prima} we are given a number of valuable definitions, among which are the important ones of clearness and distinctness. "I term that clear which is present and apparent to an attentive mind, in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they operate upon it with sufficient strength. But the distinct is that which is so precise and different from all other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear."\textsuperscript{23} But if a clear and distinct idea is always true, as stated above, we can conclude only that error is found elsewhere. So Descartes must answer the question: Where is error found?

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 78, ("res cogitans").

\textsuperscript{22}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{23}Rene Descartes, \textit{The Philosophical Works of Descartes}, trans. Haldane and Ross (Cambridge, 1931), I, 237.
He defines substance: "By substance, we can understand nothing else than a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist." He then adds that only one substance can be conceived as plainly needing nothing else in order to exist, namely God; and, thus, substance cannot be applied both to God and to creatures in an univocal manner, although created substance can be applied univocally to both corporeal and thinking substances. From the existence of any attribute we can conclude to an existing thing or substance to which it belongs; but every substance has a pre-eminent attribute, which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all others relate. Thus, extension in three dimensions constitutes the nature of corporeal substance. For everything else which can be ascribed to bodies presuppose extension and is only some mode of an extended body. Likewise, all things which we find in the mind (thinking substance) are simply diverse modes of thought. Figure and motion are modes of extension; imagination, sensation, and will are modes of thought. But it does seem strange, as we shall see Maritain remarking, that a being, whose essence it is

24 Haldane and Ross, p. 239.
26 Ibid., pp. 24-25.
27 Ibid., p. 25.
to think, could ever be subject to error. This is another difficulty presenting itself to Descartes' solution to the problem of error.

Other points of Pars Prima pertinent to this chapter will be sufficiently treated in the following chapters; so we need not go into them here. It is worthy of note, however, that Descartes concludes the Principia by saying that he is ready to submit to the authority of the Church concerning the material he has treated.28

And so we see from our summation of some fundamental points of Descartes' doctrine that error presented a serious and difficult problem for him. He was confronted with error, and, therefore, had to explain it. He posited logical rules to avoid error speculatively, and moral rules to avoid error practically. He tells us that clear and distinct ideas are always true, and so we wonder how we can be subject to erroneous ideas. Our faculties come from God, who is not a deceiver; how then is error possible without placing any blame on God? And finally, how can a thinking substance, a being whose essence it is to think, be subject to error?

Various commentators have also noticed the key position that an explanation of error had in the Cartesian system. Among them is Fr. Leo Keeler, who states: "Descartes is the third great thinker, (after Plato and St. Augustine), for whom the fact of

28 Ibid., p. 329.
error raised an important philosophical problem." And a number of likely answers present themselves to answer the question, why? On the one hand, it was Descartes' opinion that error had a wide prevalence in nearly all departments of knowledge. On the other hand, he believed that truth was comparatively easy to acquire for anyone with a mature mind. But he saw that many philosophers were mistaken in their interpretation of the obvious facts of experience. Why, then, so many mistakes when man can reach certain knowledge by means of methodical doubt, a radical, though necessary stratagem in the present circumstances? This method, as we saw, conceives of all convictions as doubtful and even erroneous until proven true. This fact, together with the doctrine of Descartes on the passiveness of the intellect, which we shall discuss later, makes it necessary for him to express himself rather fully on the possibility and nature of error. For, if error actually exists, though not necessarily, he must show how error is possible and in what it consists. But other philosophers have let the question sleep; why not Descartes? Perhaps there was another motive for undertaking a solution to the vexing problem of error. And so there was. Since Descartes knew that God cannot deceive us and is the ultimate source of all our clear and distinct ideas, it would seem that all our ideas are true, and consequently, that error is im-

possible. Descartes has made divine veracity the criterion of all certain knowledge of the outside world; and so he reasons that an all-wise, all-good, and omniscient God would not, rather, could not give us an intellect and will subject to error when the ideas are clear and distinct. But, as Keeler remarks, this argument seems to prove too much; since Descartes must ask and answer the question: How could such a God give us faculties that are ever subject to error?\textsuperscript{30} "The problem of error as posed by Descartes, is, therefore, a particular aspect of the metaphysical problem of evil in the world."\textsuperscript{31}

Keeling expresses the importance of the problem of error for Descartes in this way: "He readily sees that the crucial problem of epistemology is to explain, not the possibility of knowledge, but the possibility of error. And what he sees so clearly is not merely that no theory of truth which fails to provide a satisfactory theory of error is acceptable, but the further fact, that by examining the constitution of erroneous belief we shall be laying bare at the same time the constitution of knowledge."\textsuperscript{32}

Finally, Maritain gives us one more reason why Descartes must consider this problem. Due to the Cartesian conception of man as a thinking substance, error raises an almost insuperable

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{30}Ibid., p. 142.
\textsuperscript{31}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32}S.V. Keeling, Descartes (London, 1934), p. 156.
difficulty. How is it possible that I should be mistaken, since I am a spirit? How can a substance, whose essence is to think, think wrongly? These are a priori or de jure reasons which demand that Descartes investigate this question rather thoroughly. There is also the obvious de facto indication which shows that this problem must have been of the utmost importance for him. Why else would he have devoted a whole meditation (Meditatio Quarta) and many sections of that part of the Principia that is concerned with human knowledge (Pars Prima) to its solution?

For these reasons, therefore, we find that error is a great problem for Descartes, greater, perhaps, for Descartes than for most other philosophers.

---

CHAPTER II

DESCARTES' DOCTRINE ON ERROR IN MEDITATIO QUARTA
AND PRINCIPIA PHILOSOPHIAE (PARS PRIMA):
A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

We have seen that the problem of error was extremely impor-
tant for Descartes, and that it stemmed basically from his sys-
tem of philosophy. Now let us consider the detailed doctrine of
error as he presented it in Meditatio Quarta and Principia Phil-
osophiae (Pars Prima). This present chapter will be a study of
these two texts in those parts pertinent to our discussion of
error. The Meditatio Quarta, of course, is completely devoted
to the study of error (and truth), while the first part of the
Principia is concerned with human knowledge in general; so we
shall select only those sections of this latter work which will
clarify and augment the former work. In general, we shall treat
four points: the nature of error; the causes of error, both re-
 mote and proximate; and the manner in which Descartes removes
any blame for our errors from God.

Turning our attention, then, to the first point of consid-
eration, let us see Descartes' description of error. He tells
us in the Meditatio Quarta that "error as such is not something
real which depends upon God, but only a deficiency."¹ Distinguishing further he states that "error is not a pure negation (that is, it is not a simple deficiency or lack of some perfection which is not my due),² but rather a privation (or lack)³ of some knowledge which it seems to me that I should possess."⁴

This is Descartes' doctrine on the nature of error as found in Meditatio Quarta. In the Principia we find him describing error in much the same manner, although here he makes another distinction showing that in some sense error is a negation; "That our errors in respect of God are but negations, while in respect to ourselves they are privations or defects."⁵ The reason they are negations as far as God is concerned is that they do not require the actual assistance of God in order that they may be produced.⁶ And finally, Descartes adds one further distinction. We saw that error is a defect or privation; but this does

² The clause "n'est pas le simple défaut ou manquement de quelque perfection qui ne m'est point deu" is not found in the original Latin. (Cf. Med. IV, A.T., IX, 43-44.)
³ The phrase "sive carentia" is not found in the French translation. (Cf. Med. IV, A.T., VII, 55.)
⁴ Meditations, LaFleur, p. 49.
⁶ Ibid.
not mean for him that it is a defect in our nature; for if this were true, we would have no possibility of exonerating God, since He would in this case have given us a defective nature. Although our errors are not defects of our nature, they are "the defects of our mode of action." And this mode of action that causes error is "the manner in which we use our freedom."

Having seen how Descartes discusses the nature of error, let us proceed to consider the causes of error. In Meditatio Quarta and the Principia (Pars Prima) he treats the proximate causes of error, namely, the will and understanding. But further on in the Principia he discusses the remote causes or sources of error. It is to the remote sources that we now turn our attention. Although the proximate causes of error are not the primary concern of this thesis, it is necessary also to allow Descartes to point out what he considers the remote sources of error to be. They are four in number: (1) prejudices of childhood; (2) the fact that we cannot forget about these prejudices; (3) that we become fatigued by attending to those objects which are not pre-

---

7 Ibid., p. 234.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Although Descartes does not use the distinction between remote and proximate causes of error, the distinction seems to be valid. He refers to these four causes as causes; we might, nevertheless, consider them as remote sources of error, to distinguish them from the proximate causes of error, the will and understanding.
sented to the senses; and (4) that we attach our thought to words which do not express them with accuracy.

Now let us analyze these four remote sources more thoroughly.

1) "[T]he principle cause of error is found in the prejudices of childhood."\(^1\) Due to the fact that in early life the mind was so thoroughly bound to the body, it attended to nothing except thoughts by which it perceived objects that made impressions on the body. As yet the mind did not refer these thoughts to anything existing beyond itself. The mind simply felt pain or pleasure, or sensations, which are representations of nothing outside the mind, and which vary as the body is affected. Later on, however, when the body followed what was harmful or beneficial, the mind, which was still closely connected to the body, reflected on the objects it pursues or avoids, and remarked for the first time that they exist outside itself. Therefore, the mind attributed to these objects magnitude, figure, color, taste, and many other qualities. It first judged that there was greater or less reality in each object as the impression it causes on the body was more or less powerful. For instance, the mind is led to believe that there is more substance in rocks than in air.\(^1\)\(^2\)

Likewise, our mind has been filled with so many other such prejudices from infancy, which we later accepted without suffi-
cient explanation, and admitted as possessing truth and clear-
ness, as if they had been known by our senses or implanted in us
by nature. But as a matter of fact, in early life we knew things
clearly, perhaps, but certainly not distinctly. 13

2) "[T]he second cause of our errors is that we cannot for-
get these prejudices." 14 Although in later life, when the mind
is no longer wholly subject to the body, and is no longer in the
habit of referring objects to the body, it seeks, instead, to
investigate the truth of things in themselves. And so, in this
way we observe a great many judgments we have made in early life.
Still, it is extremely difficult to clear our memory of these
judgments; and as long as they remain there, they are the sources
of error. 15

It is necessary, therefore, to clean up our memory, as it
were. For the mature thinker can apprehend things more clearly
and distinctly who has had fewer prejudices, or who has succeeded
in ridding his memory of them. 16

3) "[T]he third cause is that our mind fatigues itself when
it applies its attention to the objects which are not present to
the senses." 17 The mind cannot attend to any object for any

13 Ibid., p. 250.
14 Ibid., p. 251.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
length of time without suffering pain and fatigue. If this is true about any object, it is even more true about objects which are not present to the senses or imagination. 18

Thus it happens that many are unable to conceive any substance unless it is corporeal or imaginable, and even sensible, although there are many objects that are intelligible which are not imaginable. And so they are persuaded that there is no body which is not sensible. But since we perceive no object such as it is by sense alone, but only by reason exercised upon sensible objects, it happens that the majority of men perceive nothing except in a confused manner. 19

4) "The fourth cause is that we attach our concepts to words which do not accurately answer to the reality." 20 In order to speak we attach all our conceptions to words which express them, and commit to memory thoughts in connection with these words. Later on we find it easier to recall the words than the things signified by them, and so can conceive nothing we conceive with that distinctness necessary to separate what we conceive from the words used to express our conceptions. For this reason, many attend to words rather than to things, and content themselves to assent to terms without knowing just exactly what they mean. 21

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p. 252.
21 Ibid.
We shall see in the next chapter that we err when the will passes judgment on something that is not clearly and distinctly perceived. And the fact that something is not clearly and distinctly perceived results from the four reasons noted above. For this reason, therefore, we can designate these four factors as the four main remote sources of error. But clearly, these four remote sources would have no immediate effect were there no proximate causes of error. When Descartes examines error more closely, he tells us that it arises from two joint causes, "the faculty of knowing . . . and the faculty of choice, or rather of free will."

Let us consider first the faculty of knowing—the understanding. "[B]y the understanding alone (I neither assert nor deny anything, but)\(^{23}\) I only conceive the ideas of things which I may assert or deny. Nor (in considering the understanding thus precisely)\(^{24}\) can we say that any error is ever found in it.\(^{25}\)"

In the *Principia* he tells us the part played by the understanding when he says: "I admit that we can judge of nothing unless our


\(^{23}\) The clause "ie n'asseure ny ne nie aucune chose, mais" is not found in the original Latin. (Cf. *Med.* IV, A.T., VII, 45.)

\(^{24}\) The phrase "en le (entendement) considerant ansi presise-ment" is not found in the original Latin. (Cf. *Ibid.*)

\(^{25}\) *Meditations*, LaFleur, p. 50.
understanding is made use of, because there is no reason to suppose we can judge of what we in no wise apprehend."\textsuperscript{26} The judgment, as we shall see in our next point, is placed by the will. And thus the understanding has a minor, though necessary role to play in error. It has no active part to play, but is a passive prerequisite in so far as the will passes judgment on what the understanding perceived obscurely.

What, then, is the role of the will in error? But first of all, let us consider the nature of the will. In comparison with the understanding, this faculty is immensely greater than the limited understanding.\textsuperscript{27} "([A]s a matter of fact)\textsuperscript{28} I experience (it to be so ample and extended)\textsuperscript{29} that there are no limits which restrict it."\textsuperscript{30} Further on in this part of Meditatio Quarta Descartes defines the nature of the will in the following manner: "For it consists only in the fact that we can (make a choice; we can)\textsuperscript{31} do a given thing or not do it—that is to say, we can affirm or deny, pursue or avoid. Or more properly, our free will

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{26}Haldane and Ross, p. 233.
\item\textsuperscript{27}\textit{Meditations}, LaFleur, p. 51.
\item\textsuperscript{28}The phrase "en effet" is not found in the original Latin. (\textit{Cf. Med. IV, A.T., IX, 45}.)
\item\textsuperscript{29}The words "1(e) si vague & si entenduë" are not found in the original Latin. (\textit{Cf. Ibid}.)
\item\textsuperscript{30}\textit{Meditations}, LaFleur, p. 51.
\item\textsuperscript{31}The phrase "faire une chose" is not found in the original Latin. (\textit{Cf. Med. IV, A.T., IX, 46}.)
\end{itemize}
consists only in the fact that in affirming or denying, pursuing or avoiding the things suggested by the understanding, we behave in such a way that we do not feel that any external force has constrained our decision."\textsuperscript{32}

However, since the power of willing comes from God, and since it is perfect in its own right, Descartes argues "that the cause of my errors is not the power of willing (considered by itself).\textsuperscript{33}\textsuperscript{34} And for the same reason the understanding is not the cause of error, when it is considered in itself.\textsuperscript{35} For even though the understanding is limited in its range, it is perfect in this respect that "everything I conceive I conceive properly, and it is not possible for me to be deceived in that respect."\textsuperscript{36}

Since error does not arise from the will, nor from the power of conceiving, considered in themselves, Descartes logically asks himself the question: "Whence, then, do my errors arise?"\textsuperscript{37} And the answer that immediately follows is that error arises "from the fact that the will is (much)\textsuperscript{38} more ample and far-

\textsuperscript{32}\textit{Meditations}, LaFleur, p. 51.

\textsuperscript{33}The phrase "per se spectatam" is not found in the French translation. (Cf. \textit{Med. IV}, A.T., VII, 58.)

\textsuperscript{34}\textit{Meditations}, LaFleur, p. 52.

\textsuperscript{35}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{36}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{37}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{38}The word "beaucoup" is not found in the original Latin. (Cf. \textit{Med. IV}, A.T., IX, 46.)
reaching than the understanding, so that I do not restrain it within the same limits but extend it even to those things which I do not understand." 39 In the Principia Descartes cites the same reason for error when he states: "Further, the perception of the understanding only extends to the few objects which present themselves to it, and is always very limited. The will, on the other hand, may in some measure be said to be infinite . . . , so that we easily extend it beyond that which we apprehend clearly. And when we do this there is no wonder if it happens that we are deceived." 40

To sum up what we have said thus far on the proximate causes of error, we can refer to a section of the Principia already cited, where we found Descartes saying that "our errors are defects of our mode of action." 41 The mode of action is the use, or rather, the misuse, of the will in making a judgment on what is not clearly and distinctly perceived by the understanding.

There remains one final point for our consideration, and that is to explain the manner in which Descartes removes all blame for our errors from God. Starting the Meditatio Quarta he demonstrates the existence of God, concluding: "And from the

---

39 Meditations, LaFleur, p. 52.
40 Haldane and Ross, p. 233.
41 Ibid., p. 234.
very fact that such an idea occurs in me, or that I who possess this idea exist, I so evidently conclude that God exists and that my own existence depends entirely upon him every moment of my life that I am confident that the human mind can know nothing with greater evidence and certainty." Due to this unbounded confidence in the absolute certainty of the providence of God, Descartes must clearly establish the fact that God can in no wise deceive man by causing him to err. For, if we so depend upon God every moment of our life, the realization that God would, or even could, deceive us, would certainly destroy any faith in the providence and goodness of God. If error stems from God, what recourse is left for the philosopher but scepticism or agnosticism? If God can deceive us, we must conclude that He can deceive us in anything. Therefore, no matter how confident one is that something is certain, even if one has a clear and distinct idea, he must withhold his firm assent because there will always remain the fear that the opposite opinion may be true because God is deceiving us. In short, a deceiving God would destroy the validity of human knowledge.

For this reason we find Descartes giving a number of reasons why God is excused from causing our errors. First of all, he gives a metaphysical argument showing that deceit is repugnant to God. Secondly, he excuses God for giving us a will and

---

43 *Ibid.*., p. 32.
understanding that are not absolutely perfect. And thirdly, he shows that the will errs, not in so far as it comes from God, but in so far as it is misused by us.

First of all, then, for the metaphysical argument showing that God cannot deceive us. "For first, I recognize that it is impossible for God ever to deceive me, since in all fraud and deception there is some kind of imperfection. And although it seems that to be able to deceive is a mark of (acumen,\textsuperscript{44}) (subtlety,)\textsuperscript{45} or power, nevertheless to wish to deceive testifies without question to weakness or malice, which could not be found in God."\textsuperscript{46} Much the same argument is offered in the Principia: "The first of God's attributes which falls to be considered here is that He is absolutely true and the source of all light, so that it is evidently a contradiction that He should deceive us; that is to say that He should be properly and positively the cause of the errors to which we are conscious of being subject. For although the capacity for deceit would seem to be a mark of subtlety of mind amongst men, yet the will to deceive proceeds only from malice, or fear, or weakness, and it cannot conse-

\textsuperscript{44} The word "acuminis" is not found in the French translation. (Cf. Med. IV, A.T., VII, 53.)

\textsuperscript{45} The word "subtilite" is not found in the original Latin. (Cf. Med. IV, A.T., IX, 43.)

\textsuperscript{46} Meditations, LaFleur, p. 48.
quently be attributed to God." 47

But Descartes' absolute faith in God seems to be at least weakened by the fact that we have everything from God, and that our faculties do actually err. This brings us to his second argument. Since error is a privation, we might wonder why God has not given our faculties all that is due to them. God is defended in this matter in two ways. First of all, we simply cannot understand why God does what he does. 48 And this lack of an understanding of God’s ways should not lessen our faith in Him. Secondly, we should consider the perfection of creation as a whole; for what appears to be an imperfection in an individual element does not appear imperfect when considered as a part of the whole of creation. 49

We should not complain because God has not given us an understanding that is unlimited and a will that is unerring. Rather "we should be grateful for the good things He has granted us and not complain that He does not bestow from His bounty all that we knew He might have dispensed." 50 He adds one further argument: "And although God has not given us an understanding which is omnipotent, we must not for that reason consider that

47 Haldane and Ross, p. 231.
48 Meditations, LaFleur, pp. 49-50.
49 Ibid., p. 50.
50 Haldane and Ross, p. 234.
He is the originator of our errors. For all created understanding is finite, and it is of the nature of finite understanding not to embrace all things."\(^{51}\)

And finally, Descartes argues that he is "a mean between God and nothingness, that is, so placed between the supreme Being and non-being that, in so far as a supreme Being had produced me, there is truly nothing in me which could lead me into error; but if I consider myself as somehow participating in nothingness or non-being, that is, in so far as I am not myself the supreme being (and am lacking many things),\(^{52}\) (I find myself exposed to an infinity of defects, so that)\(^{53}\) I should not be astonished if I go wrong."\(^{54}\)

There are, of course, two ways in which God could make us unable to err and yet allow us our freedom. "He might, for example, have given my understanding a clear and distinct comprehension of all the things about which I should ever deliberate."\(^{55}\) But clearly, God has not done this, nor did He have to do it. But there is another way He might have helped me so that

---

\(^{51}\)Ibid., p. 233.

\(^{52}\)The words "desuntque mihi quamplurima" are not found in the French translation. (Cf. Med. IV, A.T., VII, 54.)

\(^{53}\)The words "ie me trouve exposé à une infinité de manquements, de façon que" are not found in the original Latin. (Cf. Med. IV, A.T., IX, 43.)

\(^{54}\)Meditations, LaFleur, pl 49.

\(^{55}\)Ibid., p. 55.
I would be less susceptible to error, for "he might simply have engraved so deeply in my memory the resolution never to pass judgment on anything without conceiving it clearly and distinctly that I could never forget this rule." Although God Himself has not impressed this rule on my memory, still this manner of avoiding error is within my grasp. I can, by resolving never to judge without a clear and distinct idea, acquire the habit of not erring. For every clear and distinct idea is something real and positive, thus having its origin from God, "and consequently we must conclude that such a conception . . . is true." Therefore, if I judge only where the idea is perceived by my understanding clearly and distinctly, I shall never err.

And so, not only can we say that God is not the cause of our errors, but also that He has given us everything needed for a correct and true judgment. The elements necessary for a true judgment are a clear and distinct idea, an understanding that clearly and distinctly perceives, and a will that freely affirms or denies. And even when we do not have a clear and distinct idea, the will is never forced to make a judgment. The will is

---

59 *Haldane and Ross*, pp. 231, 232.
60 *Meditations*, LaFleur, pl 51.
always free to withhold its assent. 61

In conclusion, therefore, we find that Descartes has explained error by saying that it is caused by the will in an act of affirming or denying what is not clearly perceived by the understanding. Although God has given us these two faculties, which in conjunction cause error, He is in no way guilty of causing our errors, because in themselves these faculties cannot go wrong, and because error is not a real thing, which would make it dependent on God, but a privation, which makes it dependent on ourselves alone. It is only when we use our faculties in a way not intended by the Creator that we fall into error. By thus explaining the proximate causes and nature of error Descartes has satisfied himself that God is in no way the cause of our errors.

61 Haldane and Ross, pp. 232, 234.
CHAPTER III

THE WILL, UNDERSTANDING, AND JUDGMENT

ACCORDING TO DESCARTES

In the previous chapter we examined Descartes' doctrine on error in general and discovered that error is a defect caused by ourselves, and not anything real\(^1\) caused by God. It results from an interplay of the understanding and the will in judgment. But in what we have seen of Meditatio Quarta and Principia Philosophiae (Fara Prima), Descartes is not always explicit about the exact nature of the will, understanding, and judgment. He has used these concepts, but he does not always explain them, except in a very general way. Therefore, it will be necessary to analyze these notions more carefully, taking the material for our analysis from the above mentioned works as well as from other passages in his writings.

It will be necessary to consider not only the two faculties

\(^1\)In answer to an objection of Hobbes Descartes explains the nature of error: "Etsi ad errandum opus sit facultate ratiocinandi (vel potius judicandi, sive affirmandi & negandi), quia nempe est ejus defectus, non ideo sequitur hunc defectus esse realem, ut neque coeitatem esse realem, quamvis lapides non dicantur coeci, propter hoc solum quod non sint visus capaces." (Cf. Objectiones III, A.T., VII, 190-191.)
of will and understanding, but also the act of judging, since this is so intimately connected with his doctrine of error, and since error is, indeed, in the judgment alone. Because judgment is in the will, according to Descartes, it will be more profitable to analyze first the will and with it the understanding, and then proceed to our discussion of the judgment. From our consideration of the will and understanding we will be able to see why he places judgment in the will and not in the other mode of thought, the understanding.

Again, as in the previous chapter, we shall attempt, as far as possible, to remain in the realm of Descartes' thought, regardless of its validity. We shall, however, resort to commentaries in this present chapter whenever they can shed some light on the matter at hand.

As we shall see, the will and understanding are the two general modes in the Cartesian doctrine of thought.\(^2\) So perhaps it would be better to discuss his notion of thought and the nature of the modal distinction before we discuss the will and understanding themselves.

First of all, then, what did Descartes mean by "thought"? According to Anscombe and Geach, the word *pensée* in everyday French of the seventeenth century had a wider application than in

\(^2\) In the responses to the second set of objections to the *Meditationes* Descartes defines thought as follows: "Cogitationis nominem complctor illud omne quod sic in nobis est, ut ejus immediate conscius alimus." (Responsiones II, A.2., VII, 150.)
modern French. It was natural then, though not now, to refer to an emotion as une pensée. Likewise, the word cogitare had long been used by philosophical Latin in the wide sense. For example, cogitationes cordium in St. Thomas covered all internal states of the mind.3

But the English word "thought" has a predominantly intellectual connotation. Therefore, to translate cogitare and pensée by the word "thought" would be giving Descartes' doctrine an intellectual cast that was not intended by the author.4 However, "the words think and thought will sometimes do; for example, in the Discourse we render je pense donc je suis by I am thinking therefore I exist because here the pensée involved, being an act of doubting, really is a thought, in the ordinary sense. We have however, often found it advisable to use more general terms, such as the noun and verb experience and the adjective conscious."5

By the term cogitatio Descartes understands all that we are conscious of as operating is us. Therefore, this wide use of cogitatio or pensée will include not only understanding, willing, and imagination, but also feeling and emotion.6

There is no doubt in Descartes' mind that he actually has

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. xlviii.
thoughts, that he thinks, since this is the first indubitable conclusion which occurs to anyone philosophizing in an orderly manner. Thought is the essence of the thinking self or mind, and we know the mind more clearly than anything else. For a substance is known more clearly in proportion to the number of qualities we discern in that substance. But all those operations of the mind such as understanding, willing, imagining, feeling, etc., are qualities of thought, though Descartes uses the specific term "mode" for the generic term "quality." And since we know of more qualities of the mind than of the body, the mind is better known than the body.

Further on in the Principles Descartes is more explicit concerning the division of his conscious experience, for he classifies the modes of thought into two general classes, of which one is the mode of perception (understanding), and the other the mode of volition (will). Sensing, imagining, and perceiving are different modes of the understanding. Desiring, being aware, affirming, denying, and doubting are different modes of willing.

And this brings us to the discussion of the modal distinction. According to Descartes, a substance is that which is of itself, while an attribute is that which is imperfectly dis-

---

7Ibid., p. 8.
8Ibid.
9Ibid., p. 17.
tinct from the substance, that is, we can think of one without thinking of the other. But a mode is that which is distinct from substance in such a way that substance is perfectly distinct from the mode, although the mode is only imperfectly distinct from substance. For example, one can think of substance (corporeal) without thinking of motion (mode), although one cannot think of motion without at the same time thinking of substance. Applying this modal distinction to the thinking substance, the mind, we find that we can think of the mind without thinking of either the will or the understanding, but we cannot think of either the will or understanding without thinking of the mind.

This modal distinction is quite convenient for Descartes, since it helps him explain how the understanding and will, which are two quite diverse faculties, can cooperate to perform a single judgment. Although we can think of the understanding without thinking of the will, and vice versa, we can think of neither without thinking of a common element, the mind. And since what

---

10 Ibid., p. 24.
11 Ibid., p. 29.
13 Princ., p. 29.
14 The mind for Descartes is a simple substance, that is, a subject (substance) in which we comprehend only thought (attribute) with the various modes of thought (in general, the will and the understanding). Notae in Programma, A.T., VIII, 350-351.
is clearly and distinctly thought, exists as it is thought, we can conclude for Descartes that the will and understanding, because they are thought of as existing together, actually do exist together. Therefore, it would seem that for Descartes these two faculties, one of which is superior in both range and dignity to the other,\textsuperscript{15} can work together quite easily. This we propose as one possible help for Descartes since he does not argue in this manner. As a matter of fact, he does not seem to give any effective answer to the question of how the will and understanding work together.\textsuperscript{16}

Now that we have seen the general analysis of the mind into its attribute (thought) and modes, let us, first of all, consider the mode of thought called the will. We shall consider the existence of the will; and its nature: as a power of affirming and denying, as a perfect power, and as an unlimited power.

Descartes does not spend much time proving that we actually have a will and that it is free.\textsuperscript{17} In the \textit{Principia} he tells us "that we possess a Free-Will which causes us to abstain from giving assent to dubious things, and thus prevents our falling

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Med. IV, A.T., VII}, 56-57.


\textsuperscript{17} It is to be noted that Descartes makes no distinction between the will and free will. He uses these two notions synonymously. (Cf. \textit{Med. IV, A.T., VII}, 56-57.)
into error." The argument he offers for this statement is that when, in his process of methodical doubt, he even supposed that God were deceiving him, still he had the liberty to abstain from believing what was not clear and distinct.

We see above that when Descartes is asserting the existence of the will, he is also defining its nature as a power of affirming and denying. In Meditatio Quarta he states that the will "consists only in the fact that we can . . . affirm or deny, pursue or avoid. Or more properly, our free will consists only in the fact that in affirming or denying, pursuing or avoiding the things suggested by the understanding, we behave in such a way that we do not feel that any external force has constrained us in our decision." Thus the faculty of willing consists in the power of affirming or denying what is presented by the understanding, with-

---

18Haldane and Ross, p. 221.
19Ibid., p. 234.
21Meditations, LaFleur, p. 51.
out any external compulsion. But to be free does not mean that
we are necessarily indifferent, for the more we are inclined to
one of two contraries, the freer we are. This inclination may
come from the fact that one of the two contraries contains more
goodness, or because God is guiding my mind.22 "And certainly,
divine grace and natural understanding, far from diminishing my
liberty, rather augment and strengthen it. Moreover, that in-
difference which I feel when I am not more moved toward one side
than the other by (the weight of)23 some reason is the lowest
degree of liberty, and is rather a defect in the understanding
than a perfection of the will. For if I always understood
clearly what is true and what is good, I would never need to de-
liberate about what judgment and what choice I ought to make,
and so I would be entirely free without ever being indiffer-
ent."24

And since indifference is not a perfection of the will, it
is not hard to see why Descartes would claim that indifference
is not essential to human liberty. "[A]nd finally indifference
does not belong to the essence of human liberty, since we are
free not only when our ignorance of the right renders us indif-
ferent, but also, and chiefly, when a clear perception impels us

22Ibid., p. 52.
23The phrase "le poids d'" is not found in the original Lat-
in. (Cf. Med. IV, A.T., IX, 46.)
24Meditations, LaFleur, p. 52.
to prosecute some definite course."\textsuperscript{25}

This is Descartes' general doctrine of the nature of liberty of the will as proposed in the \textit{Meditationes}. But on the matter of liberty of indifference there seems to be a change in doctrine in his later works. In a letter to Father Mesland, May 2, 1644, he states that "I would have you observe that I did not say that a man is indifferent only where he lacks knowledge, but rather that he is more indifferent in proportion as he knows fewer reasons for choosing one side rather than the other; and this, I think, nobody can deny."\textsuperscript{26} Here he seems to be admitting some kind of liberty of indifference.

We need not go into the mooted problem of why Descartes changed his doctrine on the will, or more specifically, on freedom of indifference. According to Keeler: "Gilson's thesis, that Descartes had no original and well worked-out theory regarding human freedom, has been generally accepted by historians."\textsuperscript{27} Keeler then concludes, speaking for himself: "In the \textit{Meditations} he speaks as a Thomist, whereas in the \textit{Principles}, a book written

\textsuperscript{25}Rene Descartes, \textit{The Philosophical Works of Descartes}, trans. Haldane and Ross (Cambridge, 1934), II, 249.

\textsuperscript{26}Anscombe and Geach, p. 289. It is significant to note that this letter was written in May, 1644, two months before the publication of the \textit{Principia}, and almost three years after the publication of the \textit{Meditationes}. The sentiment expressed in this letter seems to be the same notion of freedom of indifference as that held in the \textit{Principia}. (Cf. \textit{Princ.}, A.T., VIII, 17-24.)

\textsuperscript{27}Keeler, pp. 165-166. He is referring to Gilson, \textit{La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie} (Paris, 1913), cc. iii-vii.
after the outbreak of the Jansenist controversy, and which the author hoped to see introduced into the Jesuit colleges, the tone is rather that of a Molinist, for whom indifference is inseparable from freedom." But since a solution to this problem is not essential to our thesis, let us leave the matter in the hands of the historians.

Getting back, then, to our discussion of the nature of the will, let us proceed one step further. We find that the will, the faculty of affirming or denying, is not the will that is in a pure mind, but is rather the will of a thinking self that is embodied. Therefore, it is influenced not only by certain natural impulses, but also by false prejudiced acquired in early years. Thus we see how the remote sources of error, treated of in the previous chapter, find their application here as affecting the proximate cause of error, the will.

It is also the nature of the will, according to Descartes, to be perfect and unlimited. And as a matter of fact, it is perfect in its freedom precisely because it is unlimited, that is, without limits which restrict it. It is perfect, and, indeed, the only perfect faculty we have; for nothing else in us is so perfect or so great that we cannot understand the possibility of

28 Keeler, p. 166.
29 N.K. Smith, New Studies, pp. 73, 229.
30 Meditations, LaFleur, p. 51.
something still more perfect, still greater.\textsuperscript{31} The perfection of the understanding, as we shall see, is very slight and greatly restricted; memory, imagination, and all other faculties are also possessed of a reduced and circumscribed perfection.\textsuperscript{32} Of all the faculties in us, except the will, we can form the idea of a far greater faculty. "There is only volition alone, (or the liberty of the will,)\textsuperscript{33} which I experience to be so great in myself that I cannot conceive the idea of any other more (ample and)\textsuperscript{34} extended."\textsuperscript{35}

And the reason why the will is perfect is that it is unlimited, that is, there are no limits to its scope. There is no assignable limit to the range of possible affirmations and denials; that is, in respect to any proposition we can contemplate, the will can affirm or deny. In practice, perhaps, we intend to affirm only what we believe to be true, and to deny only what we believe to be false. But we also know that we often affirm and deny propositions; although it is not our wont to affirm and deny them capriciously, still, it is within our power to do so.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33}The words "sive arbitri libertas" are not found in the French translation. (Cf. Med. IV, A.T., VII, 57.)
\textsuperscript{34}The words "ample &" are not found in the Latin original. (Cf. Med. IV, A.T., IX, 45.)
\textsuperscript{35}Meditations, LaFleur, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{36}Keeling, pp. 156-157.
In summary, then, our analysis of the will consists in this, that man has a free will, whose function it is to affirm and deny what is apprehended by the understanding. And this free will or power of choice is both perfect and unlimited.

Secondly, before going on to see why Descartes is forced to make judgment an act of the will and not of the understanding, let us consider the understanding in itself. In our analysis of the understanding we shall discuss its nature as being passive, as being imperfect because limited, and yet in some way perfect. Also, we shall see that this faculty has some primacy over the will.

The understanding in knowing is, as it were, "patiently contemplative."37 As a matter of fact, "it cannot invent for itself a single new idea; and being thus passive in the reception of those which present themselves to it, neither can it in any wise modify or distort them."38 The reason the understanding cannot modify nor distort those ideas which come to it is that modification and distortion are actions and the understanding is passive.

But with this emphasis on the passivity of the understanding, we might well ask ourselves the question: Just what does the understanding do? It is a faculty, and, therefore, we would ex-

37 N.K. Smith, p. 228.
38 Ibid.
pect it to do something. Descartes answers our inquiry in Meditatia Sexta when he says that "the mind, in conceiving, turns somehow toward itself and considers some one of the ideas which it possesses in itself."39

Although the understanding can freely think or not think ideas, once they are thought they control and govern the mind.40 The reason for this passivity is because, as Descartes says, "I do not distinguish otherwise between mind and its ideas than between a piece of wax and the different figures that it can receive; and as it is not properly an action, but a passion in the wax to receive different figures, it seems to me that it is also a passion in the mind to receive such and such an idea, and that only its volitions are actions."41 For, as he tells us in Meditatia Quinta, "thus, for example, when I imagine a triangle, even though there may perhaps be no such figure anywhere in the world outside of my thought, nor ever have been, nevertheless the figure cannot help having a certain determinate nature, or form or essence, which is immutable and eternal, which I have

39Meditations, LaFleur, p. 65. To put this description of the act of the understanding into context, Descartes is here comparing it to the act of imagination, which "se convertat ad corpus, et aliquid in eo ideae vel a se intellectae vel sensu perceptae conforme intueatur." Med. VI, A.T., VII, 73.


41Ibid., p. 108, footnote. (Cf. Lett., A.T., IX, 199.)
not invented and which does not in any way depend upon my mind.\footnote{42}{42}
Of course, to explain the fact that ideas control and govern the mind, Descartes must resort to innate ideas.\footnote{43}{43} These innate ideas are implanted in the mind by God, and, therefore, the mind does not have to form them, but simply has to become conscious of them.\footnote{44}{44}

Besides being passive, the understanding is imperfect, because its range is very limited. The things the understanding can know clearly are fewer by far than the things the will can affirm ordain.\footnote{45}{45} Although the understanding can contemplate ideas clearly and distinctly, and, therefore, adequately, it contemplates others more or less clearly. But as we pointed out in treating of the remote sources of error, many men know only confusedly, due to the prejudices of youth, the inability to forget these prejudices, the easily tiring nature of the understanding, and the inadequate use of words. Though we desire (will) to understand clearly what we perceive obscurely, we often fail to do so. And although the will can affirm or deny propositions

\footnote{43}{Malebranche objects to this position on two counts: first it would involve an infinite number of ideas in a finite mind; and secondly, even if the mind had stored up in itself all these ideas, it would be impossible to explain how it could find those it wanted. N. Smith, p. 109, footnote. (He is referring to Malebranche, Recherche, p. 390 ff.)}

\footnote{44}{Norman Smith, p. 109.}

\footnote{45}{Princ., A.T. VIII, 18. (For the dispute between Descartes and Gassendi on the infinitude of the will as opposed to the limited understanding, cf. Keeler, pp. 168-169.)}
capriciously, as it were, it is not capable of causing every proposition to be clear. Hence, to say that the intellect is limited and the will unlimited without qualification, would be misleading. Perhaps it would be closer to Descartes' real meaning to say that the understanding's power for clear and distinct ideas is very limited, although its power for knowing, at least obscurely, is much less limited.

Although the understanding is imperfect because it is limited, it is in another sense no less perfect than the will. Keeling tells us: "True, there are many things we cannot understand, yet what we do understand clearly is, exactly as we perceive it. Though the limitations of our understanding are many, in no instance is understanding 'deceptive' or positively misleading in its disclosures."46 In other words, the understanding of itself cannot make mistakes.47 This is true for three reasons. First of all, the understanding is merely passive and receptive, not having the power to falsify ideas. Secondly, all clear and distinct ideas are of their very nature true; and so, whenever the understanding receives a clear and distinct idea, it is incapable of making a mistake. And thirdly, as we shall see, there is no error or mistake in judgment until the will comes into play. Confused ideas, as we shall also see, can be

---

called materially false, but there is no formal falsity until the judgment affirms or denies. But no matter how clear or obscure the ideas, as long as the understanding is content simply to contemplate these ideas, there is no danger of error. That is to say, merely knowing ideas will never involve formal falsity.

Even though, in the ordinary sense of Cartesian epistemology, the understanding is imperfect, and the will perfect, still the understanding has a certain primacy over the will. According to Descartes man's will is most perfect and most free when it judges on a clear and distinct idea. "For if I always clearly understood what is true and what is good, I would never need to deliberate about what judgment and what choice I ought to make, and so I would be entirely free without ever being indifferent." This doctrine is expressed by N.K. Smith in the following manner: "In man the intellect has primacy over the will; it is only in proportion as the true and the good are preveniently apprehended that the human will can achieve freedom of action." On the other hand, we can misuse our freedom by judging on what is not clearly enough understood. But whether the will judges correctly or not, the ideas must first be per-

48Keeling, p. 158. (Cf. Princ., A.T., VIII, 9.)
49Meditations, LaFleur, p. 52.
50N.K. Smith, p. 268.
ceived; and in this sense the understanding has primacy over the will.

Thus we see that the understanding is passive, imperfect, and limited; while the will is active, perfect, and unlimited. Mahaffy compares the two faculties: "Our understanding is finite . . . Our will is rash." 52

Finally let us turn our attention to the judgment. For various reasons Descartes claims that judgment is in the will. Keeler enumerates four of these reasons: 53 First of all, the understanding is a purely passive faculty whose only duty it is to receive ideas. Therefore, all the activities of the soul belong to the will, and not to the understanding. For this reason judgment, which is obviously an action, belongs to the will. Secondly, judgment is often free, which implies the operation of a free faculty, the will. Thirdly, judgment may be false, whereas there is no falsity in the understanding. 56 And finally, only on the assumption that the will judges can one reconcile errors with the divine veracity. 57 For if the understanding,

51 Princ., A.T. VIII, 18.
53 Keeler, p. 163.
55 Keeler, p. 163.
57 Keeler, p. 163.
which is passive, were to judge erroneously, the cause of error could not be in itself, since it is passive. Therefore, the cause of the error would be something external to the understanding, either God or the will. Descartes rules out the first possibility immediately. The second possibility, namely, that the will causes the intellect to err, cannot be granted by Descartes either. "If the intellect be conceived on the analogy of a piece of wax, that passively receives impressions, or of a mirror that reflects more or less distinctly such ideas as come before it, then it is incapable of forming a synthesis of ideas, let alone pronouncing it to be true or false, and it could not, consequently, exercise such power at the behest of the will. I could see links between ideas, but not *componere et dividere, ferre sententiam*, posit something as existing in things."\(^{58}\)

And so, if the understanding can make an erroneous judgment neither because of itself nor because of something else, we can only conclude that the understanding does not judge.

Therefore, Descartes' theory of the human mind inevitable leads him to the conclusion that the will judges. But although it is the will that judges, we do not imply that the understanding plays no part. For the will must, obviously, have something to judge about.\(^{59}\) The judgment, therefore, consists

---


\(^{59}\) *Princ.*, A.T., VIII, 18.
in an interplay between the understanding and the will, the latter faculty actually doing the affirming and denying. The understanding furnishes the ideas, which are merely subjective appearances in the mind. Before these appearances can become knowledge the will must intervene and interpose that objective reality which the ideas of themselves do not possess. In brief, the understanding alone conceives; the will alone affirms or denies.

The judgment is different from the understanding, which gives immediate awareness, and this difference is due to the presence in judgment of an *aliqoid amplius*; and this *aliqoid amplius* is precisely an affirmation or denial. However, we must not suppose that this judgment presupposes complete cognition. Descartes tells us: "Nor, in order to form any judgment whatever, is it necessary that we should have a perfect and entire knowledge of a thing; for we often give our assent to things of which we have never had any but a very obscure and confused knowledge." 61

Thus we see that both the will, which is infinite, unlimited and perfect, and the understanding, which is limited, passive, and receptive, play their part in judgment. Although the idea perceived by the understanding is a necessary component of judgment, still, judgment is primarily an act of the will, which

---


61 *Princ., A.T., VIII, 18.*
affirms and denies.

It is to be noted that Descartes has substituted a doctrine of judgment with the emphasis on the role of the will in affirming or denying, for a patiently receptive and sheerly intellectualist type of intuition as proposed in the Regulae. The reason for this change seems to be the fact that Descartes would be able to find no solution for the problem of error in an intellectual intuition and still exonerate God. N.K. Smith offers another reason for this substitution. In 1628 Descartes came in contact with the Paris Congregation of the Oratory. "As the philosophy favored by the Oratory was more Augustinian than Thomist, we can conjecture with considerable probability that this was an influence which played a not unimportant part in familiarizing Descartes with Augustinian teaching and thereby in the later shaping of his own metaphysics." 63


63 N.K. Smith, p. 23.
CHAPTER IV
THE ROLE OF THE WILL IN ERROR

In the second chapter we presented Descartes' doctrine of error in a general way. In the third chapter we analyzed the three fundamental notions necessary for a complete understanding of error, namely, the will, understanding, and judgment. In this latter chapter we prescinded, to a certain extent, from the question of error, in order to discuss the nature of these three notions in themselves. Now we once again return specifically to the problem of error in order to investigate and present Descartes' position more fully. Again, as in the previous chapters, criticism will be omitted. And again, as in the third chapter, we shall make use of various commentaries which are available on Descartes' notion of the will in error whenever they can help us.

But before we can give Descartes' complete solution to error, it will first be necessary to discuss briefly two other points: What is truth, according to Descartes? And, where is error not found?

Truth, according to Descartes, is "a subjective certitude,—that is true which I cannot help believing."¹ True knowledge

¹Keeler, p. 162.
is assent to what is certain, and its truth coincides with its certitude. When I know something with full certitude, so that I can neither doubt nor suspect reasons for doubting, that knowledge is true for me.²

We saw in the introduction that clear and distinct ideas are the criterion for truth. If we have a clear and distinct idea of something, that thing is true.³ It is obvious, then, for Descartes to conclude: "For the knowledge upon which a certain and incontrovertible judgment can be formed, should not alone be clear but also distinct."⁴ He states the same idea in the first rule of logic, which is contained in the Discours: "The first rule was . . . to include nothing in my conclusions unless it presented itself so clearly and distinctly to my mind that I had no occasion to doubt it."⁵ By this he means that we must carefully avoid any haste or prejudice, and accept as true only what can be verified by one's own experience. Truth, therefore, is a subjective certitude of something based on a clear and distinct idea.

The second question we wish to answer is: Where is error not found? Descartes takes for granted that falsity in things

⁴Haldane and Ross, p. 237.
is absurd. What, then, of the possibility of error in the imagination or senses? Images, taken as psychic events are true. The senses, since they do not immediately perceive things outside, must be true. Error will come in only when judgment is involved, by which we mistakenly suppose that these perceptions are likenesses of things outside.

Neither can ideas, in themselves, be false according to Descartes in Meditatio Tertia: "Now as far as ideas are concerned, if we consider them only in themselves and do not relate them to something else, they cannot, properly speaking, be false." One reason for this impossibility of error is that an idea is just what it is and nothing more. But ideas must be true for still another reason. An idea is true in the sense that what it represents must have real being. Were this not the case, God would deceive us by creating ideas that represented unreal things. But here we must make an important distinction. When we say that an idea in itself is true, we are speaking of clear and distinct ideas. Descartes bases the veracity of a clear and distinct idea on the principle that God exists, and that everything we have comes from Him, everything, that is,

---

6 Keeler, p. 147.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Meditations, LaFleur, p. 33.
that has positive reality. But a confused and obscure idea is not positive since it participates in nothingness, that is, it is not wholly perfect.\(^\text{10}\) And so, as we shall see, these ideas (confused) do not contain formal error, although they do contain material error.

As long as an idea is just an idea, existing in the mind, there can be no error. The reason Descartes gives for this statement is that "if I considered the ideas only as certain modes (or aspects)\(^\text{11}\) of my thought, without intending them to refer to some other exterior object, they could hardly offer me a chance of making a mistake."\(^\text{12}\)

This last quotation gives us a clue to a further distinction Descartes makes about error, namely, between an idea being materially or formally false. He spoke above of giving the material for error, and so it is only natural for him to make the distinction between formal and material error. A clear and distinct idea is not formally false, since formal error is had only in judgment. Nor is such an idea even materially false, since a clear and distinct idea is of its very nature true, since it comes from God, and is the criterion of truth. But confused


\(^{11}\) The words "ou faisons" are not found in the original Latin. (Cf. *Med. III*, A.T., IX, 29.)

\(^{12}\) *Meditations*, LaFleur, p. 33.
ideas can have material falsity, although they cannot have formal falsity since formal error is had only in the judgment. Such ideas are called materially false because they can offer to the will the material for an erroneous assent. So we conclude that the only falsity ideas can have is the material falsity of confused ideas. But since material falsity is not real error, we can say that ideas in themselves are not false.

Perhaps a further clarification of what Descartes means by confused ideas would be profitable here. By confused ideas he usually means ideas of so-called secondary qualities. For example, color, heat, cold, or pain. The confusion in such ideas comes from the fact that we conceive them as existing outside the mind in bodies, when the fact of the matter is that they represent nothing existing outside the mind. These ideas in themselves are so obscure that they do not reveal their subjectivity, and, therefore, we tend to mistake them for representatives of existing things. But in reality, they represent what is nothing as if it were something. And thus material falsity is had when ideas "represent that which is nothing as though it were something."

15 Keeler, p. 158.
17 Meditations. LaFleur, p. 39.
Furthermore, in these confused ideas we recognize nothing so great or so excellent that it seems impossible that they could arise from myself. Since they represent entities that do not exist, we know that they proceed from nothingness; that is, they occur in us only because something is lacking in our nature, which nature is entirely perfect. And even if these ideas should be true, nevertheless, since they show me so little reality that we cannot even clearly distinguish the object represented from the non-existent, we see no reason for denying that these ideas come from ourselves. And since they are so derived, they do not come from God, as do clear and distinct ideas; and so again God is freed from any blame of causing us to commit errors. 18

Thus far we have seen that the imagination, the senses, and ideas are not in themselves false. What, then, of the understanding? As we saw in our analysis of the understanding in chapter 3, this faculty is receptive and passive. It can neither modify nor distort the ideas which it received, because such modification and distortion would involve action, and hence would exceed the capacity of a passive faculty. The understanding merely conceived ideas, while the will affirms and denies them. For this reason no error is found in the understanding considered in itself. But the understanding is also unable to make mistakes because this faculty, though limited, is from

God, and, therefore, Descartes concludes that it must not be of its nature erroneous.19 Were this not so, God would be guilty of deceit.

Now since the will in itself cannot be false, because it too is a faculty that comes from God, and indeed is a perfect faculty,20 there seems to be only one possible solution to the vexing problem of error. It is in no one of our faculties, nor in ideas in themselves; it must be contained in some combination of these elements. And so it is. Error lies in the judgment, which consists of the affirmation or denial on the part of the will of what is presented to it by the understanding. Error is formally in the judgment.

Now that we have answered these preliminary questions of the nature of truth and of where falsity is not found, let us proceed to give Descartes' complete analysis of the will in error.

Error, indeed, was quite a problem for Descartes. He certainly could not deny the existence of many errors in the world of speculative and practical thought. As a matter of fact, the presence of these many errors and contradictions in philosophy is precisely what incited him to begin the whole philosophical investigation anew, and to devise a new method which would admit

20 Ibid., pp. 56-58.
admit of no error, but which, if followed exactly, would result in a flawless philosophy. But it was still necessary for him to account for the obvious presence of error in the world and to give an explanation for it. As we saw, Descartes described error as "a privation . . . of some knowledge which it seems to me that I should possess." And we also saw that Descartes places error neither in the will nor in the understanding considered in themselves; so it was obvious for him to conclude that error comes from a combination of these two faculties in judgment. This act, which uses both the general modes of thought, is an affirmation or denial of what is presented to the will by the understanding.

Judgment, as we have seen, is caused by the will alone, since, for one thing, a judgment consists of an affirmation or denial, which operations are performed by the will alone. The part played by the understanding is that of a conditio sine qua non. Descartes' doctrine, however, is not as complete as we would like it to be, for he leaves certain basic questions unanswered. For instance, what is the relation of the will to the understanding? How is the will moved by the understanding,

---

21 Meditations, Lafleur, p. 49.


23 Descartes does not use this term when referring to the part played by the understanding in a judgment, but it seems to be a valid interpretation of his doctrine.
since the understanding must present it with an idea, and yet is a passive faculty? From the Principia we learn that the will can judge only when an idea is presented to it by the understanding, but beyond this general explanation, Descartes does not expressly show how the two faculties are related. For this reason, we must agree with Professor Koyre when he states: "In spite of the important place the theory of judgment occupies in the Cartesian system, it is anything but clear. The terminology is vague, the development fragmentary; while the fact that the position of the problem is determined by error and not by knowledge itself, renders the interpretation extraordinarily hard."\(^\text{25}\)

But in order to understand the doctrine that Descartes does present, we must analyze his explanation of judgment, specifically, an erroneous judgment, basing our analysis on the explanation of the will undertaken in the previous chapter. There we saw that the will has two general characteristics, namely, its property of being unlimited and free. Here, each of these two characteristics can help us explain an erroneous judgment.

First of all, how does the will as unlimited help us to explain error? God has given man many clear and distinct ideas, for example, a clear and distinct idea of God's own being as necessarily existing, or a clear and distinct idea of one's own

\(^{24}\text{Princ.}, \text{A.T.}, \text{VII}, 18.\)

\(^{25}\text{Keeler}, \text{p. 149}, \text{quoting from Descartes und die Scholastik (Bonn, 1923), p. 48.}\)
existence. These clear and distinct ideas, of their very nature, cannot lead man into error. And yet even the ideas which a man does not have in a clear and distinct manner need not lead him into error. For a mature and careful thinker can always desist from assenting to those confused and obscure ideas. But the point we wish to make here is that only when man assents to, that is, affirms or denies, an idea that is not sufficiently clear and distinct, can he err. And this event is clearly man's fault and in no way the responsibility of God. If the will were limited in its assent, say, to the scope of clear and distinct ideas, the will would never make a false judgment. But the realm of the will is unlimited in so far as its domain extends beyond the perfect use of the understanding. For, as Des...tells us, errors arise "only from the fact that the will is (much) more ample and far-reaching than the understanding, so that I do not restrain it within the same limits but extend it even to those things which I do not understand."  

For example, I see a horse, and my idea tells me that it is a horse. The will enters in and assents to the judgment that it is clearly a horse. The will says: That is a horse. The will itself makes the affirmation. In this case I have truth. But

---

27 The word "beaucoup" is not found in the Latin original. (Cf. Med. IV, A.T., IX, 46.)
28 Meditations, Lefleur, p. 52.
supposing that I see what looks like a horse. The will says: Since that may or may not be a horse, I will make no judgment that it is one. Truth is not exactly had in this case, but it is at least safeguarded. But if the will says in effect: Despite my confused and obscure idea of that thing I say that it is clearly a horse. Here we have error. If, in this latter case, the thing of which I have an idea really is a horse, truth is had only accidentally. But the fact to be noted is that the error does not come from my confused understanding, but from my rash and unlimited will.

But here again we find a lacuna in Descartes' thought. Since the will is more extended than the understanding, how can it act in that area in which it is unlimited? For this would seem to imply that the will could act without the understanding. No specific solution is given to this question, though Descartes seems to imply that the will is coextensive with the understanding when it presents either a clear or an obscure idea. Father Keeler also finds Descartes' doctrine incomplete when he states:

In his endeavor to be plain and unscholastic, Descartes too often speaks as though he were satisfied with the old formula, so general in most post-Aristotelian Greek schools: the mind has ideas, images; the will assents to them as real, or rejects them; if they are not quite clear, it ought always be called false. He saw well enough, when he wanted to, that this account is altogether inadequate; yet he steadfastly declined to undertake a more searching analysis of the situation, and especially of the part that must be assigned to the intellect in the act of judgment."
We might look at this unlimited will in another way. Both the understanding and will are perfect in their own way; so error can come from neither left to themselves, but only from the judgment wherein they jointly act. The combination of a limited, restricted understanding with an unlimited free will can explain error. But as long as we are content to contemplate our thoughts, without affirming or denying, we shall never err. But neither would we, in this case, possess knowledge, for this contemplation or passive understanding "is simply historical occurrence. Truth and falsity can relate only to propositions about what exists or occurs, not to occurrences. But the more eager we are to reach knowledge, and the less experienced or habituated we are in withholding assent from propositions proposed to our minds, the more readily do we give assent where we are not fully clear about what it is we are asserting."

The understanding can perceive the content only as it is presented, while the will can affirm it to be what it is not, or deny that it is what it is. And so the will is unlimited in its capacity to affirm or deny. In this unconditional freedom lies the possibility of error.

29 Keeler, p. 149.
32 Keeling, p. 158.
And this leads us to the second characteristic of the will, its freedom. Descartes holds that the will is sometimes indifferent, but that freedom does not consist in this indifference. The more the will is inclined to a thing the freer it is, which means that in the scholastic terminology, the less indifference the will had the more freedom it has. And since the will has more inclination to a clear and distinct idea, it is freer when a clear and distinct idea is presented to it for a judgment. On the other hand, when the will is perfectly indifferent to either side, as happens when the idea is confused and obscure or when it is not aware that the idea is clear and distinct, then the will has the lowest grade of freedom. The understanding is most perfect when its idea is clear and distinct. The will is most free when it assents to that clear and distinct idea, and in this ideal judgment is had perfect truth. Thus, the more freedom we have from God, the less able we are to err.

But here again we find ourselves asking important questions of Descartes which he left unanswered. According to Descartes the will has its lowest grade of freedom when it assents to obscure and confused ideas. The cause of this lack of perfect freedom is its indifference, which seems to be the same as being.

34 Ibid., p. 58.
35 Ibid.
unlimited. But when we ask Descartes for a distinction between the will as free and as unlimited we ask in vain.

Our freedom is undeniably used as it should be used when we assent to only what is clear and distinct, and when we refrain from assenting to what is only obscure.\(^{36}\) We are never compelled to use our free will, and can, therefore, suspend judgment whenever we want. And this freedom, which seems to be freedom of exercise, though Descartes does not use the term, is exercised by yielding or withholding assent. Perhaps if Descartes had made a distinction between freedom of exercise and specification, his doctrine would be clearer. As a matter of fact, he seems to pass over in silence freedom of specification, since he defines the operation of the will as freedom of exercise: "For it consists only in the fact that we can . . . do a given thing or not do it—that is to say, we can affirm or deny, pursue or avoid."\(^{37}\)

To complete our analysis of the will in error we might discuss briefly the two general sources of error according to Keeling. In both of these causes we find the erroneous judgment caused by the unlimited and free will. These two causes are, first of all, a precipitate judgment, due to insufficient care; and secondly, a prejudiced judgment, due to the foundation we have of habit or strong feeling.\(^{38}\)

\(^{36}\)Ibid., pp. 59-60.

\(^{37}\)Meditations, LaFleur, p. 51.

\(^{38}\)Keeling, p. 63.
Sometimes we are unwilling to take the trouble to think our
and state clearly what the character of the fact under contem-
plation is, and so we acquiesce too readily in passing judgment
upon what is only more or less clear. In this case our judg-
ment expresses conjecture and not knowledge. This hasty con-
jecture is erroneous precisely because it misinterprets a real
character of what is given in thought, the misinterpretation
coming from a vague awareness of what is given for interpreta-
tion. Knowledge, on the other hand, is due, in part at least,
to a clear discernment of what is given for knowledge. The
trouble lies in the fact that we can affirm or deny without re-
striction, as often as we choose, even when we do not clearly
understand what we are affirming or denying, which is not in-
frequent. The obvious solution to this state of affairs is to
refuse to judge on anything we do not clearly understand.39

The second general cause for error lies in a prejudiced
judgment. Due to vanity, we may hesitate to suppose we lack
knowledge of those common matters which the majority of men
claim to possess. Or we may be reluctant to accept a proposi-
tion that is actually true, because it conflicts with some be-
lief we hold as certain, which we do not wish to admit as false.
Then again, a proposition is not true merely because it is af-
firmed to be so by the generality of mankind, because this ma-

39 Ibid., pp. 63-64.
jority is no less precipitate in its judgments than we. This general agreement is not sufficient to make a proposition true; and we, therefore, must check our strong inclination to believe it until we ourselves have verified it. What we must do is to "take arms against these insidious forms of rashness and bias in judgment, never affirming what we do not know to be certainly true, or what is even capable of being doubted."

To sum up, then, Descartes' exposition of error, we find that error is not a real thing but a privation. Therefore, it neither comes from God, nor does God concur in it. Error is not found in the imagination, nor in the senses. It is not found in clear and distinct ideas either formally or materially, although error can be found in confused ideas in the sense that they offer to the will the ingredients, as it were, of a false judgment. And so confused ideas are said to be materially false. Since neither the will nor the understanding, in themselves, are subject to error, this privation in us can only be found in an act which combines these two faculties. This act is judgment, by which the will affirms or denies what is presented to it by the understanding. Although God has given us these two faculties, we can in no way blame Him for causing our errors, since error stems from a misuse of our faculty of willing. This formal and proximate cause of error, the misuse of our unlimited

40 Ibid., p. 64.
41 Ibid.
freedom, arises from the various remote sources, namely, that we acquire prejudices in childhood, and are hardly able to forget about them in later life; that we become fatigued easily when concentrating, especially on those objects which are not sensible; and that we attach our thoughts to words which do not express them with accuracy.

And finally, what is the role of the will in error? We saw above that error exists formally only in judgment. And from the nature of the will and understanding we can easily see why the will alone makes the judgment. The understanding is restricted rather narrowly, since the range of propositions it can contemplate is quite limited. Although it can contemplate many things obscurely and confusedly, the number of those things it can understand clearly and distinctly is small. To the will, however, is given no assignable limit. It can affirm or deny whether the propositions be clear or obscure. It is precisely in this unlimited will that we are so susceptible to error. When the ideas, even obscure ones, are merely contemplated by the understanding, we have no error. But when the will becomes rash and assents to these ideas, it is misusing its freedom, thereby forming a mistaken judgment. While it is a misuse of freedom that condemns us to innumerable errors, it is a proper use of this freedom that saves us from error. For we are using freedom correctly when we either assent to clear and distinct ideas, or when we refuse to assent to obscure ones. Thus, the faculty which gives us error can also deliver us from it.
CHAPTER V

CRITICISM

Now that we have considered just what Descartes held on error, and how he solved the problem by the use of the will, we are ready to give an evaluation. This evaluation will consist in a double criticism, as we pointed out in the introduction. We shall try, first of all, to point out the two internal difficulties in Descartes' use of the will in error, and then the external difficulties. This second criticism will be a comparison of Descartes' position with that of St. Thomas.

But before we proceed to the two internal inconsistencies we find in Descartes' position, it would be well to refer to the omissions we found in the previous chapter. There we discovered that Descartes left unanswered a number of basic questions, which, if answered by him, would have made his doctrine more intelligible, or would have shown him that his doctrine needed revision. Concerning the relation of the will with the understanding we saw that two important questions were left unsolved. First of all, how is the will moved by the understanding? Secondly, how can the will operate in that area in which it is more extensive than the understanding? Concerning the nature of the will we found two other problems left unsettled. First of all,
what is the distinction between the will as unlimited and the will as free? Secondly, is there any liberty of specification in the will? These omissions seem to make Descartes' doctrine of the will, and specifically of the will in error, less intelligible, if not incorrect.

Now let us discuss the two internal inconsistencies present in Descartes' explanation of the will in error. The two inconsistencies or contradictions we find are: (1) that he explicitly explained error as a judgment of the will. But in truth, he seems to be driven to make judgment an act of the understanding; and (2) that the basic purpose in his explanation of error was to free God from any blame in causing our errors. But in the final analysis, he cannot help but place the blame on God, to some extent, no matter how much this is against his pious Catholic temperament.

First of all, then, we shall point out that error is due to an improper use of the understanding and not of the will, no matter how much Descartes would have it otherwise. We mean that it is due to the understanding even in his system. "It was Descartes's intention originally to show that error is directly due to an improper use of our unlimited freedom in willing, but the conclusion to which he is in point of fact eventually driven is, that the use is 'improper' precisely because of a defect—not in our will, but in our understanding. For, though to yield assent to what is obscure or confused is to abuse our freedom of will, the very possibility of such abuse is solely due to a defective
No one will deny that the understanding alone is responsible for apprehending anything obscurely. "That which a confused idea is 'of,' is never intrinsically such that, if it is perceived at all, it must be confusedly or obscurely perceived. It is always intrinsically such that, unless the faculty concerned in its apprehension is defective, it must be clearly and distinctly perceived. The confusion or obscurity in the idea is not, therefore, due to the thing of which the idea is an idea."\(^2\)

But if there were no occasion in which we ought to withhold the assent in order to avoid error, that is, if we had no confused or obscure ideas, there would be no possibility of error. And so Keeling concludes: "So, to Descartes's dictum that in willing alone we are responsible for error, we must make the reservation that our defective (confused) apprehension is certainly an accessory before the fact!"\(^3\)

Since the understanding is passive, according to Descartes, analogous to a piece of wax receiving impressions or a mirror reflecting images, it is incapable of forming a synthesis of ideas, let alone pronouncing them true or false. This act is, therefore, exercised by the will. However, as Keeler objects,

\(^1\)Keeling, pp. 269-270.
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 270.
\(^3\)Ibid.
"it is one thing to mark off in general terms this extreme opposition between passive and active faculties, and quite another to take it in all seriousness. Descartes himself never understood it strictly, nor accepted the psychology it would have led to. In spite of certain out-of-the-way positions he was carried to by the strong undercurrent of voluntarism in his otherwise intellectualist philosophy, the fundamental difference between intellect and will remained for him what it had been for the Schoolman; the former is the faculty of the true, the latter, that of the good."⁴ Descartes takes for granted that the judgment is the proper seat of truth, and that the very purpose of philosophical study is "to direct the mind toward the enunciation of sound and correct judgments on all matters that come before it."⁵ For this reason Keeler concludes that "judgment is for him primarily an act of the understanding, however much he may prefer to refer to the will."⁶

The reason for this assertion is clear. Affirming and denying have to do with a thing being so or not so, and these two acts cannot be reduced to a mere pursuing or shunning because these acts regard good and evil. It is evident to us that we often affirm when we really feel nothing but aversion, and that

⁴Keeler, p. 164.
⁵Haldane and Ross, p. 1.
⁶Keeler, p. 164.
negation can be called shunning "only by a transparent metaphor."\(^7\) Descartes tells Gassendi that "quia ita vis, ita judi-
ces."\(^8\) This is true enough, but proves only that judging and believing are subject to the influence of the will, and not that they are essentially acts of that faculty.

According to Keeler, Gilson was not exaggerating when he wrote that, "in spite of the seemingly contradictory texts that can be cited, it remains true to say that the Cartesian conception of the relation between intellect and will is at bottom that of St. Thomas himself."\(^9\) In other words, the understanding, not the will, judges.

The second internal inconsistency we find in his doctrine is that Descartes does not prove what he started out to prove. One of his main objectives in his lengthy explanation of error was to place all blame for error on ourselves, none on God. This he has not done. Descartes would suppose that since God is so good, so honest, He could be neither a deceiver nor wish to cause our errors in any way. Therefore, we are the adequate causes of our errors. But this all-good God makes it even more difficult to explain our errors, not easier. Why is it that an all-powerful God, who endowed us with perfect wills should not

---

\(^7\) *Ibid.*

\(^8\) *Varia*, A.T., X, 359.

be held responsible for permitting obscure and confused ideas in our understanding, when He could have easily created us with an understanding uniformly clear in its operation.\textsuperscript{10}

Descartes, as we saw, tried to answer this difficulty, and did answer it to his own satisfaction, by saying that the understanding is of its nature finite, that is, there are many things which it cannot comprehend.\textsuperscript{11} Keeling replies to this by saying "But, it must be objected, whether or no God is responsible for having endowed finite selves with understanding limited in respect to the extent of their knowledge, He certainly does seem to be responsible (notwithstanding Descartes's denial) for endowing us with understandings, which, even within the restricted ranges of their competence, should all too often prove incompetent! Even though we could not have cognitions of everything that is theoretically knowable, why should so many, or any, of the cognitions our constitutions do permit us to have, be unclear and confused?"\textsuperscript{12}

As we saw, these confused and obscure ideas come from secondary qualities, which are confused precisely because of Descartes' dichotomy between body and soul. If his theory of error were not subjected to this basic principle, it does not seem

\textsuperscript{10}Keeling, p. 270.

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Med.} IV, A.T., VII, 60.

\textsuperscript{12}Keeling, p. 270, footnote.
that he would have fallen into error on this point. He did not want to blame those obscure ideas on God, and so he said that they came from himself. But they could come from him for either of two reasons. Either his nature was defective, or there was something lacking in the nature of things. Whichever horn of the dilemma Descartes takes, he must, it seems, place the blame for that deficiency on God in some way or other.

He was so obsessed with the idea that God had no part in this business of error that he denied that the Creator was even giving His concurrence to error. If Descartes had seen the distinction between the entity of an act and its taleity, he would have more easily solved his problem, and still saved the sanctity of God.

Now we come to the final aspect of our criticism of Descartes' doctrine of the will in error. We shall try to show that his position is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons which were cited in the introductory chapter.

1) The first point we shall take up for criticism is the assertion that the understanding is merely passive. We have stressed this basic concept in Descartes' doctrine, so we need not explain his position here. Let it suffice, by way of criticism to show that the understanding is not merely passive, but active as well.

It is clear that our intellect is in some way passive because we start off with nothing, that is, we at one time do not
know something, and at another do. Our knowledge does not change the thing known, but in some way it changes us. Since the intellect (possible) is passive, in potency, it must be actuated. The possible intellect cannot be actuated or informed by itself, at least not in so far as it is in potency, nor can it be actuated by innate ideas. It cannot be informed by some external cause such as an intuition of God, the senses alone, or by some created thing such as a word, a teacher, etc. The only thing left is that it is actuated by some act, which is also an intellectual faculty. This operation we give to the agent intellect. We need not go into the part played by the phantasm or the impressed and expressed species. Suffice it to say that the intellect cannot be merely passive, since we must have some active faculty to inform the possible intellect, to move it from potency to act.

When St. Thomas describes the operation of the intellect he merely breaks down the word intelligere etymologically, and concludes that to understand is a process by which one "interius in ipas rei essentia veritatem quodammodo legit."\(^\text{13}\) This process, obviously, cannot be performed by a faculty that is passive alone.

We can also discover the nature of the intellect as an operative faculty from the natural appetite of the intellect and

\(^\text{13}\) De Ver., 15, loc.
from its dynamic character. Its dynamic character is evidenced in the pursuit of knowing; the search for solutions and insights; the striving to make things actually intelligible, which is the characteristic of the agent intellect.

2) Next, let us discuss Descartes' assertion that truth is in the will. Although his position on truth is not the primary concern of this thesis, still, an understanding of his mistake in this point will make it clearer why he failed to explain error satisfactorily.

The question of supreme importance concerning truth is: In which faculty is it found? Descartes protests that it is in the will because the understanding is passive. Both the contention and the reason for it must be denied. Truth is found in that operation of the mind in which that which is known about a thing is referred to the thing formally. And, obviously, this operation can take place only in the judgment of the intellect. When the intellect judges that a thing known conforms to the form which it apprehends about that thing, then it first knows and expresses truth. This it does by composing or dividing. That is, it either applies to or removes from the thing signified by the subject of a proposition, some form signified by the predicate. 15

3) This thesis has been an explanation of Descartes' doc-

15 S.T., I, 16, 2c.
trine of the will in error. We have seen that error occurs when
the will affirms or denies what is not clearly and distinctly
perceived. But according to St. Thomas error is found in the
judgment of the intellect under the influence of the will.
Since we pointed out in a previous point of criticism (2) that
the judgment is not in the will as Descartes held, and since we
will point out in a subsequent point of criticism (4) that ob-
jective evidence is the criterion for truth, it will be rather
easy to show the relationship between the will and intellect in
error. We might point out again that Descartes failed to demon-
strate this relationship in his system.

Descartes, of course, agrees that error is found in judg-
ment, because here alone we have affirmation or negation, which
operations can only be placed by the will since that faculty of
the mind is alone active. If he had not posited the fact that
the understanding is passive, perhaps he would not have fallen
into this position of making judgment an act of the wrong facul-
ty.

But we know that in an erroneous judgment the intellect at-
dributes a form to something which that thing does not have, or
denies to something a form which it does have. But what part
does the will play? In a true judgment the intellect is moved
by objective evidence. But in an erroneous judgment there is
not sufficient evidence because what is false cannot move the
intellect objectively, since it is not objective. Therefore, we
need something else to move the intellect, and this something else can only be the will. The intellect cannot determine itself, since it is not a free potency. Therefore, it is moved by the will, which is in man the principal moving power.

According to Maritain "human error is explained for Descartes in the same way as theologians explain angelic error; I mean, more precisely, that the Cartesian theory of error, so little consistent with his position, would only become coherent and logical if one brought to it, with suitable emendation, the case of the errors of fallen spirits. Percipitancy of judgment!" When an angel erra, he apprehends an object clearly. When he impetuously extends his affirmation beyond what he understands and gives a precipitate assent, it is because of his will. Man affirms or denies, according to Descartes, beyond what he clearly and distinctly perceives, from a weakness in his free will, from an impetuosity for which his will is solely responsible.

4) As was mentioned in the introduction and referred to many times in the body of this thesis, Descartes' criterion of truth is a clear and distinct idea. If we have a clear and distinct idea of something, that idea is necessarily true. It is this subjective clarity which is for Descartes that which moves the will to assent.

It is good to note, however, that in making clearness of

---

16 Maritain, p. 60.
of course, could find nothing like objective evidence, because what his understanding knew was the idea and not the thing.

5) It is rather obvious that Descartes, in his solution to the question of error, has confused consent with assent. It is in this confusion, perhaps, that the best refutation of volitional judgment is to be found. For assent and consent are essentially different. "The former," as Father Maher points out, "is intellectual acquiescence in something as true; the latter is voluntary complacency in something as good."¹⁷ This is only to say that the formal object of the understanding is the true, while the formal object of the will is the good. Now since in judgments the truth is being sought, it is evident that the will can have no formal part in their formation.

6) Let us point out also that the will cannot be moved by any external efficient cause. In order to be free, the will must move itself. But Descartes would have the will being most free when it is most determined, which seems to be a contradiction. The intellect cannot be the efficient cause of the will, because it is the formal cause. If the thing known by the intellect were an unmixed good, e.g., the Beatific Vision, then the will would be necessitated. But in this case the will would certainly not be free. Nor is the will free concerning the good in general, since this is its formal object, and no faculty can

be indifferent to its formal object. In other words, there are
times when the will is free and indifferent, and times when it
is determined. But to say, as Descartes does, that it could be
both at the same time would clearly be a contradiction.

7) Descartes, as we saw, repeatedly denied that God had
anything to do with error. For this reason he denied even the
concurrence of God in an erroneous act. Merely saying that er-
ror is a privation, however, does not leave God out of the pic-
ture. For, what is a privation is something, and is a privation
in so far as it is not all that it should be. Therefore, God
must concur in such an act, because this act is a being, a con-
tingent being, and all beings depend upon God as their efficient
cause. This does not mean, however, that God is the author of
error. Quite the contrary. The act comes from God in so far as
it is a being, and in this respect it is good. The act comes
from man in so far as it is this being, and in this respect it
is erroneous or evil.

To sum up Descartes' doctrine in a sentence, we find that
error is a privation proceeding from the judgment, which is an
act of the will affirming or denying what is presented to it by
the understanding. But for the reasons stated above, this posi-
tion is untenable. We would rather offer this solution: Error
is a positive distortion proceeding from the judgment of the in-
tellect, moved by the will in lieu of objective evidence.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. PRIMARY SOURCES

Descartes, René, Oeuvres de Descartes. Edited by Adam & Tannery, 13 vols., Paris, 1897.


II. SECONDARY SOURCES

A. BOOKS


Gilson, Etienne, Index Scholastico-Cartésien. Paris, 1913.


Keeling, S.V., *Descartes.* London, 1934


The thesis submitted by William A. Schock, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of Philosophy.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

May 30, 1956
Date

Walter S. Farwell, S.J.
Signature of Adviser