

Descartes on What “Truly Belongs” to Us

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Abstract

In recent literature commentators have challenged the standard interpretation that the Cartesian Self is a *res cogitans*. Various modifications have been proposed: the will should be regarded as an essential feature of thought as well (not just the intellect), and even the body – in some sense – belongs to the Cartesian Self. While these modifications are important, commentators have neglected Descartes’ wholly different conception of the Self in the *Passions of the Soul*. In his definition of generosity, Descartes claims that the Cartesian Self is a *res volans*: the *only thing that truly belongs* to the generous person is her *free will*. I aim to unpack what Descartes means in the “truly belongs” locution (TBL), ultimately arguing for what I call the *weak essentialist reading*. Descartes’ grounds for claiming that free will truly belongs to the Cartesian Self is that free will constitutes the *activity* – not *passivity* – of the mind. And that is the most important property in the essence of a mental substance.

Keywords: *res volans, res cogitans, Cartesian Self, essentialist reading.*

1. *Res Cogitans* or *Res Volans*?

On the canonical understanding, the Cartesian Self is a *res cogitans* (see, e.g., *Preface to the reader*, AT VII: 7-8/CSM II: 7; *Third Meditation*, AT VII 50/CSM II 35; *Sixth Meditation*, AT VII 86/CSM II 59)². In recent

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² I employ the following abbreviations for primary texts: ‘AG’: *Philosophical Essays* (cited by page), Ariew and Garber (1989); ‘AT’: *Oeuvres de Descartes* (cited by volume and page), Adam and Tannery (1996); ‘CSM’: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (cited by

years, however, commentators have started to challenge the standard view, arguing that Descartes recognizes different conceptions of the Self. Much of this important work revolves around the nature of the *res cogitans*, and whether the body is constitutive of the Cartesian Self as well. For example, some commentators have argued that the *res cogitans* should not be considered solely as an intellectual substance, for the will is also constitutive of the Cartesian Self (Mihali 2011). But much of the recent discussion aims at unpacking the sense in which the body belongs to the Cartesian Self as well, which is purportedly learned in the Sixth Meditation (Brown 2006, 2014; Chamberlain 2019, 2020; cf. Simmons 2017).

However, in the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes offers a wholly alternative account of the Cartesian Self that has, for the most part, been neglected by commentators. This account is *prima facie* inconsistent with these alternative interpretations, and seems to turn that entire discussion on its head. In his account of the first component of the *passion* and *virtue* of *generosity* (*générosité*), Descartes claims that the only thing that *truly belongs* to us is *our freedom to dispose of our volitions*, that is, free will (*Passions* III.153, AT XI: 445-6/CSM I: 384). Insofar as Descartes is making a claim about what truly belongs to *us*, he should be read as making a claim about the nature of the Cartesian Self. This constitutes his last published claim about the Self, and thus deserves our attention. Following some commentators who have picked up on this claim – but not necessarily all of the revisionary implications – we might say that Descartes’ final view is that the true Cartesian Self is a *res volans*, not a *res cogitans* (Boehm 2014; Brown 2006; Mihali 2011; Parvizian 2016).

The key to understanding the first component, I contend, is the *truly belongs locution* (TBL). But in the *Passions*, Descartes is unclear about his intended meaning of TBL; indeed, he uses TBL only once in that treatise. In other texts, however, Descartes frequently uses similar locutions – *really does belong*, *nothing else belongs*, etc. – to make a metaphysical claim about what constitutes the essence of a substance³.

volume and page), Cottingham *et al.* (1985); ‘CSMK’: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* [correspondence] (cited by page), Cottingham *et al.* (1991).

³ See, e.g., *Preface to the reader*, AT VII: 7-8/CSM II: 7; *Synopsis to the Meditations*, AT VII: 12-3/CSM II: 9; *Second Meditation*, AT VII: 28-9/CSM II: 19, AT VII: 31/CSM II: 20; *Fifth*

But simply reading the *Passions* in light of those unique TBL-type expressions generates an interpretive problem. If free will is the only thing that *truly* belongs to us, then it *seems* that all the other features that are standardly attributed to the essence of the Cartesian Self, and all the features that commentators have tried to now build into the Cartesian Self, do not truly belong to it.

I aim to reconstruct Descartes' intended understanding of TBL and thus an interpretation of the first component of generosity. To be clear, this is a speculative and reconstructive task. Nowhere does Descartes explicitly flag how we ought to understand TBL in the *Passions of the Soul*, although many texts are helpful. But as indicated earlier, Descartes does use similar locutions elsewhere, which may serve as a starting point. My strategy is to identify the problems and virtues of two extant readings of TBL (Boehm 2014; Parvizian 2016), to help us identify a path forward to the right interpretation. My standard for establishing Descartes' considered view is the right combination of textual evidence against systematic considerations.

The task of achieving a plausible and consistent interpretation should not, however, leave us with a reading of TBL that loses its moral significance and depth. I will not claim, for example, that the addition of "truly" was merely rhetorical flourish, not indicating anything of philosophical and moral significance. That *would* be a solution to the purported inconsistency, in some sense, but not Descartes' considered view. Rather, my aim is to find a reading of TBL that is (1) consistent with Descartes' claims elsewhere about the nature of the Self, (2) fits with his fundamental epistemological and metaphysical commitments, and (3) has explanatory power in his ethics.

To anticipate – salvaging pieces from Boehm (2014) and Parvizian's (2016) readings of TBL – I will propose a *weak essentialist reading* of TBL. The weak essentialist reading depends on an implicit Cartesian distinction

Meditation, AT VII: 65/CSM II: 45; *First Replies*, AT VII: 115/CSM II: 83, AT VII: 121/CSM II: 86; *Second Replies*, AT VII: 149-60/CSM II: 107, AT VII: 161/CSM II: 114, *Third Replies*, AT VII: 175-6/CSM II: 124, *Fourth Replies*, AT VII: 219/CSM II: 155, AT VII: 223-4/CSM II: 157-8, AT VII: 225/CSM II: 158, AT VII: 226/CSM II: 159, AT VII: 228/CSM II: 160; *Fifth Replies*, AT VII: 355/CSM II: 245, AT VII: 257/CSM II: 247; *The Search for Truth*, AT X: 520-1 CSM II: 414.

between an *essential property* and a *truly essential property*. Descartes is claiming, on my view, that free will truly belongs to us because it is the source of our *activity*. But this does not preclude that other properties that are *passive* in nature – e.g. the intellect or even the body – belong to us as well in some sense.

II. Desiderata on The First Component of Generosity

Descartes claims that generosity,

“Which causes a person’s self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be, has only two components. The first consists in his knowing [*connaît*] that nothing truly belongs to him [*qu’il n’y a rien qui véritablement lui appartienne*] but this freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using this freedom well or badly. The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well – that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best. To do that is to pursue virtue in a perfect manner.” (*Passions* III.153, AT XI: 445-6/CSM I: 384)

My focus for now is the first component, not the second component concerning the pursuit of virtue. The first component actually involves a conjunction:

[FIRST COMPONENT]: For any generous subject, *S*, *S* knows that:

- (1) The only property truly belonging to *S* is free will.
- (2) The only property for which *S* can be legitimately praised or blamed for is *S*’s use of free will. (cf. Shapiro 1999)

A few observations are in order. First, notice that the first component is *epistemic*. It consists of two distinct items of knowledge: (1) and (2). Insofar as the first component amounts to *Cartesian knowledge*, we must ask what *kind* of knowledge is involved here. The *Passions* is written in French, and Descartes uses ‘*connaît*’ here. As is well-known, however, Descartes has less conceptual and linguistic machinery in French to express the subtleties of his epistemology. Descartes’ technical epistemological terms are offered in Latin, where he distinguishes

(broadly speaking) between *scientia/perfect scire* (perfect knowledge), *cognitio* (awareness), and *persuasio* (opinion or conviction)⁴. We must decide (or at least assume) what kind of knowledge Descartes has in mind here. This is crucial, for in Descartes' classic philosophical system, metaphysical claims can be read off the right kind of epistemic claims (in particular, *scientia* claims). Second, *S*'s knowledge of (1) is clearly primary and explanatory of her knowledge of (2). *S* cannot know (2) before she knows (1)⁵. This priority relation demands explanation as well. Third, we want to know how the generous subject, *S*, attains knowledge of (1) and (2). Fourth, we need a specific understanding of TBL that is consistent with Descartes' fundamental epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical commitments.

I propose, then, the following (minimal) desiderata on a satisfactory theory of the FIRST COMPONENT. While I think there is some proper order of discovery here, I will leave that open for now. Thus, in no specific order, we need an account of:

1. *Epistemic Status*: the kind of knowledge possessed by the generous subject, *S*.
2. *Epistemic Relation*: the relation between *S*'s knowledge of (1) and (2).
3. *Acquisition*: how *S* acquires knowledge of (1) and (2).
4. *TBL Unpacked*: a specific and systematic understanding of TBL.

In general, the few commentators who have tackled the FIRST COMPONENT head straight to an account of *TBL Unpacked*, based on some (usually quick) analysis of *Epistemic Status*, *Epistemic Relation*, or *Acquisition*.⁶ Dialectically, I would like to examine some of those interpretations first, so as to demonstrate textual and systematic

⁴ For an analysis of the different epistemic terms in Descartes' epistemology, see Clark (2019).

⁵ Some readers may not agree that there is such an epistemic priority relation between (1) and (2) because there is no distinction between (1) and (2). However, the texts here are limited, and I see no texts that would suggest such a collapse. Moreover, the content of (1) and (2) on just a baseline reading are different: (1) is an epistemic claim about the properties of a subject, and (2) is an epistemic claim about moral responsibility.

⁶ Boehm (2014), Shapiro (2005), and Parvizian (2016) all have thoughts on *Acquisition*, although Boehm is the only commentator who addresses *Epistemic Status*.

problems with those interpretations, which will then shed light on a way forward. Then, I will begin working through the desiderata on my own, building out my alternative interpretation. The proper order of discovery will be revealed after working through the existent interpretations.

III. The Essentialist and Evaluative Readings for TBL *Unpacked*

Generosity has been discussed in a variety of contexts, and commentators are, of course, aware of TBL. However, there are only two commentators who have tried to examine TBL in any detail, namely, Omri Boehm (2014) and Saja Parvizian (2016). Boehm offers an *essentialist reading*, while Parvizian – in response to Boehm – offers an *evaluative reading*. Both interpretations have virtues. But I will argue, on textual and systematic grounds, that both interpretations are problematic and should be ultimately abandoned⁷.

III.i Boehm's Essentialist Reading

According to Boehm, TBL should be read metaphysically, along the same lines of Descartes' other uses of TBL in his metaphysics. As Boehm writes, "If property φ is the only property truly belonging to S , it is also the only property belonging to its nature or essence" (2014, 718). Accordingly, he offers the following interpretation of TBL *Unpacked*:

"If I come to experience *générosité* – know that nothing truly belongs to me but my freedom – I come to know what essentially I am. Using strong terms such as 'know' (*connaître*) and 'truly' (*véritablement*), the definition of *générosité* defines not merely what *générosité* is but what we are." (2014, 718-19; cf. Cassirer 1995, 93)

This is the *essentialist reading*:

[ESSENTIALIST READING]: property φ is the only property truly belonging to subject S IFF φ alone constitutes the essence of S . (*Ibid.*)

⁷ I will follow Parvizian's (2016) reconstruction of the *essentialist* and *evaluative* readings, and also present his objection to the essentialist reading, as I agree with him here. However, I will present an independent argument against Parvizian's *evaluative reading*.

A few clarifications are in order. The ESSENTIALIST READING is inferred from an epistemological interpretation of the FIRST COMPONENT, that is, an account of *Epistemic Status*. On Boehm's reading of the French, Descartes is claiming that the generous subject, *S*, has *scientia* of (1) and (2) in the FIRST COMPONENT. And *scientia* that *p*, of course, allows one to make a metaphysical claim that *p* is the case (i.e. the referent of *p* exists). In other words, Descartes is implying that free will (or freedom) is the only property that metaphysically belongs to *S*. Given the essentialist reading of TBL, this means that free will alone constitutes the essence of *S*⁸.

The ESSENTIALIST READING has virtues. For example, it gives us an explicit account of TBL *Unpacked* and *Epistemic Status* (I will not address whether that is right or not, I am just noting that certain desiderata are being addressed). However, following Parvizian (2016, 232-3), I agree that the essentialist reading is untenable. Knowledge of an essence is determined by a clear and distinct perception. If the generous subject, *S*, has *scientia* that the only property truly belonging to *S* is free will (1), then *S* must have a clear and distinct perception that the essence of *S* is free will. But possession of a clear and distinct perception of (1) requires that *S* is capable of *distinctly* perceiving (1), that is, *excluding* other properties – via the *method of exclusion* – from the nature of the Self (*Principles* I.60, AT VIIIA: 28-9 CSM I: 213; *Fourth Replies*, AT VII: 223/CSM II: 157)⁹.

But Descartes is explicit, in many places, about the metaphysical essence of the Self. For example: “*my essence* consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing [*res cogitans*]” (Sixth Meditation, AT VII: 78/CSM II: 54; emphasis added). A *Res cogitans* possesses various faculties: intellect, will, the senses, memory, and imagination. Now

⁸ It is important to note that Boehm is not making a claim about judgments or volitions that are issued by free will. Rather, the claim is that the faculty of free will (from which these mental states proceed) constitutes the essence of the mind. As a referee has rightly pointed out, if Boehm claimed that judgments were essential to the mind, then that would include an aspect of the intellect, for judgments are a combination of both volitions and perceptions. Indeed, that is an alternative reading, and one that I will not consider, for it will be *a fortiori* ruled out by my preferred weak essentialist reading (see section VI, and footnote 11).

⁹ On the method of exclusion and theory of distinction see Wells (1966); Murdoch (1993); Nolan (1997); Hoffman (2002).

Descartes does claim that some of these faculties – e.g. the senses and imagination – are not essential to the mind because they have physiological origins: “I can clearly and distinctly understand myself as a whole without these faculties” (*Ibid.*). However, the intellect and the will are essential attributes of the mind (Sixth Meditation, AT VII: 72-3/CSM II: 50-1; *Principles* I.32, AT VIII: 17/CSM I: 204). In short, the method of exclusion must fail for the ESSENTIALIST READING: one cannot clearly and distinctly perceive the intellect without the will and vice versa. The intellect and the will are, as Descartes would put it, *conceptually* – but not *modally* – *distinct* (*Principles* I.61-2, AT VIII: 29-30/CSM I: 213-5). But here, following Hoffman (2002) – pace Nelson (1997) and Nolan (1997) – I would claim that a conceptual distinction entails *inseparability*, not *identity*. As such, the intellect and will are metaphysically inseparable, but not identical. In short, Boehm’s reading does entail an *ultima facie* tension between the *Passions* and the *Mediations*¹⁰.

III.ii Parvizian’s Evaluative Reading

Parvizian’s (2016) alternative reading reduces TBL to knowledge of a normative claim grounded in the true source of legitimate praise and blame. According to Parvizian, the key to TBL *Unpacked* is *Passions* III.152, which immediately precedes the account of generosity:

“I see only one thing in us which could give us good reason for esteeming ourselves, namely, the exercise of our free will and the control we have over our volitions. For we can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend upon this free will.” (AT XI: 445/CSM I: 384)

On Parvizian’s reading (2016, 234-5), the reason why Descartes says that the only thing that truly belongs to us is free will, is because we ought to only be praised or blamed for how we use our free will. Put differently, the generous subject, *S*, knows that free will is the only thing that truly belongs to her, because free will is the only legitimate source

¹⁰ Boehm is aware of the tension, but claims he cannot full address why Descartes’ views may have changed over time. For his preliminary response see (2014, 719). For Parvizian’s response to Boehm’s – albeit first pass – explanation see (2016, 233-4)

of self-esteem. Only our volitions are under our control and power, while all of our other properties are ultimately circumstantial and outside the purview of the will (cf. Letter to Princess Elizabeth 4 August 1645, AT IV: 264–5/CSMK: 257). The other aspects of my Self do not truly belong to me, because the Cartesian Self cannot legitimately be held accountable for them.

This is the *evaluative reading*:

[EVALUATIVE READING]: property φ is the only property truly belonging to subject S IFF φ alone is worthy of esteem by S . (Parvizian 2016, 235)

The EVALUATIVE READING is supposed to be preferable to the ESSENTIALIST READING because it does not generate a tension between the *Meditations* and the *Passions*. While the EVALUATIVE READING admits that free will is essential to the mind, it does not deny that other faculties can belong to it as well (but perhaps in a different sense, especially when it comes to the body). As Parvizian puts it: “Metaphysically speaking, we are *res cogitantes*. Morally speaking, we are *res volantes*” (2016, 235; cf. Brown 2006, 25).

While the EVALUATIVE READING clearly has virtues as well, it is also untenable. Parvizian violates the priority relation between conjuncts (1) and (2) in the FIRST COMPONENT. Recall the desideratum of *Epistemic Relation*: we wanted an account of how (1), i.e. S 's knowledge that the only property truly belonging to her is free will, is prior to her knowledge of (2), i.e. S 's knowledge that the only property for which S can be legitimately praised or blamed for is S 's use of free will. But on Parvizian's reading the knowledge in (2) actually explains how we should read the knowledge in (1) – indeed it seems that (1) actually reduces to (2) on Parvizian's reading. We ultimately did not achieve the right analysis for TBL *Unpacked*.

In the remainder of the paper, I turn to my alternative reading for TBL *Unpacked*, the *weak essentialist reading*. On the weak essentialist reading, the intellect and even the body can belong to the Cartesian self. However, there remains a sense in which free will truly belongs – in a deeper sense – to the Cartesian self. This is because free will constitutes the *activity* of the Self (whereas the intellect and body constitute its

passivity). In trying to identify the true nature of the Self, it is our active – not passive – nature that matters.

In arriving at this reading, I propose the following order of discovery: *Acquisition*, *Epistemic Status*, *Epistemic Relation*, and finally TBL *Unpacked*. My rationale for this order is as follows: by examining Descartes' method for generosity, we will get a sense of the epistemic requirements for inducing generosity in the soul. By understanding these epistemic requirements, we will be in a position to unpack the *Epistemic Status* of the FIRST COMPONENT. Once we are settled on *Epistemic Status* then we will be able to unveil the right reading of TBL *Unpacked*, that is, an account of (1) in the FIRST COMPONENT. And once that is established, we can quickly see the *Epistemic Relation* between (1) and (2). It is important to stay faithful to this order of discovery, and to not beg the question. That is, build in the desired reading of TBL from the get-go, e.g. at the stage of analyzing *Acquisition*.

IV. *Acquisition*

There are currently three interpretations of how generosity is acquired (Shapiro 2005, 2008; Boehm 2015; Parvizian 2016). I will assume – following Parvizian – that Shapiro and Boehm's accounts are problematic. According to Shapiro, generosity is acquired in the Fourth Meditation, while Boehm claims that generosity is acquired in the Second Meditation. Parvizian offers a close analysis of Descartes' account of *Acquisition*, which shows that the unique epistemic requirements for *Acquisition* preclude the meditator from acquiring generosity in either the Second or Fourth Meditation. The meditator simply does not have enough on the table – *epistemically speaking* – to know that free will is the only thing that truly belongs to her, regardless of how one decides to read *Epistemic Status*, *Epistemic Relation*, and TBL *Unpacked*. Nonetheless, while I will follow Parvizian's reconstruction of the method for acquiring generosity, I will modify it as well so that it helps us understand *Epistemic Status*, which Parvizian does not address. Finally, while I will explain Descartes' account of *Acquisition*, I will not give an account as to why *Acquisition* give rise to the FIRST COMPONENT, for

there is a worry of begging the question. Methodologically, it is best to address *Epistemic Status*, and then TBL *Unpacked*.

In *Passions* III.161, Descartes offers an account of *Acquisition*:

“If we occupy ourselves frequently in considering the nature of free will and the many advantages which proceed from a firm resolution to make good use of it – while also considering, on the other hand, the many vain and useless cares which trouble ambitious people – we may arouse the passion of generosity in ourselves and then acquire the virtue.” (AT XI: 453-4/CSM I: 388)

According to Parvzian, *Acquisition* consists of two distinct “meditations on the will” (2016, 224-5) First, there is the *metaphysical meditation on the will*, which involves frequent meditation on the nature of free will. Second, there is the *consequential meditation on the will*, that is, frequent meditation on the advantages and disadvantages that come from a virtuous and vicious use of the will, respectively.

As Parvzian argues, the metaphysical meditation on the will does, in some sense, occur in the Fourth Meditation (*Ibid.*) However, the consequential meditation on the will presupposes both a certain degree of epistemic progress, as well as a combined theoretical and empirical capacity to evaluate the actions of others that the meditator is simply not in a position to accomplish.

Given that the consequential meditation on the will asks us to meditate on the virtuous and vicious behavior of other moral agents, we must know how to identify virtue and vice. And that requires knowing the distinction between vice and virtue, which also requires understanding of a whole host of truths about the existence of God and divine providence, the real distinction between mind and body, the immensity of the universe, and the interconnectedness of the parts of the universe – which Descartes describes as *knowledge of the truth* in a letter to Princess Elizabeth (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 15 September 1645, AT IV: 291-5/CSMK: 265-7). Knowing these truths is necessary for theoretically distinguishing between virtue and vice. But the consequential meditation on the will requires us to use our knowledge of the truth to evaluate the actions of others, which involves a whole host of sensory, visual, and imaginative perceptions that are, arguably, not of the clear and distinct variety. In short, while there are *a priori*

truths involved in the consequential meditation on the will, this meditation is also an a *posteriori* activity.

V. Epistemic Status

The metaphysical meditation on the will is grounded in *scientia* of the existence and nature of free will. But there may be a worry that the consequential meditation on the will precludes *Acquisition* from generating *scientia* in the FIRST COMPONENT. This is because the distinct truths that comprise what Descartes calls "knowledge of the truth" cannot all amount to *scientia*. The existence of God and the real distinction between mind and body do amount to *scientia*. However, the knowledge of physics that Descartes mentions in the September 1645 Letter to Elizabeth (i.e. *Principles* III), and the interconnectedness of the universe falls under the scope of natural (and possibly moral and political) philosophy. But as Descartes claims at the end of *Principles* IV, scientific knowledge is, at best, *morally certain* (*Principles* IV.205–6, AT VIII A: 327–9/CSM I: 289–291).

As such, the so-called "theoretical" knowledge required for the consequential meditation on the will does not, on a whole, amount to a body of *scientia*. Moreover, the consequential meditation on the will requires applying this theoretical knowledge to assess a body of sensory, visual, and imaginative perceptions concerning the actions of other moral agents. Given that non-clear and distinct perceptions are figuring into the grounds for our first-order moral judgments about other agents' moral activities, it seems that the consequential meditation on the will cannot lead us to *scientia*, even though these first-order moral judgments are in part guided by items of *scientia*. Let alone the fact that Descartes clearly claims elsewhere that all first-order moral judgments can only achieve moral certainty, not absolute certainty (*Principles* IV.205, AT VIII A: 327/CSM I: 289, fn. 2; see also Letter to Princess Elizabeth 6 October 1645, AT IV 308/CSMK: 269).

However, it would be rash to say that meditating on some combination of true and absolutely certain judgments (*scientia*) and morally certain first-order moral judgments could not induce a distinct item of *scientia*, i.e. *scientia* that the only thing that truly belongs to the

generous subject, *S*, is her free will. Indeed, if we think of Cartesian meditation as consisting in a set of well-ordered *cognitive exercises* (Hatfield 1986), as opposed to *demonstrative proofs* require fully justified premises, then one can read the *Meditations* as a set of cognitive exercises that require the meditator to engage a variety of content-types (both clear and distinct, and obscure and confused). Such cognitive exercises can ultimately terminate in further clear and distinct perceptions and thus the acquisition of *scientia*.

In short, there is nothing about *Acquisition* – and Descartes' broader epistemological commitments – that would prevent *Acquisition* from generating an item of *scientia*. As such, I will follow Boehm here, and claim that the language used in describing the First Component – albeit vague in the French – is best interpreted in terms of *scientia*. But I should be clear that this is also a dialectical choice. The project at hand is most interesting when we read the FIRST COMPONENT as making a rigorous *scientia* claim. For if the FIRST COMPONENT merely amounts to (say) *cognitio*, then there really is *no tension* between the *Passions* and the *Meditations*. One could say that the meditator has *scientia* that she is a *res cogitans*, while the generous subject has *cognitio* that she is a *res volans*. While that is in some sense interesting, there is no inconsistency that needs to be explained away. Perhaps my preferred analysis of *Epistemic Status* is ultimately an assumption. If so, defending that assumption on independent grounds is a project for another day. For now, let us stay focused on the self-imposed challenge at hand, and play the game.

VI. TBL *Unpacked*

So, here is where we stand. The FIRST COMPONENT amounts to *scientia*. The generous subject, *S*, has *scientia* that the only thing that truly belongs to her is free will. But now recall my earlier methodological claim about the relationship between epistemic and metaphysical claims in Descartes' system. If a subject, *S*, has *scientia* that *p*, then *S* is entitled to make some kind of claim about the existence of the referent of *p*. In contemporary terminology, we might say that for Descartes, *scientia* is a *success term*. Suppose the meditator has *scientia* that *bodies exist*. This entails, metaphysically, that *bodies exist*. Similarly, if the FIRST

COMPONENT amounts to *scientia*, then it follows *metaphysically* that the only thing that truly belongs to the Cartesian Self is free will.

But now notice that the inconsistency Boehm faced between the *Passions* and the *Meditations* becomes lives again. Solving that inconsistency is where the prize lies. The *Passions* claims that the essence of the Cartesian Self is a *res volans*, whereas the *Meditations* claims that the essence of the Cartesian Self is a *res cogitans*. A *res volans*, it seems, excludes the intellect from its essence, whereas a *res cogitans* does not.

We can thread the needle. What we need is a distinction between what is *essential* (or metaphysically belongs) to the Self, and what is *truly essential* (or what truly metaphysically belongs). Indeed, I think this is the exact kind of distinction that Descartes is tacitly gesturing at in his account of generosity. Let us spell out the distinction on his behalf:

[ESSENTIAL PROPERTY]: property φ belongs to the essence of a substance, C , IFF φ cannot be conceptually excluded from a clear and distinct understanding of C .

[TRULY ESSENTIAL PROPERTY]: property φ truly belongs to the essence of a substance, C , IFF φ satisfies ESSENTIAL PROPERTY and has metaphysical priority within the essence of C .

ESSENTIAL PROPERTY is standard fare, and does not require defense. TRULY ESSENTIAL PROPERTY, however, requires defense.

In order to attribute TRULY ESSENTIAL PROPERTY to Descartes, we need evidence that he would acknowledge that there can be an ESSENTIAL PROPERTY that has *metaphysical priority* in the essence of a substance (more on the notion of 'metaphysical priority' below). I claim that he does. The avenue to seeing this is Descartes' distinction between *activity* and *passivity*, and implicitly the distinction he would make between *essential active properties* and *essential passive properties*¹¹.

¹¹ For texts on activity and passivity see, e.g., *Appendix to Fifth Objections and Replies*, AT VII: 206/CSM II: 271-2; *Passions* I.12, AT XI: 337/CSM I: 332-3; *Passions* I.13, AT XI:

According to Descartes, some properties instantiated in a substance (whatever those properties may be) are passive in nature. By 'passive' Descartes means that the property obtains in a substance due to that substance being affected by some other cause. For example, when body *A*'s motion causes motion in body *B*, we would say that body *A* is the *agent* and its motion an *action*, while body *B* is the *patient* and its change in motion a *passion*¹². We can make a structurally analogous distinction for mental states, particularly, sensations and passions or emotions (both of which are *passions* in a general sense). For example, when a distal body *A** causes damage to bodily part *B** of the mind-body composite, this ultimately terminates in the mind-body composite undergoing a *pain sensation, P*. Body *A** (say, a sword) is the *agent*, and its motion that causes the damage an *action*, while bodily part *B** (say, the abdomen) is a *patient* and the damage incurred (say, tissue damage) is a *passion*, which leads the nervous system to form a brain impression that gives rise to the pain, *P*.

In short, *passivity* consists in the capacity to undergo *passive perceptions* (note the distinction between passivity in general and token passive mental states). The mind's passivity is an ESSENTIAL PROPERTY of the mind, indeed it is required due to the very finitude of the mind. Of course, we can conceive of a disembodied mind that does not experience passions and sensations that have physiological origins. But even a disembodied mind that only has clear and distinct perceptions is still passive, for the mind is still be affected in clear and distinct perception. Indeed, the intellect is the ultimate source of the mind's passivity (*Principles* I.32, AT VIII A: 17/CSM I: 204), whether that mind is embodied or disembodied.

Conversely, some mental states are *actions*. These are *judgments or volitions*. Consider judgments. These are formed when the (free) will either affirms or denies some perception supplied by the intellect. The will is the *agent*, the judgment the *action*, and (although the details are

338/CSM I: 333; *Passions* I.41, AT XI: 359-60/CSM I: 343; *Rules*.XII, AT X: 412/CSM I: 40. See also fn. 9 below.

¹² I am not concerned with explaining the source of activity in *res extensa*, although that is a topic of extended discussion in Descartes' physics. See, e.g., Gabbey (1980), Garber (1992), Hatfield (1979), Hattab (2007).

tricky) in some sense we must say that the perception supplied by the intellect, or the *mind as a whole* is the *patient*. In short, the source of the mind-body composite's activity is the faculty of free will (note the distinction between activity in general and token active mental states). And the faculty of free will is clearly an ESSENTIAL PROPERTY of the mind. One cannot conceive of a mind without a will. As Descartes writes to Regius:

"For strictly speaking, understanding is the passivity of the mind and willing is its activity; but because we cannot will anything without understanding what we will, and we scarcely ever understand something without at the same time willing something, we do not easily distinguish in this matter passivity from activity." (Letter to Regius May 1641, AT III: 372/CSMK: 182)¹³

But the faculty of free will – that is, the source of the mind's activity – is also a TRULY ESSENTIAL PROPERTY, because it has metaphysical priority within the metaphysics of the mind. To be clear, by 'metaphysical priority', I do not mean causal, logical, or temporal priority. That is, I do mean that the activity of the mind is somehow causally responsible for the passivity of the mind, or that particular volitions are logically or temporally prior to perceptions. Rather, I mean that it is truly the activity of the mind that makes the mind a substance. The passivity of the mind is a necessary consequence of our finitude.

¹³ There are texts, of course, where Descartes says that ultimately *token* actions and passions are two sides of the same coin, i.e. they are identical in some sense and that when we think of a mental state or corporeal event as a passion or an action we are making some kind of *abstraction* (see, e.g., Letter to Hyperaspistes August 1641 AT III: 428/CSMK: 193; *Passions* I.1, AT XI: 328/CSM I: 328). But here, I am talking about the *sources* of actions and passions, namely, the will and the intellect. While perceptions may be logically prior to volitions, that is independent and wholly consistent with my claim that the faculty of the will is metaphysically more essential to the mind than the intellect and any other faculties of perception. Moreover, Descartes does not in this text or similar texts (and ought not) make any kind of identification between the powers of activity and passivity (i.e. the will and intellect). To do that would be to create fundamental confusions in his metaphysics and epistemology (e.g. the theory of judgment in the Fourth Meditation). But for a discussion of the identity of token actions and passions see Schickle (2011).

Here, I think that Descartes anticipates Leibniz. What makes a substance *a substance* according to Leibniz is that it has power, force, or activity (see, e.g., *Discourse on Metaphysics*.15, AG: 48; *Monadology*.11-19, AG: 214-5). While a substance also must have passivity – the monad requires both perceptions and appetites – the real explanatory power lies on the side of activity (see, e.g., Mercer 2001, 85). Descartes concurs in his own way. What makes a substance *independent* – the real criterion for a substance in Cartesian metaphysics (*Principles* I.51, AT VIIIA: 24/CSM I: 210) – is activity, which is free will¹⁴. It is through activity or free will that we create independence from other “substances” in the universe, and what prevents us from being “things” that are wholly passive, that is, merely affected by the actions of other substances. Again, that is not to say that passions and the source of passivity – i.e. the intellect – are not essential to the mind. The claim is that the intellect is merely an ESSENTIAL PROPERTY, not a TRULY ESSENTIAL PROPERTY. And this, I contend, is what Descartes meant to express in the FIRST COMPONENT of generosity (and what the other commentators are ultimately trying to get at as well).

Indeed, we clearly can have *scientia* of the mind’s activity, which – albeit elliptically – shows that my alleged assumption about *Epistemic Status*, namely, that the FIRST COMPONENT consists of *scientia*, is well-founded. Thus, I propose the following reading of TBL *Unpacked*:

[WEAK ESSENTIALIST READING]: property φ is the only property truly belonging to subject S IFF φ is the *only* TRULY ESSENTIAL PROPERTY of S .

The WEAK ESSENTIALIST READING should be read as an advancement of Boehm’s ESSENTIALIST READING. Boehm was right that Descartes was indicating the true essence of the mind in the FIRST COMPONENT. His lapse – albeit – understandable given Descartes’

¹⁴ While the notion of metaphysical priority developed here is related the criterion of metaphysical independence in Descartes’ theory of substance, I will bracket spelling out the full relationship between metaphysical priority and metaphysical independence here, as that will require a full discussion of the relationship *between substances* within Descartes’ system. For a recent analysis of the independence of Cartesian substances see Schectman (2016, 187-199).

imprecision – was not making a distinction between an ESSENTIAL PROPERTY and a TRULY ESSENTIAL PROPERTY. Once that distinction is drawn, we see that there is no *ultima facie* tension between the claim in the *Meditations* that the Cartesian Self is a *res cogitans*, and the claim in the *Passions* that the Cartesian Self is a *res volans*. The WEAK ESSENTIALIST READING is weak with respect to Boehm's ESSENTIALIST READING, because it does not claim that free will *alone* is essential to the Cartesian Self.

VII. Epistemic Relation

We are now in a position to explain the priority relation between (1) and (2) in the FIRST COMPONENT. Because the generous person, *S*, knows that free will is a TRULY ESSENTIAL PROPERTY, *S* also knows that she can only be legitimately praised or blamed for her use of free will. This is where we can salvage some of Parvizian's EVALUATIVE READING. Parvizian writes:

"If I am to be legitimately praised or blamed for something, whether it be one of my actions or features, then I must be responsible for its existence. I am responsible, in the right way, for an action or feature if my free volitions produced it. If an action or feature does not (or could not) be causally traced back to my will, then I cannot be legitimately praised or blamed for it. For example, I can be praised or blamed for pursuing philosophy, because this action depends on my will; but I cannot be praised or blamed for naturally having brown hair, because this feature does not depend on my will." (2016, 234-5)

We can see that Parvizian is gesturing at the fundamental grounds of legitimate praise and blame, namely, the activity of free will. But once those substitutions are made, we can see that Parvizian is spot on. I cannot be legitimately praised or blamed merely for my passivity (be they essential or non-essential passions). I can only be praised or blamed for my virtuous or vicious use of my activity, i.e. free will. Indeed, once we read Descartes' account of generosity against the activity and passivity distinction, much of the discussion in the *Passions* surrounding generosity begins to make sense. For example:

"I see only one thing in us which could give us good reason for esteeming ourselves, namely, the exercise of our free will and the control we have over our volitions. For we can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend upon this free will. It renders us in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves, provided we do not lose the rights it gives us through timidity." (*Passions* III.152, AT XI: 445/CSM I: 384)

Helping myself to a Leibnizian reading once again, the reason why Descartes claims that free will renders us similar to God, is because free will is ultimately a (*finite*) instantiation of the very same (*infinite*) activity or power in God. And that is what makes us masters of ourselves, and what renders us *human beings* – not passive *biological automatons* – in the first place.

VII. The Weak Essentialist Reading and Descartes' Ethics

I believe I have sufficiently addressed how the WEAK ESSENTIALIST READING fits with the epistemological and metaphysical commitments of Descartes' system. In closing, I would like to address how the WEAK ESSENTIALIST READING helps us understand Descartes' ethics, in particular, the account of generosity and his virtue theory more generally.

For the purposes of this paper, I bracketed discussion of the SECOND COMPONENT of generosity, which claims that the generous person, *S*, must have a firm and constant resolution to carry out whatever she judges (via free will) to be the best (in the "conduct of life). The SECOND COMPONENT of generosity encapsulates the heart of Descartes' theory of virtue, and the WEAK ESSENTIALIST READING helps us understand why Descartes claims that virtue is our *supreme good*, and that we should set virtue as our end (Letter to Princess Elizabeth 6 October 1645, AT IV: 305/CSMK: 268, Letter to Queen Christina 20 November 1647, AT V: 83/CSMK: 325).

If free will is the TRULY ESSENTIAL PROPERTY of the Cartesian Self, then the Cartesian virtuous agent must pursue the cultivation and perfection of that property. As Descartes makes clear, it is not merely possession of free will – as a TRULY ESSENTIAL PROPERTY – that generates maximal justified self-esteem in generosity. Rather, it is a virtuous use of

that will. So, once we realize that our true value lies in our virtuous activity, then we will be motivated to set on the ethical path Descartes envisions in his mature ethical writings: regulating the passions, prioritizing intellectual pursuits over bodily pursuits, abandoning fear of death, inculcating and practicing love toward all parts of the universe even at the expense of one's own interests, and perhaps more importantly, helping secure the conditions for other mind-body composites to acquire their own degrees of virtue, well-being, and happiness. If the WEAK ESSENTIALIST READING is right, there is much more fruitful work to be done in reconceiving Descartes' *perfect moral system (la morale)* in the tree of philosophy (French Preface to the *Principles*, AT IXB: 14/CSM I: 186).

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