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**Toward a virtue of irresolution:****An exploration of Descartes' practical philosophy****Nicholas Koziolk '07**

*This paper explores an apparent tension in Descartes' practical philosophy between an agent's commitment to the search for practical knowledge and the necessity for the agent to act, at least sometimes, on the basis of a judgment he recognizes (or suspects) to be uncertain, and so possibly false. The main argument of the paper is that the psychological mechanisms through which the agent brings himself to act with certainty on the basis of uncertain judgments threaten the very happiness that is the goal of Descartes' practical philosophy. More specifically, the worry is that one cannot maintain a real commitment to the search for practical knowledge, while at the same time recognizing that one's knowledge is inadequate, and still avoid the kind of anxiety and irresolution that Descartes seems to think are the greatest threats to human happiness.*

In Part Three of the *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes sets out a "provisional moral code" (CSM I: 122, AT VI: 22), which he plans to follow while he carries out his theoretical project of calling into question everything he has accepted as true in the past. To any modern ethicist, however, the second maxim of this moral code will sound at least a bit odd. Descartes states the maxim as follows: "My second maxim was to be as firm and decisive in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain" (CSM I: 123, AT VI: 24). He adds, a few lines later:

Even when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some; and having done so we must then regard them not as doubtful, from a practical point of view,

but as most true and certain, on the grounds that the reason which made us adopt them is itself true and certain. (Ibid.)

One worry is that such a view of morality will be apt to engender either disingenuousness or self-deception. I suspect that such worries are rooted in part in the thought that the only way we can follow this maxim is either to *pretend* to be certain when we know we are not, or else (somehow) to *convince* ourselves that we are certain, and so to forget any uncertainty we may have had. Neither of these options sounds particularly appealing as a guide to practical thinking. We can imagine the kind of person who follows this maxim: bullheaded, unwilling to listen to reason, unwilling to consider other ways of acting. As a result, we are disinclined to take Descartes' maxim seriously.

We ought to wonder, then, why exactly Descartes would put forth such a maxim. And our perplexity is only increased when we turn to his later work, *The Passions*

of the *Soul*. There we find that Descartes has made this commitment to practical certainty (as I will call it) an essential component of virtue itself (see, e.g., Articles 153 and 154, CSM I: 384, AT XI: 446). Fortunately, Descartes' more extensive discussion of his ethics in the *Passions* does provide us with some answers as well. In particular, we find evidence that the aim of Descartes' ethics is not so much to teach us which specific actions, or types of actions, we ought to perform under different circumstances, but rather to teach us how to attain happiness. His ethics has an inward, rather than an outward, focus: the focus is on our reasons for, and our reactions to, our actions, rather than on the actions themselves. Descartes thus ends the *Passions* by concluding that "the chief use of wisdom lies in its teaching us to be masters of our passions and to control them with such skill that the evils which they cause are quite bearable, and even become a source of joy" (CSM I: 404, AT XI: 488, a. 212).<sup>1</sup> Given, then, that the result of following the maxims of Descartes' practical philosophy is happiness, or "tranquility" or "peace of mind" (CSM I: 396, AT XI: 471, a. 190); that "in order that our soul should have the means of happiness, it needs only to pursue virtue diligently" (CSM I: 382, AT XI: 442, a. 148); and that virtue is to live "in such a way that [one's] conscience cannot reproach [one] for ever failing to do something [one] judges to be the best" (ibid.);<sup>2</sup> it turns out that the kind

<sup>1</sup> Notice, in particular, that "the chief use of wisdom" is most emphatically *not* to lead us always to do the right thing. Compare the use of wisdom for Descartes to the use of Kant's categorical imperative, for instance.

<sup>2</sup> Note the difference between what Descartes says about virtue and what Kant says about the requirements of an action's having moral worth. Kant requires that the action both be in

of practical confidence advocated in the *Discourse* is a (necessary) condition of *happiness*.

It seems to me, however, that the compatibility of happiness and practical confidence is precisely what is *doubtful* about this picture. There is, as it were, a latent tension in Descartes' practical philosophy between, on the one hand, the desire for practical *knowledge* and, on the other, the unavoidable necessity of *action*. My worry, to be more precise, is that there is something (psychologically) *unhealthy* about the mechanisms through which we might attain the requisite confidence about our actions, when we are aware (or when we suspect) that our knowledge about what we ought to do is in some sense lacking. Any happiness achieved as a result of denying, or otherwise suppressing, doubts about the rightness of my actions would, at best, be precariously maintained.

I want, therefore, to explore Descartes' practical philosophy with an eye to the possibility of resolving this tension. My interest in resolution<sup>3</sup> does not stem simply from a desire to rescue Descartes' practical philosophy from a potentially fatal objection. For it seems to me that the tension in question affects (infects) far more than one philosopher's ethical theory. The tension, if it is a real tension, will be present in all our lives, constantly threatening (whether we are aware of it or not) our assurance, our peace

accordance with the categorical imperative and that it be performed for the sake of duty, i.e. with the right intention. Descartes seems not only to drop the first requirement, but also to weaken the second (see especially a. 170 [CSM I: 391, AT XI: 460], quoted below, where Descartes says that "we always do our duty when we do what we judge to be best").

<sup>3</sup> This word is, here, amusingly ambiguous between, on the one hand, resolution of the *tension* I find in Descartes' philosophy and, on the other, the *virtue* of resolution Descartes himself advocates (what I have called "practical confidence").

of mind—perhaps even our ability to act (to live as human beings) at all. If the tension can be resolved, we will have new reason to hope that real tranquility and peace of mind can be maintained in a world of doubt and uncertainty. If, on the other hand, it turns out to be an inevitable result of a deliberative perspective we cannot (can no longer) escape, then I think it will provide evidence for—because it is a more concrete expression of—the idea that human action is, in some sense, (essentially) a transcending of human limitation, of the limits of human knowledge.<sup>4</sup> One way or another, we must confront the dilemma: by resolving it—or rather, as Descartes would have it, by showing how an individual might work toward its resolution in his own life—if possible; or else, failing that, by learning to live (with) it. I begin, then, by looking to the source of the tension.

Certain parts of the *Passions* suggest that what I have called "practical confidence" is the opposite of what Descartes calls "irresolution", a passion for which he provides certain remedies. These remedies are described in terms strikingly similar to the second maxim of the provisional moral code of the *Discourse*: "the remedy against such excess [of irresolution] is to become accustomed to form certain and determinate judgements regarding everything that comes before us, and to believe that we always do our duty when we do what we judge to be best, even though our judgement may perhaps be a

<sup>4</sup> I find this idea implicit in the thought of many (most?) modern philosophers: most importantly, I think, in Kant and Hegel; but more explicitly in certain existential writers, in particular Sartre (where it is *most* explicit), and perhaps also in Kierkegaard.

very bad one" (CSM I: 391, AT XI: 460, a. 170). It is important to notice, however, that it is only an *excess* of irresolution that Descartes finds problematic. Indeed, it is only when irresolution is excessive that it becomes a passion at all: irresolution "is not a passion, unless it happens that our anxiety of choosing wrongly increases our uncertainty" (CSM I: 390, AT XI: 459-60, a. 170) about what we ought to choose. Irresolution is "extremely bad" "when it lasts longer than it ought, making us spend in deliberation the time required for action"; kept within proper bounds, on the other hand, "it has a beneficial function" (ibid.). But what, precisely, are the proper bounds of irresolution?

There can be little doubt that these proper bounds are connected in some way with the relation between deliberation and action. Descartes says that irresolution is useful, or beneficial, when it "gives [the soul] time to make a choice before committing itself" (ibid.) to an action. On the other hand, what Descartes finds especially troubling is the passion of anxiety that often attaches to proper irresolution, rendering it improper; which anxiety "is so common and so strong in some people that although they have no need to make a choice and they see only one thing to be taken or left, the anxiety often holds them back and makes them pause to search in vain for something else" (ibid.). The effect of this anxiety is that, while I may know perfectly well what I ought to do—indeed, as Descartes describes the situation, I can hardly fail to know, since there is only one option available—yet, because I have "too great a desire to do well" (ibid.), I cannot bring myself to act, for fear that I have overlooked some other option or otherwise failed to assess the situation with perfect accuracy. I am so concerned to do the right thing that I am, as it were, unwilling to commit myself to *any* action; at least until I have discovered some additional evidence

that the course of action presenting itself to me is indeed, beyond question, the *right* one.

It is here that the tension between the desire for (*certain*) practical knowledge and the necessity for action begins to manifest itself. Yet we might suspect that Descartes is exaggerating the danger presented by the joining of irresolution with the passion of anxiety. Is this anxiety in fact “so common and so strong” as Descartes seems to think? And if it is not, if for most of us action is never, or at most very rarely, so problematic, will we not remain unaffected by the tension over which I have made such a fuss? These are important questions. I, for my part, have difficulty believing that the anxiety Descartes describes could ever have been as common as he suggests. (Perhaps his mistake was to generalize too confidently from his own experience.) As a result, I must grant that many people may indeed remain unaffected by the tension I have described. That admission, however, does nothing to impugn my claim either that the tension is important or that it affects Descartes’ practical philosophy. For I shall argue that the degree to which one feels this tension is directly proportional to the importance one places on the correctness of one’s practical knowledge, on the importance for one of the pursuit and attainment of (perfect) virtue. Some agents, then, will not feel the tension because they will have made no commitment to the pursuit of practical knowledge. We may hold out hope, however, that others—if Descartes is right, the Cartesian sage among them—will not feel the tension because they will have found some way to resolve it: they will have found a way to maintain commitment *both* to the pursuit of

practical knowledge *and* to confident, decisive action in the face of uncertainty.

It is difficult, however, to see how Descartes can resolve this tension. For the tension is in fact implicit in what appears to be the primary component of his solution to the problems I have raised. This purported solution is the virtue of generosity. Descartes understands generosity as having two components. One we have already seen: the generous person resolves “never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best” (CSM I: 384, AT XI: 446, a. 153). The other provides the potential key to a solution of the problems I have raised. It “consists in [the generous person’s] knowing that nothing truly belongs to him but [the] 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” (ibid.). The idea is that the dangerous anxiety sometimes caused by irresolution will at least be diminished, and will possibly even be eliminated, if I am convinced that what is important is merely aligning my will with my best judgment about what to do. For if willing in accordance with best judgment is what matters, then, so long as I act on my best judgment, there will be no reason to be anxious about the possibility that, after I have acted, I might discover, in light of some new evidence, that the action I performed was not, in fact, the action I ought to have performed. By internalizing this second component of generosity, the generous person gains the ability “to form certain and determinate judgements regarding everything that comes before [him]” (CSM I: 391, AT XI: 460, a. 170). Thus, “[e]ven when no opinions appear more probable than any others” (CSM I: 123, AT VI: 24), the generous person is able to form solid judgments on which he can act without anxiety. And because he does not become anxious about the absolute correctness of his judgments, the generous person will not develop “too great a desire to

do well” (CSM I: 390, AT XI: 459-60, a. 170), and so will not be susceptible to the kind of inability to act that Descartes finds so troubling.

There are at least two problems that will threaten any theory of ethics developed along the lines suggested by these two components of generosity. The first has to do with the idea that the generous person resolves to “carry out whatever he judges to be best”. The problem, of course, is that this resolution is no help to me if I find myself unable to make a judgment about what is best. But there are (at least) two ways to understand my inability to judge. On the one hand, we might say that when I am unable to reach a determinate judgment about what to do, reason simply delivers no verdict with which I can (fail to) align my will. There can then be no question whether I used my freedom well. On the other hand, we might say that reason *does* issue a verdict, namely that there is no right answer: under the circumstances, while I may keep deliberating so long as I have time, when the time for action arrives I may choose any of the actions open to me (though of course I *must* choose one). On this understanding, I can properly be said to have used my freedom well *whichever* action I choose. So long as I *act*, instead of standing there fretting over what to do, I have used my freedom well. The second understanding has the advantage of providing, in *every* case, an answer to the question whether I used my freedom well. Not only that, it appears to remove the very problem posed by the possibility that reason might not always deliver a decisive verdict. For now the failure of reason to deliver a verdict for or against a particular action is itself to be taken as a verdict that the proper attitude to take toward the action in question is one of

indifference. If I take that verdict seriously, then, I will realize that there is absolutely no need to feel any anxiety over my decision.<sup>5</sup>

The second problem facing an ethics based on the virtue of generosity cuts much deeper. It has to do with the very idea of using one’s freedom well or badly. So far, I have said only that using my freedom well requires that I will, and act, in accord with my reasoned judgment about what is best. Acting in accord with my best judgment may not always be an easy task, as Descartes is perfectly willing to recognize. He thus admits that

the objects of the passions produce movements in the blood which follow so rapidly from the mere impressions formed in the brain and the disposition of the organs, without any help at all from the soul, that *no amount of human wisdom* is capable of counteracting these movements when they are not adequately prepared to do so. (CSM I: 403, AT XI: 486, a. 211, my emphasis)

Importantly, however, Descartes takes himself to have provided a way to overcome this difficulty and to prevent the unwanted effects of unexpected passions. For any passion, on Descartes’ view, can be countered and overcome by an opposing passion, which the soul can arouse in itself “indirectly through the representation of things which are usually joined with the passions we wish to have and opposed to the passions we wish to reject” (CSM I: 345, AT XI: 362-3, a. 45). Thus Descartes holds that “even those who have the weakest souls

<sup>5</sup> This interpretation of the inability to reach a determinate judgment also makes perfect sense of what Descartes says in the *Discourse* in his discussion of the second maxim. See, in particular, the second passage from the *Discourse* quoted on page one of this paper.

could acquire absolute mastery over all their passions if we employed sufficient ingenuity in training and guiding them” (CSM I: 348, AT XI: 369, a. 50).

Nevertheless, even assuming Descartes is right to be so optimistic about our ability to control the passions, a further question remains: what, if any, is the relation between using my freedom well and pursuing practical knowledge? Our discussion has thus far considered only particular judgments, and we have seen that using my freedom well at any particular time requires only that I will and act in accord with my particular judgment about what is best. What we must now consider is the very process that leads, ultimately, to the formation of these particular judgments. The issue at stake is that of the difference between two agents, one who is committed to developing his rational abilities and increasing his knowledge so as to allow him to make the best judgments possible in *every* case (considered generally), and another who is, as it were, pacified by the idea that he needs only to do his best in each particular case (considered in isolation). While the second is concerned only with acting in accord with his best judgment, the first has an additional concern, namely that his (future) judgments be as good as possible; and ideally, of course, that would mean that his judgment be *true*. So we must ask: for Descartes, is it a condition of my using my freedom well that I be committed to pursuing practical knowledge? In other words, is it a condition of my using my freedom well that I do everything I can to guarantee that the judgments I (will) make are true?

This question poses an interesting dilemma for Descartes. Answering in the negative would appear to make him an advocate of the view I described at the

very beginning of this paper, on which Descartes’ ethics would almost inevitably lead at best (worst?) to disingenuousness or bullheadedness, and at worst (best?) to a precarious happiness, or even to mental instability.<sup>1</sup> Answering in the affirmative gives Descartes a much stronger, more plausible view, one that is at least no

<sup>1</sup> The parenthetical insertions are intended to acknowledge the fact that we might see each of these outcomes from two different perspectives, that of the individual and that of the moral community (or some other suitably universal moral perspective). For Descartes’ practical philosophy, it would seem that only the individual perspective would be of any great importance.

obviously objectionable. My worry, however, is that the second component of generosity provides no solution to the problems I have been discussing (i.e., provides no way to resolve the tension between the desire for knowledge and the necessity of action) because using one’s freedom well actually *requires* that one *not* always treat doubtful principles as if they were certain. That is, I suspect that a commitment to the proper use of one’s freedom demands an openness to doubt. And this openness to doubt, Descartes seems to think, threatens our tranquility and peace of mind.

We can better see how the tension between the desire for knowledge and the necessity for action is implicit in Descartes’ discussion of generosity by considering one final component of his view of practical philosophy: his skepticism about the possibility of certain practical knowledge. For it turns out that, on Descartes’ view, we human beings are left in what appears to be a rather unfortunate situation. As he himself admits in a letter to Elisabeth, *our* knowledge is, and must be, limited: “nobody except God knows everything perfectly” (CSMK: 265, AT IV: 291). As a result, irresolution can *never* be entirely inappropriate for us, but only for a being with perfect knowledge: namely God, and only God. In other words, we have not met, and cannot meet, the requirements of judging well, or using our freedom well, in all cases. In the same letter to Elisabeth, Descartes admits that “[i]n order to be always disposed to judge well, only two things seem to me necessary. One is knowledge of the truth; the other is practice in remembering and assenting to this knowledge whenever the occasion demands” (ibid.). If this is so, then because we do not, and cannot, have

(complete) knowledge of the truth, it will be impossible for us *always* to judge well. And while Descartes may be correct in saying that we can only be praised or blamed for how well we use our freedom, simply using our freedom as well as possible is, in some sense, never enough. It may even be that the correct use of our freedom requires that we maintain a constant awareness of the limitations of our knowledge. Only by reminding ourselves of our imperfection can we protect ourselves against the tendency to become *overconfident*, to grow complacent in our ways. The most virtuous human being, then, is aware that his knowledge is limited, and will cultivate in himself a sense of the precariousness of his practical knowledge—a sense that, as far as practical knowledge is concerned, doubt is, in some respects, *always* appropriate.

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These conclusions might seem too strong. In particular, one might object that I have criticized Descartes’ practical philosophy by assuming a different purpose for ethics than the one Descartes himself intends. The conclusions I reached above appear to depend on the idea that there are objective truths about how we ought to act, and that any acceptable practical philosophy must make the search for these truths the primary goal of ethical life. This objection is extremely important, but it is difficult to assess. For there are times (e.g. in the letter to Elisabeth quoted above) when Descartes does seem to commit himself to the existence of some ethical truth which, though we may be unable to know it perfectly, we ought yet to seek to the best of our ability. Thus while the explicit aim of *Passions* is to teach us how to control the passions, how

to derive joy even from the painful ones, and ultimately how to attain tranquility, a role is retained for ethical truth as well. What falls out from the foregoing is that, because he makes ethical truth—or at least a commitment to seeking it—a necessary component of tranquility, Descartes' view embodies a disturbing tension between the desire for tranquility and the commitment to truth, because it turns out that tranquility is *humanly* possible only if we qualify our commitment to the search for truth. I want, in closing, to say a bit more about the way in which Descartes' qualification of that commitment, expressed in the idea that we “ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than [our] using [our] freedom well or badly” (CSM I: 384, AT XI: 446, a. 153), fails to provide a way of attaining stable tranquility.

First, however, a few comments on the various tensions I have mentioned so far in this paper, and their relations to one another. I began, remember, by suggesting that there is a tension in Descartes' practical philosophy between the desire for practical knowledge and the necessity for action. I take the latter to be closely tied to Descartes' concern to avoid excessive irresolution, which I earlier referred to as a commitment to practical confidence. I have tried, in the foregoing, to establish an additional connection between the commitment to practical confidence and Descartes' second component of generosity, namely the commitment on the part of the generous person to use his freedom well. If what I have said is convincing, we are left with a tension between the commitment to use one's freedom well and the desire for practical knowledge. Finally, then, if true tranquility is possible only for the generous person, as Descartes suggests, we arrive at the

tension, mentioned in the last paragraph, between tranquility and the desire for practical knowledge. To take all this together and state it simply, what I am suggesting is that a sincere desire for practical knowledge is at odds with an unquestioning commitment to confident, resolute action and makes difficult a thoroughgoing commitment to the belief that judging as well as one can is all that matters. As a result, a sincere desire for practical knowledge seems to pose a threat to the kind of tranquility and peace of mind that are the ostensible goals of Descartes' practical philosophy.

There is some reason to think that Descartes was aware of these tensions, at least to some degree. Recall his comment to Elisabeth in the letter quoted above: “In order to be always disposed to judge well, only two things seem to me necessary. One is knowledge of the truth . . .” (CSMK: 265, AT IV: 291). By the time *Passions* is published, however, the requirement of knowledge of the truth has disappeared, and has been replaced by the noticeably weaker claim that “we always do our duty when we do what we judge to be best” (CSM I: 391, AT XI: 460, a. 170). Judging well, it seems, no longer requires knowledge of the truth. Judging well is, to put it tritely, merely doing the best we can. Arguably, the *point* of weakening the requirement is to make tranquility possible for beings lacking perfect knowledge. The hope is that we can in this way reconcile ourselves to our epistemic limitations by taking consolation in the belief that we can be expected to do no better than our best. Failing to get things right is not a failure that reflects on me—and so is not a failure that need threaten my tranquility—so long as the judgment I made was the best I could have made,

given the information available to me at the time.

What is most troubling about this apparent weakening of Descartes' position is not that the claim that “we always do our duty when we do what we judge to be best” is obviously false. Whatever we ultimately want to say about such a principle, I think it difficult to deny that there is something intuitively plausible, or at least highly attractive, about it. Rather, what worries me is the relation between a strong belief in this principle and a firm, sincere commitment to expanding our knowledge of the truth in the practical realm. For it is not at all clear that a person can treat his judgments as if they were certain, even when he is in some sense aware that they are doubtful, and at the same time continue to seek the truth. What is it to be certain of something if not to believe that you have it right, and that you do not need to continue investigation into its truth or falsity? And what is it to *treat* something as certain if not to refuse to continue investigation into its truth or falsity?

We might respond to this worry, on behalf of Descartes, by arguing that he requires us to treat our judgments as certain only while we perform them, and that after we have acted we can resume inquiry into the goodness of the action we have performed. This response works well with what Descartes says about repentance, namely that it “results from our believing that we have done some evil deed” (CSM I: 396, AT XI: 472, a. 191). Presumably, then, we could repent of an action that we performed confidently on the basis of our best judgment (at the time), but which we later, on the basis of newly available information, realized was not the action we would have performed, had all the information been available when we

made the original judgment, the one on which we acted.

Descartes' claim that “the remedies against this fault are the same as those which serve to dispel irresolution” (CSM I: 397, AT XI: 473, a. 191) may seem to speak against this way of understanding repentance. It will do so, however, only so long as we take “this fault” to refer to repentance in general. But it refers, I think, only to a certain kind of repentance, when we “repent of deeds [we] have done without knowing for certain that they are evil” (CSM I: 397, AT XI: 472, a. 191). The suggestion here that repentance is appropriate only when we know *for certain* that an action we have performed is evil may be too strong. However, the weaker, more plausible claim, that repentance is appropriate only when our current best judgment of a past action is that it was wrong, is good enough to save Descartes on this point, and so I think we can safely set this matter aside.

More important for our purposes than the passion of repentance are the closely related passions of irresolution and remorse. Descartes says that “[r]emorse of conscience is a kind of sadness which results from our doubting that something we are doing, or have done, is good” (CSM I: 392, AT XI: 464, a. 177). Importantly, on Descartes' understanding of this passion, we can feel remorse with respect to an action we are presently performing. So remorse, like irresolution (which was discussed in detail above), will be likely to make (confident) action difficult or even, in the extreme, impossible. And, also like irresolution, Descartes attributes to remorse a positive function: “The function of this passion is to make us inquire whether the object of our doubt is good or not, and to prevent our doing it

another time, as long as we are not certain that it is good" (ibid.). (But *unlike* irresolution, and unlike repentance, it does not appear that Descartes distinguishes in any way between an appropriate and an inappropriate type of remorse.<sup>7</sup>)

On reading the articles on irresolution and remorse, we ought, therefore, if we are reading carefully, to be left wondering how Descartes thinks to reconcile his desire to eliminate these two passions with the seemingly important positive function of remorse. That this worry is the right one is made clear by Descartes' claim that "we may prevent [remorse] by the same means as those by which we can free ourselves from irresolution" (ibid.). For now it seems highly plausible to think that the doubt necessary to the passion of remorse is caused by that "excess of irresolution [which] results from too great a desire to do well" (CSM I: 390, AT XI: 460, a. 170). It then follows that we can benefit from the positive function of remorse only through excessive irresolution; and we are driven, finally, to our final and most important question: in the absence of irresolution and remorse—in other words, given a resolute commitment to form firm and determinate judgments about what to do—what will motivate us to remain honest with ourselves in maintaining our commitment to seeking out the truth about what to do?

<sup>7</sup> He says only that "because remorse presupposes evil, it would be better never to have occasion to feel it" (CSM I: 393, AT XI: 464, a. 177). If it is supposed to provide us with reason to eliminate the passion of remorse, this claim is troubling. For my purposes, I think it is safe to assume that Descartes' reasons for wanting to eliminate remorse are essentially the same as his reasons for wanting to eliminate excessive irresolution. I will not, therefore, consider this issue further.

Perhaps Descartes can yet provide a satisfactory answer to this question. I cannot rule that out. But I have my doubts; and what I hope I have shown in this paper is that there is good reason to suspect that, for beings with limited knowledge about ethical truth, too strong a commitment to confident action—to treating our ethical judgments as if they were certain, even when they are not—is dangerous, because maintaining that commitment seems to require the mitigation of an equally important commitment to seeking as much ethical truth as possible. I can put my worry yet another way: while Descartes is concerned to avoid developing "too great a desire to do well", I fear that his advice about how to avoid that desire will lead us into problems in another direction, that his advice will lead us to develop too great a desire to be resolute. I think the danger of moving in this direction is particularly acute, given that, as Descartes sees it, our very happiness is at stake. But this does not mean that Descartes' worry is not real and important. *Both* worries are real, and both are important. As Descartes tries to show, too great a desire to do well can make action in the world difficult or even impossible. But as I have been saying all along, too great a desire to be resolute can lead us into bullheadedness and (self-)deception. There is a precarious balance to be maintained here; to maintain it, however, we must keep *both* dangers in sight. My worry is that, in trying to remove one danger, Descartes will lead us directly into the other.

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Having, then, acknowledged the precipice on which we stand, we must ask, is there a way off? Or is our predicament a necessary one for all creatures of limited knowledge? And if

there is no way off, how do we act, knowing that action is necessary and that all knowledge about *how* to act is, and must remain, uncertain? Can we fully acknowledge the uncertainty of our knowledge, and still act? More to the point of Descartes' worries: can we act in uncertainty and yet maintain our peace of mind? These questions remain, and others too. In order to treat of them adequately, we must understand ourselves accurately. As Descartes rightly saw, the desire for tranquility (and the need to act) is not to be sacrificed to the desire always to do the right thing. But equally, the desire always to do the right thing is not to be sacrificed to the desire for tranquility (and the need to act). It may be, I admit, that neither desire admits of absolute fulfillment unless we give up the other. But maybe—just maybe—*having*, and nurturing, *both* desires is more important than attaining absolute fulfillment of either one.