

A Comparison of Aristotelian and Cartesian Highest Human Goods

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by

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ABSTRACT

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by

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The present thesis is an attempt to analyze and compare two philosophers' accounts of the highest human good: Aristotle's and Descartes'. My main goal has been, after understanding the conceptual frameworks necessary to evaluate the accounts these two philosophers give of the highest human good, to analyze and compare them.

In my analysis I have concluded that for Aristotle the highest human good is *contemplation*, and for Descartes a *special contentment of the soul achieved through following virtue*.

In the comparison I have made, I found one similarity between them: this is that both accounts include godly features. Besides that, there were two main differences between these accounts. One difference originated from the difference in the accounts of causation in Aristotelian and Cartesian philosophy. The second difference concerned the relation between the account of the highest good and the rest of the philosophy it belongs to. The Aristotelian account of the highest good has a necessary relation with the general philosophy of Aristotle, whereas the Cartesian account of the highest good has only a contingent relation with the general philosophy of Descartes.

KISA ÖZET

Aristoteles Felsefesindeki ve Kartezyen Felsefedeki ‘En Yüksek İnsan İyisi’

Görüşlerinin Karşılaştırılması

Levent Safalı

Bu tez çalışması iki felsefecinin, Aristoteles ve Descartes’ın insan için en yüksek iyi konusundaki görüşlerinin incelenmesi ve karşılaştırılmasına dönük bir girişimin ürünüdür. Çalışma boyunca başlıca amacım, bu iki felsefecinin insan için en yüksek iyi konusundaki görüşlerini anlamak için gerekli kavramsal çerçeveyi edindikten sonra, bu iki görüşü analiz etmek ve karşılaştırmak olmuştur.

Analizimde, Aristoteles için en yüksek insan iyisinin *tefekkür* (contemplation) olduğu, Descartes için ise *erdemın yolunu izleyerek ulaşılan ruhsal rahatlık* olduğu sonuçlarına ulaştım.

Yaptığım karşılaştırma sonucunda, her iki görüşte de, tanrısal özellikler içermeleri bakımından bir benzerlik buldum. Bunun yanı sıra bu iki görüş arasında iki önemli fark tespit ettim. Bu farklardan birincisi, Aristoculuk ile Kartezyen felsefenin farklı nedensellik görüşlerine sahip olmalarından köken alıyordu. İkinci fark ise her bir en yüksek insan iyisi görüşünün, bağlı bulunduğu felsefenin geri kalanı ile ilişkisi ile ilgiliydi. Aristoteles’in felsefesinde zorunlu bir ilişki mevcut iken, Descartes’in felsefesinde olumsal bir ilişki söz konusuydu..

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INTRODUCTION

In this work I will make a comparison between Aristotle's and Descartes' accounts of the highest human good. The plan of my thesis is as follows:

In section one I will investigate Aristotle's account of the highest human good.

In the first part, I will first try to place the concept "good" for Aristotle. To do this, it will be necessary to have some idea about related issues. These are the notions of "purpose" and "cause".

In the second part of my investigation, I will search for Aristotle's account of the human good and I will try to delineate the highest one, if there are many. My starting point, in this search, will be his work *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE). I will first focus on eudaimonia (happiness), which Aristotle claims to be the highest human good. After that I will present and investigate his function (*ergon*) argument in which Aristotle reasons in a special way to establish the function of man which has necessary connections with his account for the highest human good. Since the function argument is based on the Aristotelian account of soul, I will also examine whether his account of soul in *De Anima* and in the function argument are consistent.

Beside these, I will try to present the sides of a philosophical discussion on the Aristotelian account of the highest human good. These sides are the so called “inclusivist” and “exclusivist” accounts. After that, I will try to clarify my position in this discussion.

In the third part of my work, I will offer another way to get the Aristotelian account of human good: that is the idea of deriving it from Aristotle’s own life.

In the fourth part, I will shortly remark that my conclusion about the Aristotelian highest good, which is *contemplation*, has a content which necessitates other human goods in a special way.

In section two, I will investigate Descartes’ account of the highest human good.

In the first part of this section, I will try to give a general view about the Cartesian enterprise including its approach to certainty, method, previous philosophy and knowledge.

In the second part of section two, I will focus on the Cartesian account of intellect and will since these two faculties have an important place in evaluating Descartes’ moral ideas and his account of the highest human good.

In the third part of section two, I will start to evaluate Cartesian morality. I will try to do this work through investigating his related works: the provisional moral code of the *Discourse on the Method* and the *Passions of the Soul*. I will also use the *Correspondence* as a source in relevant places. In this part, I will try to show that the third maxim of the provisional morality has no function in the search for certainty. I will claim that Descartes holds this maxim for its own sake.

In the fourth part of section two, I will also try to clarify the Cartesian account of the highest human good, which I claim to be a specific contentment of the soul by following virtue.

In the third section I will compare the highest human good accounts of these two philosophers.

In the first part of section three I will try to make a comparison between both accounts of highest goods. I will mention about similarities and differences of them. At the end I will conclude that both accounts have a similarity in one point: that is for both philosophers the highest human good is somehow related to attributes of God. In other words, Aristotle's account of the highest human good, that is, "contemplation", is an activity which gods do, and Descartes' highest human good, "contentment of the soul", is something that presupposes virtue, which is "proper use of free will", which is the only perfect, hence godly, attribute of man.

For the difference part, I will focus on two issues to be able to make the difference more intelligible: 1- relation of the difference to the causal accounts of these two philosophers; 2- difference from the perspective of coherence of their highest human good and their philosophy.

In the second part of section three, I will conclude that both accounts of the highest human good, although they share one similarity, have basic differences. Cartesian ethics, which mainly rests on a principle which is announced in the third maxim of the provisional morality, has no essential connections with the rest of Descartes' philosophy. In other words, Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology has no necessary relation with Cartesian ethics and hence the Cartesian highest human good. Whereas for Aristotelian ethics the opposite is true.

SECTION ONE

1-GOOD FOR ARISTOTLE

The concept “good” has both ethical and non-ethical connotations in Aristotle. Therefore it can get fairly different meanings than the modern meaning of the “good”. In modern usage the word “good” is used to denote an ethical judgment as in “it is not good to talk loudly.” However for Aristotle the “good” is a kind of intrinsic aim that all things try to reach. It is a kind of goal, wanted for its own sake. Therefore, before examining the “good” it is better to begin with the place of “goal” or “purpose” in Aristotelian metaphysics.

1.1 Nature and Purpose:

Aristotle in *Physics* gives many examples of natural¹ events which could not be explained with mere coincidence or chance. He says that it rains in winter but rarely in summer. Whereas, it is hot in summer but not in winter.² He delineates that there is a relation between natural events like raining and growing of plants. He goes

¹ In *Physics* Chapter 2 Aristotle classifies existing things into two main groups. Natural things fall under one category. The distinctive feature of these natural things is that they carry an internal principle of motion and stationariness. According to Aristotle examples of natural objects are the animals, the plants, and the simple bodies (earth, fire, air, water).

² Phy. 198b 35- 199a2

further and proposes that the relation is a kind of “means to end relation.”³ And from these observations he concludes that all these natural events have a function or aim.

If we take a closer look at his argument, in which he infers that there is purpose in nature from regularities of natural events, we can see that it is in the form of an abductive argument, that is, inference to the best explanation. 1-Most of the events in nature are related in the form of means to end. 2-The “means to end” relation shows that there is a goal or purpose of such events. From 1 and 2 one can conclude that there is purpose in nature.

Aristotle proposes a parallelism between arts and nature and says that aim in nature is similar to the one in art. “It is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present because we do not observe the agent deliberating, art does not deliberate. If the ship-building art were in the wood, it would produce the same results *by nature*. If, therefore, purpose is present in art, it is present also in nature. The best illustration is a doctor doctoring himself: nature is like that. It is plain then that nature is a cause, a cause that operates for a purpose.”⁴

Aristotle’s argument is similar to the “argument from design” in which justification of a *designer* is inferred from the design itself. But Aristotle does not go that far. He does not make any existential claim of a designer other than nature itself. He simply claims that this network of events in nature, in which the end result of each event (or each action) has some function, can not be just coincidental. But still he leaves some place for coincidental events like raining on a hot summer day, which he sees as unlikely but possible.

³ Phy. 199b 9

1.2 Purpose as a Cause:

The notion of purpose in nature lies at the very heart of Aristotelian metaphysics. He claims that this purpose has the status of a cause. Let's have a look at Aristotle's account of causation and see this privileged place of purpose in his theory. In *Physics* book 2, chapter 3 Aristotle examines the different kinds of causes.⁵ He discriminates four kinds of them.⁶

1-Material: Aristotle says that "in one sense that out of which a thing comes to be and which persists, is called "cause", e.g. the bronze of the statue."

2-Formal: according to him, in another sense "cause" is "the form or the archetype", e.g. the plan of a statue which is firstly in the mind of sculptor, is the formal cause of this statue.

3-Mover: a sense of the "cause" which is "the primary source of the change or coming to rest". Aristotle gives an example of father as the cause of a child for this kind of causation.

4-That for the sake of which: that "in the sense of end or 'that for the sake of which' a thing is done". This cause is widely named as "final cause". Aristotle gives the following example for this last cause: "health is the cause of walking about ('Why is he walking about?' we say. 'To be healthy' and, having said that, we think we have assigned the cause.)"

Aristotle says that the last cause (that for the sake of which) is a cause in the sense of the end or the good of the rest. He stresses that this cause is "best and the

⁴ Phy 199b 27-32

⁵ Phy. 194b 22-35

⁶ Aristotle, while giving explanation of these causes, does not name them. However later while mentioning them he uses the names: "material", "formal", "mover", "that for the sake of which".
Phy 198 a 24-25

end of the things that lead up to it”.⁷ Aristotle equates “the goal” to which a change or an action leads up with “the good”. The motive behind this aim is a special kind that is “for its own sake”. From these, it is possible to derive the definition of good: *the good is the aim of all things for its own sake.*

2-HUMAN GOOD FOR ARISTOTLE

Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) searches for what is good for man. He also searches for what is the best of all goods if there is more than one. His first sentences underline that man is not an exception in aiming at the good. I.e. like everything human activities also inherit purpose which is the good.

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.⁸

Aristotle continues with a distinction that some goods are activities (e.g., playing the flute) and some are the products of activities (e.g., house building). He says, for example, the good for medicine is health and for economics wealth. As could be seen from these examples, the aim of a specific entity is its function (*ergon*). Although the examples clearly match that the good for something is its function, to be able to see why it is so, we should look at his account of substance and change. Aristotle takes the substance as composed of two elements: “one element is matter and another is form, and one is potentially and the other actually.”⁹ Aristotle thinks in a way that everything in nature is demanding to be in a further functional state of its existence, like a seed aiming to be a tree. According to him this process is “becoming actual from a state of potentiality”. In our example “seed” is a

⁷ Phy. 195a 23-25

⁸ NE 1094a 1-3

potential tree, and the tree coming out of this seed is the actuality of that seed. In Aristotelian metaphysics, potency and actuality are not statically handled, but have relativity as in the following example. A seed is a potentiality for a tree or in other words a tree is the actuality of a seed. But on the other hand a tree is a potentiality of wood furniture which has been made from it. In a series of changes each step is a potency with respect to the following one and each step is an actuality with respect to the preceding one. Hence, while a tree is an actuality of a seed, it is at the same time potentiality of the wood furniture.

2.1 Happiness (Eudaimonia):

Aristotle claims that there are many goods and questions about which is the highest one. He says that the highest good is commonly agreed to be eudaimonia. He adds that there are other candidates like honour, pleasure etc. However, these are choiceworthy for the sake of themselves but at the same time for the sake of happiness. Since he thinks that the lower ends are also for the sake of the higher ends, he accepts that happiness is the highest one.

We choose (happiness) for itself and never for the sake of something else but honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves, but we choose them also for the sake of happiness.¹⁰

Although Aristotle seems to be right in his acceptance that happiness is something everybody wants, I will claim that he makes a category mistake in his reasoning since he takes happiness, fame, wealth etc. at the same level as if they all belong to same category.

⁹ Met. 1044a 23-25

¹⁰ NE 1097b 1-5

Aristotle treats happiness as if it is something like being rich or famous, but happiness is *categorically* different. Being “rich” or “famous” is something which one cannot deny even if he tries to do so. If you are a rich person then it means that you have money or other kinds of properties which can be converted into money. Same thing for fame. If you are famous, you are so. People recognize you when you go outside. People regard you or treat you differently. In short there are some external criteria that you are rich or famous. However, being happy is different. Happiness is a kind of diagnosis that we make about ourselves. It is quite possible that even though one has had everything in his or her life (think that a God-like being gives you what you want) one still cannot be happy, i.e. does not make the diagnosis of happiness about his or her situation. We all know that there are such kinds of people that they don’t become happy anyway.

Since being happy or not depends on how we feel about ourselves, i.e. a subjective feeling, it is different than being rich or famous, which are objective facts. It is still possible to object to my distinction that happiness is a subjective diagnosis we make about ourselves but the others have objective criteria. But still I insist that “happiness” is categorically different than being rich or famous. My reason is the following: I can be happy and let’s accept that I show my happiness with my behaviours, i.e. I behave in accordance with happiness. Although not everybody has to show his happiness I should accept that for there to be talk about happiness some people must have been showing it explicitly. Otherwise we could not mention such a thing called happiness. Even in these conditions, the criteria of my happiness would be a kind of behavioural criteria. But the criteria for being rich or famous are not behavioural. We can possibly know that a person is rich even if he looks like a poor man. E.g. if we know about his bank account then we can conclude that he is rich.

Since the criteria of happiness are different than being rich or famous they do not belong to same category.

Therefore, I believe that my claim of “happiness being categorically different than being rich or famous” is a justified one. It is legitimate to ask what the point is if it is categorically different. If I am right about my claim then happiness cannot be taken in the hierarchy of human goods together with being rich or being famous etc. Indeed Aristotle also seems to make no use of deciding that “happiness” is the highest human good since he feels that “happiness” is something without certain content. In the following part of NE we will see that he is going to try to equate happiness with something with a much more definite content like *contemplation*. I claim that if we took the notion of happiness out of the NE and used instead of it something like the “highest human good” NE would not lose anything of its value. I.e. the notion of happiness does not help to clarify or explain anything in NE. Although my reason for this is somewhat given above, I will make it clearer. Aristotle first declares that the highest human good is happiness. And after that he tries to figure out what happiness is. After deliberately working on it, he decides that happiness is contemplation.¹¹ In this argument, it is possible to make a shortening and the result is as follows: the highest human good is contemplation. That’s why I claim that the notion of happiness in NE is just multiplying reality, i.e., making his ontology unnecessarily crowded. The fact that the notion of happiness brings no light to the search for the “highest human good” could be seen in an alternative way. In the order of NE, Aristotle first agrees with most of the Greeks that “happiness” is the highest human good¹² and after that starts to search for a clearer account and constructs an argument known as the “function (*ergon*) argument” in which he tries

¹¹ For the sake of my argument I do not now discuss at this moment whether Aristotle coherently says so, i.e., happiness is equal to contemplation.

to figure out what is the highest good for man from what is the function of the man. If "happiness" has had an explanatory value in his search for "highest human good" then he would try to make clear what "happiness" is in a deliberative way. However Aristotle starts from the first level of the discussion and searches for the "highest human good". Or in other words, on the one hand Aristotle tries to make his answer of happiness to the question of what the "highest human good" is, clearer but on the other hand instead of making his answer clearer he starts to derive the "highest human good" from the function of man.

I believe that my point about the needlessness of the notion of happiness in NE is clear. Although epistemologically the notion of happiness does not bring much light to the discussion of the "highest human good" still there can be some merits of examining the notion of happiness. I believe that one of the reasons that Aristotle deals with happiness is because of his methodology. Ackrill points out that there are certain features of Aristotle's philosophising. He says that one of these features is the following.

(for Aristotle) not only the views of previous thinkers, but also what ordinary people say, must form part of the material from which philosophical enquiries start.¹³

Therefore, although I still hold my objections against the notion of happiness since it has not been taken properly, I accept that the notion of happiness could take a place in such a discussion in some other way.

Now I want to take a closer look at Aristotle's function argument. This argument, I believe, opens a fruitful way in the search for the highest human good.

¹² NE 1097b23

¹³ J. L. Ackrill; Aristotle the Philosopher; p.10

2.2 Function (*Ergon*) Argument:

In this part of my work I will discuss the function argument of NE book 1 chapter 7. Aristotle is dissatisfied with his answer that happiness is the highest human good since this answer seems a platitude.¹⁴ In the following sentence he says that it is necessary to look at the function of man for further clarification. The argument goes as follows.¹⁵

A “for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function.”

B “Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities and has man none?... as eye, hand, foot and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these?”

C “What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox and every animal.”

D “There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought.”

E “And, as ‘life of the rational element’ also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term.”

¹⁴ NE 1097b 24

¹⁵ NE 1097b 25 – 1098 a 18

F “Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle,”

G “and if we say ‘a so-and-so’ and ‘a good so-and-so’ have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre-player and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well),”

H “If this is the case,- and we state the function of man to be a certain

kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these,”

I “Then human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.”

I take the structure of the argument to be the following. In **A** for those things which have a function, the good can be understood from their function. Aristotle thinks that this relation between the good and function holds for man too if man has a function. In **B** Aristotle makes an inductive generalization such that from some examples (parts of the body like hand and different professions like carpentry etc.) which have a function he derives the conclusion that man has a function. After clarifying that man has a function, in **C** he questions what it can be. Since the nutritive and perceptive lives are shared with plants and animals, he excludes them. In **D** what remains is the part of the soul with reason, which is composed of two parts: thinking part and obeying part. In **E** Aristotle distinguishes two parts of the rational element: a part with capacity and another one with activity. He notes that the activity part more properly fits thinking. In **F** he makes a summary such that the function of man is

rational activity of his or her soul. **G** is the point where Aristotle switches from ordinary man to good man and the change stemming from this switch is that the good man performs his or her function better (or well). At the first sight this move that Aristotle makes may not seem important, but it is actually important since by making this move his question changes. The new question is: what is the good for a good man? In **H** Aristotle make use of the change in the question and says that: the function of the good man is virtuous rational activity of his or her soul. And finally in **I** Aristotle re-states his answer in **H**; although he does not use the term "good man" he still searches for the highest good for the "good man" My reason for saying this is the following: the function that Aristotle proposes as the function of the "good man" is the virtuous activity of the soul (not normal activity). He makes his claim even stronger by saying that if there is more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete one. With this argument, Aristotle sets the stage for determining the highest human good. And it seems clear enough that Aristotle is trying to reach the ultimate good; i.e. he does not think that a bunch of human goods is the place to stop. Although in the function argument, Aristotle does not say what this highest good is, there are not so many options to be a real candidate for the position of highest good as defined in the argument.

To sum up, the function argument starts with the question of whether man has a function and gives an affirmative answer to the question. In later stages of the argument this function becomes clear as "rational activity of man's soul". And after that the question a bit changes and Aristotle starts to search for the question of what the function of good man is. And he gives his famous answer to this last question: "activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there is more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete". Even though in this argument we don't

get what the highest human good is, there seem to be not many choices which fulfil the requirements of the highest good.

2.3 Two Interpretations: “Exclusive” or “Inclusive”

There is a dispute among the interpreters of NE about what it is that we ultimately aim at. The sides of this discussion are widely known as “inclusivist” and “exclusivist” in accordance with the terminology introduced by R. Hardie.¹⁶ Exclusivists hold that, for Aristotle, there is only one type of activity for the sake of which we do everything else, i.e. there is one highest good. On the other hand inclusivist interpreters hold that the ultimate answer is a package of activities rather than one single kind of activity.¹⁷ They claim that it is not sensible to hold just one activity as a supreme worthwhile activity even though Aristotle in NE suggests so. An inclusivist, Ackrill, holds that it is an eccentric recommendation for Aristotle to hold one activity (contemplation or *theoria*) as the chief activity and “spend as little time and effort on other things as possible and to attach no importance to any practical or moral concerns or claims in comparison with the value of theoretic activity.”¹⁸ According to Ackrill, there cannot be only one supreme good that all human activities are done for the sake of, but instead there should be a “package of activities” for the sake of which we do other activities. Therefore, as could be seen from Ackrill’s comment this discussion cannot be finished just by showing that one thesis (inclusivist’s or exclusivist’s) fits the texts better, i.e. although the claim of one group might be in accordance with the texts of Aristotle, their claim still could be inconsistent with the big picture of Aristotle’s theory. On the other hand, an exclusivist, Richard Kraut, reasons as follows. “When Aristotle speaks of doing X for the sake of Y, he always thinks of X as having a causal influence on Y. Thus, we

¹⁶ G. J. Hughes; Aristotle on Ethics; p.27 refers to R. Hardie; Aristotle’s Ethical Theory; 1968

¹⁷ G. J. Hughes; Aristotle on Ethics; p.27

can say that we make bridles for the sake of horsemanship, since a bridle causally affects the riding of horses, just as horse-riding has a causal effect on, say, winning the battle. Kraut maintains that Aristotle never says that we can do X simply for the sake of some package-deal consisting of {X+Y+Z+...}. Yet something like that would have to be involved if the inclusivist interpretation was correct.”¹⁹ According to Kraut since Aristotle is searching for the highest good *for the sake of which* we do other things why not take this “for the sake of” relation as a causal one? And he interprets “performing X for the sake of Y” as X causes Y. Although in this relation X is an efficient or mover cause of Y, X is not a “for the sake of” cause or final cause of Y. On the contrary Y is the “for the sake of” cause of X. And since he is intended to take the “for the sake of” relation as a causal relation he should not treat it as an efficient or mover cause. I think Kraut is mixing up causes here. To make my claim more certain it is better to look at what Aristotle says in *Physics*. “Some things cause each other reciprocally, e.g. hard work causes fitness and vice versa, but again not in the same way, but the one as end (or “for the sake of” LS), the other as the origin of change.”²⁰ Therefore, if we take Aristotle’s example: hard work causes fitness and the cause in this sense is an efficient cause; reciprocally fitness causes hard work in the sense of a final or “for the sake of” cause. And if one is inclined to treat the “for the sake of” relation as a causal relation then one has to take it as a “for the sake of” cause. My position in this debate is on the side of exclusivists, i.e. I believe that there is one supreme good for Aristotle for the sake of which we do all others. But I think when I have given the details, my position could satisfy, to an extent, inclusivists like Ackrill. I agree with Kraut that the “for the sake of” relation is a causal one for Aristotle, but in the way that the highest good is the one causing all the other actions

¹⁸ J. L. Ackrill; Aristotle the Philosopher; p.139

¹⁹ G. J. Hughes; Aristotle on Ethics; p.29

²⁰ Phy. 195a 7-11

to be done, but not the reverse as Kraut claims . I have two reasons for accepting the “for the sake of” relation as a causal relation: 1- for Aristotle the name of the final cause or end cause is “for the sake of cause.” If Aristotle intended to denote another thing, other than the final cause, he would use another terminology in order to avoid perplexity. 2- If we remember the place of “good” in Aristotle’s metaphysics, “good” is a kind of norm or purpose that drives everything internally to itself. Therefore as far as the “human good” is concerned, it should satisfy the same kind of requirement since it is a kind of “good”, i.e. it should be a final cause of all the things that lead up to it. But accepting that there is a final human good doesn’t mean that other actions leading up to it are useless or not important. Indeed all the actions that lead up to the final good are practically very important or indispensable since if those steps are not taken you cannot reach the final step. Although categorically the final human good is more important than others, this does not mean that other actions can be neglected, as Ackrill claimed to be so. As an example: I perform an action “X”, although it is different than my final aim “Y”. But I know that if I do not perform “X” I could never reach “Y”. In this sequence, both “X” and “Y” are indispensable for me, although categorically “Y” is the final aim and for the sake of “Y” I perform “X”. If we grasp the hierarchy of human goods in the way I proposed, then Ackrill’s criticism against exclusivists of “neglecting other human goods except the supreme one” becomes contentless.

2.4 Human Soul and Function Argument:

The function argument is mainly based on Aristotle’s account of soul in *De Anima* (DA). In this work, Aristotle divides the human soul into different compartments and proposes that some parts of human soul are like the one in plants and animals, e.g., human souls have a nutritive part similar to the one in plants and a

perceptive part like the one in animals.²¹ In DA, Aristotle states that “man and possibly another order like man or superior to him, -possess- the power of thinking, i.e. mind.”²² Although at first sight, the account of mind (or the thinking part of the soul which is peculiar to man) seems to be similar in DA and in the function argument, but there seem to be important differences between them. In DA Aristotle makes a further distinction in the rational part of the human soul, similar to the distinction which he makes in the function argument; he distinguishes the active and the passive parts of the rational soul. In DA, Aristotle says that the active intellect (or maker mind) is impassible, immortal, separable, eternal and strictly necessary for thinking.²³ For Aristotle, man is not the only being which has this active mind or actuality of thought. In DA, he leaves the door open by saying that “possibly another order like man or superior to him -possesses- the power of thinking.” In *Metaphysics* book XII he clarifies what this order is. “And God is in a better state. And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality.”²⁴ Therefore we can say that for Aristotle the active part of the rational soul, or power of thinking, or active mind is not peculiar to man.²⁵ But in the function argument, Aristotle claims that the thinking part of the rational soul is peculiar to man. If one really searches to find a part of the rational soul peculiar to man, I claim that this part is the passive mind which exists as a capacity for thinking. But I think Aristotle is indeed trying to make a separation between man and lower kinds. Since he was really trying to find what is unique to human then he should point out passive intellect.

²¹ DA II Ch. 3

²² DA 414b 20

²³ DA 430 a 18-25

²⁴ Met. 1072 b 25-27

3-ARISTOTLE'S LIFE AND THE HUMAN GOOD

In this part of my work I will try to find an answer to the following question: could Aristotle's life provide us valuable data from which we can derive his human good account, i.e. if we have been given the task of deriving the "Aristotelian human good" from his life and his efforts (let's think that he didn't say what the human good is but we are trying to get it by investigating his life)?

In the following part I will argue that Aristotle's life could be accepted as a satisfying example for deriving intellectual virtues but not moral virtues.

According to Aristotle each kind of virtue, the moral ones and intellectual ones, have different paths of development. Let's see first how one gets moral virtues in his theory.

... moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name *ethike* is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit).²⁶

According to him, possessing moral virtues is a matter of habituation. Aristotle thinks that these virtues arise in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature. But "we are adapted by nature to receive them, and they are made perfect by habit."²⁷ It is not difficult to say that these habits start to develop from early childhood, at times when we almost don't have any self-control about them. That is why it could be said that for one to possess moral virtues is not completely in his hands but is the responsibility of those people who have raised him.

Certainly, my claim is valid to a certain extent since one could get habituated to these virtues after he or she is grown up. But on the other hand it is not possible to

²⁵ Ackrill also defends this view that thinking as activity is a property shared with God. But he does not suggest that "passive intellect" or "thought" is a better candidate for being a property specific to man. J. L. Ackrill; Aristotle the Philosopher, p.139

²⁶ NE 1103 a 17-19

²⁷ NE 1103 a 23-25

neglect the effects of childhood on this issue. The point I want to arrive at is the following: even the one who has the best moral knowledge may not be the one possessing the best moral virtues since as we have seen this is not a matter of knowledge. Aristotle clearly declares this point: "as a condition of possession of the (moral) virtues, knowledge has little or no weight."²⁸ Therefore it is theoretically possible that Aristotle might not be an example of the best morally virtuous man since it is not completely in his hands.²⁹

How about intellectual virtues?³⁰ Do we acquire them in a different way? Aristotle gives an affirmative answer to this question. "Intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching."³¹ If this is so, could we say that Aristotle is not a man with intellectual virtues? I think we don't have any option other than saying "no" to this question since he is the founder of many branches of science and he is a cornerstone in philosophy.

If I had been sentenced to summarize what Aristotle did in his life which can be taken as the human good then I would give such an answer: devoting his life to understanding and teaching the facts of the cosmos. I think this conclusion can be legitimately taken as an Aristotelian human good since if such kind of intellectual life were not good then Aristotle would not take it. Because we know that unlike moral virtues, intellectual virtues are obtainable thorough education. If we look at which kind of virtues are more important for Aristotle we see that intellectual virtues have a higher position with respect to moral ones.³² I.e. the highest human good is something that should be sought within the realm of intellectual virtues. Therefore,

²⁸ NE 1105b 1-2

²⁹ Although there are evidences, like his will which, as Barnes puts it "gives us a valuable insight into his personal affairs and private moral opinions" and shows us that Aristotle was a gentleman. J. Barnes; *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*; p.2 and p.195

³⁰ These are philosophic wisdom and understanding and practical wisdom. NE 1103 a 5

³¹ NE 1103 a 15

³² NE 1178 a 8

we can conclude that Aristotle's life, more accurately, his intellectual efforts are done for the sake of the highest human good. Or in other words, the highest human good caused Aristotle to lead such a life.

4-HIGHEST HUMAN GOOD FOR ARISTOTLE

In the tenth chapter of NE Aristotle clearly declares that the highest human good is contemplation (theoria),³³ although this answer, at the first sight, sounds odd as inclusivists claimed to be so. But if we focus on the very definition of contemplation which is "reflecting on what we know about", it makes sense. I want to underline the word "to know" since if you don't know anything then there is nothing to contemplate about. And for more contemplation one has to know more. If the direct relation between contemplation and knowledge is stressed then I think the claim that contemplation is the highest human good becomes more reasonable.

It seems obvious that Aristotle lived a life under the influence of this highest human good. And this life was undeniably devoted to understanding and the knowledge of the cosmos.

It is quite reasonable that for Aristotle, the highest good thing is to reflect upon what he knows. And as I have explained earlier, the following two claims are perfectly compatible: on the one hand, all human goods have the same level of practical importance since they are causally related, i.e. if you cannot accomplish one you cannot reach the other one. But on the other hand, categorically one of the human goods is on top of the others. Thus, just as an example, it is justified to think in the following way. For contemplation one requires knowledge; for knowledge it is necessary to make some activities (discussion etc.); for these activities you need good social relations; for these relations you had better be a morally good man; to be

a morally good man you should be a good citizen (or father etc.). Certainly this hierarchy of goods can be done in a better way than I did here. However, the point I want to delineate is all goods have practically a high level importance since deficiency of one of them may block the way to the highest end.

SECTION TWO

1-THE CARTESIAN PROJECT

At the beginning of *The Search for Truth*, Descartes mentions some important points which are critical in understanding his theory.

Man comes into the world in ignorance, and since the knowledge which he had as a child was based solely on the **weak foundation of the senses** and the **authority of his teachers**, it was virtually inevitable that his imagination should be filled with innumerable false thoughts before reason could guide his conduct... I shall **bring to light the true riches of our souls**, opening up to each of us the means whereby we can find within ourselves, without any help from anyone else, all the knowledge we may need for the conduct of life, and the means of using it in order to acquire all the most abstruse items of knowledge that human reason is capable of possessing...what I am undertaking is not so difficult as one might imagine. For the items of **knowledge** that lie within reach of the human mind are **all linked together** by a bond so marvelous, and **can be derived from each other** by means of inferences so necessary, that their discovery does not require much skill or intelligence.³⁴

³⁴ AT X 496; CSM-II 400 (bold face by me LS)

I will use this quotation as a guide to give a general picture of some important aspects of Descartes' theory. And I will focus on four points: 1-obstacles which prevent us from getting true thoughts; 2- the possibility of overcoming these difficulties and reaching true beliefs; 3- the benefits of getting this knowledge; 4- the very nature of the knowledge which makes it accessible.

1.1 Obstacles

a) "weak foundation of senses"

According to Descartes metaphysics is so important that all the other sciences take their roots from it.³⁵ And, I think, because of this, he demanded the highest level of certainty which he calls "metaphysical certainty"³⁶ in this field.

At the beginning of *Meditations*³⁷ Descartes says that "... from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once."³⁸ As we see in this quotation, the demand for metaphysical certainty requires Descartes to keep his doubtful position -also called methodological doubt- while structuring his metaphysics. Therefore Descartes regarded the senses as unreliable sources for getting knowledge about the universe, not because they deceive us most of the time but even though they do it occasionally.

For Descartes, beside the possibility of the senses leading us to have false beliefs, there is another point which is also important, that is, the beliefs which are obtained through the senses are not enough for perception to grasp the thing or event in question. Even when we think that we grasp the nature of the things through our senses we in fact do it with our intellect without noticing it.

³⁵ AT IX B 14; CSM-I 186

³⁶ *Principles of Philosophy*; part IV, a.206

³⁷ *Meditations on First Philosophy*

³⁸ AT VII 18; CSM-II 17

A well known argument of Descartes, showing that beliefs obtained through the senses are not enough for perception, is known as the *wax argument*.³⁹ While making comments about a piece of wax getting melted because of heat, Descartes reasons in the following way.

1- The properties of the piece of wax that we perceive with the senses change as the wax melts.

2- This is true for all properties of wax, including its shape, extension, and size.

3- But, although it melts, the wax keep being the same piece of wax and we know that it is the same wax although all the properties of it have been changed.

Conclusion: our ability to diagnose that the wax is the same wax as before – in spite of changes that it has undergone-, can not be a product of our senses alone. Insofar as we know the wax, we know it through our mind and faculty of judgment, not through our senses or imagination.

Descartes' attitude of not valuing the beliefs acquired through the senses does not only stem from the fact that they can cause us to acquire wrong information about colors or distances etc. but is deeper than that in two respects: 1- the fact that we get much less knowledge through the senses than we think that we do. For example, Descartes says that when we look out from the window we think that there are people outside. But what we see is actually "hats and coats which could conceal automaton too". Therefore he concludes that (just as in the wax example) "we *judge* that they are men".⁴⁰ 2- Even though we get true beliefs with the help of our senses it is not possible to distinguish whether we are dreaming or not.

³⁹ AT VII 30-32; CSM-II 20-21

⁴⁰ AT VII 32; CSM-II 21 (italics by Descartes)

As we see, Descartes, while structuring his metaphysics, never tends to value the beliefs coming from sense organs since he is trying to get a high level of certainty called metaphysical certainty.⁴¹ The highly possible reason for this can be drawn from his conception of the relation between metaphysics and other areas of inquiry. As Descartes states in his tree analogy,⁴² metaphysics constitutes the root of other areas of inquiry. And it could be drawn from this picture that any false thought in metaphysics would affect the whole system of knowledge. Therefore Descartes used a very stringent requirement to hold a belief in metaphysics and tried to accept only the thoughts that are necessarily true in this area of inquiry.

It may be asked whether Descartes was a skeptic since he challenges the beliefs acquired through senses. He was not a skeptic indeed but he was using doubt as a method to get rid of the doubt, i.e. to reach the truth.⁴³ Descartes explicitly remarks in the *First Meditation* that he does not let doubt influence him in practical matters but only uses it in his investigations: "I cannot possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude. This is because the task now in hand does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge."⁴⁴

b) "authority of teachers"

Descartes is widely accepted as the founder of modern philosophy. It is hard to guess whether he was aware of this mission. However we can, for sure, say that he was aware that his way of philosophizing was radically different than the way of previous philosophers. When we look at the works of Descartes we can see that he underlines in many places differences of his philosophy from those preceding him. It is needless to say that Descartes' approach to those philosophers was very critical. In

⁴¹ *Principles of Philosophy*; part IV, a.206

⁴² AT IX B 14; CSM-I 186

⁴³ AT VII 12; CSM-II 9

Discourse on the Method, we see him challenging all the previous philosophical accounts for not being certain about any topic.

Regarding philosophy, I shall say only this: seeing that it has been cultivated for many centuries by the most excellent minds and yet there is still no point in it which is not disputed and hence doubtful.⁴⁵

It should be noted that although Descartes' main focus of criticism seem to be theoretical, i.e. to reach true beliefs, he was aware that his point has important practical reflections.

As for the other sciences, in so far as they borrow their principles from philosophy I decided that nothing solid could have been built upon such shaky foundations.⁴⁶

If we remember the tree analogy of Descartes in which metaphysics constitutes the roots of almost all areas of human knowledge- physics, morals, medicine etc.- then we can imagine the practical consequences of these "shaky foundations" of the old philosophy. Descartes supported his claim about the insufficiency of the old philosophy with a descriptive argument which is a version of the argument- from- success.

Indeed the best way of proving the falsity of Aristotle's principles is to point out that they have not enabled any progress to be made in all the many centuries in which they have been followed.⁴⁷

Descartes, here, accuses the philosophy of his time which is mainly Aristotelianism, of not being successful as far as the progress in general is concerned. I will not go

⁴⁴ AT VII 22; CSM-II 15

⁴⁵ AT VI 8; CSM-I 114

⁴⁶ AT VI 9; CSM-I 115

into details of the criticism of Descartes regarding Aristotelianism and Scholastics but mention Descartes' proposal for the solution of the problem. According to Descartes the old philosophy needs to be re-evaluated in a radical manner. The first step he offers is to get rid of the old philosophy.⁴⁸

1.2 Solution: bring to light the true riches of our souls

After getting rid of the scholastic philosophy or Aristotelianism of that age Descartes proposes the following: we should replace the beliefs we throw away with better beliefs or with the same beliefs after checking them with the standards of reason.⁴⁹

Although it is quite sensible for Descartes to claim to replace the old beliefs with the new beliefs, it sounds odd at first glance that he is open to the possibility of using the old one. Was all his criticism about the Scholastic philosophy just about a possibility of its being useless?

I don't think so. Because, even if Descartes is open to accept all he rejected about the old philosophy, he says that he could do this only after a process of squaring it with reason, i.e. getting permission from reason. And we can say that this process in itself would bring a stronger foundation to the previous beliefs, i.e., unless they are justified in a *certain* way then Descartes would never take them back. In order to grasp this point it is necessary to recall how Descartes was criticizing the thoughts of the old philosophy: *because of having shaky foundations*.

Therefore it should be underlined that the problem which Descartes emphasizes about the old philosophy is not restricted to its rightness or wrongness about a particular topic but is deeper than that. Besides criticizing the Scholastics for

⁴⁷ AT IXB 18; CSM-I 189

not having good foundations Descartes also objects to the way of reasoning of the old philosophers and he claims that even the reasoning of the lay man is far better than their reasoning.

It is far better never to contemplate investigating the truth about any matter than to do so without a method. For it is quite certain that such haphazard studies and obscure reflections blur the natural light and blind our intelligence... for we very often find that people who have never devoted their time to learned studies make sounder and clearer judgments on matters which arise than those who have spend all their time in the Schools.⁵⁰

Descartes while criticizing the “obscure reasoning” of Scholastics, offers an alternative way of using reason. This new way is *thinking with a method*, principles of which are given in detail in his work *Discourse on the Method*. I will not go into details of the Cartesian method but I should say that it allows the thinker to reason equally in all areas of inquiry, i.e. it is universally applicable to all sciences.⁵¹ I will only list four basic principles of this method.⁵²

1-Not to accept anything as true if I didn't have clear and distinct evidence of its truth

2-To divide each problem into as many basic parts as may be necessary to manage them better

3- While solving a problem, to think in an orderly manner, proceeding from simple - easily known- to complex.

⁴⁸ AT VI 13; CSM-I 117

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ AT X 371; CSM-I 16

⁵¹ AT X 360 ; CSM-I 9

⁵² AT VI 18-19 ; CSM-I 120

4-To check everything after solving the problem.

Descartes informs us that he has taken the inspiration for his method from “geometrical analysis and in algebra, using the one to correct all the defects of the other.”⁵³ He also says that he didn’t regard *logic* as a source to derive his method since logic is “less useful for learning things than for explaining to others the things one already knows.”⁵⁴ Although Descartes accepts that logic contains some good things, it is mixed up with many harmful ones in such a way that it is so hard to distinguish.⁵⁵ The very bad thing about logic is that it gives us an opportunity to speak about things without judgment on issues one is ignorant about.⁵⁶

Descartes’ critical attitude to logic, at first glance, might be found a bit exaggerated in the sense that he is underestimating logic. *Deduction*, which is one of the main inference tools of logic, is also the main mechanism of Descartes for reaching absolute certainty. But when he criticizes logic, he is thinking of Aristotle’s syllogistic rules which let one use formal rules instead of forcing him to think about the subject matter. And beside this fact, when we look at his work *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, we see that he expects his method to work at a more basic level than deductive inferences, i.e. method itself guides where to apply deduction.

If our method properly explains... how we should go about finding the deductive inferences that will help us attain this all-embracing knowledge, then I do not see that anything more is needed to make it complete.⁵⁷

What Descartes is most proud of about his method is that it forces us *to use our reason*.⁵⁸ According to him his method is a kind of help to bring to light the *true*

⁵³ AT VI 20; CSM-I 121

⁵⁴ AT VI 18; CSM-I 119

⁵⁵ AT VI 17; CSM-I 119

⁵⁶ AT VI 17; CSM-I 119

riches of our souls or as he says in another place “to increase the natural light of reason”.⁵⁹

1.3 Knowledge: “all linked together... and can be derived from each other”

There exists a bold claim at the heart of the Cartesian enterprise, that is: “items of knowledge that lie within reach of the human mind are all linked together by a bond so marvelous, and can be derived from each other by means of inferences so necessary, that their discovery does not require much skill or intelligence.”

I believe that the self-confidence of Descartes’ project lies in this assumption about the very nature of knowledge, since, for him, the limiting factor in knowing the universe is not the nature of the universe itself but the capacity of human intellect. In other words, if I use the expression in the quotation above: one can get the all the knowledge within reach of the human mind.⁶⁰

It is worth asking why a person seeking for absolute certainty makes such a claim which is very hard to confirm. Although the detailed discussion of this issue is beyond our investigation, I will mention two possibilities.

The first one is: Descartes is looking at the sciences through what I call a “mathematical paradigm”, i.e. accepting that mathematics is a kind of science representing the essential features of all sciences. I have two reasons for this claim. i) One is about his method. Descartes, as I have mentioned above, derived his method from mathematics. This might indicate that he implicitly accepts the method of mathematics as universal for all sciences. And if this is true, then he might think that mathematics is a kind of pure science manifesting the essential features of other

⁵⁷ AT X 372; CSM-I 16

⁵⁸ AT VI 21; CSM-I 121

⁵⁹ AT X 361; CSM-I 10

⁶⁰ For Descartes man has a limited faculty of knowledge unlike God’s

sciences. ii) The second is related with the analogy which Descartes makes between the “unmasked sciences” and the “series of numbers”.

The sciences are at present masked, but if the masks were taken off, they would be revealed in all their beauty. If we could see how the sciences are linked together, we would find them no harder to retain in our minds than the series of numbers.⁶¹

My second explanation regarding Descartes’ assumption about the easy accessibility of knowledge when the correct method is applied is the following: Descartes says that he has obtained successful results by using his method on various issues.⁶² He might have thought that such a success could be generalized in such a way that all the items of knowledge (within the reach of human mind) are accessible and linked together. Although this way of deriving a conclusion is somehow beyond the Cartesian method since it uses inductive generalization, I still hold it as a possibility.

After seeing the Cartesian conception of knowledge, now we can see the first move or first item of knowledge from which Descartes derives all the others. This argument is a very well known one and is named “cogito”, a short version of the Latin original that is “cogito ergo sum” or in English “I am thinking therefore I exist”. I will not go into details of this argument. But I should say that it is the first truth for Descartes since as he says “the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it.”⁶³ After getting this very truth Descartes derives all the other items of knowledge from it.

⁶¹ AT X 215; CSM-I 3

⁶² AT VI 27; CSM-I 124

⁶³ AT VI 32; CSM-I 127

2-INTELLECT AND WILL

In order to understand Descartes' ethical ideas, it is necessary to know specific functions and interactions of two faculties of soul, namely the faculty of knowledge (intellect) and the faculty of choice (will). But before that it would be necessary to shortly mention about the Cartesian account of body and soul. Descartes says in *Principles of Philosophy*⁶⁴ that there exist two kinds of substances: thinking thing (soul) and material thing (body). He states that the essential or defining attribute of the material substances is extension whereas soul is a thinking thing which has the essential or defining attribute of thought. These two classes of substances can exist separately; hence they are distinct. According to him a human being is a thinking thing and is capable of thought and it is God who joined this thinking thing (soul) to some corporeal substance (body) forming a unity out of them.

Intellect, for Descartes, only allows us to perceive ideas, not to make judgments on them.⁶⁵ And for the will, he says that it "simply consists in our ability to do or not to do something—that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid."⁶⁶ According to him intellect is limited in the sense that it does not possess the ideas of every existing object⁶⁷ and lacks understanding of many things.⁶⁸ However, will is a perfect faculty and it is not limited.⁶⁹ Descartes states that the will is the best faculty among the others -imagination, memory, intellect etc. He states that this unlimited capacity is the only faculty we have that resembles the one in God.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ *Principles*, part I, a.60

⁶⁵ AT VII 56; CSM-II 39

⁶⁶ AT VII 57; CSM-II 40

⁶⁷ AT VII 56; CSM-II 39

⁶⁸ AT VII 60; CSM II 42

⁶⁹ AT VII 56-57; CSM-II 39

⁷⁰ AT VII 57; CSM-II 40

Descartes states that in such situations of affirming or avoiding “we do not feel we are determined by any external force”⁷¹ and therefore he claims that our will is free. And in the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes while mentioning the freedom of will says that this is something “self-evident”. According to him, will “must be counted among the first and most common notions that are innate in us.”⁷²

The intellect has a significant influence on what receives the will’s approval or disapproval, because intellect could present its content in a sound or convincing way such that will feels a powerful inclination to approve it.⁷³ This “convincing effect” of the intellect may appear to be in conflict with the idea of free will. However, Descartes states that this is not true.

In order to be free, there is no need for me to be inclined both ways; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction-either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts- the freer is my choice.⁷⁴

Descartes gives the example of *cogito* for such a situation. He says that since the evidence of my intellect about my existence, that is, “I think”, was unshakable, my will inclined to approve that “I exist”. But he adds that “this was not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force.”⁷⁵ Can we say that, although there is no external force compelling will to approve or disapprove, there are still instances in which will automatically affirms or denies the content of intellect? No indeed. For Descartes, this would be something incompatible with the freedom of will. But there still is a problem since it seems as if while the intellect entertains a clear and distinct

⁷¹ AT VII 57; CSM-II 40

⁷² AT VIII A 19-20; CSM-I 206

⁷³ AT VII 58; CSM-II 40

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ AT VII 59; CSM-II 41

idea or object, the will cannot do anything but affirm or deny the object of perception.

To shed some light to the issue, let's have a look at the distinctions of Descartes regarding the concept of "indifference". According to Descartes if will is indifferent to affirm or deny something, this is the lowest state of freedom,⁷⁶ since in such situations whatever it affirms or denies is contingent. And being indifferent in this sense has nothing to do with the freedom of the will. What I understand from this is the following: a free choice is a kind of rational choice. If one is at the same distance to each option then he or she cannot *choose* one of them. Since the term *choosing* is something loaded with "preference", i.e. if you are not preferring something but just accepting one option, you are not making a choice.

However Descartes says that the term "indifferent" can be understood in a positive way as well. In his letter to Mesland he explains this point.

But perhaps others mean by "indifference" a positive faculty of determining oneself to one or other of two contraries...I do not deny that the will has this positive faculty... when a very evident reason moves us in one direction, although morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction, absolutely speaking we can. For it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing.⁷⁷

Therefore, even in those instances in which there exists very clear and distinct evidence in favor of one option, will could act on the contrary if it wants to show that it is free. In other words, the will can stay "indifferent" in a positive sense. But in this

⁷⁶ AT VII 58; CSM-II 40

case, being “indifferent” is not like will deciding without a preference. On the contrary, will prefers the option which should not be preferred normally to prove that it is free to decide.

I think after this example it is clear that the Cartesian will does not always have to choose the option which is well supported by the intellect. Moreover, an exaggerated preference of “choosing what should be done” could be seen as lack of free will, as Descartes comments about the behaviors of animals: “a high degree of perfection displayed in their actions makes us suspect that animals do not have free will.”⁷⁸

According to Descartes man has a capacity to have wrong preferences, and he seems to use this feature to distinguish between humans and animals as is clear from the quotation above. He explains the mechanism behind these faulty choices and offers a model to overcome it.

In his opinion, the problem of wrong decisions arises from the tension between unlimited will and limited intellect. In this picture drawn by Descartes, on many occasions will gives assent to the content of the intellect which is not properly understood by it. And this, as could be expected, leads to wrong decisions. According to him “the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will.”⁷⁹ In other words, the will should only give assent to the clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect, because only in this way can we keep from making wrong judgments and get the highest guarantee of choosing the true and the good.

⁷⁷ AT IV 173; CSM-II 245

⁷⁸ AT X 219; CSM-I 5

⁷⁹ AT VII 60; CSM-II 41

Since our will tends to pursue or avoid only what intellect represents as good or bad, we need only to judge well in order to act well, and to judge as well as we can in order to do our best.⁸⁰

As is clear from the quotation above, for Descartes, the origin of making wrong judgements and choosing bad options instead of good ones is related with improper usage of our free will. And this is something avoidable provided that our will doesn't give any assent to a content of intellect which is not clear and distinct.

3-ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF DESCARTES' PHILOSOPHY

Descartes is not regarded as a moral philosopher. And this is not only the opinion of those who comment about his philosophy. He also didn't want to use the label of "moral philosopher" for himself, even in his work, *The Passions of the Soul*, where he discussed many ethical issues.⁸¹ What was the reason for Descartes not to prefer to write as a "moral philosopher" even in matters concerned with morality? We know that the reason was not any lack of interest.

...the study of philosophy is more necessary for the regulation of our morals and our conduct in this life than is the use of our eyes to guide our steps.... the human beings, whose most important part is the mind, should devote their main efforts to the search for wisdom, which is the true food of mind...⁸²

Even though it is easy to justify that he cares very much about moral issues there still is a question in need of answer: that there is no work of him in which he systematically investigates moral issues. I think there are two reasons for the apparent distance of Descartes from ethics. One is objective and the other is

⁸⁰ AT VI 28; CSM-I 125

⁸¹ AT XI 326; CSM-I 327: "my intention was to explain the passions only as a natural philosopher, and not as a rhetorician or even as a moral philosopher"

⁸² AT IX 3-4

subjective. Objectively, Descartes was thinking that there needs to be done some previous work before giving a systematic account of morality. I should remind the reader at this moment of his famous tree analogy in the French preface to *The Principles of Philosophy*.⁸³ In this analogy: metaphysics makes up the roots of the tree of philosophy, and its trunk is composed of physics. Medicine, mechanics, and morals are the branches of the tree.⁸⁴ The place of ethics in this picture is after metaphysics and physics. Therefore, before reaching the mature knowledge of these areas, Descartes thought that it is not appropriate to write on ethics.

I should have to give an exact account of medicine, morals and mechanics- this is what I should have to do in order to give to mankind a body of philosophy that is quite complete; and I do not yet feel... so far away from knowledge of these remaining topics, that I would not now boldly try to bring the plan to its conclusion, provided I had the resources to make all the observations I should need in order to back up and justify my arguments. But this, I can see, would require great expense- too great for an individual like myself unless he were assisted by the public.⁸⁵

As we see, in the quotation above, Descartes was aware of the deficiency of the moral part in his works, but regarded this deficiency as a result of incomplete tasks in areas which are needed for moral studies. Beside this objective fact, which is preventing Descartes from writing systematically on moral issues, there is another reason which is subjective, that is the hostile responses of the scholars to his philosophy.

⁸³ This preface first appeared in the 1647 French edition. CSM-I 179 n. 1

⁸⁴ AT IXB 14; CSM-I 186

⁸⁵ AT IXB 17; CSM-I 188

Had I dealt with moral philosophy, then perhaps I would have reason to hope that she⁸⁶ might find my writings more agreeable; but this is a subject which I must not get involved in writing about. The Regents are so worked up against me because of the harmless principles of physics... if I dealt with morality after all that, they would never give me any peace.⁸⁷

I think this factor also has some weight, for him not to give his moral opinions in a systematic manner and not to prefer to use the label of "moral philosopher."

However, in spite of all these, Descartes had written many things related with morality which are scattered throughout his works. And most importantly, he explicitly gave us what I would call his "formula for morality" which is his methodological remark in making moral decisions.

Since our will tends to pursue or avoid only what intellect represents as good or bad, we need only to judge well in order to act well, and to judge as well as we can in order to do our best—that is to say, in order to acquire all the virtues and in general all the other goods we can acquire. And when we are certain of this, we cannot fail to be happy.⁸⁸

I would say that even if Descartes had not written anything about ethics other than giving the account above, he should still be regarded as a philosopher who has a moral theory. Because in this account he formulates the partial weights of "intellect" and "will" in making a moral decision. And we see that for Descartes the process of making good judgments is similar to having certain knowledge.

In the following pages, I will try to examine Descartes' opinions concerning ethics in three different sources. Firstly, the "provisional morality" which is an

⁸⁶ Princess Elizabeth

⁸⁷ AT IV 536; CSMK-299

⁸⁸ AT VI 28; CSM-I 125

account he gave in *Discourse on the Method*, secondly *The Passions of the Soul* and thirdly I will look at his letters containing his moral opinions. In these investigations besides giving a general view I will try to convey my examination to find an answer to the question what the highest human good is for Descartes.

3.1 Provisional Morality

In *Discourse on the Method*, part two, Descartes outlines rules of his method and in part three, he gives us some rules which he calls a *provisional moral code* as a necessary part of his project which is the search for certain knowledge.

As I have mentioned before, his method requires him not to hold any belief whose certainty is not obvious. However, Descartes points out that while searching for the truth, he had to decide in many practical issues. And it was not possible for him to apply his method to practical life properly since it would not be possible to get clear and distinct perception in each contingency of life. Then, how could he perform this task without a moral theory which could help him as a guide in making decisions necessary in daily problems? This was important for him because, if he could not find a solution to this problem then he would be in an indecisive position in many daily issues. And Descartes didn't want this since this would possibly create unwanted consequences which can prevent him from living a happy life.

Likewise, lest I should remain indecisive in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgments, and in order to live as happily as I could during this time, I formed for myself a provisional moral code consisting of just three or four maxims.⁸⁹

I want to call your attention to the fact that even in his avant-garde epistemic project -which he says is similar to breaking down your house and making a new one

⁸⁹ AT IV 23 ; CSM-I 122

instead of it- he pays attention to living happily. This, I think, typically shows that Descartes never overlooks human happiness even when there are extraordinary conditions. However, there also might be some other motivations for him to give this provisional moral code that are similar to the “subjective reason” which I have mentioned above: to stop hostile criticisms of schoolmen.

Otherwise it seemed that people would have objected that such a universal doubt could give rise to great indecision and moral chaos.⁹⁰

But still, this doesn't necessarily require that we should think the content of the provisional code is affected by non-philosophical motivations. In other words, on the one hand, the reason for Descartes stressing his position of staying as a moral agent during his search for truth might be to stop the attacks of conservatives, but on the other hand, the content of this moral code might represent his real philosophical opinions. I think that this issue would become clearer if we focused on the content of the provisional moral code. Now, I will present and discuss the maxims of this provisional moral code.⁹¹

Maxim 1

The first was to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions- the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live.

At first glance, this maxim could have a shocking affect since the writer of these lines is the one who champions not holding any belief unless it is absolutely certain. But on the other hand he says that we should hold opinions accepted by some

⁹⁰ AT II 35; CSMK 97

other people without judging them. However, if we place this rule into its proper place, which is making decisions in those circumstances where the method for certainty is not available, then the first rule becomes more intelligible; otherwise, it seems inevitable to make false judgments. For example, beside his general objectivity, Morgan makes such a comment about first maxim. "The first rule of the provisional morality advocating an apparently unreflective social conformism."⁹²

I will try to make the first maxim more understandable through an analogy. Let's think that all of a sudden we have found ourselves in a community about which we have no idea. In other words we don't know anything about their culture- their norms, ethics etc. But let's suppose that we have a chance for communication- either we know their language or in some other way. And think that we don't have any chance of saying that we are a stranger to their culture for demanding their tolerance for our possible mistakes. I think a Cartesian subject who left his previous beliefs and is taking his way for certainty and at the same time trying to live in a society is in similar conditions. The best way to act for a person in such conditions would be to observe others and try to act like the average of the sensible people in this society. By this way it is possible to minimize mistakes, which is the point Descartes emphasizes in the following part of maxim one.

I choose only the most moderate, both because these are always the easiest to act upon and probably the best (excess being usually bad), and also so that if I made a mistake, I should depart less from the right path than I would if I choose one extreme...

One can ask whether there are limits in "adaptation" to the society for such a Cartesian subject or not. There are limits actually and Descartes is aware of this. He

⁹¹ AT VI 23-28 ; CSM-I 122-124

makes a warning “not to give up some of our freedom”. I think this is an important normative remark which can function as a fuse showing us where to stop in adapting to society. Since we know that free-will is kind of *sine qua non* for Descartes to make sound judgments we can say that Descartes is on the one hand trying to adapt to the society but on the other hand not giving up his free-will. It is worth asking what this kind of adaptation could bring to the Cartesian subject. I think it gives the opportunity of having more time for reaching better judgments. Descartes points out that he is not just trying to obey the average but wants to make reforms through making better judgments.

I saw nothing in the world which remained always in the same state, and for my part I was determined to make my judgments more and more perfect, rather than worse. For these reasons I thought I would be sinning against good sense if I were to take my previous approval of something as obliging me to regard it as good later on, when it had perhaps ceased to be good or I no longer regarded it as such.

As is clear from the above quotation, the main motivation of Descartes is to grasp the situation in which he is, and try to increase *the natural light of reason*, i.e. use his reason more effectively, as much as he can. I think this strategy fits my analogy which I have given above. If we were in such a situation what we would do is, most probably, first try to get adaptation while keeping our freedom of will and at the same time try to use our reason as much as possible.⁹³

⁹² Morgan, Vance G; *Foundation of Cartesian Ethics* 1994; p.45

⁹³ In order to make my analogy more concrete, I can give an example of a soldier who has newly applied for military service. I think what he does would be in the following order. First obey the rules and act like everybody acts. But in the mean time keep your will as much as free –at least try not to act like a slave- and lastly as times passes, -or after getting adapted- use your mind better and try to make your life more comfortable.

Therefore, I think the expected function of the first maxim is in accordance with the main motivation of Descartes: that is, trying to make better judgments. Since the conditions are unfavorable he first prefers to respect the judgments of other sensible people keeping in mind to replace them with his own as the time passes.

Maxim 2

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.

While the first maxim is taken as a guide mainly for the process of making a decision or judgement, the second one is related to the action part. I think this maxim is the easiest to grasp since Descartes gives us a helpful analogy to understand it in the correct sense. He says to think of a traveller lost in a forest. Descartes advises him the best strategy to find his way back. That is: he

should not wander about turning this way and that, and still less stay in one place, but should keep walking as straight as he can in one direction, never changing it for slight reasons... he will at least end up in a place where he is likely to be better off than in the middle of a forest.

Needless to say, the message given here is: if you cannot overcome a doubtful opinion then the worst decisive action is better than best indecisive one. Besides stating this bold advice, i.e. don't change your decision, Descartes is open to change it if there is a very good reason. What he says is only "don't change it for slight reasons". In the following part of the second maxim he makes another important remark. He says that it might follow that the way you act could not bring satisfactory results to you or could even bring bad consequences. In such a situation, Descartes advises you not to feel regret and remorse since although the preferred action is not

the right one, the principle followed for this action is right. In other words, besides the general usefulness of this maxim, in cases where it gives unwanted results, you can still feel better because you have taken the right course of making a decision as far as the strategy of action in doubtful conditions is concerned.

If I look at the second maxim from the perspective of its role in the Cartesian project I can say that it offers the best rational strategy in cases in which you cannot overcome doubt but have to act in some way since in everyday life you must usually act without delay.⁹⁴

Maxim 3

My third maxim was to try always to master myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than the order of the world. In general I would become accustomed to believing that nothing lies entirely within our power except our thoughts, so that after doing our best in dealing with matters external to us whatever we fail to achieve is absolutely impossible so far as we are concerned. This alone, I thought, would be sufficient to prevent me from desiring in future something I could not get, and so to make me content.

I want to discuss two points related with the third maxim. Firstly, I claim that the third maxim seem to be formulated only for peace of mind. This is in contrast with the functions of the first two maxims, since they have specific roles in the journey of the Cartesian subject for seeking certainty beside their effects to make the subject feel content. Since it has no apparent function, I am inclined to say that Descartes prefers “to feel content” for its own sake. One may challenge my claim and say that a maxim which helps the Cartesian subject to feel content also helps his

⁹⁴ The second maxim offers a practical solution to a paradox known as Buridan's Ass: a hungry donkey is sitting exactly between two piles of hay, but there is nothing to determine him to go to one side rather than the other. And this indecisive donkey dies of hunger.

mind function better. In other words it is possible to say that when your mind is at peace then you can think better. And by this way, the third maxim might have been given a positive role in the project of the search for certainty. But I don't think that this is a strong justification for Descartes' formulating the third maxim. Simply because it is possible to give arguments from the opposite side: it also makes sense that feeling some anxiety or stress related with the problem in question makes one more efficient as far as mental work and creativity is concerned. Or better one can say that feeling content just makes your mind lazy.

To be able to get a clearer understanding let's approach the problem from a different perspective: what happens if one is not content in his search for certainty? Does the project lose its power in this case? I don't think so. The Cartesian method works perfectly even if the subject is not content. And one can continue the project for certainty even if he is anxious etc.

Therefore I don't think that Descartes is trying to get "peace of mind" for being more efficient, but that "to get contentment" is something desired for its own sake. I think this line of interpretation fits the general picture of Descartes better.

I am not excessively fond of glory—indeed if I dare to say so, I dislike it in so far as I regard it as opposed to that tranquility which I value above everything else.⁹⁵

The second thing I want to discuss about the third maxim is related with the proposed mechanism to be able to get contentment. That is the proper usage of free-will. In other words, when the Cartesian subject tries his best but cannot achieve the preferred goal, he changes his desire in such a way that he desires what he could achieve. The thing I want to point out is this, the aim that is "to get contentment" is

⁹⁵ AT VI 74 ; CSM-I 149

achieved through an operation of the free-will. As we could remember, will also has a critical role in achieving certain knowledge.

Therefore, I claim that although the third maxim does not have any critical function in the continuation of the Cartesian project for reaching certain knowledge, it has an inner mechanism which carries the spirit of Cartesian method: that is, proper use of free-will.

The Last Part of the Moral Code

After giving these three maxims Descartes makes a general comment about two things: 1- how he feels about searching for certain knowledge and 2-the place of the provisional morality in this picture. For the first one, he compares his occupation with the other occupations, and he concludes that he is doing the best one.

Since beginning to use this method I had felt such extreme contentment that I did not think one could enjoy any sweeter or purer one in this life. Every day I discovered by its means truths which, it seemed to me, were quite important... and the satisfaction they gave me so filled my mind that nothing else mattered to me. Besides, the sole basis of the foregoing three maxims was the plan I had to continue my self instruction.⁹⁶

Descartes explicitly claims that obtaining the important truths which are gained through his own method, gives him the best contentment or satisfaction. And after that he gives us a clue for the true perspective of interpreting the provisional morality: the maxims are helpful for the continuation of the process of achieving knowledge.

As we have seen above Descartes has stated the highest good for him: that is, the contentment gained through achieving knowledge via his method. However, this

is not enough to say that according to Descartes such a contentment is the highest human good. Because we don't have any clue that Descartes thinks that such a contentment is good for everybody. In other words, Descartes does not generalize this specific kind of contentment to other people. Although the same is true for the maxims of provisional morality as far as the text of *Discourse* is concerned, in one of his letters in which he refers to those three maxims he says that these maxims could make everybody content.

It seems to me that each person can make himself content by himself without any external assistance, provided he respects three conditions, which are related to the three rules of morality which I put forward in the *Discourse on the Method*.⁹⁷

3.2-Conclusion:

What is the foundation of the provisional moral code? Is it a necessary moral code for the epistemic journey of Descartes or a prescription for getting contentment? I don't think that we can find an answer to this question in Descartes. Because for him these two things are the two faces of one process since he gets contentment during his search for certainty.

However I claim that the linkage of these two processes is not an essential one. In other words, one can prefer to explore the truths as Descartes did, however one might not get contentment similar to Descartes. Moreover it is possible that after seeing that the truths are achievable through such a method one can even become more arrogant and greedy.

Because of these reasons I am inclined to treat the first two maxims as necessary moral codes to achieve right decisions for a person in search for certainty.

⁹⁶ AT VI 27; CSM-I 124

Whereas the third maxim is something preferable for its own sake, that is “to get contentment”.

3.3 The Passions of the Soul

I will investigate *The Passions of the Soul* (PS) through the lens of a philosophical perspective, that of Descartes’ account of the highest human good. Indeed my aim is in accordance with the main motivation of Descartes in investigating the passions; that is to give an account of mastery of passions to reach happiness, as he states at the end of the book.

“It (wisdom) teaches us to render ourselves such masters of them (passions), and to manage them with such ingenuity, that the evils they cause can be easily borne, and we even derive Joy from them all.”⁹⁸

At the beginning of *Passions* Descartes says that although the knowledge of the passions is always sought by previous philosophers, they didn’t give a satisfactory account of them.⁹⁹ For him one of the main reasons for not getting a true account of passions is the misconception of their origin. Descartes states that it should be the first task to distinguish the very origin of the passions: from the body or from the soul?¹⁰⁰

a) What are the Passions?

According to Descartes, the passions originate in bodily changes, which are transferred by the animal spirits¹⁰¹ to the pineal gland,¹⁰² and thereby cause affective

⁹⁷ AT IV 263; CSMK 257.

⁹⁸ PS; a.212

⁹⁹ PS; a.1

¹⁰⁰ PS.; a.2

¹⁰¹ The term “animal spirits” denotes corporeal substances. PS; a.10

¹⁰² Descartes thought that through this gland the body and the soul interact. PS; a.31

states in the soul. These affections are referred to the soul itself and not to the body.¹⁰³ He makes the definition of passions:

Perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul which are referred to it in particular and which are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of spirits.¹⁰⁴

Descartes discriminates six primitive passions. These are wonder, love, desire, hatred, joy and sadness. All the others are either products composed of these passions or they are the species of them.¹⁰⁵ He does not give the number of passions but rather says that they are indefinite or unlimited.¹⁰⁶

b) The Effects and Functions of the Passions

The principal effect of all the human passions is that they move and dispose the soul to will things. For example the feeling of fear moves the soul to want to flee, that of courage to want to fight.¹⁰⁷ The spirits which cause the passions at the same time prepare the body to behave in accordance with the passion. In other words, the agitation of the spirits which causes the passions and hence volitions, also disposes the body to make movements which help to realize these volitions. For example: when a sensible object excites our nerves this causes a movement of those nerve fibers and in turn this movement leads to opening of some pores in the brain in a certain way. There exist animal spirits in these pores and these spirits enter the muscles accordingly. And this leads to muscle contracting, hence movement.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ PS; a.27

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ PS; a.69

¹⁰⁶ PS; a.68

¹⁰⁷ PS; a.40

¹⁰⁸ PS; a.34

According to Descartes the function of the passions is simply this: they incline the soul to will the things nature tells us are useful and to prevent us from performing the harmful ones.¹⁰⁹

Although the natural function of all the passions is to preserve the body, - hence they are all useful or good-, the effects of the passions could bring harm in case they are exaggerated or misused.¹¹⁰ The reason for this is the fact that passions are not only caused but also maintained and strengthened by some particular movements of the spirits.¹¹¹ There are loops in the formation of passions which strengthen their effect. In other words, there are mechanisms in which agitation of animal spirits in turn causes agitation of more animal spirits. For example, let's think that the spirits moved the pineal gland and caused the passion of fear in the soul. It may happen that some other spirits go to the heart and this in turn triggers some other spirits to come back to the pineal gland and increases the fear feeling in the soul.¹¹² For the most part the passions are directed at immediate ends, and for this reason they exaggerate the goodness or badness of their objects, prompting us, for example, to flee quickly from apparent dangers. Although at first glance such an inclination - to escape for example- might be helpful to preserve body, it might not indicate the proper conduct. For example, if there is a threat to your family in this case instead of escaping, it would be proper to act bravely.

c) How to Master the Passions

We should not forget that the passions are mostly ordered for the preservation of the body, and not for proper moral conduct; for this reason, according to Descartes, it is necessary that the passions be regulated by reason, whose "proper

¹⁰⁹ PS; a.52

¹¹⁰ PS; a.211

¹¹¹ PS; a.46

¹¹² PS; a.36

weapons” against their misuse and excess are “firm and decisive judgments concerning the knowledge of good and evil, which it has resolved to follow in conducting the actions of its life.”¹¹³

However this task of using reason to master passions is not easy, because of two reasons. The first one is the fact that there is no direct relation between feeling a passion and knowing it, as Descartes states: “... those who are most agitated by their passions are not those who know them best.”¹¹⁴

In *Principles*, Descartes mentions this difficulty of diagnosing sensations, perceptions and appetites.¹¹⁵ But although we do not know them directly, it doesn’t mean that we cannot know them. Descartes offers a solution for gaining epistemic access to the passions. He states that you should only use what you have strictly perceived in your judgment. And he adds that this is a difficult rule to practice. But even though it is a difficult one it is so important. Because in order to gain mastery over the passions, first we should be able to be aware of them.¹¹⁶

The second difficulty stems from the fact that knowledge of the passions is not always enough to master them. Since, according to Descartes, our will cannot directly alter passions, but can only indirectly perform this task.¹¹⁷ Let’s take an example to clarify the issue: in case our soul is affected by a passion, like hatred, spirits prepare the body- in accordance with the passion- for “raising the hand to hit”. Let’s think that we had the knowledge of this passion and our reason has some good reasons for not hitting, i.e., our judgment is not in favor of hitting. At this moment, there are two forces acting on the soul: the effect of the spirits that cause the passion and the effect of the will. These two effects do not neutralize each other, but they

¹¹³ PS; a.48

¹¹⁴ PS; a.28

¹¹⁵ *Principles* part I, a. 66

¹¹⁶ PS; a.211

exist together.¹¹⁸ If we look at this struggle from the perspective of the body we see that our hand tends to raise involuntarily because of the agitation of the spirits; however our volition is such that we want to stop our hand rising. In such a case, the resulting action depends on the relative strengths of these two opposing forces. In mild cases we may control ourselves and not raise our hand for hitting, but if the agitation of the spirits is strong enough we may raise our hand for hitting. Strong souls have a higher capacity to control the effects of passions than weak ones. In other words, strong souls have more ability to stop the concomitant effect of spirits on the body, which are agitated during the passion, than the ability of weak souls.¹¹⁹ However, as I have said above there is a limit for the soul to stop the effects of the spirits on our body.

Descartes offers us a method which could enable even the weakest souls to master the passions. To do this, according to Descartes, we should change the relation between the movement of the gland by spirits and the thoughts arising from this movement. He states that this specific relation is established from the beginnings of our life, and it is similar to giving "meaning" to the "words" that we read.¹²⁰ In other words, we can replace the thoughts arising in our soul, resulting from the movements of the pineal gland, just as we could replace the meaning of a word. For example if we were instructed in such a way that the word "peace" means "bad things are going to happen, take care of your self"; and the word "danger" means "no problem" then we can, after a few trials, get used to these new connotations of the words.

¹¹⁷ PS; a.41

¹¹⁸ Just as is said in a.47: the soul feels driven almost at the same time to desire and not to desire the same thing

¹¹⁹ PS; a.48

¹²⁰ PS; a.50

Therefore, although it is not possible to stop the agitation of spirits and their effect on the pineal gland, it is fairly possible to replace the passion evoked by this specific movement of the gland. Needless to say the replacement of thoughts should be under the guidance of reason. It consists of revising our judgments about the importance of things. In one of his letters he underlines this point.

The true function of reason, then, in the conduct of life, is to examine and consider without passion the value of all the perfections.¹²¹

Descartes claims that one gets quickly habituated to the new judgments or thoughts after using them for a few times.¹²²

d) **Obstacles in Mastering the Passions**

Although Descartes shows us a possible way to master the passions using our reason as described above, this project inherits a difficulty, that is: one has to get prepared for all possible versions of external events which are objects of the passions –hence there are countless passions- in order to replace them with the thoughts preferred by reason. Descartes says that there cannot be many people who could get prepared in such a way.

...there are few people who are sufficiently prepared in this way against all sorts of contingencies, and that these movements, excited in the blood by the objects of the Passions, immediately follow so swiftly from mere impressions formed in the brain and from the dispositions of the organs, even though the soul may in no way contribute to them, that there is no human wisdom capable of withstanding them when one is insufficiently prepared to them.¹²³

¹²¹ AT IV 286; CSMK 265

¹²² PS; a.50

¹²³ PS; a.211

As we see, Descartes appear to state that it is not possible to master the passions when they have occurred unless you have prepared for them before. However, as we will see he has more to say.

e) Happiness in the Presence of Passions

Descartes thinks that it is still possible to be happy in the existence of passions which are not pleasant. If we remember the quotation at the beginning of this section Descartes was mentioning about the possibility of deriving joy from sadness. Although it sounds strange to be happy in the presence of distressing passions, this is because we assume a direct relation between a distressing passion and unhappiness, which is not necessarily true.

To be able to understand how one can derive joy from evil things we need to understand “inner excitations of the soul”. Descartes states that these are excitations of the soul created by the soul itself, hence different from the passions which stem from the body. Descartes explains their function in the quotation below.

(inner excitations of the soul) seem to be very good for keeping us from suffering any distress from the Passions: our good and our ill depend principally on inner excitations...although these excitations of the soul are often joined with the passions that are like them, they may also frequently be found with others, and may even originate from those that are in opposition to them.¹²⁴

Deriving one passion from another as in the case of “getting joy from sadness” is an operation of the soul which creates it through inner excitations. This task has a similar mechanism of controlling passions in which we were trying to separate the movements of the spirits from the thoughts to which they are commonly

¹²⁴ PS; a.147

matched. In the present case, Descartes offers another move: separation of disturbances originating from passions from the injury of the soul. In other words, although passion's disturbing effect is present, our soul doesn't get injured by this effect. This is achieved through inner excitations of the soul which are stronger than the passions.¹²⁵

Provided our soul always has what it takes to be content in its interior, none of the disturbances that come from elsewhere have any power to harm it. On the contrary, they serve to increase its joy, for in seeing that it cannot be injured by them it comes to understand its perfection... (for our soul) to be content, it needs only to follow virtue diligently.¹²⁶

Descartes proposes to us to follow virtue, which is clearly defined in one of his letters as: "a firm and constant resolution to carry out whatever reason recommends"¹²⁷ But it is still an unanswered question why one gets happy if she follows virtue.

According to Descartes if one makes the best choice among the options presented by her intellect then her conscience cannot get angry at her for being mistaken in doing anything she judged to be best. In other words, our subject has done her best. And she knows that if she did so, then she could have an inner excitation, which is a thought. In other words, Descartes suggests that we think in the following way: although the result is not good, I have done my best. I used my free will in the best way which is something that I should be proud of. Since the rightness or wrongness of a decision should be judged under the circumstances in which it is made, then it is not fair to judge my decision after seeing its result.

¹²⁵ PS; a.148

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ AT IV 265; CSM-III 258

According to Descartes, such inner excitations or thoughts originating within the soul are strong enough that one can derive joy from sadness. Moreover, seeing that our soul is not distressed by these passions helps it to understand its perfection. And by this way, passions never can disturb the tranquility of the soul. And this in turn increases its contentment.

Although Descartes says that following virtue is sufficient for happiness, he warns us that it should be enlightened by intellect for happiness to be solid.¹²⁸ Since will only prefers the options presented to it by intellect, in case intellect does not provide good options then one can go into evil courses. Because of this reason, Descartes recommends an ethical perfection called generosity in order to be happy regardless of the external conditions.

Generosity is a disposition of the soul, which unites wisdom (perfect use of intellect) and virtue (perfect use of free will) together.

Generosity, which makes a man esteem himself as highly as he can legitimately esteem himself, consists only in this: partly in his understanding that there is nothing which truly belongs to him but this free control of his volitions, and no reason why he ought to be praised or blamed except that he uses it well or badly; and partly in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well.¹²⁹

As we see, generosity brings us to legitimately or justly esteem ourselves and one of its parts includes understanding the critical role of our free will in our conduct. Because of these it requires wisdom. Besides that, generosity requires a firm and constant resolution to use our free will, i.e. virtue.

¹²⁸ AT IV 267; CSMK 258

¹²⁹ PS; a.153

Needless to say, generosity has no relation with external conditions like being rich, noble etc., but only requires one to use his intellect and will in a good way. Descartes derives another conclusion from this specific requirement of generosity regarding our relations to other people, that is, every person should be evaluated with the criteria of generosity, not with the criteria of richness, beauty, fame etc.¹³⁰ Descartes says that if a person lacks generosity still we should not blame him. Because this is mostly due to lack of knowledge rather than the lack of good will.¹³¹

4-THE HIGHEST HUMAN GOOD FOR DESCARTES

Before looking at the account of Descartes of the highest human good, it is better to have a general idea about what happiness is for him. If we follow Descartes' methodological advice given at the beginning of the *Passions* then we should first get clear about whether happiness belongs to the body or to the soul. He delineates this issue in one of his letters.

Happiness is not inseparable from cheerfulness and bodily comfort. This is proved ... by bodily exercises like hunting and tennis which are pleasant in spite of being arduous. Indeed we see that often the fatigue and exertion involved increase the pleasure... The soul derives contentment from such exercise because in the process it is made aware of the strength, or skill or some other perfection of the body to which it is joined...¹³²

As we see for Descartes happiness is possible in the presence of bodily discomfort; nevertheless the feeling about the perfection of the body might be one of the causes of happiness. According to Descartes there might be many other causes of happiness which stem from the soul itself -like some inner excitations of the soul-

¹³⁰ PS; a.154

¹³¹ Ibid.

provided that they cause *pleasure of the soul*¹³³ which is the very definition of happiness for him. Hence we can for sure say that according to Descartes happiness belongs to the soul.

According to Descartes there are two classes of things which give us happiness: 1-those that depend on us: virtue and wisdom; 2-those which do not depend on us: honor, riches, and health.¹³⁴

He states that those having both of them get more contentment; however it is still enough to possess the items in the first class to be happy. Because, he says, "a small vessel may be just as full as a large one, although it contains less liquid."¹³⁵ Therefore, according to him the items in the first class- virtue and wisdom- are both necessary and sufficient for happiness.

Then we can say that happiness comes from the perfect use of intellect and free will, i.e. wisdom and virtue. In this picture, intellect offers the best option to will and will is inclined to give assent to it in a firm and constant manner. We have seen that the ethical perfection generosity is achieved through a combination of these two perfections.

If we come to the topic of the highest human good for Descartes then we see that he discriminates happiness from the supreme good.

For happiness is not the supreme good, but presupposes it, being the contentment or satisfaction of the mind which results from possessing it...for the supreme good is undoubtedly the thing we ought to set ourselves as the goal of all our actions, and the resulting contentment of the mind is also

¹³² AT IV 309; CSMK-III 270

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ AT IV 264; CSMK 257

¹³⁵ Ibid.

rightly called our end, since it is the attraction which makes us seek the supreme good.¹³⁶

As we see, Descartes states that happiness is the contentment of the soul that results from possessing the supreme good. However he does not clarify what the supreme good or highest good is. In one of his letters we see a further clarification about the supreme good: "the supreme good of each individual is a different thing, and consists only in a firm will to do well and the contentment which this produces."¹³⁷ This passage defines the supreme good as a specific contentment achieved through proper use of free will or following virtue. So according to this passage the supreme good is a contentment such that it could be achieved by following virtue. In other words it is not an ordinary contentment which could arise from bodily pleasures etc. However as we see in the first quotation the supreme good is defined as the cause of the contentment of the soul. Can we reason in such a way that indeed the supreme good is virtue itself? At first glance, the intersection point of the two quotations about the supreme good appears to point to virtue as the supreme good. However, if we take a closer look at the very definition of virtue, we see that it is the perfect use of free will in such a way that it produces contentment in the soul. Therefore, I will claim that it seems not to be easy to give a detailed definition of "virtue" without including the contentment of the soul. In other words, virtue is a kind of operation of will in such a way that it produces contentment of the soul. If so, can we say that the highest human good for Descartes is not contentment of the soul but virtue? I think we can't since whenever we say virtue we automatically refer to the contentment of the soul as well.

¹³⁶ AT IV 275; CSMK 261

¹³⁷ AT V 82; CSMK 324

We have another passage from Descartes which could help us. In one of his letters he makes the following analogy.

Suppose there is a prize for hitting a bull's-eye: you can make people want to hit the bull's-eye; conversely, those who see the bull's-eye are not thereby induced to fire at it if they do not know there is prize to be won. So too virtue, which is the bull's-eye, does not come to be strongly desired when it is seen on its own; and contentment, like the prize, cannot be gained unless it is pursued.

As we see, for Descartes virtue only functions when it sees the end which is contentment of the soul (the prize). Without desiring it, seeing the bull's-eye (virtue) does not produce any result. But contentment of the soul is justly achieved only through virtue.

From these I conclude that for Descartes the supreme good or the highest good is a specific contentment of the soul achieved by following virtue.

SECTION THREE

1-COMPARISON BETWEEN TWO ACCOUNTS OF THE HIGHEST HUMAN GOOD

In this part of my work I will try to make a comparison between both philosophers' accounts of the highest good. I will first mention about the similarities between these two accounts and after that I will point out the differences.

a) Similarity

I think there is one similarity between the two philosophers' highest goods: that is that both give accounts of the highest good containing godly features.

The Aristotelian highest human good, which is in my view contemplation, is an activity which is the only thing man shares with the gods. It is a kind of perfection man can possess. Indeed this is the reason for Aristotle to choose it as the highest good. If we remember his *ergon* (function) argument, Aristotle derives the specific function of the man from his distinctive property, which is *having rational activity*. For him the function of man should be searched for in this higher part instead of the lower ones –like the nutritive and perceptive parts etc. - which he shares with other living beings.

After that he takes the “better” part of this rational element which is, according to him, the part *exercising thought*. The very reason for contemplation to be the highest human good is that it is the activity of this highest faculty of the mind which exercises thought. Hence contemplation is the most perfect thing a man could do. And in the Aristotelian picture, it is gods who continuously perform this activity.

Similarly, the highest good of Descartes which is *specific contentment of the soul achieved following virtue*, has some important relations with a godly faculty which is freedom of will. According to Descartes, this is the only unlimited and perfect faculty in man and proper use of this faculty is accepted as the very definition of virtue.

b) Differences

I will mention about two big differences.

1-Aristotle and Descartes have different accounts of causation which in turn lead them to have different approaches in defining the highest human good. The most critical difference which I will mention here is the absence of teleological cause in Descartes' philosophy.

I consider the customary search for final causes to be totally useless in physics; there is considerable rashness in thinking myself capable of investigating the –impenetrable – purposes of God.¹³⁸

Absence of the final or teleological cause in Descartes' system enables him to challenge the Aristotelian *ergon* argument since for Descartes there is no given function or purpose of man, and even if there is this is known only by God.

Descartes, in one of his letters, gives us his ideas about the previous accounts of the highest human good, including Aristotle's. He says that for Aristotle the

highest human good is related to “the perfections of which human nature is capable.”¹³⁹ and he adds that this doesn’t help him to understand what the highest human good is. Simply because for Descartes “possible or potential perfections” are not necessarily actualized, while for Aristotle it is *natural* for such a potential perfection to be actualized; in other words if there is no final cause, then a potentiality does not have to be realized.

Moreover, there is no privation of the good resulting from this non-realization. Since there is no final cause, there is no link between “realization” and “good”. In other words, in the Cartesian system things do not approach the good as they realize their potentials since in Descartes’ philosophy, there is nothing like the Aristotelian good to which every natural change is directed. Once you don’t have any “final cause” but God’s grace instead of it, then there is no need for the good to which everything has an inherent tendency to reach.

2-The second difference is about the relation between each philosopher’s highest good and their philosophy in general. In this part I will claim that in Aristotle, the highest good is closely linked to his philosophy whereas in Descartes, the highest good does not have a necessary relation with his philosophy. In other words, the Aristotelian account of the highest human good is a necessity derivable to a large extent from his philosophy in general -including his metaphysics, his physics etc., whereas for Descartes’ philosophy, this relation is absent.

One may object to my claim that Descartes’ highest human good is essentially an operation of will, which is necessarily derivable from his philosophy since Descartes’ epistemology and ethics is based on this specific use of free will. In other words, as we have seen before, in Cartesian philosophy the truth and the good

¹³⁸ AT VII 56; CSM-II 39

conduct are determined in such a way that will gives assent to the best option presented by the intellect. Therefore his highest good is in accordance with his rest of his philosophy. Although this is true, for Descartes there is still an important gap between his highest human good and the rest of his philosophy; that is the end or goal of the will: contentment of the soul. If Descartes had not included this “contentment of the soul” as a criterion for the proper use of the will or virtue, than we could say that his highest human good account and the rest of his philosophy have close and necessary links. However, there is no necessary requirement for accepting the contentment of the soul as a criterion of virtue. This criterion seems to be a contingent one; in other words Descartes holds it for its own sake, not as a requirement of his philosophy.

Moreover I will claim that a radically different account of highest human good is perfectly compatible with Descartes’ philosophy in general. Whereas this is not possible for Aristotelian philosophy.

If I start with the Aristotelian one, as we have seen in the first part of our discussion, the Aristotelian account of the highest human good is necessarily derived from his philosophy through the *ergon* argument. In this argument as we have seen, Aristotle seeks the function of man. And we know that if we get the function of man then we can derive the good for man since every thing in the Aristotelian cosmology tries to reach a better state, hence the good. That is why there is a strong relation between the “function of man” and the “good for man”. Although it is possible to hold different ideas and still stay in the paradigm of Aristotelian philosophy, the change cannot be a radical one as is possible in Descartes’ case.

As I have claimed in the part in which I have investigated Descartes' provisional moral code, one of Descartes ethical principles-the third maxim- in conduct of life does not have strong relations with his main project, that is, the search for certainty.

And it is the third maxim which has a very important role in sustaining the peace of mind or the contentment of the soul which is the highest good for Descartes. I claim that one can easily continue to search for the truth without holding this third maxim. Hence I say that it is not a rational extension of Descartes metaphysics' or epistemology but a contingent maxim he holds.

To make my claim more sound, let's think of another Descartes who has the same motivation for reaching true beliefs and had taken the exactly the same way for searching for certainty as Descartes did in *Meditations*. Let's continue to think that this new Descartes used a similar method including the first two maxims of the provisional moral code but not the third maxim which advises one to change his own ideas instead of the external conditions to reach the contentment of the soul. Our new Descartes, say, instead of holding the original third maxim, championed the following idea:

The only important thing in this world is to reach certainty. We should use our reason in the best way to reach true beliefs. But this is a long and hard way to take, since we should not only struggle to get certainty but we should also struggle with the whole Scholastic system and its conservative supporters. In this noble way for seeking truth it is obvious we might experience all kinds of anxieties and pain; however we should not give up our powerful demand for certainty since it is nobler than peace of soul. It is God's grace that we have an intellect and a perfect faculty of free will; then we should use it in the best way to reach certainty; otherwise we

would not be only ignorant but sinful Christians too. The anxiety that we are going to face in our walk to certainty- since we are not only going to search for it but announce it as well by publishing books which will be a great cause of anxiety as far as the guards of Scholastics are concerned- is the highest and noblest human good since it stems from the search for certainty.

I think the ethical approach of our new Descartes is perfectly compatible with the main structure of the Cartesian project, that is, to search for certainty. Moreover, it might be claimed that this new moral maxim fits better the revolutionary epistemology of Descartes which started the modern age in philosophy. I will not go that far since it is beyond the horizon of my work. But I want to underline that our new Descartes still follows virtue, but this virtue is different than the original Descartes' virtue in the following respect: it does not hold the contentment of the soul as a criterion of proper use of free will or virtue.

Therefore I claim that the highest human good of Descartes can be radically changed without making any big change in his philosophy in general. But this is not possible for the Aristotelian one.

2-CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have presented and discussed the Aristotelian and Cartesian accounts of the highest human good. After that I have compared them. I have found that they share one similarity: that is both accounts have godly features. For Aristotle, the highest human good is "contemplation", which is an activity that God does. And for Descartes the highest human good is "contentment of the soul" which is reached only by a godly perfection that man acquires: that is the best use of free will.

However there are basic differences between the two accounts of the highest human good. One of the differences originates from the difference in their accounts of causation. Aristotle holds a special cause called the *final cause* which requires everything to change in the direction of performing its function. Since Aristotle looks at the issue from this perspective, his account of the highest human good is related with the function of man. On the other hand, for Descartes there is not any final cause. Because of that he tries to formulate his account of the highest human good from the perspective of what the goal of man is. From these different paths, Aristotle reaches contemplation as the highest human good, and Descartes reaches contentment of the soul.

Secondly I have investigated these two accounts from the perspective of their relation to the general philosophy of these philosophers. I have concluded that although Aristotle's account of the highest human good can be derived, to a large extent, from his philosophy, Descartes' account of the highest human good has no inherent necessary relation with the rest of his philosophy.

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