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## Book Review: The Will To Reason, Theodicy, And Freedom In Descartes

Emily Kelahan

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*The Will to Reason: Theodicy and Freedom in Descartes*, by C. P. Ragland. Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 272. \$78.00 (hardcover).

EMILY KELAHER, Illinois Wesleyan University

C. P. Ragland's *The Will to Reason* is a nuanced and novel discussion of two central issues in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*: the scope and nature of the skeptical doubts of the First Meditation and the nature of human freedom in light of Descartes' Fourth Meditation theodicy. Ragland deftly engages rival interpretations of a variety of Cartesian doctrines, registering agreement and disagreement with precision. Overall, his conclusions are carefully defended and richly supported by text. Despite the title, Descartes' skeptical problems and his view of the nature of human freedom sometimes seem only tenuously connected. However, by the end, Ragland does connect the dots for his readers and enables them to see why he believes these things are importantly related.

Chapter 1 is an analysis of the scope and nature of the skeptical worries raised in the First Meditation. Descartes' skepticism is often described as methodological. He raises doubts about the reliability of both the senses and reason in order to show that reason is superior to sensation and, when used properly, yields reliable beliefs. In fact, many scholars believe this is *the* project of the *Meditations*, establishing the authority of reason over the senses and against skepticism. Ragland agrees with this big-picture view, but stakes out less familiar ground on the type of skeptical worry with which Descartes is concerned and how best to handle the Cartesian Circle. He believes Descartes is primarily concerned with "consequent," not "antecedent," skepticism, afflicting those who initially trust reason only to discover that it is self-undermining in exactly the way highlighted by the Cartesian Circle. Descartes needs God as a guarantor of his clear and distinct perceptions, but reason suggests that he might have a defective nature such that he errs systematically. This doubt is universal, applying even to the truth rule and clear and distinct perceptions, and, in the case of clear and distinct perceptions, indirect. Descartes cannot doubt clear and distinct perceptions when he's having them, but only retrospectively. However, this retrospective doubt is what Descartes needs to remove with the guarantee afforded by the existence of an omnipotent God.

Following some other interpreters, Ragland endorses a version of the "two-level" solution to the Cartesian Circle wherein there are two types of knowledge Descartes has at different crucial moments. He has *cognitio*, a lower level of knowledge of current clear and distinct perceptions, when he begins to trace the circle, but he acquires *scientia* once he proves God's existence and the truth rule. This allows him to be certain of clear



and distinct perceptions he's had in the past even when he's not perceiving them. Included in this stock is his perception of an omnipotent God, which precludes the possibility of a deceptive nature. I'm not convinced that this solves Descartes' circularity problem, but I see that the payoff is sizeable and credit Ragland for engaging deeply with several objections.

Illuminatingly, chapter 2 casts Descartes' Fourth Meditation theodicy as epistemological as much as theological. Far from an unnecessary interlude in the *Meditations*, Ragland argues that Descartes' theodicy is crucial to his overall project of establishing the reliability of reason against skepticism. God is the guarantor of his clear and distinct perceptions, but the fact that he errs counts as rational evidence against the existence of an omnipotent God. Thus, Descartes must show that error does not entail that an omnipotent God does not exist. To do this, Ragland argues that Descartes actually responds to two different questions using two different strategies. First, how is *actual* error compatible with God's perfection? Ragland is satisfied with the traditional free will defense as an answer. Secondly, why would an omnipotent, perfectly benevolent God give humans freedom given that it makes error *possible*? Ragland accepts the traditional answer here, too. God has a morally sufficient reason for giving us the kind of freedom that makes error possible, namely, that the universe is more perfect with humans possessing the kind of freedom that leads to error than it would be if we did not. Distinguishing these questions is helpful, but invoking the principle of organic unities is fairly tried and true. However, Ragland's engagement with Michael Della Rocca on the related question of why God would allow errors with respect to the senses but not with respect to clear and distinct perceptions reminds one of why both of these philosophers are so very worth reading. Ragland resolves the mystery posed by Descartes' differential treatment of sense-based beliefs and clear and distinct perceptions by arguing that Descartes endorses a version of Kant's "ought implies can" principle. It's not that Descartes assumes the truth of his clear and distinct perceptions before the end of the Fourth Meditation, but rather that he does not believe that God requires us to do what we cannot do, namely, resist assent to clear and distinct perceptions. We can, however, resist assent to obscure and confused perceptions, and should. One might wonder whether this is a genuine normative principle capable of saving reason from inconsistency. Ragland guards against this worry somewhat by connecting it to a principle that is uncontroversially normative, "avoid error," but I worry that this move doesn't have quite enough horsepower. Despite my reservations, I will never teach or think about the Fourth Meditation in quite the same way having read this chapter.

Convinced that Descartes has shown that human error and the divine guarantee are compossible and also that Descartes has a way of defending reason against charges of inconsistency, chapters 3 and 4 seek to further elucidate the murky notion of freedom that generated so much trouble in the Fourth Meditation. Ragland argues that, to the surprise of many, Descartes consistently endorses a version of the Principle of Alternative

Possibilities (PAP), or the view that freedom requires being able to do otherwise than we actually do. To begin, Ragland stakes his position on how best to understand Descartes' puzzling, and only, definition of freedom:

[i] the will, or freedom of choice . . . simply consists in this: that we are able to do or not do (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid); [ii] or better [*vel potius*], simply in this: that we are carried in such a way toward what the intellect proposes for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, that we feel ourselves determined [*determinari*] to it by no external force. (AT 7:57/CSM 2:40; Ragland's translation)

This definition is composed of two clauses, and it's not clear how they relate. The first clause says that freedom is a two-way power (to do or not do). The second says that freedom is spontaneity (not being determined by an external force). Does the second clause *replace* the first? Does it *expand* on it? Ragland argues that it *clarifies* it. Two-way power and spontaneity are "two sides of the same coin" and "any free act with one must also have the other" (86). Ragland pores over the text of the *Meditations* to support this reading of the definition and his claim that Descartes is committed to the PAP. The latter is clear only once we acknowledge two different sorts of two-way power: power in virtue of not being externally determined and power in virtue of being motivationally indifferent. While Descartes cannot be motivated otherwise when having a clear and distinct perception, he could have done otherwise in the sense that he is not externally determined to assent to clear and distinct perceptions.

Chapter 4 advances textual support from outside the *Meditations* for Ragland's claim that Descartes is committed to a weak version of the PAP (freedom requires the ability to do otherwise in the sense of not being externally determined). Particularly interesting is his discussion of the connection between Giebieuf and Descartes where he argues against Kenny and Gilson in favor of the weak PAP view. By the close of the chapter, Ragland has made Descartes' uncomfortable positioning with respect to freedom in the Fourth Meditation clear. He is, apparently, mired in an inconsistent quartet. Because Descartes treats the will and freedom of choice as synonyms in his Fourth Meditation definition, he is committed to (1) freedom is essential to the will (FEW). He is also, according to Ragland, committed to (2) PAP. Together these entail that alternative possibilities are essential to the will. Because Descartes believes that we cannot resist assenting to clear and distinct perceptions, he is committed to (3) clear and distinct determinism (CDD). However, because he believes that assent to the *cogito* is voluntary, he is committed to (4) judgment is a voluntary act (JVA). Together CDD and JVA entail that alternative possibilities are *not* essential to the will. As Ragland observes, the conflict is really between CDD and PAP, so one must reject Cartesian freedom as incoherent, reject CDD, reject PAP, or rethink CDD or PAP such that they no longer conflict. Ragland takes the last option with his two senses of two-way power, one of which doesn't deny CDD.

Throughout chapters 3 and 4 I found myself resisting Ragland's clever two-two-way powers solution to the inconsistent quartet. It's clear that we are not motivationally indifferent when it comes to clear and distinct perceptions, and so Ragland must argue that we are not externally determined. But what counts as "external"? As clear and distinct perceptions ultimately come from God, it would seem that we lack freedom in both senses of two-way power. Ragland goes to some lengths in addressing these kinds of worries in chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 advances a compatibilist reading of Descartes that hinges on a distinction between categorical and hypothetical two-way power (we now have a two-two-two-way-powers solution). Categorical power is the ability to do otherwise in the exact same circumstances. Hypothetical power is "counterfactual categorical ability" to do otherwise in "relevantly *different* circumstances" (131). What differentiates the circumstances is what an agent decides to make the object of her attention if she were to trace back time. It is true that agents are determined by clear and distinct perceptions once attended to, and so lack categorical freedom, but they might have initially directed their attention elsewhere, so hypothetically they are free. Intellect does determine the will in cases of clear and distinct perceptions, but it doesn't determine the will in all cases, so, in opposition to his previous view, Ragland maintains that Descartes is a compatibilist. I remain unconvinced that this analysis fully addresses concerns about what's external to the agent, and I suspect that this kind of two-two-two-way freedom may strike some as not being freedom at all. Chapter 6 details the ways in which Descartes sees freedom as coming in degrees. While interesting, it fills out Cartesian freedom as Ragland sees it without doing much to advance his claim that, properly understood, freedom helps Descartes refute skepticism. Again, freedom helps by being the fall guy for error in the Fourth Meditation, which insulates God against the charge that divine nature might be such that we cannot reasonably expect human nature to not be defective, allowing us to once again rule out defective nature doubt and to trust reason.

Chapter 7 returns to the connection between freedom and skepticism about reason by way of an examination of how to reconcile divine providence with human freedom, but this time the news isn't good for Descartes. According to Ragland, this is where the Cartesian project really comes off the rails. After contextualizing Descartes' views on a variety of interconnecting doctrines, Ragland carefully explains that Descartes has a unique perspective on providence and freedom that borrows some elements from the Dominicans and some from the Jesuits. God creates the eternal truths and all "conditional future contingents." Because of this, God *logically* determines human action even if God does not *causally* determine human action. As Ragland puts it, "creatures may not be puppets, but they certainly seem like robots, merely acting out a program that God wrote" (221). Reason tells us both that we are free and that God logically determines our actions—conflicting propositions—forcing us to question its reliability. As an attempt at reconciling this conflict (or perhaps just a surrender),

Descartes concedes that we are rationally incapable of fully understanding God's power. Thus, a weakness in our reason is exposed *and* we cannot be sure that God would not give us a defective nature.

Though hard to resist in the moment, one must, of course, question whether Ragland's interpretation of Descartes on human freedom is the most accurate account of how Descartes actually conceived of it. If it is, one must question whether it can carry the load Ragland thinks it can even for the longer but ultimately short distance that it goes. At the very least, Ragland shows that the Cartesian project of establishing the authority and reliability of reason against skepticism might implode at a later juncture than is commonly thought, and this is an important contribution. Insightful and compellingly argued, *The Will to Reason* is a seminal work on Descartes' view of human freedom and his skeptical crisis likely to challenge and delight scholars for years to come.