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# Adding Substance to the Debate: Descartes on Freedom of the Will

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## Abstract

It is widely accepted by commentators that Descartes believed in freedom of the will, but it is fiercely debated whether he accepted a libertarian or compatibilist notion of freedom. With this paper I argue that an examination of Descartes' conception of 'substance,' specifically his distinction between divine substance and created substance, is a fruitful source for the debate regarding Descartes on freedom of the will. I argue that the commentators who read Descartes as a libertarian are forced to focus on passages that emphasize the similarity between God and humans. This is problematic because Descartes is clear that there is a non-univocality between God and humans concerning 'substance.' This non-univocality between God and humans puts a strain on the libertarian's focus. During the course of this argument I examine the passages frequently cited by commentators concerning Cartesian freedom and I make explicit the analogy between Descartes' view on substance and freedom. The upshot is that Descartes' considered account of substance is further evidence for the compatibilist reading.

## Introduction

It is widely accepted by commentators that Descartes believed in freedom of the will, but it is fiercely debated whether he accepted a libertarian or compatibilist notion of freedom. With this paper I argue that an examination of Descartes' conception of 'substance,' specifically his distinction between divine substance and created substance, is a fruitful source for the debate regarding Descartes on freedom of the will. To my knowledge this connection between Descartes' conceptions of substance and freedom has not been explored and I intend to start the exploration with this paper. In section one I argue that Descartes' compatibilist understanding of human freedom stems from an acceptance of theological determinism. I then consider, and respond to, the objection that Descartes' clear rejection of

intellectual determinism<sup>1</sup> undermines theological determinism and along with it a compatibilist account of freedom. In the second section I begin by considering the passages that seem to motivate a libertarian reading in which Descartes says that we are most like God with respect to our will. In response I argue that Descartes understood some concepts as applying non-univocally, but at the same time non-equivocally, to humans and God. To support this argument I outline Descartes' "independence conception" of substance as one example of this sort of non-univocal and non-equivocal concept. I conclude by arguing that Descartes' understanding of 'freedom' is analogous to his understanding of 'substance' and by offering a sketch of what it is that makes human freedom similar to divine freedom. The upshot is that the analogy between Descartes' understanding of humans as substances and his understanding of humans' freedom provides additional evidence for the compatibilist interpretation.

## I. Theological Determinism and Compatibilism

In the *Fourth Meditation* Descartes seems to be explicit that the human will is completely free and unlimited. He writes, "I cannot complain that the will or freedom of choice which I received from God is not sufficiently extensive or perfect, since I know by experience that it is not restricted in any way" (CSM II.39).<sup>2</sup> This is in line with a libertarian understanding of freedom which holds that freedom is incompatible with determinism. In order for one to be free he or she must have the power to affirm or deny despite everything that has preceded (Ragland 2006-A, p. 75). However, many commentators, including myself, believe that this seemingly explicit endorsement of libertarianism is not Descartes' considered view regarding human freedom. In other texts, and even in other passages from the *Meditations*, Descartes seems to indicate that the human will is not completely unrestricted. In his October 1645 letter to Princess Elizabeth, Descartes explains that God is "a supremely perfect being; and he would not be supremely perfect if anything could happen in the world without coming entirely from him" (CSMK 272). In the *Passions* Descartes writes, "[N]othing can possibly happen other than as Providence has determined from all eternity. Providence is, so to speak, a fate or immutable necessity" (CSM I.380). Descartes makes it even more clear that God's determination applies to the human will later in the October 1645 letter to Elizabeth and in another letter written a month later (November 1645):

[P]hilosophy by itself is able to discover that the slightest thought could not enter into a person's mind without God's willing, and having willed from all eternity, that it should so enter...God is the universal cause of everything in such a way as to be also the total cause of everything; and so nothing can happen without his will. (CSMK 272)

[T]he greater we deem the works of God to be, the better we observe the infinity of his power; and the better known this infinity is to us, the more certain we are that it extends even to the most particular actions of human beings...I do not think that you have in mind some change in God's decrees occasioned by actions that depend on our free will. No such change is theologically tenable. (CSMK 273)<sup>3</sup>

As for free will, I agree that if we think only of ourselves we cannot help regarding ourselves as independent; but when we think of the infinite power of God, we cannot help believing that all things depend on him, and hence that our free will is not exempt from his dependence...The independence which we experience and feel in ourselves, and which suffices to make our actions praiseworthy or blameworthy, is not incompatible with a dependence of quite another kind, whereby all things are subject to God. (CSMK 277)

Descartes' considered view seems to have been that theological determinism is true, or in other words, that God is the total cause of everything and that nothing could occur, even a human thought or volition, without God's willing it. The third passage is most telling for the compatibilist interpretation because Descartes clearly states that the human will is not exempt from God's determination and that the freedom which makes us praiseworthy and blameworthy for our actions is *compatible* with this dependence. Descartes is not ruling out freedom of the will, he is simply saying that our freedom is of a sort that it is compatible with divine determination.

These explicit pronouncements of theological determinism from the *Passions* and Descartes' *Correspondence* are accompanied by similar passages in the *Principles*. In Part One, while Descartes is describing the principles of human knowledge, our understanding of God, and the relation between this understanding and our understanding of all other things, he writes:

Now since God alone is the true cause of everything which is or can be, it is very clear that the best path to follow when we philosophize will be to start from the knowledge of God himself and try to deduce an explanation of the things created by him. This is the way to acquire the most perfect scientific knowledge, that is, knowledge of effects through their causes. (CSM I.201)

This seems to be a clear expression of Descartes' view that God is the cause of everything that is actual *and* everything that is possible or is yet to be actual.

When one considers the view that God determines *everything*, in conjunction with Descartes' belief that humans have freedom of the will, one seems to be led to the natural conclusion that Descartes was some sort of compatibilist, or in other words, that divine determinism does not exclude freedom of the will. However, the commentators who read Descartes as a libertarian often argue that while these passages all *seem* to suggest that Descartes accepted theological determinism, they fall short of definitively answering the question of whether Descartes was a compatibilist or whether he exempted the will from God's determination.<sup>4</sup> This is generally followed by an argument alleging that Descartes *did* take the will to be exempted from divine determination. These arguments contend that Descartes rejected intellectual determinism, thereby exempting the will from determination, and thus rejecting divine determinism. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to prove that Descartes accepted intellectual determinism, I will use the remainder of this first section to argue against the libertarian reading by highlighting passages that *suggest* that Descartes *did* accept intellectual determinism. The limited goal of this argument is merely to demonstrate that the libertarian reading is not *obviously* the correct interpretation. Creating this logical space, in which it is possible that Descartes accepted intellectual determinism, is all that is required for my thesis to remain viable and be used as additional evidence supporting a compatibilist reading. In other words, as long as it is still an open question whether Descartes accepted intellectual determinism, my proposal that Descartes' conception of 'substance' is analogous to his conception of 'freedom' should be counted in favor of the compatibilist interpretation.

In the spirit of the limited argument I am attempting to make against the libertarian reading, I would like to begin by noting that the question of whether Descartes accepted theological determinism is a separate issue from the question of whether he accepted intellectual determinism. An acceptance of theological determinism *does not* necessitate an acceptance of intellectual determinism and a denial of intellectual determinism does not necessitate a denial of theological determinism.<sup>5</sup> While this shows that it would be invalid to move directly from an individual's rejection of intellectual determinism to the conclusion that the individual also rejected theological determinism, a different argumentative move that a commentator might make is to offer textual evidence that Descartes was a libertarian and conclude from this that Descartes rejected theological determinism. One example of an attempt at this sort of strategy is offered by C.P. Ragland when he alleges that passages from the *Passions* and the *Principles* demonstrate that Descartes took the human will, and thus freedom, to be exempted from divine determination:

[W]e must recognize that everything is guided by divine Providence, whose eternal decree is infallible and immutable to such an extent that, *except for matters it has*

*determined to be dependent on our free will*, we must consider everything that affects us to occur of necessity and as it were by fate. (CSM I.380 emphasis added)<sup>6</sup>

[W]e can easily get ourselves into great difficulties if we attempt to reconcile this divine preordination with the freedom of our will, or attempt to grasp both these things at once...But we shall get out of these difficulties if we remember that our mind is finite, while the power of God is infinite...We may attain sufficient knowledge of this power to perceive clearly and distinctly that God possesses it; but we cannot get a sufficient grasp of it to see how it *leaves the free actions of men undetermined*. (CSM I.206 emphasis added)<sup>7</sup>

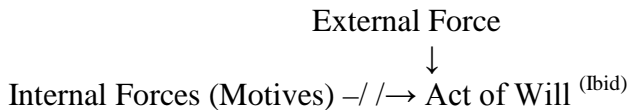
I admit that these passages *seem* to be exempting human freedom from determination; however, they are not definitive and can be still understood within a compatibilist notion of freedom. But before we get ahead of ourselves we must first examine Descartes' only explicit definition of "free will." In the *Fourth Meditation* Descartes explains that,

[T]he will, or freedom of choice...simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid); or rather, it consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force. (CSM II.40)

It seems clear that Descartes took freedom to be essential to the human will.<sup>8</sup> This is because Descartes takes volitions to be the only free actions<sup>9</sup> and volitions are actions of the will. Descartes also took the will, and its corresponding volitions, to be necessarily tied to a mind.<sup>10</sup> A mind, with its powers of the will and the intellect, and the corresponding actualization of the will (volition), are the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for freedom. One's intellect (power of perceiving) presents things to his or her will, and his or her will is free when it follows its internal reasons in either its affirmation or denial (volition). In addition, these actions are most free when our reasons are clear and distinct and the will spontaneously affirms or denies.<sup>11</sup>

With this sketch of Descartes' understanding of "free will" we are in a better position to see how the above "exemption passages" could make sense on a compatibilist interpretation. In the second passage, when Descartes is describing our inability to understand how divine preordination could *leave the free actions of men undetermined*, the compatibilist reader could take Descartes to be making a distinction between *internal* and *external* causal forces and determination (CSM I.206). On this sort of compatibilist reading, in which freedom and

*internal* determinism are compatible, an act of the will would be unfree or *externally* determined, “just in case an external force *directly* determines the act of will at the time of action and thereby blocks the causal efficacy of the will’s own motives” (Ragland 2006-B, p. 386). The diagram below illustrates what this compatibilist type of external determination and unfree action of the will would look like:



This “act of will” would not be free because it would have been directly caused by external forces regardless of the internal forces of the agent. This is one way for a compatibilist to make sense of Descartes’ seeming contrast between free action and determination in the above passage. However, this incompatibility between freedom and external determination does not eliminate *all* compatibility between freedom and determination, only between *direct external* determination and freedom. The compatibilist can still maintain that freedom *is* compatible with *direct internal* determination, even if these internal forces are themselves caused by external forces (Ibid). The diagram below illustrates this compatibilist freedom:



In this case, the act of the will is free in the sense that it would not have occurred without the internal forces. This type of freedom could exist even if all of our internal reasons (i.e. thoughts) are determined by external forces (i.e. God).

This same sort of reading could also be applied to the first “exemption passage.” When Descartes writes that, “*except for matters it has determined to be dependent on our free will, we must consider everything that affects us to occur of necessity and as it were by fate,*” the compatibilist reader could take him to be saying that volitions are the only things which are free because they are the only things *directly* caused by us (i.e. they are acts of our will or “internal causes”) (CSM I.380 emphasis added). On this reading, our volitions need not be causally *distinct* from divine determination, they need simply be *directly* caused by us (by an internal force).

In addition to the “exemption passages,” another frequently cited passage used to argue for a libertarian interpretation is found in a 1645 letter to Mesland. Descartes writes:

I do not deny that the will has this positive faculty. Indeed, I think it has it not only with respect to those actions to which it is not pushed by any evident reasons on one side rather than on the other, but also with respect to all other actions; so that 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. (CSMK 245)

It has been argued that this is evidence Descartes held the view that the human will has two-way power in *all* of its acts because even during clear perception, a person can, *absolutely speaking*, direct his or her will.<sup>12</sup> However, compatibilist readers are once again able to offer a reading of this passage that is consistent with their preferred interpretation. They are able to argue that the human will is *not* capable of withholding assent in cases of clear and distinct perception and that the libertarian interpretation is based on a misunderstanding of Descartes' notion of the will. If we look back at Descartes' definition of the will we find that the will is simply an ability or power:

[T]he will, or freedom of choice...simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid). (CSM II.40)

It is the ability/power *to do or not do*. However, this *does not* mean that this power consists in the power to do or not do *simultaneously*. In other words, human freedom is not to be identified with simultaneous two-way power. The human will affirms or denies that which the intellect puts forward and the will is free when it *voluntarily* or *spontaneously* affirms or denies, pursues or avoids.<sup>13</sup> However, the human will can still have *a type* of two-way power, but not in the sense that it has two-way power *simultaneously*. Descartes could be understood as explaining that when the intellect puts forward an evident reason, the will follows this reason in its assertion or denial. What Descartes would then mean when he says that, *absolutely speaking*, it is open to our will to move in the contrary direction, is that we still have this *ability* or *power* to affirm or deny. We have the ability or power in that if the intellect had put forward some different reasons then the will would have been *able* to move in that direction.<sup>14</sup> This reading would also make sense of why Descartes adds the disclaimer: "provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing" (CSMK 245). What Descartes seems to be meaning is that our will always follows the intellect, and provided that our intellect *perceives it to be better* to deny than affirm what we clearly perceive as good, then our will follows the strength of the reasons



and denies. This sort of reading gains additional support from a passage in the *Meditations Objections and Replies*. Descartes explains:

As for the claim that we assent to things which we clearly perceive, whether we want to or not, this is like saying that we seek a clearly known good whether we want to or not. The qualification ‘or not’ is inappropriate in such contexts, since it implies that we both will and do not will the same thing. (CSM II.135)

This passage suggests two things, (1) the human will is guided by the intellect’s perceptions, and (2) the human will cannot both affirm and deny something *simultaneously*. Depending on the intellect’s perception, the will has the two-way power to do or not do something (i.e. affirm or deny, pursue or avoid), but not simultaneously. This *type* of two-way power is hypothetical in the sense that the will *could* have acted differently *if* the person’s internal inclinations had been different.

It is important to note that Ragland has explicitly argued against this “hypothetical two-way power” interpretation. Ragland’s position is that, “Descartes’s reply to Gassendi’s *Fifth Objections* undermines such an interpretation,” (Ragland, 2006-A, p. 73). In the objection,<sup>15</sup> Ragland understands Gassendi to be accepting intellectual determinism for the sake of the argument:

Gassendi suggests that intellectual states always determine the will’s motivational state, which in turn always determines judgment (or the absence thereof). This intellectual determinism is indirect, coming via the will’s own inclinations. Therefore, if Descartes had a compatibilist understanding of external determination, he should not find Gassendi’s picture threatening to freedom (Ragland, 2006-A, p. 73).

In the response to this objection,<sup>16</sup> Ragland understands Descartes to be rejecting Gassendi’s compatibilist account of the will. If this *was* the case, and Descartes *did* reject Gassendi’s picture of the will, the compatibilist interpretation would be in serious trouble; however, Descartes’ reply to Gassendi is *not* a rejection of this sort. It is important to examine the full passage in order to see Descartes’ actual strategy. Descartes writes:

[Y]ou, O Flesh [Gassendi], do not seem to attend to the actions the mind performs within itself. You may be unfree, if you wish; but I am certainly very pleased with my freedom since I experience it within myself...Your own words, however, establish that you have in fact had the experience of freedom. You deny that we can

guard against making mistakes because you refuse to allow that the will can be directed to anything which is not determined by the intellect; but you admit at the same time that we can guard against persisting in error. Now this would be quite impossible unless the will had the freedom to direct itself without the determination of the intellect, towards one side or the other; and this you have just denied. (CSM II.259-260)

Ragland takes the excerpt, “you refuse to allow that the will can be directed to anything which is not determined by the intellect,” to be Descartes’ rejection of Gassendi’s picture of the will (CSM II.260).

While this may *seem* like a rejection of intellectual determinism, I believe that Ragland has misunderstood this passage. Instead of rejecting Gassendi’s compatibilism, Descartes seems to be offering a conceptual argument against the coherence of Gassendi’s objection, that is, Descartes is simply pointing out that Gassendi cannot coherently make the objection he has (i.e. we don’t have the power to guard against error, only the power to guard against persisting in error) because conceptually, one must have the first power (the power to guard against error) in order to have the second (the power to guard against persisting in error). I admit that the force with which Descartes makes the statement seems to strongly imply that he is asserting it as his own view. However, the text immediately preceding the statement reveals that it is not his view. Descartes notes that Gassendi has denied freedom and explains that this denial is mistaken because Gassendi has in fact experienced the sort of freedom that Descartes is talking about. This seems to be Descartes’ way of pointing out that Gassendi’s understanding of freedom is different from his own and that they have been talking past one another. In his objections, Gassendi seems to be thinking of freedom as indifference in the sense of there not being any compulsion either way. Descartes is attempting to make clear that Gassendi has misunderstood his writings and that if Gassendi would introspect more closely he would see that he has in fact experienced the kind of freedom that Descartes is talking about.

With Ragland’s argument against intellectual determinism out of the way, we are now in a position to finish the sketch of the compatibilist interpretation. The idea that the will is a power to do or not do, and that human freedom rests in the voluntariness of following the clearest reason/perception, is echoed again in the same 1645 letter to Mesland quoted above:

Considered with respect to the time before they [acts of the will] are elicited, it [freedom] entails indifference in the second sense but not in the first [a positive

faculty to determine oneself not in a lack of compulsion]...But freedom considered in the acts of the will at the moment when they are elicited does not entail any indifference taken in either the first or the second sense...it consists simply in ease of operation; and at the point freedom, spontaneity, and voluntariness are the same thing. It was in this sense that I wrote that I moved towards something all the more freely when there were more reasons driving me towards it [CSM II.40]; for it is certain that in that case our will moves itself with greater facility and force. (CSMK 245-246)

When looking forward to a future time/action and asking what freedom of the human will consists in, Descartes is clear that it is simply a positive power to do or not do. When considered at the time of action it does not include any indifference.<sup>17</sup> At the time of action, freedom of the will consists simply in ease of operation. For God, any action of the will is possible because of his infinite power. For humans, the ease of each action of the will corresponds to the clarity of the perception of the intellect. The clearer the perception of goodness, the more inclined or pushed one is in that direction. This also helps to further explain why Descartes understood the human will to be *most free* when it was compelled by clear and distinct perception.<sup>18</sup> When the intellect perceives clearly and distinctly, the human will is immediately compelled or inclined in that direction, not by external forces, but simply by the internal clear and distinct perception.

This sort of compatibilist interpretation, armed with textual support as well as explanations for the passages that seem at first glance to be libertarian in nature, poses a legitimate challenge to the libertarian reading. However, I do not think that these arguments definitively show that Descartes accepted intellectual determinism or that he was a compatibilist; nor do I believe that the libertarian commentators have definitively shown that Descartes rejected intellectual or theological determinism. The arguments here, at the end of this section, have been intended merely to show that it is still an open question whether Descartes accepted intellectual determinism. One consequence of intellectual determinism still being on the table is that the primary argument offered by libertarian commentators against theological determinism (i.e. Descartes' rejection of intellectual determinism undermines theological determinism) is eliminated. This leaves us where we began, with the seemingly straightforward passages in which Descartes appears to endorse theological determinism. This also creates an opportunity for new textual evidence and connections to be explored between Descartes' apparent theological determinism and his other theoretical commitments. In section two I will begin by considering the passages that seem to motivate a libertarian reading in which Descartes says that we are most like God with regard to our will. In response I offer Descartes' conception of 'substance' in order to

argue that Descartes understood some concepts as applying non-univocally, but at the same time non-equivocally, to humans and God. I conclude by arguing that Descartes' understanding of 'freedom' is analogous to his understanding of 'substance' and offer a sketch of what it is that makes human freedom similar to divine freedom. This analogy between Descartes' conceptions of 'substance' and 'freedom' provides a new source of evidence for the compatibilist reading.

## II. Divine & Human Likeness: The Analogy Between Substance and Freedom

Undoubtedly, the libertarian commentator will be dissatisfied with my conclusion from the previous section. In response they may offer further argument and textual evidence intended to support their interpretation. Some likely texts they may start with are ones in which Descartes likens our will to God's:

It is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp; so much so that it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God. For although God's will is incomparably greater than mine, both in virtue of the knowledge and power that accompany it and make it more firm and efficacious, and also in virtue of its object, in that it ranges over a greater number of items, nevertheless it does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the essential and strict sense. (CSM II.40)

I see only one thing in us which could give us good reason for esteeming ourselves, namely the exercise of our free will and the control we have over our volitions. For we can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend upon this free will. It renders us in a certain way like God by making us master of ourselves. (CSM I.384)

Now free will is in itself the noblest thing we can have, since it makes us in a way equal to God and seems to exempt us from being his subjects; and so its correct use is the greatest of all the good we possess. (CSMK 326)<sup>19</sup>

These passages all seem to indicate that humans are most like God when it comes to the essence of our will. The libertarian's argument is that since Descartes took God's will to be undetermined and it seems that he understood our will to be essentially the same as God's, our will must also be undetermined. My response to this line of reasoning is that this resemblance does not entail a libertarian freedom for humans. Descartes understood some

concepts as applying to humans and God in a non-univocal, yet also in a non-equivocal way. Descartes' notion of 'substance' is a prime example of one such concept. Through the examination of Cartesian substance, and humans' dependence on God, it will become clear that Descartes could have maintained a similarity between human and divine will while also holding that human freedom is compatible with divine determination.

Descartes' considered account of 'substance' is found in the *Principles*.<sup>20</sup> Descartes explains that, "By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence" (CSM I.210). Because of the strong claim of 'independence' in this characterization, it has become known as the "independence conception." In a recent chapter about Descartes' conception of substance, Chappell explains how this explanation is both like and unlike earlier/different formulations of Descartes' account:

This definition is like the others in that it declares a substance to be independent of other things. It is unlike the definition in the *Meditations* and Second Replies in that the other things specified there are modes and attributes. In the Fourth Replies, the other things are said to be substances, but the kind of independence is left open...Here in the *Principles*, however, the independence Descartes has in mind is a relation between a substance and other substances, and the relation is causal in nature (Chappell, 2008, p. 263).<sup>21</sup>

This strong independence conception leaves an interesting divide between God and humans. On this account, God turns out to be the only substance, in the primary sense, because God depends on nothing else whatsoever. However, Descartes does classify other things as substances, including human minds and bodies, but this is only in a secondary sense since they depend on God's concurrence. This dependence of created substance is reiterated in a 1641 letter:

[W]hen we call a created substance self-subsistent we do not rule out the divine concurrence which it needs in order to subsist. We mean only that it is the kind of thing that can exist without any other created thing; and this is something that cannot be said about the modes of things. (CSMK 193-194)

We find that Descartes applied the concept 'substance' to both God and humans. This application was not equivocal, but the two types of substance are importantly different and thus the term is also non-univocally applied.

What does any of this discussion of ‘substance’ have to do with Descartes’ view on freedom of the will? I believe that Descartes’ view regarding substance is importantly analogous to his view on freedom of the will. More specifically, the divide between divine and created substance is analogous to a divide in Descartes’ understanding of divine and human freedom. In other words, Descartes’ independence conception and the non-univocality of divine and created substance is evidence of a non-univocality of divine and human freedom. This analogy provides additional support for the interpretation that Descartes held a compatibilist notion of human freedom.

To begin the examination of this analogy, I would like to look again at the independence conception of substance and the divide it creates between divine substance and created substance:

By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God’s concurrence. Hence the term ‘substance’ does not apply univocally. (CSM I.210)

Descartes’ independence conception of substance forces him to the conclusion that God is the only substance in the primary sense, because God is the only completely independent being. However, he still takes minds and bodies to be substances, in a secondary sense, because they only depend on God. The fact that Descartes believes minds and bodies *are* substances, despite their dependence on God, is important because a compatibilist reading of Descartes would require a similar admission on his part regarding human freedom.

This non-univocality of divine and created substance seems to be mirrored in Descartes’ understanding of divine and human freedom. In the *Sixth Set of Replies* he writes:

As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen...the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence. But as for man, since he finds that the nature of all goodness and truth is already determined by God, and his will cannot tend towards anything else, it is evident that the will embrace what is good and true all the more willingly, and hence more freely, in proportion as he sees it more clearly.

He is never indifferent except when he does not know which of the two alternatives is the better or truer, or at least when he does not see this clearly enough to rule out any possibility of doubt. Hence the indifference which belongs to human freedom is very different from that which belongs to divine freedom... no essence can belong univocally to both God and his creatures. (CSM II.291-292)

We see here that Descartes thinks divine freedom is very different from human freedom. Just as God is the only being that is completely independent (and thus the only substance in the primary sense), God is also the only being that is completely undetermined (and thus the only completely free being in the primary sense). However, humans are also substances (in a secondary sense) through their singular dependence on God's concurrence, and humans are also free (in a secondary sense) through their singular dependence on God. Just as we depend on God for our independent existence and thus resemble God as a substance, we also depend on God in order for our will and intellect to converge and approve of the true and good and thus resemble God. We depend on God to create truth and goodness and we also depend on God to create the circumstances that determine our perceptions, ideas, and thus indirectly our volitions. This idea, that our freedom is dependent on the truth and goodness established by God's will because the "will cannot tend towards anything else" than that which the intellect puts forth as good and true (CSM II.292), is reiterated in multiple passages in the *Passions*, *Objections and Replies*, and various *Letters*:

[T]he will tends only towards objects that have some semblance of goodness. (CSM I.392)

For if I always saw clearly what was true and good, I should never have to deliberate about the right judgement or choice; in that case, although I should be wholly free, it would be impossible for me ever to be in a state of indifference. (CSM II.40)

The will of a thinking thing is drawn voluntarily and freely (for this is the essence of will), but nevertheless inevitably, towards a clearly known good. (CSM II.117)

[B]efore we can decide to doubt, we need some reason for doubting; and that is why in my First Meditation I put forward the principal reasons for doubt. (CSM II. 270)

'[T]he will does not tend towards evil except in so far as it is presented to it by the intellect under some aspect of goodness' - that is why they say that 'whoever sins does so in ignorance.' (CSMK 56)

[I]f we see very clearly that a thing is good for us, it is very difficult - *and, on my view, impossible*, as long as one continues in the same thought - to stop the course of our desire. (CSMK 233 emphasis added)

[I]f we saw it clearly, it would be impossible for us to sin, as long as we saw it in that fashion; that is why they say that whoever sins does so in ignorance. And we may earn merit even though, seeing very clearly what we must do, we do it infallibly, and without indifference...I did not write that grace entirely prevents indifference, but simply that it makes us incline to one side rather than to another, and so diminishes indifference without diminishing freedom; for which it follows, in my view, that this freedom does not consist in indifference. (CSMK 234)

God is free in that he is completely undetermined in the establishment of truth and goodness. Our freedom is similar in that we are only dependent on the perception of this truth and goodness in order to internally determine our volitions.<sup>22</sup> The will is guided by our reason, or intellect, and affirms or denies that which is put forward as good or bad (respectively).

The upshot of this analogous non-univocality is that it is illuminating in interpreting Descartes' view concerning human freedom. If we were to read Descartes as a libertarian, then we would have to focus on the *similarity* between God and humans. While Descartes does at times talk about our will being the thing that makes us most like God, I believe it is clear from the above passage that, despite some similarities, we are *quite different* from God. Even Ragland recognizes the non-univocality analogy between substance and freedom:

The essence of divine substance is different from that of created substance, but there is an analogy between the two because they share a common feature: both involve the general idea of ontological independence. In the same way, Descartes seems to think that there is some point of similarity between the divine will and the human will...Just as divine and created substance enjoy two different kinds of ontological independence, the divine and created will enjoy two different kinds of two-way power: God's kind requires indifference, but our kind does not (Ragland, 2006-B, p. 383).<sup>23</sup>

Despite this explicit recognition of the analogy, Ragland fails to grasp the significance of it for the libertarian/compatibilist debate.<sup>24</sup> God is a substance in the primary sense because God is completely independent (i.e. not dependent on *anything*). Humans are substances in



a secondary sense because we are independent of all substances other than God. God is free in the primary sense because God is completely undetermined. Humans are free in a secondary sense because our will is only *internally* determined by our recognition of truth and goodness (which is created and dependent on God).<sup>25</sup>

The non-univocality of divine and human freedom is also evident in the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for freedom that were discussed in section one. We have seen that Descartes understood a mind, with its powers of the will and the intellect, and the corresponding actualization of the will (volition), to be the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for freedom, but there is a divide between human and divine freedom because of the simplicity of God's nature. God's willing is the *source* of truth and goodness, and therefore his intellect cannot be compelled in one direction; it simply works in conjunction with the will in its understanding of the infinite consequences.<sup>26</sup> For *human* freedom, the degree of freedom increases as the will acts with greater ease (i.e. more spontaneously/voluntarily). When the will acts with more spontaneity it is following a more clearly perceived good. At its strongest, this interaction between the human intellect and will most resemble the simplicity and freedom of the divine which is completely unlimited and spontaneous/voluntary because of its omnipotence and simple nature.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this investigation has been to argue for a compatibilist reading of Descartes' understanding of human freedom. The unique approach of this interpretation is that it takes Descartes' seemingly unrelated thoughts on 'substance' as further evidence for the compatibilist interpretation. The commentator who wishes to read Descartes as a libertarian is forced to focus on passages that emphasize the *similarity* between God and humans; however, in connection with the independence conception of substance Descartes is clear that there is a non-univocality between God and humans. This seems to put a strain on the libertarian's focus. This strain, together with the passage from the *Sixth Set of Replies* in which Descartes is clear that divine and human freedom are quite different, is additional evidence for the compatibilist interpretation. God is quite different from humans in *all* respects and this does not exclude the freedom that each of us know we possess. When we acknowledge that Descartes took there to be these vast differences between God and humans we are forced to find an interpretation of his views on human freedom that are consistent with this divine/human divide. I believe a compatibilist reading is the best way to achieve this consistency in interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the phrase 'intellectual determinism' in this paper to be equivalent to 'psychological determinism.'

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Descartes are taken from Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch's translation, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I (1985) & II (1984) (parenthetically referenced as: CSM), and Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, and Kenny's translation, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. III (1991) (parenthetically referenced as: CSMK).

<sup>3</sup> Also see the 15 September 1645 Letter to Princess Elizabeth (CSMK 265).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. see Ragland, 2006-A.

<sup>5</sup> For example, one could accept theological determinism and also be an occasionalist concerning causation. In other words, one could believe that God *directly* determines everything and is the only true cause. This would be to accept theological determinism and to reject the intellectual determinist's position that it is the intellect which directly causes the will.

<sup>6</sup> See Ragland, 2006-A, p. 60.

<sup>7</sup> See Ragland 2005, p. 165, & 2006-A, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> See CSM II.40, II.41, II.292, II.117, I.343, & CSMK 234.

<sup>9</sup> See passages from note 9 in conjunction with CSM I.335, I.339, I.343, CSMK 199, & 232.

<sup>10</sup> Chappell explains this connection in his entry on Descartes and human freedom in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*: “[T]he will is one of the mind’s powers, one of its two principal capacities—the other being the intellect or power of perceiving. Volitions are the will’s actualizations... So when Descartes says that the will acts, what he means is that the mind exercises its power of willing, thereby performing volitions... It is also his view that every volition is free, and that it is so, furthermore, of necessity. For it is the essence of the will as he puts it, to act freely: willing is free by nature [Chappell here cites CSM II.117 & CSM I.343]... It is not that men have the power of willing, some of whose exercises are free and some not. Rather, they have just the power of free-willing, or willing freely. Given merely that a man has a will, it follows logically that he has the capacity for free action” (Chappell, 1998, p. 1207-1208). Strictly speaking, volitions are the only free actions and the minds performing these volitions, through the power of willing, are the only free agents (Chappell, 1998, p. 1207).

<sup>11</sup> Descartes also uses “voluntary” and “ease of operation” as synonyms for spontaneous. (See CSMK 234, CSM I.205, CSMK 245-246)

<sup>12</sup> See Ragland, 2006-A.

<sup>13</sup> See CSM II.40 & CSMK 234

<sup>14</sup> Also see CSM I.289-291 for more on the moral / absolute distinction.

<sup>15</sup> Gassendi’s objection: CSM II.219-220.

<sup>16</sup> Descartes’ response: CSM II.259-260.

<sup>17</sup> I use “indifference” here in the way Descartes usually uses it—as denoting a perfect balance of reasons or motivation for or against a particular action or a complete lack of reasons or motivation. (See CSMK 245, CSM II.40, & CSMK 233) (Ragland, 2006-B, p. 381-382; Chappell, 1998, p. 1209-1210)

<sup>18</sup> See CSM II.40, II.292, & CSMK 234

<sup>19</sup> Also see CSMK 339-340

<sup>20</sup> I take Rodriguez-Pereyra's argument (2008) to sufficiently demonstrate that this "independence conception" of substance from the *Principles* was Descartes' considered account. For the argument that Descartes says nothing new about his conception of substance in his works after the *Principles* see Chappell, 2008, pg. 268-269.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that conceptual tension created by the earlier/different definitions of "substance" (see CSM II.30, II.114, II.10, & II.159) does not necessarily mean that Descartes did not accept these other conceptions; it could be that Descartes understood these other conceptions to be included in or a part of the complete account. This possibility would be supported if the added text in the French translation of the *Principles* was in fact endorsed by Descartes. In the French there is an addition to the end of *Principles* I.51 (the independence conception passage) which says: "In the case of created things, some are of such a nature that they cannot exist without other things, while some need only the ordinary concurrence of God in order to exist. We make this distinction by calling the latter 'substances' and the former 'qualities' or 'attributes' of those substances." If it was Descartes that endorsed this and not simply the French translator Picot, then the idea that substance is a subject for qualities to inhere seems to be a part of created substance in the larger scheme of the independence conception. This idea gets further support from another passage in the *Principles* (original Latin text) in which Descartes uses the subject conception in his explanation of how substances are known. Either Descartes is being inconsistent in his view on substance or there is some sort of relationship between the earlier/different conceptions, e.g. the "subject conception" is conceptually included in, or a part of, the "independence conception." I think the first option should only be the interpretive strategy of last resort, therefore we find slight evidence for a relationship or development between the two conceptions.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Christofidou, 2009, 647-648.

<sup>23</sup> C.f. Chappell 1998, p. 1209.

<sup>24</sup> This is partially because Ragland believes Descartes is demanding a more "metaphysically robust" account of freedom than the hypothetical two-way power I sketched in Section I (Ragland, 2006-A, p. 71-75). (For my response see again my analysis of Gassendi's *Fifth Objection* and Descartes' *Reply*)

<sup>25</sup> While the analogy between the dependence of primary substance (God) and secondary substance (humans) and the dependence of primary freedom (completely undetermined divine freedom) and secondary freedom (internally determined human freedom) offers a way for the compatibilist reader to reconcile Descartes' claims supporting theological determinism and the similarity of our will to God's, a puzzle still remains. Chappell raises a causal problem for the type of compatibilist interpretation that my analogy argument would support: "[H]ow can a volition be free if, as Descartes says in another letter to Elizabeth, everything that happens comes entirely from God, and God is not just the 'universal cause' but 'the total cause of everything'?... [H]ow [can] a volition which depends wholly on the mind that performs it also come entirely from God[?]...it now looks as if we have two distinct conditions for the performance of any volition, each of which is sufficient as well as necessary: on the one hand, that some created mind produce it; on the other, that it come from God"

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(Chappell 1998, p. 1215-1216). Chappell speculates that the most satisfactory response might be to say that God's action, of causing certain thoughts in a person's mind, is necessary but not sufficient for the performance of a volition. The problem with this response is that it seems to be contradicted at various places in Descartes' corpus. I believe a more satisfactory response would be to say that human volitions are overdetermined (i.e. *both* the human mind and God are necessary and sufficient in producing it). It is important to note that the compatibilist interpretation I sketched in section one would be able to supply such a response with the distinction between internal and external determination. (C.f. Gorham, 2004)

<sup>26</sup> There seems to be no inconsistency or incoherence in Descartes' understanding of divine and human freedom, but an interesting consequence of the view is that it seems to create tension (or at least the need for a coherent account) in the consistency of Descartes' understanding of God's nature (i.e. God as all powerful, *and* all knowing, *and* unchanging).