

## On Descartes' Notion of the Extensiveness of Intellect and Will

**ABSTRACT:** Descartes' "rule of truth", his primary methodological precept for avoiding error and securing truth in the sciences, is one of the most lauded and recognizable features of his philosophy: "[I]f, whenever I have to make a judgment, I restrain my will so that it extends to what the intellect clearly and distinctly reveals, and no further, then it is quite impossible for me to go wrong." The rule is grounded on a relation between two mental faculties, the intellect and will. Error results when we fail to protect ourselves from a kind of malalignment that can arise in us between these two faculties: "So what then is the source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand." Thus Descartes concludes that "[i]n this incorrect use of free will may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of error".

In this paper I analyze the discrepancy in range or scope between the faculties of will and intellect underpinning Descartes' account of error. I am motivated to this task by what I perceive to be significant obscurities, even frailties, in the idea that the will's extension or scope is greater than that of the intellect or understanding. My goal is to come to a better understanding of the will-intellect relation in Descartes' philosophy. In this effort the interpretive constraint I shall be most at pains to observe is consistency with the rule of method, itself, *viz.*, that we judge only on the basis of clear and distinct ideas. I take that rule to be sacrosanct in the Cartesian system, and so I set aside any interpretation of the will-intellect relation that runs afoul of it.