Why to Get Rid of the Small Flitting Images:
Descartes’s Optics and Some Medieval Theories of Vision

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“And by this means your mind will be delivered from all those small images flitting
through the air, called intentional species, which worry the imagination of Philosophers
so much” – writes Descartes in his Optics (First Discourse), referring to the medieval and
contemporary scholastic theories of vision. Although, at least since Gilson’s work,
considerable effort has been made to put Descartes’s metaphysical views into the context
of some medieval predecessors, the relationship is much less clear in the case of
Descartes’s lesser known treatises, such as the Optics, or the other essays published with
the Discourse on Method. This is all the more surprising as the Optics is one of those
very few places where Descartes explicitly deals with the medieval theories, and
develops his own theory partly in response to those. The main aim of this paper is,
therefore, to elaborate on Descartes’s relation to scholastic philosophy from the view of
his theory of vision, by presenting both his (relatively) detailed critique as developed in
the Optics, as well as, to some extent, the target of this critique.

More specifically, I will argue that Descartes’s criticism of the medieval theories of
vision can serve as a nice illustration of two important conceptual changes that took place
sometime during the fourteenth century: the change in the meaning of ‘species’, and the
change in the concept of causation, especially in regard to the concept of efficient causes.
The first of these changes is quite commonly acknowledged today, therefore it will not
need much elaboration: it can be well documented by looking at what Aquinas and Roger
Bacon originally meant by the term ‘species’, and then recalling how it gradually –
through thinkers such as Henry of Ghent, Peter John Olivi, or the lesser known William
Crathorn – lost both its representational and causal roles in the explanation of the visual
process.

Second, the perhaps less obvious but equally interesting change becomes apparent by
looking at what Descartes, on the one hand, and scholastic thinkers, on the other, meant
by giving a causal account. Although the situation is quite complex in both cases, it is at
least clear that while in the scholastic tradition, causation is understood as a synchronic
relation between active and passive powers as secondary causes, for Descartes –
although, apart from some letters, he leaves the issue implicit – secondary causes are not
substances (or powers) but the laws of nature (or the laws of physics, in this case). This
means that while under the scholastic understanding of causes the species was able to
serve as a causal factor in the visual process, this causal role, by Descartes’s time,
became rather unintelligible. Again, signs of this change appear as early as the fourteenth
century, and the various meanings of causation was already nicely summarized in
Suarez’s treatise on efficient causes in his Metaphysical Disputations.

Finally, putting this primarily scientific treatise of Descartes into both philosophical and
historical context can also help to show how the central concern of the theory of vision
changed by his time as compared to the medieval theories. The medieval theory of species, on the one hand, took it for granted that we had reliable (in fact, formally identical) sensations of the objects around us, and sought to explain how that came about (where ‘how’ is understood to give a causal account in terms of efficient causes, as understood in the medieval Aristotelian framework). Descartes’s main aim, on the other hand, at least in the Optics, was not so much to account for the phenomenal qualities of the visual experience, but rather to explain the process of vision by purely mechanical means (that is, to give a causal account in terms of mechanistic causes, as understood in the early modern framework). Although Descartes’s explanation may not have accounted for the phenomenal qualities, it still enabled him to construct some optical means by which the visual process can be perfected, and thus provided a philosophical basis for the new optical instruments of the seventeenth century.
Descartes’s Extemporaneous Ethics in the *Discourse on Method*

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In the past several years, secondary literature on Descartes has emphasized changes in his thought. From Daniel Garber’s classic paper on Descartes’s method before and after 1637 to the new book by Peter Machamer and J. E. McGuire titled *Descartes’s Changing Mind*, there is a trend among secondary literature to see Descartes dynamically. He is viewed as a figure whose thought developed and grew – that is, changed – over time as his thought matured and benefited both from a wealth of correspondence and the objections to his *Discourse and Meditations*. So, it comes as a bit of a surprise that in her essay “Descartes’s Ethics,” Lisa Shapiro argues otherwise for his moral philosophy. She argues that Descartes’s “provisional morality” in the *Discourse* has an important lasting function in Descartes’s greater moral project – one that begins in the *Discourse* and is maintained throughout his life, culminating in later works such as the letters to Elizabeth. This would mean that Descartes’s moral philosophy is something he had clearly in mind as early as the *Discourse*, only to be filled out (but not changed) in later writing.

In my paper, I argue the *Discourse* was an early work that clearly shows a Cartesian starting point but is in no way his unfinished, mature philosophy. In fact, Descartes himself hoped the comments he received on the *Discourse* would help him refine his arguments and result in a stronger publication, which became the *Meditations* and its Objections and Replies. I agree with Shapiro that Descartes is best understood as a Stoic, but disagree that his Stoicism is the same between the early *Discourse* and the late letters and the *Passions*. I argue that in the *Discourse*, he vaguely models his Stoicism from the Pyrrhonians who influence that entire work – Montaigne and Charron. In this form of Stoicism, it is a rather undeveloped life philosophy on how to best live given certain limits on human knowledge. This is drastically different from the examination of classical Stoicism in Seneca that Descartes discusses with Elizabeth. Here, it is a much more developed system that helps serve as an ethical foundation keeping with Cartesian order and method. Thus, I argue that Descartes does not have any clear moral system in mind when writing the provisional morality found in the *Discourse*, but only begins to formulate that much later in his life through corresponding with those who had interest in a Cartesian ethics.

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3 Though I disagree that he should be considered a virtue ethicist in any traditional sense. I believe that Descartes was going for something more foundational than the Stoicism Shapiro suggests.
4 In the paper, I argue that the influence of both, especially Montaigne, is clear in most of the *Discourse*.
Master in my own Domain: Leibniz on Voluntary Agency

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Leibniz holds that all actions and perceptions of an agent are determined by the agent’s prior perceptions, and ultimately by her nature. One might think that on this view, the agent has no more control over her voluntary actions than over her non-voluntary actions since both are determined in this way. The only difference between them, one might conclude, is that in the case of voluntary actions we are aware, or have more distinct perceptions, of what we are doing and why we are doing it. In other words, one might think that for Leibniz the difference between voluntary and non-voluntary actions is rather like the difference between my watching a movie with my glasses on and my watching a movie without them. Having a better idea of what is going on in the movie does not afford me any additional control over its plot.

Yet, Leibniz repeatedly stresses that a rational agent capable of voluntary agency does possess a special kind of control over her actions; such an agent is, as Leibniz says, “master in his own domain.” Is Leibniz entitled to this claim, given his belief that voluntary actions, just like all other actions, are determined by prior perceptions and the agent’s nature? My paper argues that, despite appearances to the contrary, Leibniz is entitled to this claim. Even though every action is determined, there is a crucial type of control that only agents with intellects and wills can possess and that is not only desirable, but also necessary for moral agency: they are not determined to do what their non-rational inclinations dictate but can instead do what their intellects dictate. Instead of being swept along by insensible inclinations and present pleasures, as Leibniz sometimes puts it, they can choose to do what they judge to be best overall. A close look at several texts from Leibniz’s mature period reveals that this is precisely what he means when he talks about the mastery of rational agents.

In fact, I will show that the type of control rational agents possess on Leibniz’s view is extremely similar to what John Martin Fischer calls “guidance control.” Leibniz, I argue, anticipates Fischer’s reconciliation of moral responsibility and determinism, and hence latches onto what may very well be the most plausible compatibilist strategy to date. As a result, Leibniz’s discussions of human freedom have much more to offer than commonly thought; his brand of compatibilism differs quite radically from the brands endorsed by other prominent early modern philosophers, which do not incorporate this crucial notion of control.

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5 This is in fact Sean Greenberg’s view: he argues that the only difference between voluntary and non-voluntary actions is that in the former, the agent is aware of the appetitions determining her action (“Leibniz Against Molinism,” in Leibniz: Nature and Freedom, ed. by Rutherford and Cover, Oxford UP 2005, p. 224).

6 Theodicy §326.
To see that Leibnizian mastery is indeed a type of control, and one that is worth having, it helps to consider the alternative. Imagine a creature that is entirely at the mercy of its unconscious, non-rational inclinations, even though it possesses an intellect and hence beliefs about what actions are good. This creature would be in the extremely unfortunate condition of frequently making judgments about the best course of action, but being entirely unable to act on them. She would be completely ruled by her passions and insensible inclinations. Such creatures may not exist in the best of all possible worlds, but we are like them with respect to many of our actions: the rational part of human nature, with which we typically identify, is often taken hostage by the non-rational part.

To the extent that this happens, we—qua rational beings—are not in control. Conversely, to the extent that the rational part of our nature does manage to determine our actions, we control our passions and can be called masters in our own domain.

Far from being mere spectators, we are hence in control when we act voluntarily. The difference between non-voluntary and voluntary actions is not at all like the difference between watching a movie without my glasses and watching it with my glasses; it is rather like the difference between a dream—which is determined by my unconscious mental states—and a novel that I write after thoroughly reflecting about its plot. In an important and nontrivial sense, I have a type of control over the plot of the novel that I do not have over the plot of the dream, even if the reflections and considerations that led to my writing the novel were themselves determined. Likewise, it makes sense to hold me morally responsible for the contents of the novel, but not for the contents of the dream.
Hedonism and Natural Law in Locke’s Moral Philosophy

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The thesis I wish to defend is that the idea of *convenientia* that Locke expresses in his 1664 *Essays on the Law of Nature* can be used to understand how he synthesizes the hedonism he later adopts in the 1670s with the natural law doctrine he maintains over the course of his lifetime. According to the idea of *convenientia*, God harmonizes our constitution with the natural law. Locke’s view in the *Essays* is that the natural law does not directly emerge from our constitution, but rather that it represents something over and above it that is imposed by the divine will. The point to draw attention to here is that this harmonization involves two distinct actions on God’s part: first, the creation of human nature, and second, the legislation of the moral law. God creates human beings with certain ends and then gives them a law congruent with these ends. As Locke makes clear in both notebook entries and in II.xx of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, a hedonistic account of human psychology ultimately amounts to an account of how God has fashioned human nature. God creates us with the temporal end of living in peace with one another and the ultimate end of achieving the greatest happiness understood in terms of the highest pleasure of eternal life. And God gives us a law that helps us to achieve the respective temporal and eternal ends he has set for us. We know that God will help us to achieve both the temporal and eternal happiness he has designed for us, and that he will not craft a law at odds with these purposes.

Based on his adoption of hedonism, one line of interpretation sees Locke as developing something of a proto-utilitarian position in his middle and later years. And in this interpretation, Locke’s proto-utilitarian views seem to conflict with the commitment to the natural law that Locke expresses in his *Essays* and the *Two Tracts*, all written in the early 1660s. As Wolfgang von Leyden argues, Locke’s emphasis on the importance of rewards and sanctions conceived of in terms of pleasures and pains grows with his increasing commitment to hedonism. It is undeniable that Locke maintains a hedonistic axiology in the *Essay*, though Locke is quite clear that this represents not the true nature of good and evil, but rather the origin of our ideas of good and evil. As I argue in the paper, Locke consistently applied hedonism to his theory of moral motivation, and kept it distinct from moral obligation. The basic point I make is that God, in his goodness, harmonizes the natural law with our constitution and the ends set for us. We can understand this harmonization – or *convenientia* – in terms of the distinction that Locke makes in the *Essays* between effective and terminative obligation. Effective obligation refers to the source of an obligation, while terminative obligation refers to the content of an obligation.

Locke describes the divine will as the source of the obligation to obey the natural law: this represents the effective obligation of the natural law. And Locke describes the matter of virtue as the doing of good: this represents the terminative obligation of the natural law. The content of the natural law, then, consists in doing good, construed in terms of promoting happiness and pleasure. Locke’s adoption of hedonism doesn’t
represent a position that conflicts with the views that he expresses on the natural law. Rather, Locke’s adoption of hedonism can be seen as a development of Locke’s account of the terminative obligation of the natural law. The content of the natural law consists in the promotion of happiness and pleasure by preserving society, but the source of the obligation to obey the law of sociability and preservation comes from the divine will. Locke was never quite satisfied with his thoughts on the natural law: he ignored his friend James Tyrrell’s suggestion that he publish the early Essays and he never makes good on the comment in the Essay that he should elsewhere treat the natural law in more depth. While it is not entirely clear why Locke never published a treatise on the natural law, despite his life-long interest in the topic, the conclusion I reach is that it is not his adoption of hedonism that discourages him from this project: indeed, his use of hedonism represents a development of his thinking on the natural law, rather than a divergence from it.
Catharine Trotter Cockburn’s Moral Sense Theory and the Internalist tradition

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Catharine Trotter Cockburn, in her *Defence of Mr. Locke’s Essay*, written in 1702, defended Locke against Thomas Burnet, a prominent thinker in his day who published three critical pamphlets aimed at Locke’s empiricist theory of ideas and its implications for theology and morality. Burnet subscribed to a proto-moral sense theory, according to which humans possess an internal mechanism by which we immediately sense the moral right and wrong of actions, and this prior to any practical reasoning whatsoever. Cockburn responded to Burnet’s concerns in the *Defence* by acknowledging an indispensable role for moral sensibility, but expressing some skepticism that it could possibly operate “without ratiocination”.

She continues in this vein by stating that “this sudden affection in moral cases is indeed of excellent use, when it is once set on work by an enlightened judgment, to keep up the distinction of good and evil; to incite, or to be a check upon men’s actions.” According to Cockburn, in this early work, moral knowledge requires ratiocination, but the motivation to act morally arises from our natural moral affections. Cockburn does not develop this affections view of motivation in any great detail in the *Defence*; it is only in her later works (post-1743) that Cockburn gives moral affections a position of prominence in her account. By then, Cockburn has not only introduced elements of Clarkean moral fitness theory into her generally Lockean natural law framework, but she has expanded and refined the notion of moral affection, placing what she, by this stage, calls moral sense front and center in her account of moral obligation.

Cockburn’s account of moral obligation is based on her generally anthropocentric account of morality. Human nature has built into it the means to be moral—our duties arise from our very natures—and the means we have are twofold: rationality and sociability. Both aspects of our nature carry inherent obligatory power, in the sense, for Cockburn, that both provide us with reasons for action such that our failure in either regard will naturally inspire self-condemnation. Reason provides us with moral concepts and laws, while sociability produces benevolent affections for other people. Together, these carry an obligatory force that rivals any conceivable external inducements to obedience. For Cockburn, moral obligation arising from such internal principles inspires self-condemnation in a way that external motives never can.

What is particularly interesting about Cockburn’s account is that her two major philosophical influences are Locke and Clarke. Locke is traditionally understood to hold an externalist, voluntaristic account of moral obligation and motivation. Clarke is traditionally considered a rationalist moral theorist, who places the obligation and

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8 Cockburn, *Philosophical Writings*, 77.
motivation to be moral squarely on the determinations of logically true and necessary moral rules. Neither thinker has commonly been associated with anything like a moral sense view and for this reason Cockburn’s moral theory might be seen as somewhat incoherent in its various commitments. However, it is also the case that both Locke and Clarke have been linked to the internalist tradition of Latitudinarian thought, which arose in the seventeenth century and persisted through the eighteenth century. The Latitudinarians were in general committed to a view of human nature as intrinsically moral and inherently obligated by feelings of love and benevolent affection. Locke and Clarke both express themes that are representative of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century developments in this tradition and both can arguably both be seen as advancing an internalist morality consistent with Cockburn’s own moral sense view. This paper examines this tradition as it plays out in the moralities of Locke, Clarke and Cockburn with a view to demonstrating how a moral sense theory can sit quite naturally with Cockburn’s commitments to Lockean and Clarkean moral theories. Cockburn offers an original and historically significant version of moral sense theory, which also serves to highlight the Latitudinarian internalist themes so dominant in this period but generally underexplored in the secondary literature.