

Noa Naaman-Zauderer

Descartes' Deontological Turn:

Reason, Will and Virtue in the Later Writings.

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Noa Naaman-Zauderer's book aims to bring to light the ethical underpinnings of Descartes' system: on her view, in both the practical and the theoretical spheres Descartes takes our foremost duty to lie in the good use of the will. The marked ethical import of Cartesian epistemology takes the form of a deontological, non-consequentialist view of error: epistemic agents are praised/blamed when they fulfill/flout the duty to not assent to ideas that are less than clear and distinct. Extra-theoretical realms admitting of no clear and distinct perceptions are subject to 'softer' duties of acting on the basis of the best available *reasons*. Since Cartesian epistemology involves ethical considerations, and since the late Cartesian ethics of virtue crucially depends on metaphysical knowledge about the nature and function of the will, Descartes' ethics is not just a fruit of his tree of knowledge but it also nourishes its own roots. Below I will briefly look at the chapters of this book tracking some of its Cartesian deontological motifs.

Chapter 1 consists of conceptual groundwork. By way of a thorough analysis of Descartes' theory of ideas Naaman-Zauderer clarifies the notions of truth and falsity, formal and material falsity, and clarity and distinctness. Employing Descartes' distinction between 'ideas taken materially' (as operations of the intellect) and 'ideas taken formally' (as the objects represented by those intellectual operations), Naaman-Zauderer argues that truth and falsity apply to ideas taken formally or objectively (as contents) while clarity and distinctness as well as material falsity apply to ideas taken materially (as acts of the mind).

The author contends that ideas are the locus of truth and falsehood since they purport to represent things outside of themselves. A threefold distinction is drawn between types of falsity: ontological falsity (lack of correspondence between a thought or proposition and its object); epistemic falsity (inescapable obscurity and confusion of an idea making it impossible for us to determine whether the idea in question is true or false in the ontological sense) and finally, formal falsity (applicable only to judgments and equated by Naaman-Zauderer with error, assent to ideas that are not clear and distinct).

Chapter 2 deals with 'formal falsity', or error. In footnote 20 we learn that 'this type of falsity is called "formal" because these acts (of will) apply to "ideas in the formal sense", that is, with reference to the truth or falsity of the objects they represent' (70). For Naaman-Zauderer, erroneous judgments are any *acts of judgment* not based on clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect, irrespective of whether the *content* to which we give credence is true or false. So the falsity of content is a sufficient but not a necessary condition for error. The essence of error consists in a privation of clear and distinct cognition (rather than in a privation of truth): 'a lack of some knowledge that the agent

should have possessed given *her own pretence* to hold a piece of knowledge that she in fact lacks' (77).

Naaman-Zauderer supports her view that epistemic right and wrong are not functions of truth and falsity by distancing Descartes' epistemic position from a consequentialist approach: in Meditation IV right and wrong are used interchangeably with praise and blame. Blame is appropriate for true judgments accidentally (i.e., improperly) arrived at. So, praise and blame are not about results. Additionally, in the *Passions* Descartes claims that we can be reasonably praised or blamed only for what depends on our free will (AT XI 445, CSM I 384). Extending this claim to the *Meditations* entails that we cannot be praised or blamed for truth or falsity since, as shown in Chapter 1, truth and falsity are already in the offing at the level of ideas, over which we have no control. If praise and blame are not about results, the way we get to those results comes to the fore: the clarity and distinctness of our ideas (rather than their truth or falsity) become paramount.

Descartes works with a dynamic view of rationality and the proper use of the will gains the status of end in its own right (as opposed to being a mere instrument in the pursuit of truth). Naaman-Zauderer sees this deontological view of rationality as offering a solution to the much discussed problem of the Cartesian circle: even if Descartes' argument is circular and even if our clear and distinct ideas might indeed be false, we would not be considered irrational for assenting to them. 'The truth-independent merit of limiting our judgment only to clear and distinct ideas is thus the merit of self-mastery: judging and acting in accordance with internal standards rather than being activated from the outside' (100).

Descartes' notion of epistemic duty raises the issue of 'ought implies can'. In Chapter 3, Naaman-Zauderer endorses a compatibilist position on Cartesian free will: the two-way power of the will applies only to obscure ideas; only in such case are we free to either assent or dissent. When faced with a clear and distinct idea we cannot but assent, thereby exhibiting spontaneous self-determination. The Cartesian free will 'consists in the positive power to determine oneself without a feeling of external coercion, either on one or other of two contraries (when the perceptions of the mind are obscure or confused) or on one side (when the natural light of reason or the supernatural light of grace illuminates them' (126). An analysis of the latter scenario unveils the source of the bindingness of our epistemic duty: in assenting to a clear and distinct idea we experience our will as fully unified with our intellect and as the only source of our inclination to assent; intellectual necessity and intellectual freedom are now one and the same.

In Chapter 4 Naaman-Zauderer shows that it is this experience of our free will as law-giving that accounts for our resemblance with God: the objects of God's will as well as the norms binding Him come solely from God. Similarly, when spontaneous, we experience the rules binding us as coming from ourselves (although, in fact they had already been established by God). Metaphysically, intellect and will remain distinct and so we can always resist a clear and distinct idea but morally (i.e. practically or phenomenologically) it is simply impossible for us to resist it. (This is Naaman-

Zauderer's way of dealing with the much-discussed distinction from the second 'Letter to Mesland' between freedom 'absolutely' and 'morally' speaking [AT IV 173, CSMK 245]).

Chapter 5 marks the transition from Naaman-Zauderer's reading of Cartesian theoretical rationality to a Cartesian practical rationality that is still deontological in nature: in the conduct of life, in matters of faith and morality which admit of no clarity and distinctness we are obliged to act on the basis of the right *reasons*. It is reasons and our attitudes toward reasons that matter, not consequences. After a brief look at the rule-based 'morale par provision', in Chapter 6, Naaman-Zauderer turns to Descartes' later morality where the notion of 'supreme good' is explicated in terms of the right use of the will (185). Virtue—understood as a firm and constant resolution to carry out whatever reason recommends—is the ultimate end for which we should strive in our actions. The priority of the 'right' by contrast with the 'good' (and happiness) further emphasizes the deontological character of Cartesian ethics. Moreover, Naaman-Zauderer discovers an ethical source of bindingness, corresponding to the case of epistemic spontaneity discussed above: the generous person—one who knows that nothing truly belongs to her but her free will and who also feels a firm a constant resolution to use her will well—is autonomous in recognizing herself to be the sole, self-sufficient source for her moral worth, proper self-esteem, dignity and happiness' (203).

This book's uncovering of the deontological aspects of Descartes' thought represents an original and worthwhile contribution to Cartesian scholarship. It is a rich, tightly argued and carefully researched book that accomplishes its proposed goals of inviting scholars to reconsider Descartes' views in light of deontological considerations and of opening up fresh avenues and perspectives of inquiry. One such avenue might be a more inclusive reading of Descartes, one providing a more central place to the notions of truth and happiness while also accommodating the procedural ('deontological') lessons that this book rightly characterizes as until now having been neglected by Cartesian scholars. I am suggesting an interpretation of Descartes that depicts the goal of theoretical inquiry as truth—or, to be more precise, what we finite epistemic agents with our limited cognitive resources take to be the truth—arrived at in a procedurally correct manner and our practical goal as happiness obtained via the practice of virtue, rather than emphasizing exclusively the manner in which judgments are arrived at and virtue.

Such an interpretation would in no way relegate either our duty to assent only to clear and distinct ideas or virtue to merely instrumental roles. Rather, the relation between truth and our duty, on the one hand, and happiness and virtue on the other, would be a part-whole relation: following John Stuart Mill, the pursuit of virtue would be part of the pursuit of happiness, but also sufficiently valuable to count as an end in its own right (*Utilitarianism*, London: Routledge 1895, pp. 84-92). Similarly, in theoretical matters, truth is the initial goal; but assenting to clear and distinct ideas comes to be considered an aim in its own right, due to its association with and conduciveness to truth.

Although bringing with it difficulties of its own, and notwithstanding the differences between Descartes and Mill, this model would take very seriously Descartes'

commitment to the success of science and his repeated claims about the importance of theoretical truth; it would also allow for a more natural reading of the many places where he stresses the importance of happiness *and* contentment. Interpreting Descartes as a rule-consequentialist in epistemic matters and as a eudaemonist in practical affairs would entail qualifying some of the main positions of this book while (sometimes significantly) changing others. For such an interpretation, it is important to note that the rule of this epistemic rule-consequentialism is ‘assent only to ideas that are clear and distinct’. (This way of using the term ‘epistemic rule-consequentialism’ has no connection with the epistemic rule-consequentialism attributed to Alvin Goldman in contemporary epistemology, cf. *Epistemology and Cognition*, Harvard University Press 1986). Also, I am not attributing to Mill either a rule-consequentialist or a eudaemonist position, but am merely suggesting using his way of understanding the relation between happiness and virtue as a lens for interpreting Descartes’ views.

In any event, the fact that an interpretation so different than Naaman-Zauderer’s would nevertheless incorporate her deontological insights points to the richness of Descartes’ thinking as well as to the fecundity of Naaman-Zauderer’s analysis of it.

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