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Ethical Ideas in Descartes' Philosophy

Desh Raj Sirswal*

Descartes' ethical ideas are not very popular because it is generally not discussed. It is an attempt to outline Descartes' ethical ideas mainly in *Discourse on the Method*. The best-known expression of Descartes' ethical views is the "provisional moral code" that appears in Part Three of *Discourse on the Method*. Some have read this as a definitive statement of Descartes' position, but this is consistent neither with the *Discourse* itself nor with Descartes' later writings. These are (i) to adopt the golden means preached by traditional and religious laws of one's country, (ii) to adopt one goal and to proceed towards it with complete concentration, (iii) to win a victory over one half than over one's luck and over one's desire instead of over the order of creation, (iv) to move in the direction of truth by means or reason and to behave appropriately. Cartesian morality does not greatly differ from Stoic ethics in which the wise man apples to reason in order to assure him of tranquility and felicity. *The Passions of the Soul*, describes a discipline of "virtue" that aims at bringing our capacities to experience the various passions in line with our considered judgments about good and evils, so that feelings a passion of e.g., fear constitutes a genuine reason to judge that something is fearful. This Provisory morality is made up of a few percepts that live according to the politico-religious opinions and customs of the country, follow mean (i.e., moderate) and not extreme opinions, govern yourself with constancy, without letting yourself be distracted by opportunistic considerations. In a word, live in such a manner as to assure you the greatest tranquility.

Introduction

Descartes is not well known for his contributions to ethics. Some have charged that it is a weakness of his philosophy that it focuses exclusively on metaphysics and epistemology to the exclusion of moral and political philosophy.

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Such criticisms rest on a misunderstanding of the broader framework of Descartes philosophy. Evidence of Descartes' concern for the practical import of philosophy can be traced to his earliest writings. In agreement of wisdom that is sufficient for happiness. The Third part of his *Discourse on the Method* presents what he calls a provisional morality, a morality to govern our behaviour while we are in the process of revising our beliefs and coming to certainty. In the tree of philosophy, in the Preface to the French translation of the *Principles of Philosophy*, morals are listed as one of the fruits of the tree, along with medicine and mechanics. It is also a theme in the letters he exchanged with the Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia in the mid-1640s, together with another concern the passions, what they are, and more importantly, how to control them. These themes are intertwined again in Descartes last major work, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). Descartes did not write extensively on ethics, and this has led some to assume that the topic lacks a place within his philosophy. It is an attempt to outline Descartes' ethical ideas mainly in *Discourse on the Method*.

Ethics in Descartes' Philosophy

Descartes' writings reveal a consistent conception of philosophy's goal. In the first rule of the unfinished *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, he states: "The aim of our studies should be to direct the mind with a view to forming true and sound judgments about whatever comes before it."[1] The principal goal of philosophy is to cultivate one's capacity for sound judgment, which Descartes identifies with "good sense" and "universal wisdom." This goal should be pursued for its own sake, since other ends may distract us from the course of inquiry. Nevertheless, Descartes insists upon the practical benefits of the wisdom thereby achieved: one should consider that how to increase the natural light of his reason, in order that his intellect should show his will what decision it ought to make in each of life's contingencies. In this way, we can expect to realize the "legitimate fruits" of the sciences: "the comforts of life" and "the pleasure to be gained from contemplating the truth, which is practically the only happiness in this life that is complete and untroubled by pain."[2]

The last point previews the principal concern of Descartes' ethics. In agreement with the ancients, he takes philosophy's practical goal to be the realization of a happy life: one in which we enjoy the best existence that a human being can hope to achieve. Descartes characterizes this life in terms of a type of mental flourishing, which he calls "contentment of mind," or "tranquility." Here the influence of Stoic and Epicurean ethics is evident. In keeping with a central theme of the Hellenistic schools, Descartes likens philosophy to a form of therapy that can treat

the mind's illnesses (those that stand in the way of its happiness), just as medicine treats the illnesses of the body. As he writes in one of his earliest recorded remarks, "Vices I call diseases of mind: they are not so easily diagnosed as diseases of the body; for we have often known true health of the body, but never of mind."[3] Philosophy is thus charged with leading us to "true health of the mind," which it does through the cultivation of "true and sound judgment." It is significant that Descartes—again in agreement with the ancients—focuses his efforts on the happiness that can be realized within the natural life of a human being. He is careful to note that it is a dogma of faith that "supreme happiness," consisting "solely in the contemplation of the divine majesty" and attainable only through divine grace, is reserved for the "next life". However, in contrast to the position defended by Aquinas and Roman Catholic theology, the consideration of this "supernatural bliss" plays no role in Descartes' system. On the contrary, he emphasizes that genuine happiness is attainable within this life, in spite of the trials we face. One of the main points of my own ethical code, he tells Mersenne, is to love life without fearing death. The key to developing this affirmative attitude toward life is the cultivation of reason, "True philosophy... teaches that even amidst the saddest disasters and most bitter pains we can always be content, provided that we know how to use our reason."[4]

Descartes' estimation of the importance of ethics is expressed most clearly in the programmatic statement that prefaces the French translation of the *Principles of Philosophy* (1647). Here he presents his conception of philosophy in strikingly traditional terms: the word 'philosophy' means the study of wisdom, and by 'wisdom' is meant not only prudence in our everyday affairs but also a perfect knowledge of all things that mankind is capable of knowing, both for the conduct of life and for the preservation of health and the discovery of all manner of skills.[5]

The key to the attainment of this wisdom, Descartes argues, is the recognition of the essential order among the different parts of our knowledge, an order he depicts in his image of the "tree of philosophy". The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals. Within this scheme, metaphysics is foundational, but this knowledge and the knowledge of physics that is built upon it are sought for the sake of the practical benefits that follow from the sciences of medicine, mechanics and morals, just as it is not the roots or the trunk of a tree from which one gathers the fruit, but only the ends of the branches, so the principal benefit of philosophy depends on those parts of it which can only be learned last of all. Foremost among these sciences is *la morale*. The highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom. It is for the

sake of this science above all that Descartes hopes his readers will realize how important it is to continue the search for these truths, and to what a high degree of wisdom, and to what perfection and felicity of life, these truths can bring us.

The Provisional Moral Code of the Discourse

Descartes laid down laws to govern the use of method of insight in his *Discourse on the Method*. These laws do not only control the process of thought but also function as directives of behaviour. The best-known expression of Descartes' ethical views is the "provisional moral code" that appears in Part Three of *Discourse on the Method*. Some have read this as a definitive statement of Descartes' position, but this is consistent neither with the *Discourse* itself nor with Descartes' later writings. Descartes frames the rules of his provisional moral code as part of the epistemological project—the search for certainty—announced in Part Two of the *Discourse*. In order that he may act decisively and live as happily as possible while avoiding "precipitate conclusions and assumptions", Descartes proposes a provisional moral code consisting of just three or four maxims:

"The first was to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood.... The second maxim was to be as firm and decisive in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain.... My third maxim was to try always to master myself rather than fortune, and to change my desires rather than the order of the world.... Finally, to conclude this moral code... I thought I could do no better than to continue with the [occupation] I was engaged in, and to devote my whole life to cultivating my reason and advancing as far as I could in the knowledge of the truth, following the method I had prescribed for myself."[6]

We can define these in the following terms:

1. To adopt the golden means preached by traditional and religious laws of one's country.
2. To adopt one goal and to proceed towards it with complete concentration.
3. To win a victory over one half than over one's luck and over one's desire instead of over the order of creation.
4. To move in the direction of truth by means or reason and to behave appropriately.

Descartes' apparent uncertainty about the number of rules in his provisional code ("three or four") is noteworthy and may be explained by the different status he assigns to the rules. While the first three prescribe how to act in the absence of any certain knowledge of good and evil (including the much-criticized deference to

the laws and customs of his country), the fourth rule holds out the possibility of cultivating his reason so as to arrive at knowledge of the truth. Echoing his remarks in the *Rules*, he says that in the discovery of such truths he has experienced, "such extreme contentment that I did not think one could enjoy any sweeter or purer one in this life."[7] This might be read as limiting our happiness to the contemplation of intellectual truths of the sort announced in Part Four of the *Discourse*; however, Descartes makes it clear that he sees the search for truth as having a practical import as well. By following the method he has prescribed for himself and exercising his capacity for judgment, he is confident of eventually acquiring all the true knowledge of which he is capable, and "in this way all the true goods within his reach.

It is evident, then, that the first three maxims of the "provisional moral code" are just that—provisional rules that Descartes will follow while he carries out his search for certain knowledge—and that he is confident that this search will terminate in knowledge of "true goods" that will supply reliable directives for action. Descartes hints at the range of these goods in Part Five of the *Discourse*. They will include the maintenance of health, which is undoubtedly the first good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life. Because the mind depends so much on the temperament and disposition of the bodily organs, Descartes adds, we must look to medicine if we are "to find some means of making men in general wiser and more skilful than they have been up till now. The extent of Descartes' commitment to the integration of physical and psychological health will become apparent in the *Passions of the Soul*. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from this that he proposes a reduction of ethics to medicine. As presented already in the *Discourse*, his ethics is founded on an ideal of virtue as a capacity for rational choice, together with the assumption that virtue by itself is sufficient for happiness:

"For our will does not choose to pursue or avoid anything unless that be represented by our understanding as good or bad; so right judgment suffices for right action; and the best that one can, that is, for one's acquiring all virtues and in general all other attainable goods; and with this certain, one cannot fail to be happy."[8]

Expressed in this passage are the core ideas of Descartes' ethics: the notion of *virtue*, as a disposition of the will to choose in accordance with reason's judgments about the good, and the notion of *happiness*, as a state of mental well-being that is achieved through the practice of virtue. In his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth, Descartes will elaborate on the relationship between these two ideas. Here is it worth noting that while it is virtue that links ethics to the broader goal of the cultivation of reason, Descartes gives no less weight to the importance of happiness, in the form of tranquility.

The Passions of the Soul, describes a discipline of "virtue" that aims a bringing our capacities to experience the various passions in line with our considered judgments about good and evils, so that feelings a passion of e.g., fear constitutes a genuine reason to judge that something is fearful. But we want to correct our passions not only because we aim at truth, but because we pursue other good, but so is a well ordered emotional life, so is simple experience of the pleasurable passions, and so is the health and perfection of our souls. Making our passions rational serves many of the plurality of human good Descartes recognize.[9]

The passions also make a direct contribution to human happiness. In the concluding article of the Passions, Descartes goes so far as to say that it is on the passions alone that all the good and evil of this life depends. In the body of the article, he qualifies this claim, allowing that the soul can have pleasures of its own. But the pleasures common to it and the body depend entirely on the passions. His considered view on this question seems to be that the passions (particularly those of love and joy) form a valuable part of human life, that the enjoyment of them is consistent with the happiness that is the nature product of virtue, but that happiness of the latter sort cab be had even in the presence of harmful passions such as sadness or grief.

Happiness, as Descartes defines it for Elisabeth, is a "perfect contentment of mind and inner satisfaction", or the "satisfaction and pleasure" that accompanies the practice of virtue. In the *Passions*, he distinguishes these affects from the passions that originate in the body. The former are described as "internal emotions of the soul," which are "produced in the soul only by the soul itself. In this they differ from its passions, which always depend on some movement of the [animal] spirits". "Internal emotions" are thus independent of the body and the basis of a happiness that can withstand "the most violent assaults of the passions":

"Internal emotions affect us more intimately, and consequently have much more power over us than the passions which occur with them but are distinct from them. To this extent it is certain that, provided our soul always has the means of happiness within itself, all the troubles coming from elsewhere are powerless to harm it. Such troubles will serve rather to increase its joy; for on seeing that it cannot be harmed by them, it becomes aware of its perfection. And in order that our soul should have the means of happiness, it needs only to pursue virtue diligently. For if anyone lives in such a way that his conscience cannot reproach him for ever failing to do something he judges to be the best (which is what I here call 'pursuing virtue'), he will receive from this a satisfaction which has such power to make him happy that the most violent assaults of the passions will never have sufficient power to disturb the tranquility of his soul."[10]

Descartes is committed to the view that the pursuit of virtue is sufficient for happiness. However, he firmly rejects the idea that virtue has only an instrumental value as a means to happiness. On the contrary, virtue is grounded in the one aspect of human nature that is of unconditional value: freedom of the will—the perfection of the soul that renders us in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves. The recognition of this fact forms the basis of the moral ideal Descartes calls "generosity." Generosity incorporates both the perfection of the intellect (wisdom) and the perfection of the will (virtue). The generous person "knows in what manner and for what reason anyone ought to have esteem or contempt for himself," and he possesses the perfection that is the object of that esteem. "True generosity," therefore, has two components: "The first consists in his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him but this freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using this freedom well or badly. The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well—that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best. To do that is to pursue virtue in a perfect manner."[11]

Generosity is an ideal of individual ethical perfection, but Descartes also draws from it an important conclusion about our relations to others. Upon recognizing an element of unconditional value within himself, the generous person is naturally led to extend this recognition to others. Those who possess this knowledge and this feeling about themselves readily come to believe that any other person can have the same knowledge and feeling about himself, because this involves nothing which depends on someone else. Those who are endowed with generosity are thus disposed to overlook conventional distinctions of class and social status, and to focus on the true, intrinsic worth of each individual:

"Just as they do not consider themselves much inferior to those who have greater wealth or honour, or even to those who have more intelligence, knowledge or beauty, or generally to those who surpass them in some other perfections, equally they do not have much more esteem for themselves than for those whom they surpass. For all these things seem to them to be unimportant, by contrast with the virtuous will for which alone they esteem themselves, and which they suppose also to be present, or at least capable of being present, in every other person."[12]

Thus, despite its nod to law and custom, which fill the space opened by the limits of our moral knowledge, Descartes' ethics is crowned by a principle of moral universalism. In virtue of their free will, all human beings have the same moral status and deserve equal moral respect. In this we find an important anticipation of Kant's ethics, which emerges from a similar consideration of the unconditional value of a rational and free will.

While it is clear that Descartes accords a privileged place to the science he calls *la morale*, the fact remains that he left no systematic presentation of his ethical views. He offers several explanations for why he has not devoted more attention to ethics. Given his conception of the order of knowledge, conclusion about ethics must be established in a way that reveals their dependence on the prior conclusions of metaphysics and physics. Thus, the systematic investigation of ethics can begin only after certainty has been achieved in these prior theoretical disciplines. In a late letter to Chaunt, Descartes cites two further reasons for his silence on the topic: "It is true that normally I refuse to write down my thoughts concerning morality. I have two reasons for this. One is that there is no other subject in which malicious people can so readily find pretexts for vilifying me; and the other is that I believe only sovereigns, or those authorized by them, have the right to concern themselves with regulating the morals of other people."[13] The first of these reasons reflects Descartes' inherent caution, reinforced by the hostile reception his philosophy had received at the University of Utrecht. The second points to an important limitation in Descartes' conception of ethics: he does not enunciate a specific set of duties, because these, he believes, are the purview of the sovereign. This again may make it seem that Descartes rejects a substantial role for philosophy in ethics, offering in its place a Hobbesian account of the authority of moral dictates grounded in a sovereign will. There is an element of truth in this suggestion, but uncovering it requires drawing a crucial distinction: if Descartes limits the role of philosophy in determining specific moral rules, he nonetheless upholds the ancients' conception of philosophy as a search for wisdom that is sufficient for happiness. It is in this sense that ethics remains central to Descartes' philosophy.

Conclusion

For Descartes, ethics is the science of the end of man, and this end must be determined by reason. Before reason can arrive at the knowledge of such an end, and of the means of reaching it, the philosopher and only the philosopher must construct a provisory morality, a model of life capable of assuring him tranquility, a standard which he will follow until such time as definitive and rational morality appears to his reason. Provisory morality is made up of a few percepts: Live according to the politico-religious opinions and customs of the country: follow mean (i.e., moderate) and not extreme opinions; govern yourself with constancy, without letting yourself be distracted by opportunistic considerations. In a word, live in such a manner as to assure yourself the greatest tranquility.

Descartes recognize that the end of man is virtue and happiness. The actuation of this end is brought about through reason—through the knowledge of God, of the

soul, and of the world. It is attained through knowledge of God, because God is the creator and unifier of the universe; of the soul, because the soul makes clear to us our superiority over material nature; of the physical world, because, governed by causal necessity, it teaches man the virtue of resignation and indifference in the face of the evils of life. As is evident, Cartesian morality does not greatly differ from Stoic ethics in which the wise man apples to reason in order to assure him of tranquility and felicity.

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