1

TWO OR THREE BATTLES: ORGANICITY AND TEMPORALITY IN CARTESIAN ETHICS

Pablo Bustinduy Amador

Abstract: In the *Principles*, Descartes announces his intention to deliver an "exact account of morals" which would crown his philosophical project and aim at nothing less than the "perfection and felicity of life". The development of such a perfect system of morals, however, presupposes a complete knowledge of all the other sciences, and will require their completion before it can be brought to light. Morality thus appears as the end of Cartesian philosophy, and this in a double sense: morality will be the last science to appear, but it will also bring forth the actual fulfillment of the philosophical project, its final and most perfect result. The purpose of this paper is to examine, through a close reading of the continuities and interruptions that puncture Descartes' works, the ambiguous character of such ethical promise, and the conditions in which such realization of philosophy did not take place.

Keywords: *Descartes, Ethics, Morality, Reason, Organicity, Moral Progress, Provisionality, Ethics of the Horizon, Epistemology, Modern Philosophy*.

> "Thus the whole of philosophy is like a tree. 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. By "morals" I understand the

> highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom"
> *Principles of Philosophy*, Preface to the French Edition

The metaphor of the tree is an enigmatic way of access to Cartesian morality. In fact, the metaphor posits a certain number of problems when considered in the broader context of Descartes' philosophy. The reasons for this problematicity do not derive only from the fact that Descartes never provided the "exact account of medicine, morals and mechanics" that he ambiguously announced in the *Principles*.[1] They have to do as well with the very logic that animates the metaphor, with the double function that is at work in its characterization of philosophy.

The image seems in fact to work at least in two different manners. First, it provides us with the idea of a fundamental unity: the philosophical tree is an organic whole, in which the different "parts" or limbs are integrated, united in a fundamental continuity that runs from the first principles of the metaphysical roots to the ultimate benefits of practical philosophy. But secondly, this image is presented as a projection. The tree, as it were, is not yet fully grown: it still lacks its branches, which are simply anticipated or foreseen. The unity of the organic whole appears thus as it will look like in a future state, and is seen from the perspective of an actual state of incompleteness.

In the metaphor of the tree, hence, the organicity of philosophy is inscribed upon a temporal logic of realization. The perfect system of morals, which presupposes a "complete knowledge" of the other sciences, would presumably coincide with the overcoming of this temporal lack, and thus with the full achievement of the organic plenitude announced and anticipated by the metaphor. The purpose of this paper is to examine, through a close reading of Descartes' works, the conditions in which such realization of philosophy did not take place.

[1] *Principles of Philosophy*, Preface to the French Edition, Adam and Tannery Edition, Vol. IXB: page 17; Cambridge Edition, Vol. I: page 188. Thereafter referred to as PP, followed by Volume: Page of the Adam and Tannery edition; this will be employed for all the references to Descartes' writings. In this passage of the Principles, Descartes affirms not to "feel so old, or so diffident about my powers, or so far away from knowledge on these remaining topics", as to doubt about his capacity to perfectly achieve his project. However, he points to his financial difficulties as the main obstacle which separated him for that completion.

THE ORGANIC PARADOX OF MORALITY

The metaphor of the tree is not exclusive of the *Principles*. As early as in the *Regulae*, for example, we were already told of certain "first seeds" of reason which are sown in us and "bear spontaneous fruits"; we heard about "harvests" that are richer than others in such fruits; we were assured that even the most difficult disciplines of knowledge can "achieve perfect maturity", if only they are "cultivated with extreme care".[2] As if the seeds of these beginnings, cultivated through a life of careful labor, had brought forth the imposing presence of the philosophical tree, the metaphor of the organic reality of knowledge extends between the two edges of Cartesian philosophy.

The idea of organicity posits the axiom of a perfect and homogeneous continuity between the contents of knowledge. The philosophical tree appears in fact as the result of a single and unitary process: properly nurtured, the different limbs or parts which compose it (the roots, the trunk, the branches), develop in time by growing from one another. But if the tree is to preserve this unity, and to witness for the harmonic integration of all its contents into the ordered, organic whole of philosophical knowledge, a double condition must be satisfied: all the contents of knowledge must share a certain commensurability, and their accumulation must proceed in an ordered, methodical fashion.

The universal structures of reason, first, guarantee the essential unity of philosophical knowledge. In the confrontation between reason and the object, the stress is thus systematically put on the labors of reason. Underlying every classification or division between the "branches" of knowledge, there is an essential, fundamental equality in the condition of all that is known –precisely in so far as it can be known by means of reason, as it becomes problem or object of reason.[3] Reason, as the first rule for the direction of the mind already stated, can form "true and sound judgments about whatever comes before it": by referring to reason's

[2] *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule Four, IX:373; 1:17. Thereafter referred to as RDM.

[3] See for example in Rule Thirteen: "we should not regard some branches of our knowledge of things as more obscure than others, since they are all of the same nature and consist simply in the putting together of self-evident facts" (RDM IX:428; 1:50); or in the *Discourse on the Method:* "all the things which can fall under human knowledge are interconnected" (*Discourse on the Method*, Part two, VI:19; 1:120. Thereafter referred to as DM).

potential objects of application, "whatever" stands here for the entirety of the knowable world.[4] As long as the judgment respects the conditions for the systematic labors of methodical reason, its product will become rational, commensurate and unitary "organic knowledge".

Thus philosophy appears as a unitary whole whose contents are linked by a fundamental continuity. This is the essential content of the definition that Descartes provides in the preface to the French edition of the *Principles*, just a few pages before announcing the metaphor of the tree: philosophy, says Descartes, concerns the study of wisdom, and as such it "encompasses everything which the human mind is capable of knowing".[5] In order for this wisdom to be perfect, reason must always seek clear and distinct knowledge, proceeding systematically from the simplest to the most complex while treating each singular problem. This is also how the totality of its contents must be deduced from first causes, advancing carefully through entirely clear chains of deductions. According to the *Principles*, this is primarily what to "philosophize" means.[6]

Of course, many similar statements can be signaled through Descartes' opus. But the peculiarity of this passage of the Preface resides in the fact that this definition of philosophy is framed within a temporal description of its progress. Descartes explains here how philosophy must be developed, both in learning and production, if it is to attain its utmost perfection. Philosophy, so he says, must follow a precise order of realization, leading from the first principles of metaphysics to the highest perfection of morals. Should this order be followed to the end, philosophy cannot fail to provide us with its ultimate benefits, namely the "knowledge of all things that mankind is capable of knowing, both for the conduct of life and for

[4] RDM, Rule One, IX:359; 1:9. It is revelatory that one year after the composition of the Rules, Descartes gave to his following work precisely the title *The World*. In his preface to this work, Robert Stoothoff reproduces the following words, addressed by Descartes to Mersenne in November 1649: "instead of explaining only one phenomenon, I have resolved to explain all the phenomena of Nature, i.e. Physics" (Translator's preface to *The World*, 1:79).

[5] PP, Preface to the French Edition, IXB:3; 1:180.

[6] Ibid. IXB:2; 1:179. This is the exact passage from the Preface: "thus, in order to set about acquiring [wisdom] –and it is this activity to which the term "to philosophize" strictly refers- we must start with the search for first causes or principles". Though the term "wisdom" acquires a particular relevance in the *Principles*, already in the *Rules* we can find a definition highly attuned with this later use: "for the sciences as a whole are nothing other than human wisdom, which always remains one and the same, however different the subjects to which it is applied" (RDM X:360; 1:9).

the preservation of health and the discovery of all manner of skills".[7] The ordered unity of wisdom is therefore defined by reference to its ultimate, fundamentally practical vocation: wisdom aims, as a last horizon, at acquiring skills, at preserving health, at rightly conducting our life. Morality, the highest branch of the philosophical tree, will then emerge as the ultimate benefit of philosophy.[8]

This conclusion confronts us with what might be called the organic paradox of morality. This paradox can be synthesized in an ambiguous statement, which must be understood at the same time in both of its two possible meanings: *Cartesian morality appears as the end of philosophy*. Morality, as the metaphor of the tree clearly stated, is the last discipline of human knowledge: it comes at the chronological end of the philosophical project, it is the last science to appear. But like medicine or mechanics, morals are *still* a branch of the philosophical tree. As such, hence, the "science of morals" must necessarily satisfy the conditions of the unified and ordered production of knowledge.

But morality is not just *another* branch of philosophy: it is as well its main goal and purpose, it is what knowledge is supposed to produce as its last and most perfect result, as the final end for which all the previous developments are means. The global project of knowledge, according to the Descartes of the *Principles*, aims at nothing less than "perfection and felicity of life":[9] the highest, most perfect moral system appears hence as nothing other than the ultimate fulfillment of this vocation. Consequently, morals are at the same time the last means and the first end of philosophy.

The paradox can hence be restated in the following terms. On the one hand, if morality is to become a constitutive branch of knowledge (even

[7] PP IXB:2; 1:179.

[8] See for instance: "the principal benefit of philosophy depends on those parts of it which can only be learnt last of all" (PP IXB:15; 1:186). Descartes expresses in these passages his wish to replace the "speculative philosophy taught in the schools" with a fundamentally practical philosophy, fully dedicated to the improvement of life.

[9] This link of finality between the production of knowledge and the conduct of life in its manifold aspects explicitly appears several times throughout the entirety of Descartes' works. See for example in the First Rule, where it is affirmed that one should "consider simply how to increase the natural light of his reason, not with a view to solving this or that scholastic problem, but in order that his intellect should show his will what decision it ought to make in each of life's contingencies" (RDM X:361; 1:10); or in the first part of the *Discourse*: "And it was always my earnest desire to learn to distinguish the true from the false in order to see clearly into my own actions and proceed with confidence in this life" (DM VII:9-10; 1:115).

if, chronologically, it is the youngest one), it must still satisfy the conditions of philosophical organicity: its object must be susceptible of being subsumed under the priority of systematic and methodical reason. But on the other hand, according to the Cartesian anticipation morality is not just a part of the organic unity of knowledge, not even the last stage of its development. Morality is in addition the actual fulfillment of the philosophical project; it is a culmination that brings forth its final and most perfect result. This realization, Descartes warns us, presupposes a complete and perfect knowledge of all the other sciences. This is the second aspect of Descartes' paradox of morality: in order for this realization to take place, everything must be perfectly completed *beforehand*. It is as if true morality could only appear in a future state of "highest perfection", or not to appear at all.

UNFOLDING OF THE PARADOX (I): THE TRUE AND THE GOOD

The first necessary condition for the emergence of the perfect system of morals, then, is that this system be a constitutive branch of philosophy. This presupposes a fundamental adequacy between morality and organic knowledge: the moral object must be capable of being determined by the priority of methodical reason. In the *Meditations*, however, Descartes seems to provide us with a clear refutation of this condition by repeatedly establishing a clear separation between the acts of speculative reason and everything that pertains to the conduct of life. Should this separation be justified, the domain of practical life could simply not be included within the realm of philosophical knowledge. The perspective of elaborating a perfect science of morals, then, could hardly be anything more than a chimerical illusion.

The question might be better posed by considering one of the subjects that raised most concerns among the contemporary commentators of the *Meditations*, to the point that Descartes himself, after reading some of their objections, decided to add an explanatory paragraph to the synopsis of the work, asking expressly from the editor to "put the words in brackets so that it can be seen that they have been added".[10] The concerns that this supplement was meant to address referred to the necessity of establish-

[10] Letter to Mersenne, March 18 1641. Included in footnote 1 of *Meditations on First Philosophy*, VIII:15; 2:11. Thereafter referred to as M.

ing a difference between two kinds of errors: errors made in the distinction between truth and falsity, on the one hand, and those made in the distinction between good and evil, on the other. Thus Arnauld, in the fourth set of objections, affirms that the former distinction is all that is needed for Descartes' project, and he enjoins him consequently to clarify that he was "dealing solely with matters concerned with the sciences and intellectual contemplation, and not with matters belonging to faith and the conduct of life".[11] In reply to this claim, the passage whose later inclusion Descartes wanted us to notice states as follows: "(But here it should be noted in passing that I do not deal at all with sin, i.e. error which is committed in pursuing good and evil, but only with error that occurs in distinguishing truth from falsehood. And there is no discussion of matters pertaining to faith or the conduct of life, but simply of speculative truths which are known solely by means of the natural light)".[12]

Descartes fully satisfies Arnauld's demand. He explains that the *Meditations* are a work dealing exclusively with the speculative contemplation of truth. In his replies, he underlines a passage from the first Meditation in which he explicitly claims that the task he his confronting "does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge".[13] According to Descartes' explanation, we are facing here a false problem. The *Meditations* concern only the search for first principles; they are restricted to the status of a metaphysical investigation on the roots of all possible knowledge, his goal being exclusively to explore the conditions under which indubitable truths can be produced. This, Descartes says, is the context in which his investigation of the nature of error must also be understood.

Now, if we follow Descartes' warning, we should assert that the conclusions of the fourth Meditation apply only to the contemplation of truth, and not the pursuit of the good in practical life. These conclusions, let us remind it, combined the diagnosis of the inevitability of error with a pragmatic solution consisting in its systematic avoidance. Errors, Descartes explains, derive from a fundamental inadequacy between the limitation of the human intellect and the infinity of our will: we make mistakes

[11] Fourth Set of Objections and Replies,VII:216; 2:152. Thereafter referred to as OR. Similar concerns, and the consequent replies, can be found in the Second (VII:126-27; 2:90), Fifth (VII:351; 2:243) and Seventh Sets of Objections (VII: 460; 2:308).

[12] M VIII:15; 2:11.

[13] M VIII:22; 2:15.

whenever we extend our ability to judge beyond the domain of certain knowledge. Being limited creatures, we cannot completely escape the possibility of being mistaken, because we cannot have a clear and distinct perception of everything we may be able to deliberate upon.[14] What we can do, however, is to acquire the systematic habit of avoiding error, an ability which Descartes describes as "man's greatest and most important perfection",[15] and that simply consists in avoiding those judgments in which the intellect has no clear and distinct perception about the issue at stake. Lacking a solid basis for its determination, says Descartes, in such cases the will cannot but be indifferent about the matter, and it "easily turns aside from what is *true* and *good*, and this is the source of my error and sin".[16]

This conflation of truth and goodness cannot but be shocking, given Descartes' insistent underlining of the distinction between the two. The passage makes clear enough that the faculty of the will, in its being determined by the intellect (and thus in its liability to error), cannot be the instance that authorizes such distinction. So the question arises: does reason act in the same way in the acquisition of knowledge and in moral decisions? Is there any difference, as Descartes repeatedly indicates, between falsity with regards to truth and error with regards to goodness?

The possibility of establishing an essential parallelism between the application of reason both to theoretical and moral judgments seems to

[14] This impossibility is expressed in M VIII:61; 2:43. In the fourth Meditation, Descartes famously explains the nature of error as the result of our "middle" ontological position: "my nature is such that in so far as I was created by the supreme being, there is nothing in me to enable me to go wrong (...); but in so far as I participate in nothingness or non-being, (...) I am lacking in countless respects, it is no wonder that I make mistakes" (M VIII:54; 2:38).

[15] M VIII:62; 2:43. This passage of the *Meditations* should be compared with *Principles* 37: "the supreme perfection of man is that he acts freely or voluntarily, and it is this which makes him deserve praise or blame" (PP XIXB:18; 1:205).

[16] My emphasis, M VIII:58; 2:40-41. It is very important to remind that, in the Fourth Set of Objections, Arnauld had included his comments on the conduct of life in a section called "Points that may cause difficulty to Theologians". So the question of faith inevitably plays an important role in Descartes' effort to distinguish speculative reason from the conduct of life, though it is difficult to establish the actual extent of this influence. The passage on supernatural illumination states as follows: "the clarity or transparency which can induce our will to give its assent is of two kinds: the first comes from natural light, while the second comes from divine grace" (OR VII:147; 2:105).

be confirmed, at first, negatively. In the second set of replies, Descartes argues about the exceptional status of faith. He introduces then a fundamental difference between matters of faith and matters of knowledge, establishing that the will can be informed in its act of choice by two causes, namely the natural light of reason or the "supernatural illumination" of the divine grace.[17] However, this "second cause" for the determination of the will is clearly not applicable to matters concerning the conduct of life. In the absence of a third cause, the realm of practical life seems to be subject to the exact same process of intellection. Morals would then imply nothing other than the freedom of an infinite will, acting either upon clear and distinct knowledge, or upon a state of fundamental indifference that corresponds to an absence of reasons.

Descartes seems to confirm this hypothesis in a passage from the second set of replies where he is attempting to clarify the uncanny implications of his conflation of truth and goodness in the fourth Meditation. The passage says: "in matters that may be embraced by the will, I made a very careful distinction between the conduct of life and the contemplation of truth. As far as the conduct of life is concerned, I am very far from thinking that we should assent only to what is clearly perceived. On the contrary, I do not think that we should always wait even for probable truths; from time to time we will have to choose one of many alternatives about which we have no knowledge, and once we have made our choice, so long as no reason against it can be produced, we must stick to it as firmly as if it had been chosen for transparently clear reasons".[18]

We must conclude two things from Descartes' words. First, that as we suspected, the faculty of judgment, consisting in the articulation of intellect and will, acts fundamentally in the same way both for the pursuit of the true and of the good. Secondly, that in what pertains the conduct

[17] Second Set of Replies, VII:149; 2:106.

[18] In *Principles* 31-42, Descartes reproduces the investigation on the nature of error in similar terms as those of the *Meditations*. It is quite significant that judgment is referred there to in terms of action. Thus Principle 38 states: "the fact that we fall into error is a defect in the way we act or in the use we make of our freedom, but not a defect in our nature. For our nature remains the same whether we judge correctly or incorrectly" (PP XIXB:19; 1:205). This is immediately preceded by 37, which affirms that "it is a supreme perfection in man that he acts voluntarily, that is, freely; this makes him in a special way the author of his actions and deserving of praise for what he does" (PP IXB:18; 1:205).

of life, and thus the pursuit of virtue, the will is often in a position of inevitable indifference, which makes us prone to constant misjudgments and mistakes. But is this reading really correct? Can the analysis of error be extended, against Descartes' warning in the *Meditations*, to the domain of practical and moral life? And if so, to what extent can morals avoid this indifference of the will, and thus its imperfection and error?

The beginning of an answer to these questions may be found in the dedicatory letter of the *Principles*.[19] There, Descartes addresses to princess Elizabeth a reflection on the nature of virtue, distinguishing between apparent virtues and true ones. The main difference between the two, he says, is that true virtues arise from an exact "knowledge of what is right", while apparent ones derive from a certain ignorance or "error".[20] In so far as they derive from perfect knowledge, true virtues have "one and the same nature" and are included under the single name of "wisdom". And this wisdom, he says, needs only two prerequisites to arise: "perception of the intellect and disposition of the will".[21]

In the last work he published during his lifetime, the *Passions of the soul*, Descartes provides us with a similar argument. He affirms there that the "chief utility of morality" consists in the ability to control our desires. This control is necessary because desire is what mediates between the passion of the soul and its realization in action. Thus the work of morality consists in establishing two things: first, whether that desire depends on ourselves or on some other external cause; secondly, to what extent it participates in "goodness". As a combination of the two, the pursuit of virtue consists in "doing the good things that depend on us".[22] But how are we to distinguish the goodness of our desire, and thus the consequent goodness of the action it will produce? Once again, Descartes' answer is very explicit: "desire is always good when it con-

[19] PP, Dedicatory Letter. IXB:2; 1:190-191. This explicit address of the question of virtue is rare in Descartes. However, even here he never defines what determines the knowledge of goodness. At the end of the day, Descartes himself would be liable of the same fault that he attributes, in the *Discourse*, to the moral writings of the Ancients: "I compared the moral writings of the ancient pagans to very proud and magnificent palaces built only in sand and mud. They extol the virtues, and make them appear more estimable than anything else in the world; but they do not adequately explain how to recognize a virtue" (DM VI:8; 1:114).

[20] PP, Dedicatory Letter, IXB:2; 1:191.

[21] Id.3 191 1.

[22] *The Passions of the Soul*, part two, IX:436; 1:379. Thereafter referred to as PS.

forms to true knowledge; likewise it cannot fail to be bad when based on some error".[23]

Thus the parallel appears to be constantly ratified: the pursuit of the good follows exactly the same rules and conditions that apply for the pursuit of truth. The same faculty, acting exactly through the same mechanisms, is responsible for our choice of the true or the false, what is good or what is evil. Speculative knowledge and moral knowledge appear both under the same light, the light of wisdom that allows to overcome the limitations and weaknesses of human nature either through perfect knowledge or through the avoidance of error. The difference between knowledge and action, between science and practical life, is definitively not to be found in the relation between reason and its object.[24] The first necessary condition for the emergence of morals, its commensurability with the proceedings of organic reason, appears then to be wholly verified.

So why does Descartes emphasize so insistently the distinction between the contemplation of truth and the pursuit of goodness? As we have seen, this distinction cannot be due to any incommensurability between moral and rational judgments. Consequently, there must be something in practical life that makes it impossible for us to escape the indifference of the will, its failure to control a desire or to recognize a virtue. There must be something that makes us especially prone to error in those cases. The conclusive paragraph of the *Meditations* states: "But since the pressure of things to be done does not always allow us to stop and make such a meticulous check, it must be admitted that in this human life we are often liable to make mistakes about particular things, and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature".[25] That something that makes us

[23] PS IX:436-437; 1:379).

[24] In a sense, this profound unity of reason is precisely what informed Descartes' argumentation of the peculiarity of the human. When in the *Discourse* he conjectured the existence of a machine that would perfectly imitate our actions "for all practical purposes", he affirmed that one would still be able to distinguish it from humans, because of its lack of reason. Reason, he said then, is a "universal instrument" that can be used in all the contingencies of life, in all kind of situations. Reason "makes us act", while "Nature acts through animals": in the last instance, this indistinctness between the rational and the practical is what singularizes us and makes us unique: "it is for all practical purposes impossible for a machine to have enough different organs to make it act in all the contingencies of life in the way in which our reason makes us act" (DM VI:56-57; 1:139-140).

[25] M VIII:90; 2:62.

fail in human life, then, must have something to do with the "pressure of things to be done": a pressure that, as we already saw, does often not allow us the time to wait "even for probable truths".

UNFOLDING OF THE PARADOX (II) VELOCITY AND THE PROVISIONAL

The velocity of life makes it impossible for us to "stop and check" before judging moral and practical issues. Even if morals proceed according to reason, moral judgments are somehow overwhelmed by the rhythm of life, by the urgency of things that have to be decided without allowing us to wait until we find about their truth. No doubt that this lack of time is responsible for most of our particular errors. Descartes repeatedly identified this urgency as one of the main dangers in the use of reason, even when treating of mathematical problems. "Frequently people, he says in the *Regulae*, are in such a hurry in their investigation of problems that they set about solving them with their minds blank".[26] When facing complex objects or situations, we need time in order to arrive either at a final clear and distinct perception or at the acknowledgment that we are in a position of indifference. Little wonder, then, if in speculative reasoning we are often slow, and in practical life, wrong.

So how could this imperfection be neutralized? How could morality overcome that pressure of time, which places us in a position of recurrent indifference, and thus makes practical errors almost inevitable? As we have seen, Descartes seems to provide us with a simple answer to these questions. We will avoid mistakes in practical life only in so far as we have clear and distinct knowledge about what is to be decided or done, be it the pursuit of virtue, the control of a passion or any other instance of intervention of the will. The urgency of practical time, then, could only be overcome by a substantial increase in our knowledge

[26] RDM, Rule Thirteen, X:434; 1:54. Descartes follows this assertion by a curious similitude in terms of action: "They are thus behaving like a foolish servant who, sent on some errand by his master, is so eager to obey that he dashes off without instructions and without knowing where he is to go". In a different level, this dependence of thought upon time is clearly intuited by Arnauld, who in the introduction to his Fourth Set of Objections affirms: "the work you are giving to me to scrutinize requires (...) above all a calm mind, which can be free from the hurly-burly of all external things and have the leisure to consider itself" (OR VII:197; 2:138).

of the good; that is by a better and more perfect understanding of what is to be done.

In a sense, this is exactly what the second condition for the emergence of true morals already stated. In order to have true morality, so the Cartesian anticipation announced, we need to achieve *beforehand* the completion of all the other sciences, we need the most perfect and complete accumulation and development of all philosophical knowledge. Our present condition of fragility and error, then, would be nothing but a transitory state, the imperfect uncertainty in which we wait for the attainment of the future, perfect completion of wisdom. Of course, this condition of provisionality is at the very heart of Descartes' most famous treatment of the question of morals, namely his description of an "imperfect" moral code that should be followed "provisionally while we do not yet know a better one".[27]

Since life admits no delay, says Descartes in the *Discourse*, as long as we are in this transitory state we will undoubtedly be forced to take uncertain decisions, that is, decisions that may possibly be wrong. In those cases, he explains, we must stick to those decisions as if they were undoubtedly true, and never abandon them as long as no reason can be produced against them.[28] But this moral code, he emphasizes, is indeed an imperfect

[27] PP IXB:15; 1:186. This moral code is first presented in the introduction of the *Discourse*, where Descartes characterizes it in a normative fashion, as a set of "moral rules derived from [the] method" (DM VI:1; 1:111).

[28] This is the passage of the *Discourse* in which, explaining the reasons why the provisional moral code must be adopted, Descartes says: "since in everyday life we must often act without delay, it is a most certain truth that when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable. Even when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some; and having done so we must regard them as not doubtful, from a practical point of view, but as most true and certain, on the grounds that the reason which made us adopt them is itself true and certain"(DM VI:24-25; 1:123). A similar treatment of the question of provisionality can be found in the *Principles*: "so long as we possess only the kind of knowledge that is acquired by the first four degrees of wisdom we should not doubt the probable truths which concern the conduct of life, while at the same time we should not consider them to be so certain that we are incapable of changing our views when we are obliged to do so by some evident reason" (PP IXB:7; 1:182). In the above mentioned passage of the *Discourse,* Descartes compares this attitude to that of a traveler lost in the middle of a forest, who should not doubt in his determination once a direction has been chosen for his march. The metaphor of the traveler, grounded upon his own biographical narration, is often used as a symbol of curiosity, destruction of prejudices and openness of mind. The ethical implications of this metaphor would deserve a more detailed analysis.

and provisional one. It is a transitory necessity that will disappear when the edifice of wisdom, our new home under construction,[29] is finally completed. So our practical uncertainty is inscribed upon a temporal logic of disappearance: the overcoming of our imperfection will presumably coincide with the achievement of the philosophical project. What confers to our fragility its provisional character, then, is precisely the certainty of this future realization of philosophy. A realization, consequently, that would definitively sanction our moral victory over the urgency of time.

But how could we understand the terms of such a victory? If philosophy is to free us from the uncertainty of the provisional, as we have just seen, it will do so only by achieving first the totality of its project. Perfection and completeness, then, are the conditions upon which this victory of knowledge could be grounded. So let us examine now the two conditions of this achievement.

Of course, in thinking of Cartesian perfection one would immediately be tempted to think of infinity. The urgency of time would completely disappear if we had such thing as absolute knowledge: we only need time because our intellect is limited, and we would not need it at all if an immediate, absolutely perfect knowledge were at our disposal. Descartes himself, in another remarkable conflation of virtue and truth in the *Meditations*, says: "If I always saw clearly what is true and good, I should never have to deliberate about the right judgment or choice".[30] However, this is clearly not compatible with the acknowledgment of the weakness of human nature that Descartes constantly identifies throughout his works. Wisdom encompasses "everything that can be known by the mind", that is, everything that falls within its limited range of possibilities.

On the other hand, it is precisely "man's greatest perfection" what may allow us to achieve perfection within the possible. Perfection, then,

[29] In the *Discourse*, Descartes compares the provisional moral code to a place where one can comfortably live while he is rebuilding his house: "before starting to rebuild your house, it is not enough simply to pull it down, to make provision for materials and architects (...) and to have carefully drawn up the plans; you must also provide yourself with some other place where you can live comfortably while building is in progress. Likewise, lest I should remain indecisive in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgments, and in order to live as happily as I could during this time, I formed for myself a provisional moral code consisting of just three or four maxims" (DM VI:22; 1:122).

[30] M VIII:59; 2:49.

should be understood in a relative, almost negative sense: perfection is simply conceived as the absence of error.[31] Even if our knowledge is not absolute, it will still be perfect in as much as we have no doubts with regards to its certainty, if the truth of what is known appears clear and distinctly as indubitable. So the perfect knowledge announced by Descartes will not be absolute in the sense of omniscience. It will necessarily be relative, and proportional to our own limits. True morality, then, will be grounded upon a "relatively" perfect knowledge. And as such, its perfection must also be understood in necessarily relative terms.

However, this relative perfection of true morals seems to be deeply problematic. In fact, a relatively perfect science of morals could consist, for instance, in a restricted set of true knowledge from which any possibility of error would be absolutely excluded. But in fact, this restricted knowledge would clearly not be enough to wholly overcome the urgent velocity of things. Even if perfect, a limited moral code should have to confront situations in which certain knowledge about what is to be done would be lacking. In those cases, it would still be necessary to take ungrounded decisions, and thus we would still be in a position of fragility, prone to making the wrong choices or decisions.

So even a perfect science of morals would be at least partially submitted to the urgency of time, and thus to the possibility of error. As such, it would not be able to wholly overcome the "provisional" state of uncertainty of the practical. When in the second set of replies Descartes grounds the distinction between speculative judgments and the conduct of life upon this uncertainty of the practical decision, without making any reference to the provisional character of the maxim, he seems to be acknowledging this very conclusion: the urgency of things will never be wholly overcome by the Cartesian edifice of knowledge. The provisional uncertainty of the practical, consequently, seems to aim at a relative permanence or normalization.[32]

[31] Of course, this conception of a "relative perfection" could be highly problematic for Descartes. However, several times he explains the "perfection" of knowledge as an absolute certainty which is guaranteed by its being derived from absolutely true first principles (see for instance in *Principles* IXB:2; 1:179: "in order for this kind of knowledge to be perfect it must be deduced from first causes").

[32] The provisional moral code prescribed to our practical actions something like this maxim: while we are waiting to know what should be done, we must act as if we already knew what to do. Once the dimension of the provisional is normalized, the status of practical choices would probably change its referent. In fact, one could think

So true morals will only be able to win a relative victory over time. And still, even this mutilated victory cannot be taken for granted. In fact, true morality presupposes not only perfection, but also completeness of knowledge in order to arise. Moreover, it is this condition of "completeness" what ultimately determines the possibility of emergence of morals: perfect morality will appear *only* when all the other sciences have been fully realized. In a certain sense, morals will be in a provisional state as long as this completeness of all previous knowledge is not actually fulfilled. But in what consists such completeness, and how could it be attained?

If we listen to Descartes, knowledge is complete when it has exhausted all its possibilities and potentialities. And one can even find in his work evidence of a certain optimism concerning the task, as if the perspective of this ultimate achievement of the philosophical project were not only possible but even imminent. Thus after the famous passage of the *Discourse* consecrated to the future developments of the project, where he expresses a certain confidence in the program of making ourselves the "lords and masters of nature",[33] Descartes characterizes knowledge in the

that the provisional choice would no longer refer to absolutely certain knowledge, but probably to an aspiration at something like moral certainty. Descartes treats twice the question of moral certainty in his works. First, in the *Discourse*, he speaks of a moral certainty that we have about evident things, "so that it seems we cannot doubt them without being extravagant" although they might be doubted "when it is a question of metaphysical certainty" (DM VI:38; 1:130). The second time occurs in part four of the *Principles*. In the French rewrite of Principle 205 (reproduced in footnote 2, 1:289), Descartes provides a much more "practical" definition of moral certainty, which is a kind of certainty "sufficient to regulate our behavior, or which measures up to the certainty we have on matters relating to the conduct of life which we never normally doubt, though we know it is possible, absolutely speaking, that they may be false".

[33] This infamous synthesis of the Cartesian project should be understood by considering what immediately follows this maxim: to become lords and masters of nature, apart from enjoying the "fruits" of the earth, would allow us to get rid of "innumerable diseases, both of the body and the mind", and would facilitate, "most importantly", the "maintenance of health", true foundation of every other good (DM VI: 62; 1:142-143). The fundamental role that Descartes attributed to medicine, as one of the most fecund benefits of practical philosophy should not be underestimated while analyzing this claim. Concerning the "vices" of the mind, the presence of the metaphor of a "health of the mind" can be retraced from the very beginnings of Cartesian philosophy. See for instance in the *Observations* included in his early writings: "I use the term "vices" to refer to the diseases of the mind, which are not so easy to recognize as diseases of the body. This is because we have frequently experienced sound bodily health, but have never known true health of the mind" (*Early Writings* X:216; 1:3).

guise of a war against error, a war whose success depends on the victory over very few fundamental and difficult problems. And he affirms categorically that he needs "to win only two or three other such battles in order to achieve my aims completely".[34] The only thing that he needs in order to carry out this complete accomplishment, he says, is to plan his time carefully. This is because his philosophical project is inscribed within the frame a threatening perspective: life, says Descartes, has a "short duration".[35] The only thing that could prevent him from completing the task is, once again, a certain urgency of time, the threatening "brevity of life".

This anxious optimism is radically overthrown in a passage from the third part of the *Principle*s. And paradoxically the brevity of life, which in the *Discourse* menaced the possibility of finishing the project, is now employed in an opposite, almost optimistic way. The passage in question seems to express the logical impossibility of ever attaining a perfectly complete knowledge of the sciences. And once again, a later modification of the original text appears to subvert its original meaning. Descartes had written at first: "the principles which we have so far discovered are so vast and so fertile, than their consequences are far more numerous than the entire observed contents of the visible world; indeed, they are so numerous that we could never make a complete survey of them even in our thought". Now, in the French translation of the text, a fundamental precision is included in the last sentence. The consequences are so numerous, so says the later text, that we could "never *in a lifetime* make a complete survey of them even in our thought".[36]

The question is relevant because, as such, the original version of the text could lead us to believe that in their indefinite potential of application, the principles of philosophy would never allow for such thing as a "complete knowledge" of the sciences. If that was the case, the perspective of emergence of morality should be indefinitely deferred: without total completion of the other parts of the tree, the highest system of morals could simply not appear. But the later version cannot but posit a different set of problems. In fact, if the task cannot be accomplished in a lifetime (as Descartes already feared when he referred to the short duration of his life), the project of philosophy should then be conceived as something to

[34] DM VI:67; 1:145.
[35] Ibid VI:3; 1:112.
[36] PP, Part Three, IXB:80; 1:249 (my emphasis).

be continued in an indefinite time to come. This is what the last phrase of the Preface to the French edition, precisely the version that included the later addition, said to conclude the presentation of the philosophical project: "My earnest wish is that our descendants may see the happy outcome of this project".[37] Those two or three remaining battles, then, were not be fought by Descartes alone.

In both cases, however, we are undoubtedly facing a postposition. Even the proportional and relative completion of the philosophical project, which appeared as imminent in the *Discourse*, is now deferred to an uncertain future, which Descartes describes first as being almost impossible, only to precise later that this impossibility applies exclusively to the unity of measure of a man's life. In any case, the horizon of the complete realization of philosophy is undoubtedly delayed, and we seem to be left in an indefinite state of provisionality. In this second normalization of the provisional, the ultimate aspirations of the philosophical project, precisely those that the emergence of perfect morality was supposed to realize, cannot but be deeply reformulated.

THE ETHICS OF THE HORIZON

Descartes' anticipation of a perfect system of morals is thus negated in a double sense. First, it is negated by our own epistemic capacities: due to the weakness of our nature, we will never be in a position to wholly overcome the urgencies of time, to dominate the unmanageable velocity of practical life, and hence to exclude the possibility of error. But in a second sense, the promise is also negated by its uncertain temporality. The reason is that Descartes' promise acts as a constant movement of deferral. Thus, for example, the "perfect felicity" of life whose imminence was felt in the *Discourse,* becomes a "happy outcome" that some improbable descendants might bring forth and enjoy in a distant future. In what concerns ourselves, everything seems to indicate that the provisional will be rather definitive, and that the horizon of Cartesian happiness will never be wholly accessible. What we are left with, in this dissolution of

[37] Ibid. IXB:20; 1:190. This directly concerns Descartes' problematic relation with the solitude of the philosopher. Between the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*, he intertwines affirmations of a self-confident philosophical egoism with solemn calls for the constitution of a philosophical vanguard community.

the imminence of perfect morality, is something like an ideal horizon. It is an uncertain promise, perhaps little more than a wish, about the plausibility of progress.

And yet, within that newly restricted moral space there is an element that makes this frustrating deferral productive in a different sense. That element corresponds to a certain process of self-observation, to some sort of practice of the self. The "chief utility of morality" becomes in the *Passions* an exploration of oneself, a play on the logic of possibilities and limitations that mediates between our reason and our actions, between our knowledge and our desires. "What we desire in this way, says Descartes of the moderate wishes, cannot fail to have a happy outcome for us, since it depends on us alone, and so we always receive from it all the satisfaction we expected from it".[38] This is another happy outcome, one that stands for an ethics of moderation and self-discovery, of continence and reasonability. We are far away indeed from the perfect felicity of the human race.[39]

So what is the relation between these two poles of Descartes' ethical reflection? The horizon of perfection is condemned to collapse once and again under the weight of our own imperfection, but Descartes needs it to lead us as an idea. In so far as we participate in universal reason, we have the means to progress and avoid errors, both in our knowledge and in the conduct of our life: this is the message Descartes cannot renounce to proclaim. This is also what announces one of the most recurrent metaphors of his philosophy: the idea of the path to truth, an opening of roads that lead toward knowledge, toward goodness, toward health. But on the other hand, the impossibility to actualize that horizon forces us to begin constantly anew. In this sense, nothing will be done for us: the path will only open before ourselves while we are actually walking on it.

[38] PS IX:437; 1:379.

[39] Of course, these ethics of individuality are framed by an explicit political conservatism. The contents of the provisional moral code described in the *Discourse* can in fact be synthesized in two main aspects: obedience to the authorities and a normative principle of moderation or continence. Once again, Descartes seems to satisfy Arnauld's concerns in the *Meditations*: fearing the political consequences of the Cartesian method, the objector had quoted the words of Augustine, in chapter 12 of *De Utilitate Credendi*: "absolutely nothing in human society will be safe if we decide to believe only what we can regard as having been clearly perceived" (OR VII:217; 2:152). To this respect, it is significant that, in the *Discourse*, Descartes explicitly disqualifies any aspiration to social or political transformation. In fact, it is a constant in Descartes that every experimentation must first of all secure its own practical conditions of possibility.

Wisdom becomes hence an attitude to be conquered. The main aspiration of Cartesian ethics, in this sense, is to reinvent the notion of moral habit, to make it compatible with that new sovereign individual that is to become the subject of the infinite new productions of modernity. According to Descartes, truth and goodness will only be possible in such context in so far as a good man, as he characterizes in the *Passions* the prototype of the moral man, will learn to wish them anew with all the force of individual reason.[40] That force, however, will need to be mitigated. The dreams of reason will be necessarily lonely, and remain forever unachieved.

Hence the anticipated realization of philosophy in the perfect felicity of life did never take place. For Descartes, morals are indeed a part of reason, but precisely *as reason* they cannot overcome our limitation, our dramatic submission to the velocity of life. The organicity of knowledge, responsible for the dream of its perfection, did never produce its own realization. Nevertheless, it still accomplishes a double function: first, it traces a horizon of perfection that provides us with the idea of a possible, indefinite progress. Second, by indefinitely deferring itself, it reminds us that philosophy can open the paths leading to that perfection, but that those paths will always require from each good man to walk them through in the solitude of reason. Between those two poles oscillates the moral tragedy of modernity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. I-III. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007):

—*Early Writings*, (1619-22) Transl. by John Cottingham. (AT X 213-219; Vol. I pp. 2-5) Abbreviated EW.

[40] See PS, IX:495; 1:400. The idea of the good man corresponds to the portrait of the virtuous that Descartes traces in the Dedicatory Letter of the *Principles*: "Whoever possesses the firm and powerful resolve always to use his reasoning powers correctly, as far as he can, and to carry out whatever he knows to be best, is truly wise, so far as his nature permits. And simply because of this he will possess justice, courage, temperance, and all the other virtues; but they will be interlinked in such a way that no one virtue stands among the others" (PP IXB:3; 1:191). Wisdom and virtue, here, are presented in terms of an intention or attitude.

— *Rules for the Direction of the Mind,* (1628) Transl. by Dugald Murdoch (AT X 359-472; Vol. I pp 9-78) Abbreviated RDM.
— *The World,* (1629) Transl. by Robert Stoothoff (AT XI 3-48; Vol. I pp 81-98) Abbreviated TW.
— *Discourse on the Method,* (1637) Transl. by Robert Stoothoff (AT VI 1-78; Vol. I pp 111-151) Abbreviated DM.
— *Meditations on First Philosophy,* (1641) Transl. by John Cottingham (AT VIII 1-90; Vol. II pp 1-62) Abbreviated M.
— *Objections and Replies,* (1641 ff) Transl. by John Cottingham (AT VII 91-561; Vol. II pp 66-383) Abbreviated OR.
— *Principles of Philosophy,* (1644) Transl. by John Cottingham (AT IXB 1-329; Vol. I pp 179-291) Abbreviated PP.
— *The Passions of the Soul,* (1649) Transl. by Robert Stoothoff (AT XI 323-488; Vol. I pp 326-404) Abbreviated PS.

Pablo Bustinduy
New School For Social Research
pablobustinduy@gmail.com

This paper was received on June 20, 2012 and was approved on January 20, 2013.