

PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS IN DESCARTES

Scott Pugh

In Part Three of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes attempts to separate philosophy from ethics. He asserts that the end of philosophy is the attainment of truth, while the end of ethics is happiness and resoluteness in action (31). This separation also establishes a hierarchical relationship between these two realms: philosophy is primary, ethics is secondary, or "provisional" (31). Thus, it is not surprising that when Descartes analyzes the ego he characterizes it as a "substance whose whole essence or nature is solely to think ... " (36).

Yet certain passages in Cartesian texts suggest a reversal of the positions Descartes assigns to philosophy and ethics; that is, he seems to imply that ethics is in fact prior to philosophy. In this paper I will trace Descartes' partition of philosophy and ethics and his characterization of the ego as a "thinking thing" (*Meditations* 82) which follows from it. I will also argue that Descartes unwittingly suggests a critique of this project which reveals both the priority of ethics to metaphysical and scientific philosophy and the incompleteness of his analysis of the ego as purely a thinking thing.

In Part Two of the *Discourse*, Descartes sets forth the method he devised to direct his reason. After explaining the four rules of his method he says that, above all, he will use it to "[seek] after truth in the sciences ... " (29). He goes on to state that when the method is used properly, "there can be nothing too remote to be reached in the end or too well hidden to be discovered" (29). The purpose of the method, then, is to govern one's reason in the search for truth, especially in the sciences. However, as Descartes points out, all of the sciences must ultimately be derived from philosophy (30-31). It followed for Descartes that his first task must be to "try to establish some certain principles in philosophy" (31); that is, to secure some philosophical truths on which to ground the scientific truths discovered by the application of the method. Thus, for Descartes, philosophy is the foundation of the sciences; it is the discipline from which all sciences derive their truth.

Descartes' guiding metaphor for philosophy and science is that of a building. For example, in the *Discourse* he explains that, just as we "see many individuals having their houses pulled down in order to rebuild them, some even being forced to do so when the houses are in danger of falling down and their foundations are insecure," (26) so with respect to his opinions, "[he] could not do better than undertake to get rid of them, all at one go, in order to replace them afterwards with better ones ... " (26). Similarly, in explaining the strategy of the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he says, "Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested" (76). Again, in Descartes' dialogue "The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light," Eudoxus, the voice of Descartes, says, "I would compare [knowledge] to a badly constructed house, whose foundations are not firm. I know of no better

way to repair it than to knock it all down, and build a new one in its place" (407). Thus Descartes compares the body of commonly accepted knowledge to a house or building erected on an unstable foundation. Moreover, the task of philosophy, as he conceives it, is to raze the edifice and build it again. Philosophy, however, must not rebuild the structure "only on old foundations" (*Discourse* 26), but on foundations that are firm and unshakeable—on indubitable truths.

The importance of a building as the metaphor for knowledge and truth is that it illustrates the separation Descartes makes in Part Three of the *Discourse* between philosophy and ethics. He begins:

Now, 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 ... (31)

Clearly, the house Descartes is proposing to rebuild is that of knowledge. However, he also notes that while he is disassembling and rebuilding the house of knowledge, it is necessary to erect and inhabit a makeshift shelter "while building is in progress" (31).

These two structures (the house and the temporary shelter) correspond exactly to the realms of philosophy and ethics. For Descartes, the end of philosophy (whether metaphysical or scientific) is the acquisition of knowledge and truth. Philosophy is precisely the enterprise of tearing down the old house of knowledge, erected on dubious foundations, and replacing it with a house grounded in "certain principles" or indubitable foundations (*Discourse* 31). On the other hand, the end of ethics is happiness and resoluteness in action (31). Ethics is the temporary shelter one must live in *until* philosophy completes its project of rebuilding the edifice of knowledge and truth. Thus, Descartes refers to his moral code as "provisional" (31). For in the Cartesian scheme, ethics is apparently a temporary convenience. It is a set of tentative and transitional rules to follow until philosophy fulfills its end: the establishment of the structure of truth on solid foundations. By insisting on the necessity of two independent structures (the house under construction and the temporary shelter), Descartes effectively separates philosophy from ethics. As he says, "Once I had established these [moral] maxims and *set them on one side together with the truths of faith* ... I judged that I could freely undertake to rid myself of all the rest of my opinions" (34; my emphasis). One implication of Descartes' setting morals and "the truth of faith" (34) together "on one side" (34), opposite "opinions" and "propositions" (34), is that he not only separates the realms of ethics and philosophy, but also establishes a certain order among them. That is, he effects the separation in such a way that he assigns a precedence to philosophy over ethics: philosophy becomes the primary enterprise of discovering truth by "clear and certain arguments" (34), while ethics is reduced to a necessary but temporary convenience along the way. Ethics becomes a mere auxiliary to philosophy, a

"provisional" guide (31), necessary only so long as the philosophical project is still in progress.

A significant consequence of Descartes' separation of philosophy and ethics is that, having awarded philosophy and the achievement of truth a priority over ethics and moral action, when Descartes goes on to establish his own existence and then to inquire into the nature of the ego, he concludes, "I [am] a substance whose whole essence or nature is solely to think" (36). Polyander puts it even more emphatically when he tells Eudoxus, "the one thing which I cannot separate from myself, and which I know for certain that I am, and which I can now assert with certainty without fear of being mistaken, that one thing, I say, is that I am a thinking thing" (*Search* 415). In the Second Meditation Descartes elaborates on what it means to be a "thing that thinks" (83). A thinking thing, he says, is "A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions" (83). In other words, insofar as the self is a thinking thing (which it purely is for Descartes), it is a thing which resides in the realm of philosophy, not ethics. For ethics, as Descartes says, is the realm of "actions" (*Discourse* 31)—and these are precisely what can be known only provisionally; actions are not admitted as a constitutive part of the ego. In a passage which Westphal says, "all but completely merges the questions of essence and existence in the *cogito*" (203), Descartes writes, "When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind" (*Objections* 127). Hence, to return to the philosophy-ethics partition, to be a thinking thing, for Descartes, is to be a philosophizing thing, not a morally-acting thing.

Having sketched Descartes' separation of philosophy and ethics, I will now turn to the *Discourse* and the *Meditations* to examine certain passages which suggest a reversal of the positions which philosophy and ethics appear to occupy in Descartes' thought—Cartesian passages which undermine Cartesian metaphysics.

The first passage which suggests the priority of ethics to philosophy is the very one in which Descartes seems to establish the precedence of philosophy over ethics. As I have shown, Descartes devotes the opening paragraph of Part Three of the *Discourse* to a justification of his reasons for implementing a "provisional moral code" (31). He maintains that the creation of a provisional moral code is analogous to the erection of a temporary shelter which one can occupy while rebuilding his house (31). A moral code is necessary as a temporary guide while the edifice of knowledge is being reconstructed.

But does not the necessity of a "moral shelter" reveal its priority to the house of knowledge? Descartes proposes to destroy the house of knowledge until it can be rebuilt on sound foundations, but he makes no such claim with respect to morals. Indeed, he asserts that while the demolition and reconstruction of the structure of knowledge is in progress, "you *must* provide yourself with some other place where you can live ..." (*Discourse* 31; my emphasis), and this "other place" turns out to be the sphere of ethics. In other words, Descartes allows for the possibility of suspending intellectual beliefs (he even insists upon it), but does not allow for the possibility of suspending moral action. Thus, Descartes' description of ethics as provisional reveals their fundamentality.

For, though he speaks of them in provisional terms, he recognizes that he cannot completely suspend them as he can his intellectual beliefs. Descartes' own insistence on the impossibility of suspending moral action manifests the priority of ethics to philosophy.

Descartes' analogy of the man lost in the forest is also instructive on this point. Descartes' second moral maxim is to remain as firm and decisive as possible in adhering to any adopted proposition or course of action (*Discourse* 32). In this, he says,

I would be imitating a traveller who, upon finding himself lost in the forest, should not wander about turning this way and that, and still less stay in one place, but should keep walking as straight as he can in one direction, never changing it for slight reasons even if mere chance made him choose in the first place; for in this way, even if he does not go exactly where he wishes, he will at least end up in a place where he is likely to be better off than in the middle of the forest. (32)

The analogy of the man lost in the forest shows the anteriority of ethics to philosophy in the same way as his analogy of constructing a house. Before the man lost in the forest even approaches knowing where he wants to go, he must already be walking. Likewise, before the ego recognizes any clear and distinct ideas, it is already acting. In other words, just as the man lost in the forest must already be walking *before* he can orient himself, so the ego must have a history which precedes its role as recognizer of clear and distinct ideas. Moreover, Descartes' analogies of constructing a house and wandering in the forest suggest that a crucial aspect of this history, anterior to understanding, is that the ego is acting (building, walking); it is in the realm of ethics prior to the realm of philosophy. Hence, though Descartes would have philosophy establish indubitable principles in which ethics can subsequently be grounded, it seems that philosophy is always already grounded in ethics. Philosophy, insofar as it investigates the ego, investigates what ethics already knows, or at least what ethics has already confronted.

Descartes' fourth moral maxim also implies the priority of ethics to philosophy. He writes:

... I decided to review the various occupations which men have in this life, in order to try to choose the best ... I thought I could do no better than to continue with the very one I was engaged in, and 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. (*Discourse* 33)

The fourth moral maxim prescribes the occupation Descartes will devote himself to: cultivating his reason and searching for truth by means of the method. That is, the fourth moral maxim instructs him to philosophize. However, if philosophizing is prescribed by a moral maxim, if one philosophizes *because* a moral maxim enjoins it, then morals must be in some way more authoritative and fundamental than philosophy. In other words, the activity of philosophizing is

commanded precisely by ethics. We might ask, for example, what would happen if Descartes' fourth moral maxim had directed him *not* to philosophize and *not* to follow the method? Presumably, in that case he would have refrained from philosophizing at all. Again, the fact that the activity of searching for truth is authorized by a moral maxim discloses the priority of ethics to philosophy.

Descartes' account of the source of human error in the Fourth Meditation also suggests that ethics is more fundamental than philosophy. In his synopsis of this meditation Descartes states, "it should be noted in passing that I do not deal at all with sin, i.e., the error which is permitted in pursuing good and evil, but only with the error that occurs in distinguishing truth from falsehood" (75). Nonetheless, though Descartes explicitly tries to exclude the moral realm from his account of error, his very description of the source of intellectual error points to the priority of ethics over philosophy.

Descartes attributes error to the fact that, "the scope of the will is wider than the scope of the intellect" (*Meditations* 102). For Descartes, the function of the intellect is "to enable me to perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgments" (101). Furthermore, the function of the will "consists simply in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid) ... it consists simply in the fact that when something is put forward for our consideration by the intellect, we are moved to affirm or deny it, or pursue or avoid it ... " (101-2). Thus, as Wilson says, error occurs when the will "rashly attach[es] an act of assent to something that the understanding does not perceive or understand with sufficient clarity and distinctness" (140). Conversely, in those cases when the will acts in accordance with the understanding, it is nonetheless not determined by the understanding, for then it would not be free (*Meditations* 101-102). Rather, Descartes conceives of the will as "spontaneous, occasioned, and not determined" (Beck 211), and the moment in which it accords with the understanding as a "mere coincidence, almost an occasionalistic correspondence" (Beck 210). In sum, as Descartes says, the essence of error "lies in the operation of the will" (*Meditations* 103). Specifically, it lies in those instances in which the will ventures beyond the limits of what the intellect clearly and distinctly perceives and makes judgments about what is not understood. For this reason Descartes asserts that "the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will" (103). Consequently, his solution to the problem of error is simply to "restrain my will" (105), that is, "to withhold judgment on any occasion when the truth of the matter is not clear" (104).

Now the first problem with Descartes' account of the source of error is that it seeks to establish an untenable order in the ego; namely, it seeks to subject the will to the intellect. As Grosholz puts it, Descartes attempts to show that, "infinitary will must be subordinate to finitary intellect ... " (138). However, as the analogy of the man lost in the forest shows, this is impossible. Before the man in the forest knows where he is going, before the ego understands truth, he must already be walking; the ego must already be acting (*Discourse* 32). Similarly, that Descartes has to restrain his will until the intellect achieves understanding shows that willing precedes understanding in the natural constitution of the ego. The ego as an acting substance is anterior to the ego as a substance that recognizes truth.

Descartes' solution to the problem of error is equally problematic. He says, "if, whenever I have to make a judgment, I restrain my will so that it extends to what the intellect clearly and distinctly reveals, and no further, then it is quite impossible for me to go wrong" (*Meditations* 104-105). But what is the "I" that is restraining the will? Of course, it can only be one operation of the thinking thing. However, the understanding cannot restrain the will (otherwise error would never be possible in the first place), nor does it seem likely that some other faculty such as the senses or imagination restrains the will. Presumably then, it is only the will which restrains itself. "I restrain my will" (105) amounts to saying "the will restrains itself." But, if the will restrains itself until the understanding achieves truth, the will is nonetheless acting *prior* to the attainment of understanding. In this case, the will is acting only to restrain itself, but it is acting! The will's act of self-restraint is precisely the opposite of the course Descartes prescribes for its operation, that "the intellect should always precede the determination of the will" (103). In other words, the ego as an acting substance (even if acting only to restrain the will) always precedes the ego as an understanding substance. Indeed, in Descartes' solution to the problem of error, it is precisely the fact that the ego acts (to restrain the will) which eventuates the very possibility of understanding. Thus, in Descartes' own analysis of the ego, the operation of willing is always temporally prior to the operation of understanding.

Furthermore, Descartes' *Meditations* suggests that not only must willing be an operation of the ego prior to understanding, it must also be more authoritative. When Descartes unpacks the cogito he says that "a thing that thinks" is "a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions" (83). It is clear, though, that for Descartes these operations of the ego are not equally authoritative. For example, one purpose of Descartes' famous meditation on the wax is to show that, "even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of the imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood" (*Meditations* 86). Similarly, in the *Discourse* he asserts that, "neither our imagination nor our senses could ever assure us of anything without the intervention of our intellect" (38). Hence, though sensing, imagining and understanding are all operations of the cogito, there is a hierarchy among them. The faculties of sensing and imagination are inferior to the faculty of understanding—as Descartes says, the former could never assure us of anything without the intervention of the latter (38).

If sensing and imagining are ranked below the understanding as operations of the cogito, where do we find Descartes positioning the operation of willing in this hierarchy? Descartes, of course, wants to situate it below that of understanding; he wants to show that "infinitary will must be subordinate to finitary intellect" (Grosholz 138). Nonetheless, Descartes' descriptions of each of these faculties suggest that, in fact, the operation of willing is higher and more authoritative than the operation of understanding. Descartes says the role of the intellect (understanding) is merely to "enable me to perceive the ideas which are the subjects for possible judgments . . ." (*Meditations* 101). The intellect's place is simply to understand what is clearly and distinctly true. However, the role Descartes assigns the will "consists . . . in the fact that when something is put

forward for our consideration by the intellect, we are moved to affirm or deny it, or pursue or avoid it ... ” (102). The will is “our ability to do or not do something ... ” (101). Thus, the operation of understanding must be subordinate to the operation of willing in the cogito; for it is the will which authorizes the assent or dissent, the pursuance or avoidance, of any truth ascertained by the intellect. The understanding simply presents clear and distinct ideas to the will, but the will judges them, and is in this sense more authoritative.

Willing is thus both temporally prior and more authoritative than understanding as an operation of the ego. Moreover, the fundamentality of the will in these ways once again demonstrates a reversal of the positions Descartes assigns to philosophy and ethics. For, as Descartes states, the will “consists in our ability to do or not do something ... ” (101). The essence of willing is acting. Whether “walking in the forest,” restraining itself, or making judgments, the will is always the operation of the ego concerned with acting. Conversely, the essence of understanding is the recognition of truth (101). Therefore, willing and understanding as operations of the ego correspond with the original dichotomy Descartes created between ethics and philosophy. The intent of Descartes’ original separation of ethics from philosophy was to subordinate ethics to philosophy. Nevertheless, an analysis of the operations he ascribes to the ego indicates that willing is, in fact, more fundamental than understanding. Hence, insofar as willing corresponds with the sphere of ethics, and understanding with that of philosophy, it follows that ethics is more fundamental (in the senses of being temporally prior and more authoritative) than philosophy.

Furthermore, the priority of willing to understanding as an operation of the ego reveals the inadequacy of Descartes’ characterization of the ego as a purely “thinking thing” (82). Descartes attempts to define willing, understanding, doubting, sensing and imagining as simply different modes of thinking. However, his own description of the function and operation of the will makes it clear that willing is essentially acting, not thinking. Thus, to the extent that Descartes disallows action as a constitutive part of the ego, his analysis of it is incomplete. Indeed, if, as I have argued, willing is the most fundamental aspect of the ego, then Descartes omits from analysis of the ego that which is most basic to it. In other words, if my critique of the positions assigned to philosophy and ethics in Descartes’ thought is accurate, it follows that Descartes’ characterization of the ego as a thinking substance is grossly deficient because it leaves out the most fundamental and authoritative operation of the ego: the ego as a morally-acting substance.

Descartes attempts to separate philosophy from ethics and subject the latter to the former. However, his texts nonetheless suggest a reversal of the priority he grants philosophy over ethics. First, that Descartes can suspend his intellectual beliefs, but not moral action, points to the more fundamental nature of ethics. Second, that the enterprise of philosophy is commanded by one of the moral maxims again shows the authority of ethics over philosophy. Third, that rectitude of intellect depends on proper disposition of will demonstrates the priority of ethics to philosophy. Finally, Descartes’ description of the ego as solely a thinking substance is incomplete because it excludes the fundamental operation of the ego as a morally-acting substance.

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