Cartesian Moral Code, Principles of Errors and Limits of Reason. Descartes and Pascal

Cristian Moisuc[a]*

* Corresponding author: Cristian Moisuc, cristian.moisuc@uaic.ro

[a] *Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iaşi, Romania, cristian.moisuc@uaic.ro*

Abstract

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The second rule of Descartes' "provisional moral code" stressed the obligation of mastering oneself rather than fortune. Of Stoic inspiration (*The Manual* of Epictetus), the Cartesian rule carefully delimitates what is and what is not in man's power. In addition, the rule calls for the distinction expressed in the fourth *Metaphysical Meditation* between the intellect and the will and for the necessity to temper the will's natural tendency to overcome its inherent borders. In the *Preface* of his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes views philosophy as a form of therapy that can treat illnesses of the mind, just as medicine treats illnesses of the body. Philosophy is thus charged with leading us to the "true health of the mind," by cultivating a "true and sound judgment". This Cartesian moral code that seems to provide a minimal balance between concrete action and man's will is violently criticized by Blaise Pascal in the *Conversation with Mr. de Sacy*, where the principles of Stoic morality are called "principles of a diabolic pride [that] lead him to other errors". The provisional moral code is discredited by Pascal because, in his opinion, human will cannot be limited – as Descartes thought – because it is infinite: "Self-will will never be satisfied, though it should have command of all it would".

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1   Descartes' tree of knowledge and the undetermined place of morals

In the Letter-Preface addressed to Abbot Picot, which opens the *Principles of Philosophy*, René Descartes describes the substantial unit of philosophy using the famous image of the tree: the roots represent metaphysics, the trunk stands for physics and the three branches are medicine, mechanics and morals (Descartes, 1988: 186). Descartes describes morals as the ultimate level of wisdom (*sagesse*), which presupposes the other sciences: "By the science of Morals, I understand the highest and most perfect which, presupposing an entire knowledge of the other sciences, is the last degree of wisdom" (Descartes, 1901: 8b). Hence, morals are the *last* in the chronological order of knowledge, but the *first* in terms of importance, because they are the true purpose of the whole of philosophy. Nonetheless, the seductive image of the tree of knowledge cannot occult several fundamental questions concerning mostly the relation between the root and the three separate branches of philosophy. Hence, Martin Heidegger justly wonders in what type of soil the tree deepens its roots, what is the vital element supporting and feeding it and mostly what lies buried in the essence of metaphysics as root of the entire knowledge: "What lies buried and is active in the essence of metaphysics?" (Heidegger, 2013: 6).

Heidegger's questions cannot be considered tendentious, insofar as the relationship per se between the roots, the trunk and the tree is not *proven* (but only *stated*), and the common element of all parts is supposed to be the same (without being defined as such), making its way up from the ground, through the root and to the last branch. Furthermore, while the image features three "principal" branches that seem to be *equally* important, the last branch (morals) that presupposes an entire knowledge of the other sciences actually appears to be *above* them. Under these circumstances, considering the dilemma of moral stance in relation to medicine and mechanics, we get to "a structural incompleteness of philosophy" (Vaquero, 2009: 472), which turns the unit of philosophy – posited by Descartes – into a problem more than into a given or a constituted object (Vaquero, 2009: 472). Consequently, the topologically undetermined situation of the Cartesian moral code signals the *precariousness of its metaphysical foundation*. Can a "perfect" moral code as expression of the highest wisdom, be deduced rationally from metaphysical principles? If so, does it mean that we can find an answer to the Heideggerian question "What lies buried and is active in the essence of metaphysics?"

2   Initial place: the *self* as certitude and its probable morals

In *Discourse on the Method* (1637), Descartes elaborates a provisory code of morals, composed of three maxims (Descartes, 2007: 11-2). The anteriority of the *Discourse* in relation to *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641) can maybe explain why Descartes decided to write a "provisory", not a "definitive" code of morals. At the same time, however, the maxims of this code of morals are required meant to represent the roots of knowledge. The same reason that seeks a firm and unshakeable foundation and that requires – in the first maxim of the method – avoiding "extremes" demands from the philosopher to act, in morals-related issues, *without waiting for absolute certitude*: "So as not to be indecisive in my actions during the time when reason obliged me to be so in my judgments" (Descartes, 2007:11).

It is odd how the same reason can formulate two different types of constraint: in the order of

knowledge, reason requires absolute certitude, while in the order of action it requires overcoming indecision. A *judgement* may be postponed indefinitely, if the knowledge it is based on does not prove to be sufficiently clear and distinct to eliminate all grounds for doubt: "…and to include in my judgments only what presented itself to my mind so vividly and so clearly that I had no basis for calling it in question" (Descartes, 2007: 8). Neamwhile, an *action* cannot be delayed: "And similarly, since in everyday life we often have to act without delay, it is a most certain truth that when we can't pick out the truest opinions we should follow the most probable ones" (Descartes, 2007: 12). Hence, we note that there is no perfect superposition between the order of knowledge and the order of action.

Nonetheless, how can we accept this paradoxical thesis, considering the lines written in the *Letter-Preface* of the *Principles*? If metaphysics is the root of all human sciences – including morals – and if the same sap of reason feeds the root and the branches, why can the principles of morals be *provisory*, while the root can only accept *firm and unshakeable* principles? This is not a contradiction that undermines the unity of science and the relation between sciences within the tree of knowledge?

Two answers may be provided to this question. The first answer considers the chronology of Cartesian writings. In 1637, the *Discourse* invoked only a "provisory" code of morals because metaphysics would only later – in 1641 (*Meditations*) – find a firm foundation: the *self*. The provisory code of morals does not require yet, unlike metaphysics, a firm and unshakable foundation on which to build the entire moral code. It requires an ethical situation that combines *conservatism* with *removal from extremes* („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 … on the basis of the most moderate and least extreme opinions" (Descartes, 2007: 11).

The second answer considers the different role ascribed to the *self* in the two Cartesian writings. It is as true that the *self* would become in *Meditations* the central point of knowledge, as it is that in the *Discourse* such claim was still rejected. Furthermore, the first maxim of the provisory code of morals explicitly deprives the *self* from providing grounds for morals, by replacing one's own opinions with those of *other* persons: "…the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of the people with whom I would have to live" (Descartes, 2007: 11).

Within the *Discourse*, the *self* – not yet the first principle of any knowledge – accepts to ascribe the role of moral guide to another instance. To avoid remaining undetermined for an indefinite period and to enable moral actions, ipseity acknowledges its limits and accepts submission to alterity. The theoretical possibility and practical effectiveness of morals are acquired only by paying the price of "chasing away" the *self* from the decision-making core of morals, where principles are established. A moral action cannot be possible unless the *self* willingly stops deciding in matters of morals criteria, by granting this privilege to others.

3   What the *self* can and cannot do

In his commentaries on the *Discourse*, Etienne Gilson (Gilson, 1987: 248-9) underscored the Stoic inspiration of the third maxim ("Try always to master myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than changing how things stand in the world" (Descartes, 2007: 12)). The *self* yet to acquire clear knowledge can however operate a Stoic distinction, between the things within man's

power and those exceeding his power:

> *"This involved getting the habit of believing that nothing lies entirely within our power except our thoughts, so that after we have done our best in dealing with matters external to us, whatever we fail to achieve is absolutely impossible so far as we are concerned"* (Descartes, 2007: 12).

How is it possible for an action considered morally good to occur, even in the absence of clear and distinct knowledge of things? Furthermore, how is it possible to judge whether a thing is within man's power or not? The commentary made by Pierre-Sylvain Régis (Regis, 1691: 7:44) explains this seeming contradiction within the Cartesian text by stating that man's intellect and will accomplish different functions: "…l'action de l'esprit par laquelle nous *jugeons* qu'une chose est bonne ou mauvaise est une fonction qui appartient à la volonte, et l'action que nous *connaissons* que nous avons juge ainsi est une fonction qui appartient à l'entendement". Nonetheless, it is known that intellect and will must co-operate and that the will must "stretch" almost naturally to meet the powers of the intellect, to the end of preventing the will from making wrong choices.

Hence, in the letter to Mersenne, dated May 1637 (initial dating: April 27, 1637), Descartes posits that a correct judgement is required for an action to be morally good:

> *"You reject my statement that In order to act well it is sufficient to judge well; yet it seems to me that the common scholastic doctrine is that The will doesn't tend towards evil except when evil is presented to it by the intellect as some kind of good—which generates the slogan Whoever sins does so în ignorance—so that if the intellect never represented anything to the will as good without its actually being so, the will could never choose wrongly. But the intellect often represents different things to the will at the same time, and that is the source of I see and praise the better, but I follow the worse. This applies only to weak minds, as I said in the Discourse on the Method"* (Descartes, 2013: 41).

The key to a *good action* of will is actually a *correct knowledge* of things by the intellect. Whereas they play different roles, the two faculties (*juger* – will; *connaître* – intellect) cannot be exerted independently: the intellect must represent to the will things that *are* – not only *seem* – really good. The ongoing tension governing the will – that has to make choices considering the limits prescribed by the intellect – cannot and should not disappear, because it is the most visible sign of a provisory – namely imperfect – code of morals. A disappearance of the tension experienced by the will would entail that human intellect would have reached a level of knowledge similar to divine knowledge (Gabaude, 1970: 223). Such hypothesis is excluded, precisely because human intellect will never reach the level of divine intellect, given that humans will never get to know things *adequately* (Adam & Tannery, 1983: VII, 367). Nonetheless, while knowledge will never be fully appropriate, the will must act *as though* the intellect would provide the highest and firmest knowledge. This is the meaning ascribed to the second maxim of the provisory code of morals (Descartes, 2007: 11-2).

Descartes uses a suggestive example to this end: he compares the process of taking a moral decision to the decision of travellers who, having lost their way in a forest, must not wander from side to side or remain in one place. They proceed constantly without changing the direction, because this guarantees they will come to some place (preferable to the middle of a forest). The provisory character of this code

must be maintained *as long as there is no better code of morals* and the common meaning of the three maxims is to overcome the possible sceptical objection that we cannot act if we do not hold a *perfect* knowledge of things. However, the provisory character of the code is visible mostly by adopting a Stoic view of the world (the third maxim) positing that *only our own thoughts are absolutely in our power* and that, to be contented, it is sufficient for man not to desire anything that he could not obtain.

However, is this view free of dangers? Is the first maxim – that advises the *self* to stop prescribing its own moral criteria and to adopt those of others – compatible with the third maxim (supporting that the *self* should assume its own thoughts in their capacity of unique things in its power)? Can the self give up easily and willingly (the first maxim) to the only thing in its power (the third maxim), namely its own thoughts?

4   Human wisdom and its limits

The provisory code of morals was going to become definitive, by defining wisdom (*sagesse*) not only as *prudence*. This definition (Adam & Tannery, 1983: IX, 10) shows clearly that, after 1645, Descartes views wisdom as a "perfect" knowledge that comprises all things knowable to man. On the other hand, there is an apparent difference between 1637 (*Discourse*) and 1645, when Descartes wrote to Princess Elizabeth the letter from August 4. The three maxims of the provisory code of morals become the three rules of strictly human wisdom (Armogathe, 2002: 17), primed as early as 1639, whose key is to "love life without fearing death" (*aimer la vie sans craindre la mort*), as Descartes wrote to Mersenne. It is worth highlighting the Stoic distinction between what is in man's power and what it is not and its replacement with another, which posits *to ignore the goods* that man does not possess (Adam & Tannery, 1983: IV, 265-6).

This third maxim within the Letter to Elisabeth is no longer grounded on a Stoic-inspired moral code, but only on the power of reason, which can prescribe to people the conduct to follow. Unlike the *Discourse*, where the first maxim decentres the *self* in order to provide a moral code (by instituting the obligation of leading himself by the moderate opinions of the wisest men), the first maxim of 1645 posits that reason alone should decide what man must and must not do (Adam & Tannery, 1983: IV, 265).

The purpose of wisdom (*sagesse*) is to *acquire autonomy* (Adam & Tannery, 1983: IV, 265). On the other hand, beyond the ethical dimension of the feeling of "contentment", it also has a theological dimension. Thus, Descartes redefines the classical concept of *beatitudo* (that described the state of happiness reached by man while contemplating God) by considering it a "parfait contentement d'esprit et une satisfaction intérieure" (Adam & Tannery, 1983: IV, 266). Such a redefinition of the relationship between man and God – which formerly implied reaching moral autonomy only by exerting reason and by seeking refuge in an inner satisfaction that closed the possible interrogation regarding the downsides of reason itself – could not remain outside Pascal's analysis.

5   Pascalian critique of the Cartesian *self*. The limits of philosophy

When he criticizes Descartes, Blaise Pascal does so elegantly, using both a "compliment at the same time honest and perfidious" (Bouchilloux, 1995: 245) and an "ambiguous praise" (Bouchilloux, 1995: 76). He chooses to proceed this way because he acknowledges the role and importance of the *self* as

principle of a new metaphysics and – starting from it – even of a new physics (Pascal, 1909: 60). However, Pascal is highly persuaded that Descartes is "*inutile et incertain*" (Lafuma, 1962: §887), because philosophical judgments are "*inutile(s) pour le salut*" (Lafuma, 1962: §110). Hence, Pascal shifts the matter of philosophical wisdom (*sagesse*) utility toward the soteriological dimension (aiming to Christian salvation). However, this shift is actually a "destitution" (Marion, 1986: 325-42) of philosophical claims, in the name of the theory of the three different ontological orders (*ordres*): of the bodies, of the souls and of something that is loved. Pascal pinpoints that all philosophers – without exception – are guilty of giving in to one of the three concupiscences of man (Lafuma, 1962: §919), namely *libido sentiendi*, *libido dominandi*, *libido sciendi.* In "Conversation of Pascal with M. de Saci on Epictetus and Montaigne", Pascal features the two philosophers as two extremes of any human philosophy, namely "diabolical pride" and "skepticism". However, the critique to Stoicism targets all of philosophy, because no philosopher – not even those who assimilate man to an animal – manages to resist to all three concupiscences. Therefore, the critique to Epictetus also targets Descartes directly, because the Cartesian provisory code of morals has a Stoic inspiration, while Pascal rejects (using a theological argument) the reasons' claims of determining what is and what is not in our power:

> "*These principles of a diabolic pride lead him to other errors, as that the soul is a portion of the divine substance*" (Pascal, 1909: 5).

However, the most devastating critique to Descartes does not concern the Stoic dimension of his 1637 provisory code of morals, but the very pretension of the *self* of being the *fundament* of the 1645 definitive moral code.

Pascal believes that the *self* of man affected by the Fall has an unfair (*injuste*) nature, because it always wishes to be the *centre* of all:

> "*In a word, the Self has two qualities: it is unjust in itself since it makes itself the centre of everything; it is inconvenient to others since it would enslave them; for each Self is the enemy, and would like to be the tyrant of all others*" (Eliot, 1959: §455).

This critique of the self that attempts to be the "centre" is a constant of Pascalian thinking (see also the paragraph §100). What Descartes called the metaphysical force of the *self* becomes for Pascal its original sin, and this negative trait of the *self* cannot be diminished or impaired, but it must be eradicated definitively.

To this end, the *self* must be *decentred*, *chased away from itself*, *removed* as philosophical instance and replaced by another, represented by Jesus Christ: "The nature of self-love and of this human Ego is to love self only and consider self only" (Eliot, 1959: §449).

The role of the movement made to set away the self from the central place that it wishes to occupy is not merely therapeutic (aiming to cure the self from the original selfishness) but also metaphysical. Thus, the self must ultimately *hate* itself:

> "*We must love God only and hate self only*" (Eliot, 1959: §476),

> "*Now we are full of lust. Therefore we are full of evil; therefore we ought to hate ourselves and all that excited us to attach ourselves to any other object than God only*" (Eliot, 1959: §479).

The self-hatred of the *self* has the role not only of preparing it for religious conversion, but mostly of

tearing out the very roots of the metaphysical claim of deciding *on its own*, using only reason (see the letter to Elizabeth, dated August 4, 1645) over moral code and its criteria.

The autonomy claim of reason not only helps the *self* understand the potential errors, but it forbids regretting them (even when they are proven), as Descartes states explicitly:

> *"We can rid ourselves of that opinion by bearing in mind that since we have always followed the advice of our reason we have left undone nothing that was in our power, and that sickness and misfortune are as natural to man as prosperity and health"* (Benett, 2009: 19). *Ultimately, any philosophy that does not acknowledge God as centre of the self only produces "superbes agitations de notre raison"* (Lafuma, 1962: §131).

As for Heidegger's question concerning what lies buried in the essence of metaphysics, Pascal had already provided a trenchant answer to it: *"abîme d'orgueil"* (Lafuma, 1962: §919).

Acknowledgement

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