

DESCARTES MORALE, HIS METHOD & ABSOLUTISM

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*Everything Flows.* Heraclitus.

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Rene Descartes' search for truth, '*la recherché de la vérite*', was not the result solely of following the four rules of his *Method*. It also involved compliance with the four maxims of his *Morale*. It was preceded by methodical epistemic and ethical practices, as set out in the *Discourse on Method*. In addition the Cogito had religious, political and Ideological significance. the Cogito was, I suggest, the product of following a moral method, a moral discipline, and showing that one accepted the Christian doctrine of the soul, and the absolutist demand for obedience to the authority of the King.

The *morale* Descartes proposed in Chapter Three of the *Discourse on Method* was essential to preparing the way for the performance of the Cogito as the method presented in the first chapter. One had to learn to withdraw from the deterministic, mechanical bodily world into the free, spiritual mental world of pure thought, and this involved a disciplined four step '*morale*' or ethic, Descartes clearly described.

*Maxim 1: Exclude Folly / Enclose Reason:* obey the laws and customs of my country". This ruled out the folly of social reform by private individuals, and preppedared the way for his project of the reform of reason, or science.

*Maxim 2: Choice and resolve in the quest for Truth:* "to be as firm and resolute in my actions as I could." D decided : not to seek after any science but what might be found within myself or in the great book of the world." Then he described his climactic existential choice in the hothouse warmth of his 'poele': bue after spending some eyars thus in the study of the book of the world, and in trying to gain experience, tghere came a day when I resolved to make my studies

within myself (en moi-meme) and use all my powers of my mind to choose the ways (chemins) I must follow.” DM 1, end.

*Maxim 3: Choose to closet yourself in the Ego’s Mind as the Field of Reason:* M. Descartes then resolved “to try always to conquer myself rather than fortune; to change my desires rather than the order of the world.” Maxim 3 builds on maxim 1’s constitution of the field of reason as private, not public, and the moral practices of choice and resolve in maxim 2.

*Maxim 4 Review Occupations:* “I decided to review the various occupations of human life, so as to try to choose the best”, namely “one of solid worth and importance”, M. Descartes concludes in his fourth and final maxim. His *morale* ends by returning to its origin. His review is an example for the reader to appropriate and follow in his own life, in his own mind, guided by both the maxims of the morale and the rules of the method. But following the maxims of the *morale* are the necessary propaedeutic to following the rules of the method. The method, that is, presupposes the morale, not as a matter of argument, but as a matter of psychological and ethical practice.

The result is that the *Cogito* is epistemically precarious, and ethically and psychologically mediated. It only becomes intuitive and self-evident, only after one has gone through the fourfold exercise of the Morale. the *Cogito* then is an ethical as well as epistemic performance, and in both cases a form of methodical psychological practice. Accordingly, it is a far from certain truth. Rather, as Jacques Derrida said, :nothing is less reassuring than the *Cogito* at its proper inaugural moment.” [*Writing And Difference*. A. Bass, trans., Chi UP, 1978. p56]

**Descartes’ Dubious *Cogito*:** The main argument for a disembodied conscious awareness is Rene Descartes’ powerful statement, *Cogito, Ergo Sum: I think, Therefore I am*. (It is not, I note, Plato’s mainly religious arguments about a reincarnation and the soul.) Thinking is intuitively self-evident, of itself it proves the being, the existence of the Ego, of the thinking subject, of I who think. Note, only of the I who thinks, not of you, he, she or it who thinks. Think is what his method, meditation does. In himself, in his mind, and, perhaps / therefore only about himself. In his mind all he can immediately intuit and therefore know is his self. Nothing else is immediately intuitable and, therefore, certain. Only the Ego is certain, and then only while ‘I think’. If I am not thinking, namely I am sleeping, unconscious, then the existence of my Ego, my psychological substantive self, is not self-evident, and is, for all purposes, M. Descartes contended, with good reason, in doubt. A seemingly powerful argument for one central truth, and one which is psychological, subjective and even personal, not physical, Objective, or social. Also its intuitively self-evidence, indicates its metaphysical simplicity. A moment of pure thought cannot be reduced to any other operation or process, M. Descartes held.

All basic truths, Descartes claimed, were cognitively simple or reducible to their simplest elements. Thus complex scientific theorems had to be analytically reduced to their simplest elements. This was for M. Descartes the main work of mathematical reasoning and the heart of scientific knowledge, as he was at pains to point out in the four rules of his famous method of inquiry into / search for truth. The four rules or maxims of Descartes’ *Method in the Search for Truth* are:

Rule 1. Never accept anything as true if I had no evident knowledge of its being so.  
[Doubt]

Rule 2. Divide each problem I examined into as many parts as was feasible, as this was requisite for its better solution [Analyze]

Rule 3. Direct my thoughts in an orderly way, beginning with the simplest objects, those most apt to be known and ascending little by little in steps as it were to the knowledge of the most complex . [simple to complex Order]

Rule 4. To make throughout such complete enumerations and such general surveys that I might be sure of leaving nothing out. [Completeness]

Rule 1 of Descartes' *morale* is to obey the laws, submit to absolute rule. This choice allows D freedom to pursue his philosophical project, the search for truth. It reflects similar withdrawals from the public social sphere, of almost unending civil & religious strife into the private, depoliticised world of one's mind on the part of Montaigne and 16<sup>th</sup> century French / European philosophers, like Charron. (Cf Montaigne's Apology for Raymond Sebond; and Nannerl Keohane, *Philosophy & the State in France: the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*.) Engagement in politics in those times was, as D recognized, dangerous to one's wellbeing.

Rule 3, 'the will to conquer myself, rather than fortune' is a key rule for the 'direction of the mind' in the search for truth; for only our thoughts are completely within our own power' to control, not fortune—as witness the religious wars all around him. Descartes later refers to his inner resolve 'not to rest content with other men's opinions' but rather to 'use my own in examining them' and thereby advance in his search for truth / knowledge. This is religiously supported by his consideration that God has 'given each of us some light to distinguish truth and falsehood,' So the search for truth is a religious as well as personal and moral project, and part of his self-depoliticizing withdrawal from social strife in the realm of fortune. This resembles Machiavelli's contrast between personal vertu (moral actions, within one's power) and fortuna (beyond your control) in *the Prince*..

The internalization and privatization of religious belief and worship was essential element of state tolerance of different religions, 1—which Henri IV of France tried, and in which the Dutch succeeded in achieving after throwing out the Spanish and therefore finding a public solution to ending religious. To say this has nothing to do with Descartes' philosophy is in my mind to profoundly mis understand his project. It was not purely epistemological or metaphysical, On the contrary, purifying philosophy of religious, sectarian implications was essential to legitimizing it, and avoiding political, possibly violent, interference.

In sum Descartes' '*recherche de la verite*', his search for truth and his analytic method (DM I), depended on establishing a sphere of freedom of thought within his complete control (DM III). His plan (or '*dessein*') was overtly religious, moral and political as well as personal project. Like European philosophers, I treat these elements as fundamentally connected, not analytically separable. Philosophy is a living, situated and profoundly practical human intellectual project. Descartes vividly understood, as did most of his contemporaries that private thought / subjective faith, was the only legitimate path open for religious believers. It represented a model for both philosophical reflection and personal Freedom. It culminates in the *Cogito* which embodies a existential choice for inner freedom and truth, since neither could not be attained in the public social, strife torn world. How very Protestant this all sounds; and Hobbesian. Indeed it explains D's

admiration for Hobbes. D even alludes to the simpler, Catholic theology he prefers, as did many non papist, non Spanish Catholics; and D chose to live in Holland, the home of the great Erasmus, a proponent of religious moderation. Note too how much he argues for moderation in the *morale*; this too was *religiously* and therefore *politically* significant, in his times.

D is clear that his project of an inner search for truth is not unlike an inner religious purification to combat the outer corruption and violence of a century or religious war in France and Europe. RD went to Holland deliberately to enjoy social freedom (DM I). RD spoke before the King, and debated the relation between scepticism and the immortality of the soul in the court of Louis XIII & Richelieu. He was acutely aware of the interconnected religious/ political ramifications of his philosophical project, as were most intellectuals of the time. His philosophical project therefore is deeply historically rooted, and, I would further contend, relative.

This is the most decisive maxim in the whole of RD's opus in my view, for it suggests that one's control of one's mind is precondition of the cogito.. Leads FD to withdraw from dominion of fortune (the external social, natural world) into the mind—this is the actual one might even say, phenomenological constitution of the realm of the mind, as versus the body, by a moral choice, act of will.. driven by need to control..

It is on this basis that RD reviews all occupations to choose the best, which is what he does in ch I of DM.. and decides 'to spend all my life cultivating my reason and advance as far as I could in the knowledge of truth, following my self-imposed method' – could RD have been clearer that the morale, especially maxims 2 & 3 are necessary propaedeutic, personal, moral and religious preparations for pursuing the project of the search for truth, and, as well, finding truth in the mind. This is RD's real project of 'mathesis', in the sense of both learning, and, given his own scientific capabilities, mathematics.

Descartes makes my final point himself when he writes 'having assured myself of these maxims, along with the truths of faith,' in effect so as to becoming 'free to undertake getting rid of ... all my other opinions' ... Then he moved into his little warm room, 'where I had all these ideas' ... He notes he was not imitating the sceptics, and doubt merely for the sake of doubting' a clear allusion to Montaigne—who was explicit about the complementarity of scepticism and faith / civil peace. This too is critical, for it is the entry point for Peirce's critique of intuition and Cartesianism. Doubts, like questions, should not be arbitrary, they must be intelligent, based on reasons, etc. That seems to be what D is saying here. Finally, D says 'my whole aim was to reach security' ['assurance' in French, which has both objective and subjective connotations], and reach 'rock' solid foundation.. He then restates his metaphor of rebuilding an old house, not destroying it—with which he started this chapter. Once more, in the context of religious wars, D is reinforcing his penchant for moderation. This, and continued to practice his self-imposed method' and mathematical research .. In all this 'I was steadily pursuing my design ['dessein' plan, design, project] and profiting by the knowledge of truth,' more perhaps than only if he read books.

But there are many objections to Descartes' central claim, namely, that the *Cogito* is self-evident, intuitively and immediately true, and therefore not in need of any logically deductive reasoning or proof. Such 'proofs', M. Descartes noted, would undo his claim that the *Cogito* is intuitively self-evident. For logical deductions, like solving equations, or interpreting languages, all take time. They are cognitively mediated performances, not cognitively immediately or intuitively

self-evident acts like conscious awareness/thinking, at least according to the *Cogito* theory. Thinking itself it proves its validity, its truth; beyond all doubt. So it is the epistemological bedrock of all philosophy. Or so M. Descartes maintained.

Rene Descartes contended that only 'I' can test the *Cogito* for myself. No one else can do it for me. The *Cogito* is not open to replicable testing, even though that is what he claimed. It is only open to 'subjective repetition.' That is because others can only observe our bodily behaviour, not our mental operations and processes. So there is no direct, epistemically certain way of knowing whether any other person, or other intelligent organism is actually thinking at any time, no matter how intelligent and thoughtful its behaviour may appear. The only test for the *Cogito* is subjective. Is my thinking my thoughts, myself. No one else can do it for me. No one. the *Cogito* is always a first person performance. There is no way of epistemically certain knowing that any other being on the planet, or anywhere in the universe, actually thinks. Even if the *Cogito* is intuitively self-evident, which I doubt, it does not solve the central problems of Cartesian philosophy, it offers no way of proving the existence of other minds. On the contrary, the existence of other minds, of intelligent agents who also think conscious thoughts is epistemically problematic and doubtful, and, Therefore, for M. Descartes, uncertain at best, untrue at worst. the *Cogito* Therefore in one fell swoop takes to the heights of knowledge to the depths of scepticism. It is both subjectively self-evident and true, Objectively fallible unprovable, and false.

A further corollary is that the test can only be performed while thinking, while one is awake and conscious, not while unconscious, not before or after one was awake or conscious. A second problem is that if the *Cogito* is intuitively self-evident, then why did it take countless millennia for humans to discover this allegedly obvious truth. Clearly, it is not obvious, and therefore not intuitively self-evident, since its discovery had to await the birth of M. Descartes, his education as a philosopher, and, still more, his years of thinking and studying philosophical problems, in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century France and Holland. Furthermore M. Descartes himself admits that 'thinking' is not a simple act or operation, but involves multiple modes or psychological operations: cognitive, emotional, imaginative, executive, etc. conscious awareness, he claims is an ever constant accompanying quality of all the modes of thinking, in contrast to pure bodily operations, processes, movements.

There is a Husserlian way of understanding Descartes, too. The phenomenological *epoche* is represents the [bracketing] of thought, mental experience that, as H himself said, constituted the *Cartesian Meditation* method. Bracketing is exactly what D's method does. He brackets off / encloses the mind/soul, the sphere of the *Cogito* and faith, by withdrawing from, and excluding, the sphere of the body—namely, the sensory, bodily, political and social world. That is what a [bracket], exactly does. It is like or a *clear, distinct* boundary, It encloses the field within it, by excluding what is clearly outside it, and different from it. But enclosure is temporary, and problematic.

In fact there are problems. If conscious awareness only occurs in accompaniment of diverse modes of thinking, then it cant be simple, for at least two elements are involved, conscious awareness and the specific mode of thinking at work at the time. Secondly, each mode of thinking has a specific content on which it is focused, one always is thinking of something. So this makes conscious awareness even more complex, and mediated rather than immediate. Thirdly, the meaning of interpretation of what we are thinking is not itself intuitive, but is a fallible feeling.

Often one needs various aids, like writing, specific visuals, words, sounds, tactile sensations or smells (a famous aid to memory), to clarify exactly what one. So one must speak of the association of the thought with some sensory content. Its meaning, interpretation is not simple, or immediately evident. In fact interpreting ones ideas or thoughts, as Peirce (and James) have cogently argued, is a highly complex, mediated and fallible endeavour, quite unlike the instant certainty claimed by M. Descartes.

This further entails the even more disheartening consequence that one cannot know whether one was thinking before one was born, or after one dies. This last problem was critical for M. Descartes, for the *Cogito* was for him a profoundly religious truth, linked somehow to showing that the soul alone was the entity which thinks, and it was immortal, and could Therefore be rewarded with the vision of God after death (or, worse, suffer the punishments of hell for its sins). Indeed the *Cogito* was clearly seen by M. Descartes as an essential component in proving the immortality of the soul, a debate of tremendous religious, and indeed Christian even Catholic importance. M. Descartes in fact debated the *Cogito* and the immortality of the soul with Jean de Silhon, secretary King Louis XIII of France and his ministers, Cardinal Richelieu in the royal French court.

Given that the *Cogito* was neither as intuitively self-evident, immediate, epistemically robust truth, or as simple as M. Descartes himself thought, but is in contrast a highly mediated, complex, and far from evident and epistemically and psychologically precarious hypothesis, it loses all claim to constitute an epistemically empirically testable, replicable, independently confirmable, foundation for human knowledge, speak less of having any claim to scientific validity. For all scientific hypotheses must be replicable, empirically and independently testable.

A residual, tacitly Platonic, view that mental processes cannot be reduced to mere bodily operations, processes or movements, I suggest, underlies mainstream philosophy's stubborn opposition to the empirical, neural-biological naturalist approach to human intelligence and action. In opposing naturalistic forms of inquiry, and promoting the irreducibility of something called the mind or consciousness to the brain or the body, it tends to postulate several mutually incompatible premises: It requires conscious reflection to precede sound decision making, without showing that consciousness is more intelligent than non-conscious behaviours. It of necessity tends to reduce thought to a set of simplistic, vaguely defined self-proclaimedly 'rational' powers of knowledge, normative evaluation, free choice and action, including bodily elements). Alternatively rationality is adduced to define right action, but it in turn is reduced to a logical mathematical inferential model of linear cognitive processing, that is notably simpler than other forms of problem solving intelligence. Finally, it separates, and often dichotomizes empirical knowledge from normative evaluation and choice, and further opposes them by interpreting choice as an exercise of 'free will', thereby implying a magic, metaphysical exemption from causal interconnections that otherwise govern all the phenomena in our universe. In addition it tends to mistakenly label the brain, and the body, a physical machine. Both singly and as a set, these assumptions are not cognitively productive, do not constitute a basis for assembling intelligent assent based on independent testing of hypotheses, are vaguely general and ambiguous, and as a set, mutually contradictory.

In fine, Descartes' method is grounded in the *morale* (DM III). In addition it is rooted in the recent history of the ways French thought dealt with the problem of religious strife and the need for civil peace, ie, absolutism, as found notably in Montaigne's own combination of scepticism and faith and support of Henri III. Descartes was acutely aware of such implications, for he himself had

debated with Jean de Silhon on immortality and the Augustinian ‘*cogito*’ (actually, *dubito, ergo sum* was more like it), and consciously chose to live in Holland, where since 1609 religious tolerance had been the norm, on the new, revolutionary social presupposition that subjective religious faith was depoliticized and treated as a private matter (cf Descartes on complete freedom of thought).

The historical context throws quite different light on Descartes’ own statements about obedience to the state, and the need for theological simplicity. The year before he published the *Discourse*, Galileo, the greatest scientist of the day, was hauled before the Pope Julian, an old friend, and forced to abjure his heretical teachings. In those times radical theorizing about science and philosophy was religiously risky, and dangerous to one’s career and health. And D was a radical, revolutionary thinker. So he had a real problem, about publication, as he himself stated. He was acutely conscious of the dangers of religiously provocative thought. The *Cogito*, on this reading, is the product of the deliberate choice of meditation, as the private, depoliticized and socially non threatening path to truth. This may sound too historical, but neither of us is an abstract analytical and therefore anti-historical philosopher. These views are not too historical at all for any lover of Hegel, Heidegger or critical theory, which last openly commented on the relation between depoliticizing philosophy and the Cartesian privatization of theory.

The depth connection of a philosophy with its fundamental social, historical contexts, as mediated through the personal communications and reflections of the philosopher, is for me a central way of interpreting the real, underlying message/ meaning in his writings. Verbal/logical discussions of words or texts are merely surface glosses.

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A Note on Mechanical Reductionism: possibly one of the most important reasons for the *Cogito* was M. Descartes’ mechanistic view of the body. In the early 16th century the mathematical and mechanistic sciences were growing, to mature in the revolutionary new synthesis of Isaac Newton, several decades after Descartes’ death. Understandably M. Descartes, as himself a leading scientist of the time, postulated a purely mechanical concept of the human body: humans and animals as machines (Medit ? ; DM?). And, correctly, he fast saw that no machine could think or feel. This left the field open for the classic, Neo-Platonist alternative, of the immaterial, non-mechanistic, immortal soul. Given that Plato was himself a mathematical philosopher, made it even more persuasive. M. Descartes revolution not to claim only the soul could think, but to defend it by subjective personal experience, of the self’s private experience of its own thinking. Descartes internalized the Platonic soul in the thinking ego. In so doing involved withdrawing from the world, excluding it as a field of certain knowledge and possible solid field for pursuing the search for truth, and, as the *Morale* and the *Method* clearly show, enclosing himself in the sole field in which that pursuit could succeed, his own mind.