

A History of Philosophy

35 Descarte's Moral & Psychological Ethics

By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

He gives us a discussion of what he calls the passions, and then there are various indications of the direction that an ethic would take, but that's about it. In order to get at the passions, we have to see the mind-body relationship again. So, let's get clear about that.

The mind and body are two separate substances, with properties that are completely different. Consequently, the mind can function independently of the body, and the body can function independently of the mind. Even though there is causal interaction between the two, they are, in other regards, functionally independent.

His picture of the body is that its functions could be explained simply in mechanical terms, in terms of processes caused by the animal spirits coursing through the body, and so forth. In other words, bodily movements and bodily changes are all physically produced without the aid of the soul. Now, to us, perhaps, that sounds *déjà vu*, but certainly not in Descartes' day, because the conception of the soul in the medievals, as in the Greek world, was that it's the soul that enlivens and moves the body.

That's the principle of locomotion, as well as of nutrition, and the life-giving principle, as well as the rationality in humans. So, the body, then, is a self-operating kind of mechanism, independently of the soul. Now, the soul, on the other hand, has two kinds of functions.

It has its actions, active functions, that is to say, voluntary activities. Voluntary activities that include making decisions, or imaginative thinking, where you choose to think of something, and conjure up images. Actions of the soul.

Reasoning is an action of the soul. Imagining is an action of the soul. They take the exercise of will.

But in addition to those active functions, there are passive functions of the soul, and it's these which are called the passions. Passions are passive functions of the soul. They are awarenesses, conscious states, caused by bodily changes.

Conscious states are caused by bodily changes. And that's likely to include physical feelings, perhaps dreams, pains, pleasures, desires, and the like. The way he specifically defines passions, he says, they are those perceptions, sensations, or emotions that specifically refer to the soul, but which are caused, maintained, and fortified by some movement of the animal spirits.

The animal spirits are these physical fluids that explain life processes. So they are perceptions, sensations, emotions, caused by bodily changes. Now, make sure we're clear about those terms.

Emotions, physically caused, alright. Sensations, yes, we were talking about sensations as they appear in meditation six, in connection with our awareness of our own bodies. Sensations are physical feelings of one's own body.

But perceptions, sense perceptions, not just particular sensations of particular feelings, but the perception of particular physical bodies, are caused by bodily changes. So he has a causal theory of our perception of physical bodies. But he's distinguishing, remember, between perception, which is caused by external agents, and in that sense is adventitious.

And on the other hand, imagination, which is our creating of images, is therefore factitious. And on the other hand, innate ideas that God has given us. Those three kinds of ideas.

Distinguish between the conception of ideas that are innate. General ideas, abstract ideas, conception. That is purely an act of the intellect.

An active activity of the soul. Distinguish that from perception. Perception is distinguished from conception.

Perception has to do with the sense perception of particular things. And it is perceptions, which are among the passions of the soul, those consciousnesses caused by movements of animal spirits, by bodily changes, that is. And how does the cause-effect relationship take place between two things so utterly disparate? It takes place, you remember, in the pineal gland.

P-I-N-E-A-L. The pineal gland. Which, as he puts it, is suspended over that passage through which the animal spirits move.

And so it's the movement of the animal spirits in their appropriate conduit past the pineal gland, which induces these states of consciousness in the mind. So there's his mind-body relationship, and his definition of passions of the soul is simply spelling that out a little more fully in terms of the way in which the body influences the soul. Now, in reverse fashion, the soul can have causal influence over the body.

How? By virtue of its active functions. That is to say, the reason the intellect is able to represent to itself ideas of consequences that might follow a certain bodily action. And in considering those consequences, the mind cannot will to pursue those things and can change the desire that you have to do that particular action.

So it is by virtue of mental representations of consequences that the mind is able to modify the desires, those passions which would lead us in certain directions. And Descartes is apt to think that the more clear and distinct the idea the mind has, the greater its influence over the passions. Now, keep that in mind not only for what we're going to say about Descartes and moral psychology, but for what follows next week with Benedict Spinoza, because he is very much the Cartesian, pantheist though he is, and has essentially the same view of the relationship of reason to emotion as Descartes has.

Now, the outcome of this is that such emotions as desire, wonder, fear, jealousy, anger, gratitude, remorse, and emotions of that can be affected by the mind, even though they're produced by physical causes. And the moral life becomes then a matter of reason controlling, guiding the passions and therefore the behaviors of our bodily life. Now, what you have then is reason guiding the will and influencing the passions.

It is right reason, there's that phrase again that comes down to us from Scotus and Ockham that we found in Bacon and Hobbes, now it's in Descartes. It is right reason, consequential thinking, you see, prudence. It's right reason that must guide the moral life.

And as Descartes put it, right reason makes life more bearable. How does it do that? Because it gives us power. Knowledge is power.

There's the Bacon theme paralleled in Descartes. Right reason gives us the power to change what we can, change our passions, desires, as well as change some things about the world around us by scientific means. It gives us the power to change what we can, but also the power to have contentment of soul when there is nothing more we can change.

Contentment, changing the restlessness of our feelings for contentment. Power over the passions. Well, you say, this sounds very much like a Stoic kind of ethic.

Yes, it is. Copleston makes that observation. It becomes pretty evident.

And, of course, in the Renaissance, there was a resurgence of Stoicism, particularly in regard to its ethic, and here it is very evident in Descartes. So that's the way his moral psychology works. But I want to add two or three observations about the fact that this is rooted in his overall position.

There are, it seems to me, four streams of thought. Four streams of thought in Descartes, which all focus on what would be an ethic if he had developed it more systematically. So that you can, in those ways, anticipate, construct, as a ghostwriter would construct for Descartes, his ethical theory.

One of these streams of thought is about the passions and the power of reason to rule the passions. The second stream of thought is about the mind-body relationship, such that the mind is a separate substance rather than part of the physical world. Now, you see, since the soul is not part of the physical world but is a separate substance, it's not an ingredient inherent in nature in the physical sense.

The mind, as it were, stands aloof from nature, free from many of its causal processes, free to change nature, to modify nature's processes. And you get the same kind of notice in Bacon about the power that knowledge gives over nature. Now, both Bacon and Descartes, therefore, have been accused by some environmental advocates of our day of laying the groundwork for the abusive domination of the environment and the raping of natural resources, which has gone on.

Because if we're not part of nature, if our minds are not part of the natural order but are able to dominate it independently, then, well and good, this is what we've done. The rule of reason becomes the rule of science, which becomes the rule of technology after the Industrial Revolution, and as a result, the effect on the environment. That, at least, is the interpretation that's given.

Now, in addition to that mind-body relationship, emphasizing the exercise of power over nature, there is the will and intellect relationship, which we saw in relation to the problem of error. Error in rational judgments we make in meditation four. Error in perceptual judgment about physical objects.

The will and intellect interplay come out in meditation six. But insofar as error is a kind of evil, cognitive evil, error is to truth what evil is to good, then, plainly, that will and intellect interplay applies to the good and evil issue as well, deciding between, deciding what is good and what is evil. Let not your will go beyond what you know in your intellect, you see.

So the same kind of advice, the rule of reason in guiding the will, as in these other regards. But then, the fourth strain which flows into this ethic is a kind of provisional morality, which he poses towards the beginning of his discourse on method. Now, that's a shorter work than the meditations.

Its focus is much more on methodology, even though he runs through the same general line of thought as in the meditations. But when he has established the problem regarding skepticism, before he sets out to rebuild a philosophy from scratch, he sets out what he calls a provisional morality he will follow at this stage, even though he is so ignorant in terms of the knowledge that he's after, so ignorant as to whether or not this is unequivocally the right thing to do. Now, this provisional

morality is interesting for the reason that it fits in perfectly, it seems to me, with what would be the conclusion of his inquiry, leading in this way into an ethic.

It's a thoroughly prudential ethic guarded by being reasonable in order to avoid bad consequences. It's precisely that. So, let me read snatches from it.

The first moral maxim is to obey the laws and customs of my country, constantly retaining the religion in which, by God's grace, I've been brought up since childhood. Now, that was a very prudent thing to do in days of persecution and controversy and so forth. And in all other matters, to follow the most moderate and least excessive opinions to be found in the practices of the more judicious part of the community in which I would live.

Now, why be such a moderate? And his reason, as he puts it, very simply, is that if I should be in error, I won't have strayed too far from the truth. So, don't take extreme positions. If you don't know for sure, just take a moderate position and play it safe.

Number two, second maxim, to be as firm and determined in my actions as I could be and not to act on the most doubtful decisions once I had made them any less resolutely than on the most certain. In other words, don't waver. Make up your mind and act.

Why? Well, this frame of mind frees me from repentance and remorse commonly felt by those vacillating individuals who are always seeking as worthwhile things which they will later judge to be bad. Don't keep wavering and be remorseful. Just get and do it.

Sin boldly, if you like. Why? Well, think of all of the emotional turmoil of people who are always second-guessing themselves. This is the better way to a contented mind.

Number three, my third maxim was always to seek to conquer myself rather than fortune. To change my desires rather than the established order, and generally to believe that nothing except our thoughts is wholly under our control, so that after we've done our best in external matters, and what remains to be done is absolutely impossible at least as far as we're concerned, we will be contented that we have changed what we could. Well, that's precisely where his ethical thinking comes out at the end.

And then finally, the fourth, I planned to make a review of the various occupations possible in this life in order to choose the best, and he goes on to say I decided to stay with this philosophical occupation because I know of nothing which gives me greater contentment of mind. So, there it is. What did the Stoics say? Absence of pain in the body and trouble in the mind.

That's Descartes, very plainly. So, Descartes' ethic is fascinating. Now, questions, comments? No, because there are some passions that are positive, you see.

If passions include perceptions and sensations as well as emotions, to lose them altogether would be to have no sense perceptions, you see. And if, on the other hand, he were to say, " Let's kill off all our emotions, then he would have no feeling of contentment, you see. There would be a sort of anemia; it would be a sort of dead, feelingless existence.

And that's not what he wants. He wants a feeling of contentment. Dorothy? The second part of? Yeah.

Well, he was not a social activist. No, because he's going to obey the laws of his land. That would be in personal life.

Yeah. And you see the reason he gives, let's see, well, let me read a little more in that paragraph. Even if the direction is chosen at random, travellers finally arrive at some destination, not perhaps where they'd like to be at least, but at least where they'll be better off than in the middle of a forest.

So if you're lost in a forest, at least start walking, you see. Situations in life often permit no delay. When we cannot determine the course that's certainly best, we must follow one that's probably the best.

And when we cannot determine that, select one and follow it as though it were certainly best. If it isn't a good one, at least the reasons for selecting it were good. Now this frame of mind frees me from the remorse felt by vacillating individuals.

You see. That business of if you don't know, at least start walking, you know, that's picked up by Jean-Paul Sartre in his image of the human condition. Naufrage, shipwreck.

You know, we're alone in a boat without a rudder or compass on an ocean that has no bounds. Which way shall we row? It doesn't make any difference. Just row.

You see, that gives meaning to life while you're alive. So Sartre takes it in a very different direction. But Descartes' original idea.

Once again. I was curious as to what his criteria were. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, best certainly in terms of consequences.

In terms of, I think I have to say emotional consequences. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah, best in terms of handling the passions. A life of contentment. Absence of pain in the body and trouble in the soul.

Yeah. Descartes had the reputation, by the way, of being a tireless debater. So that in the Parisian salons of the day, the social evenings, he would take a very unpopular position and argue it.

And argue it against all comers. And when he had them convinced that he was right, he'd say, well, now let's look at the other side. And then he would turn the tables over and argue the other side of the thing.

That was the kind of evening's entertainment he loved. And apparently, people enjoyed it too. At least it's better than some of the conversations we have.

Plastic society. Okay. Now let's see.

David, you were asking something. Yeah. Yeah, that's rather noticeable.

Certainly, there's no natural law ethic. And there cannot be. Because if you don't have real essences and final causes, you cannot have the sort of natural law ethic that came out of Thomas Aquinas.

You might say, well, what about the Stoic conception of natural law? A life of reason. Well, that seems to be what he's talking about, but he's construing it in a prudential fashion. Which isn't altogether what the Stoics do.

I think you get a more loyal version of Stoic natural law compared to John Locke. Perhaps Thomas Jefferson. You see.

More so than Descartes. It's in the personal ethic, as Dr. Chappell noted, that Descartes is so much like the Stoics. A theological ethic? No.

Because he is separating theology from philosophy. You see, his very method, his enterprise, is to see what can be established by reason alone. In breaking out of skepticism.

You see. So the theological ethic, he'll leave to the theologians. And the application of that theological ethic, he'll leave to the church.

And in following the religion of his childhood upbringing, he'll follow that. But what's the relationship of his provisional ethic to that? Well, it seems to be what he's saying, don't shake the boat. So he has sort of a general prudential ethic, which would support the continuance of the traditional religious ethic.

Couldn't he have picked up, as you mentioned, Aquinas' natural law? I'm wondering, why couldn't Descartes sort of pick that up? Because he did see God as a good guy. He saw that his senses were alive. Couldn't he have used his senses to somehow get a general sense of what was right and wrong? Well, is right is wrong a sense quality? No, they're not physical properties.

You see. How would you get from your sense perception of particular things? How would you get any ethical conclusion? Well, I think his way is probably the only way. Watch the consequences of actions.

You see, that takes sense perception. Watch the consequences of actions, and avoid those that are going to cause problems. Pursue those that are going to make life more bearable.

You see. So, really, he is anticipating the utilitarian approach, that if you're going to come at ethics empirically, then you come at ethics in terms of consequences. And inasmuch as reason on an a priori basis yields no ethic, it's the passions which give rise to the ethic.

You see. It has to be that way. Okay, just a few words about the Cartesian influence.

I think it's fair to say that the remainder of the 17th century was dominated by Descartes. The term Cartesian is used not only in speaking about Descartes, but about many of the successors of his. We've mentioned Spinoza, and we'll be spending next week on Spinoza.

Cartesian. And, as you read him, watch the parallels to Descartes all the way through. Very, very evident.

Parallels also in Leibniz, who we'll be on the week after. Many other individuals that we won't take time to talk about, but one individual who's often mentioned is the Frenchman Malabroche, who was a metaphysical idealist. John Locke, at the end of the 17th century, while a thoroughgoing empiricist, also shows a lot of Descartes' influence.

George Berkeley, likewise, British idealist. So the whole period is now going to be dominated by the Cartesian influence. It's very, very hard to avoid.

You get materialists like Hobbes, and a Frenchman, the Baron de la Mettrie, who is Hobbesian in his view of nature, taking a thoroughly mechanistic view. Or there is a skeptic like Peter Bale, who builds on a Cartesian kind of skepticism, taking as the criterion clear and distinct ideas, a criterion for what's acceptable as true, and

relentlessly argues that there is nothing that we know with clarity and distinctness. And Bale had a profound influence on the skepticism of David Hume later on.

The influence of his method is something we have to keep in mind, this building out of nothing, reconstructing a whole philosophical position, foundationalism. But one individual who, while hardly a Cartesian, is a contemporary of his, reacting somewhat against him, a man we need to take note of, is, of course, Blaise Pascal. And so, just a few comments about Pascal.

Born in 1623, died in 1662, a younger contemporary of Descartes. He wasn't really a philosopher. He was a mathematician.

He was a Christian apologist. A member of the Jansenist movement. Jansenism was a sort of evangelical renewal movement within the Roman Church, post-Reformation.

And he stands in contrast to much of Descartes' emphasis. Let me come into Pascal with his distinction between the two kinds of knowledge. What he calls rational knowledge and intuitive knowledge.

Those two. Rational knowledge is the kind of thing that Descartes was after. Deductive reasoning, such as functions in mathematics.

Mathematical type reasoning that tries to demonstrate conclusions with logical certainty. Now, that kind of rationality, Pascal regards as applicable in mathematics, he was a mathematician, but inapplicable in natural science, theology, metaphysics, and ethics. Now, let me run through those four.

Inapplicable in natural science, because there we must proceed observationally. Amassing examples, enumerating cases, experimenting. And in natural science of an empirical sort, probabilities are what we have to work with.

Not logical certainty, but probability. And it's those kinds of empirical probabilities that guide his writings about Christian apologetics. Where he makes a lot of use of historical evidence.

What he takes to be the evidence that miracles offer. The evidence that fulfilled prophecy offers. You see, there it is, the empirical method of probabilities that is involved.

But not the demonstrative reasoning of mathematics. In theology, again, demonstrative reasoning of a mathematical sort doesn't apply because theology begins with the biblical revelation, rather than with universally accessible axioms. In metaphysics, where you would have natural theology proposed, again, it doesn't imply.

He regards the classic arguments for the existence of God as invalid. You cannot demonstrate the existence or the nature of God logically. Natural theology fails.

We need divine revelation to know about God. He is to be thought of, to use his phrase, as *Deus absconditus*. And as *Deus revelatus*.

The God who has absented himself, and the God who reveals himself. But not as a God who can be known by demonstrative reasoning. In fact, he maintains, in keeping with the skepticism of his day, that metaphysical arguments for and against positions are equipollent.

They have equal weight and are therefore quite indecisive. In ethics, again, you have disagreements that cannot be rationally settled. To know thyself, Socrates' dictum, to know thyself, to know the supreme good, is impossible, apart from the Christian revelation.

So, what you have then, interestingly, in Pascal, is a thoroughgoing skepticism. He seems to adopt the Pyrrhonic skepticism of the day, Pyrrhonism, the sort of thing that Sextus Empiricus had systematized. And in doing so, he takes it that he is uncovering our desperate state of need.

Interesting, a Christian skeptic, which is what he is. Now, frequently, that kind of skepticism in Christian thinkers is associated with some kind of intuition, religious intuition. And that is not unlike what Pascal has in mind by talking of intuitive knowledge.

A kind of intuitive knowledge that is a direct personal awareness. Direct personal awareness of what? Well, it applies in physics regarding space. It's a matter of intuitive awareness that space is three-dimensional.

Religious faith, faith in, belief in God, is a kind of intuitive awareness of the divine being. This intuition provides kinds of natural beliefs which are spontaneous on our part, not the result of chains of argument or inference. And maybe you are familiar with his classic way of putting it.

The heart has its reasons that the mind does not know. Are you familiar with that quotation? The heart has its reasons that the mind does not know. Now, I've asked myself what he means by the heart as distinct from the mind.

And in our popular vocabulary, I think going back to the 18th century, the heart is usually spoken of as the seat of emotions. Now, I don't think that that is Pascal's use of the term. I think Pascal uses the term the heart more in the biblical sense, where it is the unifying core of the whole personality.

In other words, he sees reason as involving only part of a person's God-given faculties. He sees intuition, the kind of thing the heart knows, as involving the whole of the personality in the very depth of its being, by virtue of its inner nature. So it is by virtue of our nature as physical beings that we're aware of the three-dimensionality of space.

It's by virtue of the fact that we are at heart religious beings in the image of God, that faith in God, belief in God, is a spontaneous sort of response of the person to the world in which God has put us. So the heart has its reasons that the mind does not know. Pascal stands in that regard as a critic of the kind of rationalism that is going to develop for the Enlightenment, an early critic of it.

And it's sometimes said that the next time you get anybody like that, it's Soren Kierkegaard, Pascal, and Kierkegaard, two interesting types. There is one other side to Pascal, of course, Pascal's wager. Where, in terms of the existence of God, he proposes that it pays to wager.

It's an interesting sort of consequential thing, the prudent thing is to believe. It's as if he's picking up on the right reason notion all over again. Because in that sense, right reason would go something like this.

Either God exists or he does not exist. If he does exist and you believe it, you have everything to gain. If he does not exist but you believe he does, you have nothing to lose.

If he does exist and you do not believe it, you have everything to lose. So the gain is all on wagering that God exists. That's the prudent thing to do.

And so that famous Pascal's wager, you see, is assessing, as it were, probabilities. I read somewhere that he was very interested in the theory of probability because he had watched his friends gambling. And it was the theory of chances that he saw illustrated in the chances they took that egged him on in that direction.

So, okay, Pascal, then, in contrast to Descartes. Now, questions, comments to that judge? David? A whole philosophy? No, he's not a philosopher. In the sense that he's not developing philosophical theory or philosophical arguments.

On the other hand, while he has a negative view of the possibility of effective arguments and theories, he's very much alert to logic, you see. The limitations of deductive logic, which has been getting a lot of criticism ever since Duns Scotus, and the possibilities of inductive logic, you see, probability theory. So in that sense, his contribution is much more in regard to logic.

He invented what I understand is the first calculating machine. That's why his name has been given to computers. Pascal.

This was the mathematician at work. He even worked out a public transportation plan, I think it was, for the city of Paris. He was interested in city planning and all that sort of thing.

But this is the mathematical mind at work in those things. Okay, any other comments or questions? I have a question on Descartes. You didn't ask earlier.

I just wondered if you could revamp what right reasoning means to change what we can't. I had that read out to me, but I don't really understand. What can we change? There are two kinds of things we can change.

One kind is much more effective than the other. We are most effective in changing our own emotions. Changing our passions.

And we do that by choosing to set before ourselves clear ideas about consequences that might follow from giving such passions free rein. That clear perception of consequences is likely to turn what was desired to do into a disinclination to do it. So we can modify our own passions.

The thing we cannot change as effectively is the circumstances of our lives. External things. We can do that sometimes, in some particulars.

But obviously, we're not as effective there. So then, the good life, the life that's more bearable, is one in which we are free because of our clarity of mind to change the things that we can and to gain, to win the contentment of mind in the face of things we cannot change. So it's not a purely mechanical type body.

If we didn't have the mind, if we did not have right reason, our bodies would still go on completely mechanically. But we can have some control over them. And this is what makes the human animal different from others.

And this is what makes him more of a rationalist. Yes, yes. Although keep in mind that the difference between rationalism and empiricism is in terms of the sources of knowledge.

He's a rationalist in that regard. The term rationalism has at least three different meanings. Have we talked about that before? I'm sure we have.

Well, let's refresh our minds. At least three different meanings. The first is rationalism over against empiricism, which has to do purely and simply with the sources of our knowledge.

The empiricist claims that all knowledge comes ultimately from experience. Now, what you do thereafter may be exactly the same as Descartes did. In fact, for Locke, it is.

Locke wants to get empirical premises from which to do his deductive building. Descartes has a priori premises from which he builds his deductive reasoning. The difference between them is in the sources of the premises, the ultimate sources of knowledge.

A priori or empirical. So that's one kind of rationalism, that which distinguishes Descartes from empiricists like John Locke. The second kind of rationalism stands over against what's called fideism.

And I suppose that if Pascal not given attention to things like historical evidence, he would sound like a fideist. Because a fideist is one who, well, simply believes. For whom belief is unrelated to evidence or argument.

Whereas a rationalist is one for whom belief in very large measure depends on evidence or argument. Rationalist versus fideist. Fideist, yeah.

It's a term that's obviously drawn from the term fides, faith. But it's a term that's used all the time in contemporary philosophy of religion, epistemology, so forth. Fideism is against rationalism.

It's often contrasted with foundationalism or evidentialism. Fideism. Yeah, so to say that Descartes is, in that sense, a rationalist is simply saying he's a foundationalist.

Now the third sense of rationalism has to do with this kind of moral psychology that we've come across now in Descartes. That reason is able to rule in the moral life. That the clarity of ideas, the light of reason in that sense, can dispel certain emotions.

The power of reason over emotion. Reason over the will. That's taken to be rationalism.

If it were the other way around with the will, it would be voluntarism. So this is rationalism over against voluntarism. Or, inasmuch as it has to do with feelings and emotions, I suppose you could say rationalism over against romanticism.

Yeah. Rationalism over against romanticism. Well, Descartes is a rationalist in all three senses.

He's a rationalist, not an empiricist. He's a rationalist, not a fideist. He's a rationalist, not a voluntarist.

Well, rationalist, not a voluntarist, not as clear-cut in that context, is he? Reason and will have to go it together.