

History of Philosophy

35 Descarte's Moral & Psychological Ethics

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Abstract:

This text examines **René Descartes' dualistic philosophy**, which views the **mind and body** as separate but interacting substances. Descartes describes the body as a **mechanical entity** driven by "animal spirits," while the soul possesses both **active functions**, like reasoning, and **passive functions**, known as **passions**. Morality in this system is a **stoic pursuit** where **right reason** and clear thinking are used to govern these passions, ultimately leading to a state of **inner contentment**. The source also contrasts this **Cartesian rationalism** with the views of **Blaise Pascal**, who argued that mathematical logic is insufficient for understanding **faith and human nature**. Ultimately, Descartes' framework suggests that while we cannot always change our external circumstances, we can achieve **mental mastery** by refining our internal responses through the intellect.

Briefing Document:

Descartes' Moral and Psychological Ethics: A Comprehensive Briefing

Executive Summary

René Descartes' ethical framework is rooted in his metaphysical dualism, which posits the mind and body as two distinct, functionally independent substances. While the body operates as a mechanical system driven by "animal spirits," the soul possesses both active functions (reasoning and will) and passive functions (passions). Descartes' moral philosophy centers on the application of "right reason" to govern these passions, aiming for a life of contentment and mental power.

Key takeaways include:

- **Mind-Body Dualism:** The mind can function independently of the physical body, interacting through the pineal gland.

- **The Passions:** These are passive states of the soul (perceptions, sensations, and emotions) caused by physical movements in the body.
- **Moral Mastery:** Ethics is the process of reason guiding the will to modify desires and passions, a view deeply influenced by Stoicism.
- **Provisional Morality:** Before establishing a definitive system, Descartes followed a set of pragmatic maxims focused on social conformity, resoluteness in action, and self-mastery.
- **The Role of Knowledge:** Knowledge provides the power to change what is possible and the contentment to accept what is not.

The Mind-Body Relationship

To understand Descartes' ethics, one must first recognize his definition of the mind-body relationship. He identifies them as separate substances with entirely different properties.

The Mechanical Body

Descartes views the human body as a self-operating mechanism. Its functions—such as nutrition, locomotion, and physical changes—are explained in purely mechanical terms. These processes are driven by "animal spirits," which are physical fluids coursing through the body. This departed from the medieval and Greek views that the soul was the primary principle of life and movement.

The Duality of the Soul

The soul (or mind) has two distinct categories of functions:

1. **Active Functions (Actions):** These are voluntary activities involving the exercise of the will. Examples include decision-making, reasoning, and imaginative thinking where one chooses to conjure images.
2. **Passive Functions (Passions):** These are states of awareness or conscious experiences caused by bodily changes. They are perceptions, sensations, or emotions "caused, maintained, and fortified" by the movement of animal spirits.

Interaction via the Pineal Gland

Despite their disparate natures, the mind and body interact. This causal relationship occurs in the **pineal gland**, which Descartes describes as being suspended over the passage where animal spirits move. The movement of these spirits induces states of consciousness in the mind, while the mind, through mental representations, can influence the body by modifying desires.

The Passions and the Role of Reason

Descartes defines passions as perceptions, sensations, or emotions that refer specifically to the soul but originate in the body.

Classification of Ideas

Descartes distinguishes between three types of ideas that influence the soul's state:

- **Innate Ideas:** General and abstract conceptions given by God.
- **Factitious Ideas:** Images created by the imagination (an active function).
- **Adventitious Ideas:** Perceptions of external physical bodies caused by external agents (a passive function).

Mastery Over Passions

The moral life consists of "right reason" guiding the will to control and guide the passions. When the mind represents the consequences of a bodily action clearly and distinctly, it gains the power to change the desire for that action. This "consequential thinking" or prudence allows an individual to:

- Change passions and desires that lead in harmful directions.
 - Achieve contentment when external circumstances cannot be changed.
 - Make life more "bearable" through the exercise of power over the self.
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The Four Streams of Cartesian Ethics

Descartes' ethical thought is synthesized from four primary conceptual streams found throughout his work:

| Stream | Description |
|------------------------------|---|
| Passions & Reason | The ability of the intellect to rule over physical emotions and desires. |
| Mind-Body Dualism | The mind stands aloof from nature, allowing humans to modify and dominate the environment through science and technology. |
| Will & Intellect | The principle that error (cognitive evil) is avoided by not letting the will exceed what the intellect clearly understands. |
| Provisional Morality | A set of temporary rules for living while one is in the process of seeking absolute certainty. |

Provisional Morality: The Four Maxims

In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes outlines a "provisional morality"—a pragmatic guide to behavior while he rebuilt his philosophical system from scratch.

1. **Conformity:** Obey the laws and customs of one's country and remain constant in the religion of one's upbringing. Descartes advocated for moderation and following the most judicious members of society to avoid extreme errors.
2. **Resoluteness:** Be firm and determined in actions. Once a decision is made, even if based on doubtful evidence, one should follow it as if it were certain. This prevents the "emotional turmoil" and remorse felt by vacillating individuals.
3. **Self-Mastery:** Seek to conquer oneself rather than fortune. It is more effective to change one's own desires than to try to change the established order of the world. Only our thoughts are entirely under our control.
4. **Choice of Occupation:** Descartes concluded that the best occupation was the pursuit of philosophy, as nothing else provided him with greater contentment of mind.

Cartesian Influence and Pascal's Critique

The Cartesian Legacy

Descartes' rationalism dominated the 17th century, influencing a wide range of thinkers:

- **Successors:** Benedict Spinoza and Leibniz followed the Cartesian rationalist tradition.
- **Empiricists/Idealists:** John Locke and George Berkeley showed significant Cartesian influence despite their different epistemological starting points.
- **Skeptics:** Peter Bayle used Cartesian criteria (clear and distinct ideas) to argue that nothing is truly known, influencing David Hume.

The Counter-Perspective of Blaise Pascal

Blaise Pascal, a younger contemporary, offered a significant critique of Cartesian rationalism. Pascal distinguished between two types of knowledge:

- **Rational Knowledge:** Deductive, mathematical reasoning. Pascal argued this is inapplicable to natural science, theology, or ethics because those fields rely on observation, revelation, or probability.
- **Intuitive Knowledge:** Direct personal awareness, which he termed "the heart."

The Heart vs. The Mind: Pascal famously stated, "The heart has its reasons that the mind does not know." For Pascal, the "heart" is the unifying core of the personality, capable of spontaneous responses to God and the world that the limited faculty of reason cannot reach.

Pascal's Wager: In contrast to Descartes' search for logical certainty, Pascal proposed a probabilistic argument for religious belief. He argued that wagering on the existence of God is the most prudent choice: if God exists, the gain is infinite; if He does not, the loss is negligible.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Descartes' Moral and Psychological Ethics

This study guide examines the ethical and psychological frameworks of René Descartes as presented by Dr. Arthur Holmes. It explores the relationship between the mind and body, the nature of the passions, the development of a "provisional morality," and the contrasting perspectives of his contemporary, Blaise Pascal.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. How does Descartes define the functional relationship between the mind and the body?
 2. What role do "animal spirits" play in Descartes' description of the human body?
 3. Distinguish between the "active" and "passive" functions of the soul according to Descartes.
 4. How does Descartes define the "passions" specifically?
 5. What is the function of the pineal gland in Cartesian philosophy?
 6. How can the mind exercise control over bodily desires and passions?
 7. What is the ultimate goal of "right reason" in the moral life?
 8. Describe the third maxim of Descartes' "provisional morality."
 9. According to Pascal, what are the limitations of "rational knowledge"?
 10. Explain the core logic of "Pascal's Wager" regarding the existence of God.
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Part II: Answer Key

1. **How does Descartes define the functional relationship between the mind and the body?** Descartes views the mind and body as two separate substances with entirely different properties. While they engage in causal interaction, they remain functionally independent, meaning the body can operate mechanically without the soul, and the soul can reason independently of the body.
2. **What role do "animal spirits" play in Descartes' description of the human body?** Animal spirits are physical fluids that course through the body to facilitate life processes and movement. They act as the mechanical cause for bodily changes and sensations, operating within the body's conduits without the necessity of the soul's intervention.
3. **Distinguish between the "active" and "passive" functions of the soul according to Descartes.** Active functions are voluntary activities that require the exercise of will, such as reasoning, making decisions, or creating imaginative thoughts. Passive functions, referred to as the "passions," are conscious states or awarenesses—such as physical feelings, dreams, and emotions—that are caused by bodily changes.
4. **How does Descartes define the "passions" specifically?** Descartes defines passions as perceptions, sensations, or emotions that refer specifically to the soul but are "caused, maintained, and fortified" by the movement of animal spirits. They include states such as wonder, fear, anger, and desire, which are physically produced but experienced by the mind.
5. **What is the function of the pineal gland in Cartesian philosophy?** The pineal gland serves as the site of interaction between the disparate substances of mind and body. Suspended over the passage through which animal spirits move, its motion induces states of consciousness in the mind and allows the soul to exert influence back upon the body.
6. **How can the mind exercise control over bodily desires and passions?** The mind controls passions through mental representations of the consequences of a particular action. By using the intellect to visualize clear and distinct ideas of these outcomes, the soul can modify its desires and guide the will to override physical impulses.

7. **What is the ultimate goal of "right reason" in the moral life?** The goal of right reason is to make life more bearable by providing the power to change what is within our control and the contentment to accept what is not. This process leads to a "contentment of soul" and the replacement of restlessness with peace.
 8. **Describe the third maxim of Descartes' "provisional morality."** The third maxim dictates that one should seek to conquer oneself rather than fortune, and to change one's own desires rather than the established order of the world. It is based on the belief that nothing is entirely under our control except for our thoughts.
 9. **According to Pascal, what are the limitations of "rational knowledge"?** Pascal argues that rational, deductive knowledge is applicable only in mathematics and cannot be used to demonstrate truths in natural science, theology, metaphysics, or ethics. In these fields, humans must rely on empirical probabilities, historical evidence, or divine revelation rather than logical certainty.
 10. **Explain the core logic of "Pascal's Wager" regarding the existence of God.** The Wager posits that believing in God is the most prudent choice because if God exists, the believer gains everything, and if He does not, the believer loses nothing. Conversely, failing to believe in a God who does exist results in losing everything, making the wager for belief a matter of "right reason" and risk assessment.
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Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the Source Context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Mechanical Body and the Aloof Mind:** Analyze how Descartes' separation of mind and body laid the groundwork for the scientific domination of nature and discuss the modern environmental critiques of this position.
2. **Stoic Resurgence in Cartesian Ethics:** Explore the parallels between Descartes' moral philosophy and Stoicism, specifically regarding the pursuit

of "contentment of soul" and the mastery of internal desires over external circumstances.

3. **The Evolution of Rationalism:** Compare the three distinct senses of "rationalism" mentioned in the text (vs. Empiricism, vs. Fideism, and vs. Voluntarism) and explain how Descartes fits into each category.
4. **Pascal vs. Descartes on Human Nature:** Contrast Descartes' confidence in "right reason" with Pascal's skepticism and his assertion that "the heart has its reasons that the mind does not know."
5. **Provisional Morality as a Practical Tool:** Evaluate Descartes' four maxims in his *Discourse on Method*. How do these maxims function as a "prudential ethic" for an individual navigating a world of uncertainty?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

| Term | Definition |
|----------------------------|---|
| Animal Spirits | Physical fluids in Cartesian physiology that explain life processes and mechanical bodily movements. |
| Causal Interaction | The process, occurring in the pineal gland, by which the body influences the mind (passions) and the mind influences the body (will). |
| Contentment of Soul | The state of inner peace or "absence of trouble in the mind" achieved when reason successfully guides the passions. |
| Deus Absconditus | A theological concept cited by Pascal referring to the "hidden God" who cannot be known through deductive logic. |
| Fideism | The view that religious belief should be based on faith alone, independent of evidence or rational argument. |
| Intuitive Knowledge | For Pascal, a direct personal awareness involving the whole personality (the "heart") rather than just deductive reasoning. |

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| Passions | Passive functions of the soul; conscious states (emotions, sensations) caused by movements in the body. |
| Pineal Gland | The small gland in the brain where Descartes believed the soul and body interact. |
| Provisional Morality | A set of temporary ethical maxims Descartes adopted to guide his actions while he rebuilt his philosophy from scratch. |
| Pyrrhonism | A form of thoroughgoing skepticism, adopted by Pascal, which suggests that metaphysical arguments for and against positions are of equal weight. |
| Right Reason | A prudential form of thinking focused on consequences; used to guide the moral life and control the passions. |
| Voluntarism | The philosophical emphasis on the will over the intellect; the opposite of Cartesian rationalism in a moral psychology context. |