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FRITS GÅVERTSSON† *Arguing from Reception History for the Viability of Rational Reconstruction: A Case Study Involving The Reception of Cartesian Ethics in an Anglophone Context From 1650*

ABSTRACT: I argue that Lisa Shapiro's rational reconstruction of Descartes's *provisional moral code* in terms of a broad conception of morality supplies us with an interpretative framework that make historiographical sense of the reception of Descartes's moral philosophy in an Anglophone context on three occasions: the appeal to Descartes made by Henry More, Henry Sidgwick's abrupt dismissal, and the ensuing reaction to Sidgwick found in Grace Neal Dolson. This case shows, I maintain, how reception history can be utilized to inform and support rational reconstruction of philosophical texts.

KEYWORDS: Descartes; ethics; eudaimonism; Henry More; Henry Sidgwick; Reception history

I

Rational Reconstruction in (analytic) history of philosophy is something of a methodological black box, but assume a version of rational reconstruction that (initially at least) places emphasis on the text at the expense of contextual factors. Certain *desiderata* can be discerned for rational reconstructions of the sort I have in mind; such reconstructions should, *qua* reconstructions accord with and be supported by the corpus in question, and they should, *qua* rational be internally consistent, coherent, and so on. The relative weight placed on these desiderata obviously vary according to the aim(s) and purpose(s) of the reconstruction in question; a reconstruction aimed at providing inspiration to further contemporary debate will place emphasis on the latter over the former whereas an attempt at historical understanding reasonably reverses this emphasis, for example. In such cases it is relatively common that we reach a deadlock in which a range of mutually exclusive rational reconstructions of a school's or individual's position on a given issue are offered that meet the above desiderata to an equal (usually impressively high) degree. In such cases it is common that one look to possible influences, the general intellectual and cultural milieu of the time, and other contextual factors in order to decide the issue. In such cases the *immediate* reception history also often figure as a means to attain evidence. What the above suggests is (the outlines of) an ordered procedure for the *justification* of rational reconstructions. I believe that this in procedure in general is sound, based on sound methodological principles, and aptly ordered.

Aim: I hope to show that even if we assume the above reception history has a role to play.

Proposal: Rational reconstructions should (apart from meeting the above delineated desiderata) make historiographical sense by *e.g.* affording an interpretative framework for the reception history of the theory or position in question. If this challenge is met by a given rational reconstruction this should, under the condition that the above requirements are met to a degree that at least equals its competitors, offer additional support for the reconstruction in question.

Example: Descartes' moral philosophy.

II

Three rival readings of the maxims[1] presented as a *provisional moral code* (*moral par provision*) in the *Discourse* (CSM I: 122-128; AT VI 22–28):

(Common) The provisional moral code should be read as constituting a purely pragmatic necessity postulated in order to get around the so-called *apraxia*-objection. According to this reading there is little to no reason to believe that these maxims will be retained once first principles are firmly established.

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[1] One should (i) abide by the local religion, laws and customs and govern oneself 'in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions – the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live', (ii) be firm and decisive in ones actions as one could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once one has adopted them, (iii) try to master oneself and change ones desires rather than the order of the world, and (iv) cultivate reason and advance knowledge of the truth in order to judge well and thereby act well in order to acquire the virtues and in general all the other goods we can acquire.

(Marshall 1998) The maxims of the provisional moral code have more than merely pragmatic value since they constitute a set of revisable rules meant to guide action that constitutes a proper moral theory, albeit not yet fully-fledged. On this reading the *morale* of the *Discourse* is provisional in the sense that the maxims it is comprised of constitute a first approximation of the perfect moral system.

(Shapiro 2008) The maxims presented as a *provisional moral code* in the *Discourse* comprise *in part* the 'perfect moral system' hinted at in the letter-preface to the first French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy* in the sense that they provide a frame, or a set of constraints, akin to Stoic unconditional obligations and that, accordingly, '*provisional'* should be read in a, what Shapiro calls, judicial sense as 'not being liable to be put in question by the final judgment', rather than as 'temporary'.

The nature of systematic moral philosophy is dependent upon both explicitly framed debates as well as in the way theoreticians (consciously or not) view the very aim(s), function(s), and scope of ethical theorizing. The first two readings outlined above are united in taking a stance of this latter kind. They take Cartesian morality to constitute:

M*orality in the narrow sense:* A criterion of rightness partitioning the moral realm coupled with a decision procedure or other means of action guidance in particular situations—that would presumably be more or less fully *codified* in the perfect moral system. Such a decision procedure need not, but could, be *algorithmic*.

Shapiros' interpretation differs from the alternatives in that it takes Descartes's moral theory to constitute:

Morality in the broad sense: A conception of the good life coupled with a general recipe for its attainment that need not, indeed perhaps should not, supply a set of (fully codified) principles governing conduct.

Since 'part of being virtuous in the Cartesian sense involves our figuring that out for ourselves. (Consider that the *Discourse* is meant as a fable that we can choose to learn from or leave off, and that the *Meditations* are exercises we are to engage in for ourselves.) That is, he might see (perhaps misguidedly) a set of explicit prescriptions of specific duties as antithetical to his project, even if he might agree to the reasonableness of each duty in that set' (Shapiro 2001: 272. *Cf.* Annas, 2004).

The distinction between broad and narrow senses of morality is clearly not exclusive; it is perfectly possible (perhaps advisable) to demand that a satisfactory moral theory should provide an account on both levels, *i.e.* a satisfactory theory of morality might need to provide both a conception of the good life coupled with a general recipe for its attainment *and* a criterion of rightness partitioning the moral realm coupled with a decision procedure or other means of action guidance in particular situations.

I argue that Shapiro's reconstruction fares better with respect to affording a interpretative framework for the reception history with regards to (A) The extensive reliance on the *Passions* by Cambridge Platonist Henry More; (B) Sidgwick's abrupt dismissal of Cartesian ethics as virtually non-existent, and (C) A reaction to Sidgwick's classification of ethical theories by Grace Neal Dolson.

III

Distinguish between:

Synoptic conception of ethics: (moral) philosophy as a unitary enterprise emanating in a unified system linking a conception of the human condition with a philosophical world-view,

And,

Autonomous conception of ethics: ethics is seen as an independent discipline where moral theory seen as (largely) independent from the other parts of philosophy.

The above two distinctions are *orthogonal*. The broad/narrow distinction is not exclusive.[2]

Descartes is clearly synoptic:

QUOTE 1: 'the study of wisdom, and by 'wisdom' is meant not only prudence in our everyday affairs but also a perfect knowledge of all things that mankind is capable of knowing, both in the conduct of life and for the preservation of health and the discovery of all manner of skills'

(CSM I: 179; AT 9B: 2)

QUOTE 2: Thus the whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals. By 'Morals' I understand the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom. (

CSM I: 186; AT 9B, 14. *Cf.* CSMK: 289; AT 4: 440-442.)

QUOTE 3: I agree with you [Chanut] that the safest way to find out how we should live is to discover first what we are, what kind of world we live in, and who is the creator of this world, or the master of the house we live in.

(CSMK:289, AT: 441.)

QUOTE 4: What little knowledge of physics I have tried to acquire has been a great help to me in establishing sure foundations in moral philosophy.

(CSMK: 289; AT 4: 441. *Cf.* CSMK: 368; AT 5: 290-291.)

But, Shapiro's Descartes also exclusively concern himself with *morality in the broad sense*. Is this defensible?

IV

Descartes's methodology is decidedly *foundational*. In this he differs from the *coherentistic* approach customarily employed in the classical tradition.

Classical eudaimonism: The ultimate aim of human life and conduct is the attainment of happiness, the achievement of which is closely linked to the acquisition and exercise of moral virtue and tranquillity of the soul.

A set of formal criteria: Happiness is the ultimate end achievable in action (*NE*1097^{a}24) for which all other things are done (*NE*1097^{a}15-24) and thus complete (*NE*1097^{b}16-20) and therefore self-sufficient (*NE*1097^{b}6-16) by virtue of which it is incapable of increase by the addition of any other good (*NE*1097^{b}16-20).

Debate ensues over whether virtue is then to be construed as (i) a means to happiness or (ii) wholly or (iii) partly constitutive thereof which in turn generates a series of trade-offs: proponents of (ii) will easily satisfy the demand for self-sufficiency but have a hard time showing how this amounts to a happy life, for instance. This Stoic predicament carries over to Cartesian ethics.

Descartes shows marked affinity with classical Stoic eudaimonism on several points which squares well with the fact that the Stoic school saw a significant revival in the seventeenth century due to recent recovery of Stoic texts and the work of Justus Lipsius.

We should refrain from classifying Descartes as a Stoic in the strictest of senses since it requires a firmly delineated conception of Stoicism which might—even in light of comparatively sparse and sometimes contradictory source-material—be attainable, but is hardly advisable in that it involves treating Stoicism as a theoretical monolith rather than a dynamic tradition capable of change (albeit within certain boundaries set by dogmatic elements).

This does not tell against interpretative strategies reliant on Stoicism on our behalf when it comes to interpreting Cartesian moral philosophy, and such strategies I think are indispensible.

V

(A)

[2] E.g. Annas (1993; 2004) subscribes to morality in a broad sense while remaining sceptical of a synoptic approach whereas Kantian ethicists interpreting the notion of a 'maxim' narrowly in order to treat the categorical imperative as a decision procedure subscribe to morality in a narrow sense whilst adopting a synoptic approach.

In his *Outlines of the history of ethics for English readers* Sidgwick remarks:

QUOTE 5: So far I have traced the course of English ethical speculation without bringing it into relation with contemporary European thought on the same subject. This course has seemed to me most convenient, because in fact almost all the systems described, from Hobbes downward, have been of essentially native growth, showing hardly any traces of foreign influence. We may observe that ethics is the only department in which this result appears. The physics and psychology of Descartes were much studied in England, and his metaphysical system was certainly the most important antecedent of Locke's; *but Descartes hardly touched ethics proper*. So again the controversy that Clarke conducted with Spinoza's doctrine, and afterwards personally with Leibnitz, was entirely confined to the metaphysical region. (Sidgwick, 1886: 266, emphasis added)

Sidgwick's attitude doubtlessly ties in with his opinions of self-realisationism (F. H. Bradley, T. H. Green), which he sees as closely resembling classical eudaimonism:

QUOTE 6: On the whole, then, I conclude that the notion of Self-realisation is to be avoided in a treatise on ethical method, on account of its indefiniteness: and for similar reason we must discard a common account of Egoism which describes its ultimate end as the 'good' of the individual; for the term 'good' may cover all possible views of the ultimate end of rational conduct. Indeed it may be said that Egoism in this sense was assumed in the whole ethical controversy of ancient Greece; that is, it was assumed on all sides that a rational individual would make the pursuit of his own good his supreme aim: the controverted question was whether this Good was rightly conceived as Pleasure or Virtue, or any *tertium quid*. (Sidgwick, 1874: 91-92)

(B)

There was a notably warm-hearted immediate reception of *The Passions of the Soul* on British soil upon its publication in 1650. Some of the first Englishmen to read—and make (extensive) use of—Descartes's writings where the so-called *Cambridge Platonists*.

The member of the group to show the keenest interest in Cartesian ethics was probably Henry More (influences are also evident in *e.g.* John Smith's ethics). More testifies that he and Lord Conway read *The Passions of the Soul* whilst in the Jardin du Luxembourg and the treatment of the emotions in More's *An Account of Virtue* follows Descartes closely; his definitions of 'love' and 'hate' (AV: 84) are drawn verbatim from *Passions* (CSM I: 356; AT 11: 387), for instance. Most structurally important for our purposes is the fact that More presents his own list of provisional moral rules ('the Modes and Kinds') of justice fortitude and temperance (AV: 158) that should guide man in shaping his behaviour in a manner similar to Descartes's.

Treating ethics in the way Descartes does—*i.e.* a synoptic focusing on morality in the broad sense which places a clear emphasis on the passions—is exactly what is needed to combat that 'libertine' and 'impure rascal' that is Thomas Hobbes. A clearly articulated vision of how the passions are to be trained to facilitate the reaching of 'perfect contentment of mind and inner satisfaction' by developing 'a firm and constant resolution that is the exercise of moral virtue is exactly what is needed to seriously challenge Hobbes' account of the passions as mere appetites.

If Hobbes is your nemesis, you stand little to gain from a partitioning of the moral realm coupled with a decision procedure for particular situations. A conception of the good life whose general recipe for its attainment relies heavily on cultivating the passions by means of reason, on the other hand, seems like a recipe for success.

(C)

More's debt to Descartes has not gone unnoticed to philosophers and historians of philosophy throughout history. Grace Neal Dolson remarks:

QUOTE 7: [More's] treatment of the passions shows markedly the influence of Descartes. The classifications and definitions read like an abstract of *Les passions de l'ame*. So close is the parallelism that there is no need to trace it in detail' (Neal Dolson, 1897: 597).

Dolson's analysis becomes truly interesting for our purposes because in it we can find a reason for the neglect shown by Anglophone philosophers following Sidgwick towards Descartes's ethical system:

QUOTE 8: At the present time it is considered necessary to judge all philosophical systems by the standards of to-day. If the thoughts of previous generations refuse to be measured by conceptions which did not appeal to their age, so much the worse for them. That such a procedure leads to injustice and absurdity seems to make no difference to the people who employ it. The general practice demands such an enforced conformity, and its behests must be obeyed. Before leaving More, then, we must find a label for him. There are certain questions that must be answered. Was he an intuitionist? Did he believe in hedonism? Could he be counted

> among the utilitarians? The answers to these questions are made easy by the fact that the same reply will do for them all. A simple affirmative is sufficient. He belonged to all the schools. […] In fact, it is evident that the system cannot be classified; and, after making the attempt, one is tempted to improve on a familiar Biblical maxim, and to beg people not to put old wine in new bottles. (Neal Dolson, 1897:606-607)

It is plain to see that the classificatory categories employed by Dolson—Intuitionism, hedonism, and utilitarianism respectively—are lifted from Sidgwick and it becomes clear that it is not just Sidgwick's attitude towards Cartesian morality that is of importance here but the role Sidgwick has played in the development of Anglo-American ethics as such.

Sidgwick sets the agenda for twentieth-century moral philosophy not only by providing large parts of the substance of the debate but more importantly by providing a general framework for ethical theorizing (in terms of three methodological approaches: intuitional morality, universal, and Egoistic hedonism, respectively) and an adjacent understanding of what ethical theory is ultimately about. All methods in this typology are couched in deontic language and presuppose a number of meta-philosophical assumptions that leave little or no room for ethical theorizing such as envisaged by the ancients or, by extension, Descartes.[3]

The tradition following Sidgwick favoured a distinction between:

Teleological theories: defining 'right' as that which maximises the 'good' (a notion that is defined independently of 'right').

Deontological theories: Negatively defined as those that do not.

The framework exclusively focus on *morality in the narrow sense*, a fact that I think explains the general stance taken by Sidgwick in [QUOTE 5]. Sidgwick's contention that 'Descartes hardly touched ethics proper' is surely correct if 'morality' is restricted to the narrow sense. Descartes's reason for not touching 'ethics proper' so construed just might have been principled rather than an instance of simple neglect.

VI

I have argued that Lisa Shapiro's rational reconstruction of Descartes's *provisional moral code* in terms of a broad conception of morality supplies us with an interpretative framework that make historiographical sense of the reception of Descartes's moral philosophy in an Anglophone context on three occasions: the appeal to Descartes made by Henry More, Henry Sidgwick's abrupt dismissal, and the ensuing reaction to Sidgwick found in Grace Neal Dolson. I believe that the mode of the above argument indicates—provided that we believe that contextual factors have any role to play—the force that can be gathered from utilizing reception history for evaluating and justifying rational reconstructions of this sort. Concerns regarding reception history should not overshadow, or even perhaps compete with, such desiderata as internal consistency and coherence with textual evidence. Concerning oneself with reception history ought however—if we recognize the value of even the most casual of glances to the predecessors of a position subject to rational reconstruction—if so only for symmetrical reasons be of some interest in gaining support and justification for one's rational reconstruction.

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[3] Cf. Anscombe's (1958) remark that 'There is a startling change that seems to have taken place between Mill and Moore' for which she deems Sidgwick chiefly responsible.

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