Readings, reconstructions, and reception

Three case studies of Anglophone reception of Cartesian ethics

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While analytical historians of philosophy's willingness to engage with their source material almost as if talking to a contemporary peer might seem to border on hopelessly naïve and anachronistic perennialism, this way of approaching the subject matter has the benefit of approaching historical thinkers *as philosophers* and their positions as distinctively *philosophical*.[1] This latter feature is especially prominent in the method often called "rational reconstruction"—which attempts to reconstruct a given philosopher's, or school's, position so as to arrive at the strongest, or most plausible, version of the position and the argument(s) in support of it that the source material permits. And if, as Quentin Skinner would have it, "the indispensable value of studying the history of ideas" is to reveal "not the essential sameness, but rather the essential variety of viable moral assumptions and political commitments" then such engagement with older philosophical texts—guided by a recognition of their historical situatedness—seems a necessity.[2] That is, in order for the study of history to serve as a reminder that there have been different forms of intellectual life than ours we must enter into dialogue, and in order to do that some reconstruction is necessary. In an endeavor of this kind reception history plausibly plays a crucial part in facilitating dialogue.

In what follows I will argue, using as an example an interpretative debate over how to properly understand René Descartes's moral theory, that reception history can be utilized in support of rational reconstructions as a tie-breaker in cases where we are forced to choose between two or more equally apt but incompatible reconstructions.

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Rational reconstruction

The use of rational reconstruction in analytic history of philosophy might appear as something of a methodological black-box but nevertheless certain plausible *desiderata* (i.e. theoretical virtues a reconstruction of this kind aims at and is measured against) can be discerned; such reconstructions should, *qua* reconstructions accord with and be supported by the corpus in question, and they should, *qua* rational be as internally consistent, coherent, and so on as they can be made out to be without undue distortion of the source material. The relative weight placed on these demands obviously varies according to the aim(s) and purpose(s) of the reconstruction in question; a reconstruction aimed at furthering contemporary debate will place emphasis on the latter over the former whereas an attempt at historical understanding reasonably reverses this emphasis, for example.[3] That is, the force of a charge of anachronism is dependent upon the aim of the reconstruction in question since a reading or reconstruction with the primary aim of furthering a modern debate might take liberties with its source material that would be obviously prohibited were said reconstruction aiming at historical understanding.[4] I shall exclusively be concerned with reconstructions aiming at historical understanding and will consequently bracket questions concerning whether and if so how interpretations aiming at the enrichment of current debates are subject to different demands than reconstructions of historical texts as such.

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 demands 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. What the above suggests is (the outlines of) an ordered procedure for the justification of rational reconstructions as historical interpretations. While I believe that this general procedure is—by and large—sound, based on sound methodological principles, and aptly ordered readers that disagree should feel free to substitute their preferred ordering (such as *e.g.*, the lexical ordering championed by Michael Frede or the more coherentistic approach favoured by Marcel van Ackeren[5]) as the argument that follows remains unaffected by such concerns. The reason for this is that the proposal argued for here is supposed to be understood as an addition to whatever methodological priority-ordering one happens to favour.

Thus, my suggestion does in no way conflict with the methodology described above, but instead it adds to it further resources. The gist of my proposal is this: arguably, rational reconstructions should (apart from

meeting the above delineated demands of internal consistency, coherence with textual evidence, and accordance with the broader context in question) make historiographical sense by 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 and thus act as a tie-breaker.

Just to reiterate, I propose that when we are faced with a choice between two or more incompatible reconstructions of a historical position on a given issue and when the alternatives on offer are on a par, we can profit from turning to reception history in order to decide which reconstruction to opt for. In the interest of avoiding misunderstandings it should be pointed out that this does not mean that I favour turning to reception history *rather than* considering how well a given a reconstruction situates a position in an intellectual setting or as preoccupied with problems in its time and tradition. To the contrary, I do believe that such considerations are paramount. I am merely suggesting that we can turn to reception history when an appeal to the usual theoretical virtues are not enough to settle the issue. The idea is then, simply put, that *ceteris paribus* we should prefer a reconstruction over its alternatives if it has an easier time accounting for the reception history of the reconstructed position in question by providing the resources to account for later appropriations and misunderstandings.

In order to demonstrate how the proposal argued for here is supposed to work we need an example of an interpretative issue where two or more rival, mutually incompatible, reconstructions that meet the usual demands to the same degree are on offer. Accordingly, in the next section I introduce three rival rational reconstructions of the famous maxims presented as a provisional moral code (*moral par provision*) in Descartes's *Discours de la méthode* (1637).[6] This case is chosen as an example primarily on account of the interesting deviations the rival reconstructions offer with regards to the structure, aims, and purposes of ethical theory. I then offer some brief remarks concerning the nature of Cartesian ethics in order to facilitate discussion. I finally turn to the cases at hand. These are, in chronological order (a) the extensive reliance on the *Passions* by Cambridge Platonist Henry More, (b) Henry Sidgwick's abrupt dismissal of Cartesian ethics as virtually non-existent, and (c) a reaction to Sidgwick's classification of ethical theories that is to be found in Grace Neal Dolson's "The Ethical System of Henry More".[7] These cases are chosen because they illustrate engagement with the kind of structural concerns pertaining to the conceptualisation of ethical theorising that lie at the heart of the differences

between the offered reconstructions that we shall be concerned with.[8] Obviously, a fully-fledged argument along the lines here gestured at would have to take into account a much wider range of cases (and in so doing extend the reception history for additional support). Inherent in this need lies an important limitation of the current proposal that we shall return to in the conclusion where I also summarize the achieved results and discuss some adjacent general methodological issues.

Three rival accounts of the nature of the provisional moral code

Cartesian ethics has, for various reasons, until recently been somewhat neglected by scholars, both in its own right and as part of the Anglophone reception history of Cartesian philosophy.[9] One issue that has garnered attention in the recent revival of the study of Cartesian ethics is the nature of the provisional moral code (*moral par provision*) presented in the *Discours de la méthode* that 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 one's 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.[10]

In a series of publications Lisa Shapiro, drawing on the work of Michèle Le Doeuff and attending to Stoic influences on Descartes's thought, has argued that the famous maxims presented as a provisional moral code in the *Discours de la méthode* should be read as comprising in part the "perfect moral system" hinted at in the letter-preface to the first French edition from 1647 of the *Principia philosophiae*.[11] Shapiro argues that the maxims of the provisional moral code comprise in part the perfect moral system in the sense that they provide a frame, or a set of constraints, akin to Stoic unconditional obligations and that, accordingly, *par provision* should be read in, what Shapiro calls, a judicial sense as "not being liable to be put in question by the final judgment", rather than as "temporary".[12]

Shapiro's reconstruction better manages to meet the challenge described in the previous section with regards to some interesting episodes in the reception history of Descartes's moral theory in an Anglophone context than her main competitors. Before we can move on to demonstrate how Shapiro's reconstruction manages to account for these episodes

in the history of philosophy something must be said regarding her interpretation and its alternatives. In arguing that the maxims of the provisional moral code comprise in part the perfect moral system and that, accordingly, *par provision* should be read as "not being liable to be put in question by the final judgment" Shapiro goes against two common rival interpretations.

According to the first of these, which we can call the 'standard reading', the provisional moral code should be read as constituting a purely pragmatic necessity postulated in order to get around the so-called *apraxia*-objection levelled by Stoics against ancient Sceptics—amounting to the claim that suspension of judgment in the way favoured by the Sceptic would render her unable to act—which in, spite the fact that the search for truth is supposed to be removed from the practical context, still presents a problem for Descartes.[13] According to this reading the maxims of the provisional moral code are seen as purely pragmatic, and there is little to no reason to believe that these maxims will be retained once first principles are firmly established.

According to the second alternative reading, championed by John Marshall, 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.[14] On this reading, the *morale* of the *Discours de la méthode* is provisional in the sense that the maxims it is comprised of constitute a first approximation of the perfect moral system.

The nature of systematic moral philosophy is dependent upon both explicitly framed debates as well as the way theoreticians (consciously or not) view the very aim(s), function(s), and scope of ethical theorizing. The 'standard reading' and Marshall's reconstruction, the two readings that form the main alternatives to Shapiro's reading outlined above, are united in taking a stance of this latter kind. They take Cartesian morality to constitute morality in the narrow sense—*i.e.* 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. The underlying idea that moral theory is supposed to deliver an organized and systematic way of telling us what is the right thing to do in specific isolated situations of choice can leave certain, in some cases rather extensive, deliberation up to the agent. The important distinguishing feature of this way of conceiving of ethical theory is that it sees the main aim of ethical enquiry as producing a theory of right action coupled with a decision procedure yielding (more or less specific) instructions (more or less straightforwardly) applicable to everyone.

Shapiro's interpretation differs from the alternatives in that it takes Descartes's moral theory to constitute morality in the broad sense—*i.e.* 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.[15]

Shapiro's point becomes more convincing still when we consider the fact that Descartes has already provided some of the key elements that a morality in the broad sense would want from a narrow account, *e.g.*, a systematic way of allocating praise and blame, a stance on subjective versus objective right, and so on.[16] Note however, that merely classifying Descartes as concerned with morality in the broad sense does not settle the issue since 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.

The synoptic conception of philosophy

It is fruitful to distinguish between a synoptic view of (moral) philosophy as a unitary enterprise emanating in a unified system linking a conception of the human condition with a philosophical world-view and a modern view of ethics as an independent discipline.[17] The synoptic conception of philosophy treats ethics as an integral part of a unitary enterprise comprising an investigation of the cosmos and man's place within it. This conception of philosophy originates with the classical tradition and remained influential well into the seventeenth century.

At first glance, the synoptic conception of philosophy has certain affinities with morality in the broad sense outlined in the previous section. Conversely, it might seem as if the narrow conception of morality, in concentrating on isolated situations of choice might seem to conflict with a synoptic stressing of *e.g.*, the metaphysics of the person (if that is taken

to imply a stressing of motives, intentions, emotions, and other aspects of the inner moral life). While it is true that a synoptic approach lends itself easily to a broad understanding of morality in this sense and many important synopticists have been inclined to conceive of morality in the broad sense, the distinctions are in fact orthogonal. For instance, Julia Annas 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 for ethics would be prime examples of theoreticians subscribing to morality in a narrow sense whilst adopting a synoptic approach.[18]

The sheer magnitude and width of subject matter (only some of which would be regarded as philosophical in the modern sense) of the *Principia philosophiae* testifies to Descartes's affinities with the synoptic conception. Furthermore, his definition of 'philosophy' as "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" reads as a clear mission statement for a synoptic approach.[19] His firm commitment to the synoptic conception is evident in his (in)famous simile of philosophy as a tree from the letter-preface to the first French edition of the *Principia philosophiae*:

> 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.[20]

Granted, this passage (and other cryptic remarks such as that "what little knowledge of physics I have tried to acquire has been a great help to me in establishing sure foundations in moral philosophy"[21]) tells us very little of the nature of the relations Descartes envisages as holding between these disciplines but it still remains clear that he conceives of philosophy as a unified enterprise.[22] Perhaps the placing of morals alongside medicine and mechanics implies "that morality, like medicine, can only be a technique that makes use of a theoretical science".[23] This would be in line with the ancient tradition's conception of philosophy as an art or technique of life (*techne peri ton bion*)—where medicine constitutes the corresponding art aimed at the health of the body—encompassing rational principles and training that makes virtue out to be in important ways analogous to practical skills.[24]

Furthermore, Descartes affirms the synoptic conception of ethics as the search for a recipe for human fulfilment premised upon an investigation of the cosmos and man's place within it when stating "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".[25]

Classical eudaimonism

Descartes's methodology is decidedly foundational. In this he differs from the coherentistic approach customarily employed in the classical tradition. The ethical systems of the Ancients are structured using set of central notions—virtue (*arete*), happiness (*eudaimonia*), and the soul (*psuche*)—that provide other notions a place within the larger framework without being derived from the central ones. These notions are, according to classical eudaimonism so ordered that 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 to the effect that happiness is the ultimate end achievable in action for which all other things are done and thus complete and therefore self-sufficient by virtue of which it is incapable of increase by the addition of any other good, is agreed upon.[26] Debate ensues over whether virtue is then to be construed as a means to happiness or wholly or partly constitutive thereof (which in turn generates a series of trade-offs).[27]

Approaches of this kind tend to be neither hierarchical (*i.e.* taking some set of notions as basic and derive other elements of the theory in terms of these basic ones) nor reductive in the sense of taking derived notions as reducible—either conceptually or in some weaker sense—to the basic ones without significant reminder. Furthermore, such structures tend not to be complete (*i.e.* they are not attempting to account for everything falling within the domain in question in terms of the basic concepts, or others derived from them).[28]

Descartes careful treatment of—and subtle distancing from[29]—classical eudaimonism in a series of letters to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia from 1645, Queen Christina of Sweden, his friend Pierre Chanut (then France's Ambassador to Stockholm) and others as well as some remarks in his earlier published works, amounts to an outline of an ethical theory and give impetus to the eventual publication of *Les Passions de l'âme* (1649). At the very beginning of the relevant correspondence with Princess Elisabeth Descartes explicitly states his aim as being to

> write about the means which philosophy provides for acquiring that supreme felicity which common souls vainly expect from fortune, but can be acquired only from ourselves [. . .] [and] to examine what the ancients have written on this question, and try to advance beyond them by adding something to their precepts.[30]

Descartes seemingly subscribes to the basic motivational-cum-normative tenet of classical eudaimonism when he ascribes to each person the desire to be happy, a state he understands as marked by "perfect contentment of mind and inner satisfaction" that we are capable of reaching "only from ourselves" by developing "a firm and constant resolution" through the good or correct use of our free will, which for Descartes amounts to the acquisition and exercise of moral virtue.[31] As is commonly noted, Descartes shows marked affinity with classical Stoic eudaimonism on several points such as his insistence that we restrict our desires to only those things that are within our control, his stressing of assent, his understanding of the passions as involving impulses toward, or away from, objects represented as appropriate or harmful thus providing *prima facie* reasons for actions, etc.[32]

Even in areas that might stand out as clear candidates for disagreement such as philosophy of mind and epistemology there are points of convergence: what might seem as an outright disagreement concerning the soul—*i.e.* Stoic physicalism *versus* Cartesian dualism—in actuality masks considerable agreement since both sides takes the rational soul to be unified (in contrast to *e.g.* a Platonic tripartite conception), and Cartesian "innate ideas" resemble Stoic "preconceptions", for instance. Descartes himself provides support for such a reading when suggesting to Elisabeth that their discussion centre on "considerations drawn from a certain book—namely the one that Seneca wrote *On the Happy Life*".[33]

Emphasising Stoic elements in Descartes's ethics, as Shapiro notes,[34] 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. Despite this we should, I think, refrain from classifying Descartes as a Stoic in the strictest of senses (something that require 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).[35] 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 indispensable.

There are several points of deviation from Stoic doctrine and classical eudaimonism on Descartes behalf (the most structurally significant being his restructuring of the central notions of classical eudaimonism). Despite these differences there remains, I think, an important commonality with regards to how both Descartes and classical eudaimonists conceive of the aim, function(s), and scope of ethical theory. Most important for present purposes is the agreement over the primacy of morality in the broad sense over its narrow counterpart.

Descartes's reluctance to meet a challenge issued by Elisabeth of Bohemia amounting to the claim that Cartesian morality fails to be genuinely (let alone uniquely) action guiding in specific circumstances might be grounded in a principled resistance to so doing motivated by his broad conception of morality. Obviously, it might still be the case that Elisabeth is right in her critique of Cartesian ethics. Moreover, maybe it fails to be practical in another sense that is relevant to morality in the broad sense also; it might fail to be practical in the sense that the reflective account of the good life arrived at is unable to help us come to terms with essential human activity so that we can understand what is of fundamental importance in our pursuing that activity, and doing so, to put it in avowedly Aristotelian terms, correctly, finely, and rightly. Such considerations will, however, have to stand back in favour of some considerations concerning the effect that the focus on morality in the broad sense has on the reception of Cartesian ethics in an Anglophone context, to which we will now turn.

Anglophone reception history of Cartesian ethics

In this section I will go through three episodes in the Anglophone reception history of Cartesian ethics in order to demonstrate how Shapiro's interpretation of the provisional moral code of the *Discours de la méthode* can be said to better account for these episodes than her main rivals. I ask the reader to keep in mind that these cases are meant to illustrate the general methodological stance advocated and should not be seen as exhaustive.

Henry More

The immediate reception of *Les Passions de l'âme* on British soil upon its publication in 1650 was notably warm-hearted. Some of the first Englishmen to read—and make extensive use of—Descartes's writings where the so-called Cambridge Platonists, a somewhat loosely connected group of seventeenth-century thinkers associated with the University of Cambridge working with source material of both ancient and contemporary origin under the general stance of 'perennial philosophy' (*philosophia perennis*).

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).[36] More testifies that he and Lord Conway read *Les Passions de l'âme* whilst in the Jardin du Luxembourg and the treatment of the emotions in his *Enchiridion ethicum* (translated into English as *An Account of Virtue* in 1690) follows Descartes closely; his definitions of 'love' and 'hate' are drawn verbatim from *Les Passions*, for instance.[37] 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 that should guide man in shaping his behaviour in a manner similar to Descartes's.[38] With respect to why More draws on Descartes in the way he does the answer seems clear enough: 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.[39] 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's account of the passions as mere appetites.[40] It should be obvious that, 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. Therefore Descartes, and his broad synoptic understanding of moral philosophy must have seemed like a powerful ally.

Shapiro's interpretation of Descartes's ethics can thus easily account for why Descartes seems like such an attractive thinker to More: his focus on morality in the broad sense makes him useful when it comes to combating Hobbesian moral theory. This easy way of accounting for More's use of Descartes is not available to adherents of the 'standard reading' or Marshall's interpretation since they are united in understanding Cartesian ethics as concerned with morality in the narrow sense. Thus, Shapiro has an easier time accounting for More's extensive reliance on Descartes and her account is therefore, *ceteris paribus*, preferable to the other two.

Henry Sidgwick

Henry Sidgwick, in his widely read *Outlines of the History of Ethics for English Readers* (1885), remarks:

> 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.[41]

Sidgwick's use of the word 'proper' arguably signals that he is aware of something he would consider akin to a moral theory in Descartes's writings. The attitude he expresses doubtlessly ties in with his (rather negative) opinions of the perfectionist self-realisationism of F. H. Bradley, which he sees as closely resembling classical eudaimonism:

> 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*.[42]

In his *The Methods of Ethics* (1874) 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.[43] 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. This corroborates Elisabeth Anscombe's famous remark to the effect that "[t]here is a startling change that seems to have taken place between Mill and Moore".[44] A change for which she deems Sidgwick chiefly responsible. The most prominent among these changes regard meta-philosophical assumptions that will prove important to our purposes.

The tradition following Sidgwick favoured a distinction between ethical theories based on how they define and connect the two notions of

"right" and "good" respectively. This standard distinction has it that "teleological" theories define "right" as that which maximises the "good" (a notion that is defined independently of "right") whereas deontological theories are negatively defined as those that do not.[45] One oft noted problem with this distinction is that it customarily takes the notion of 'moral worth' as somehow subordinated to one of the two notions of 'right' and 'good', thus distorting approaches that take character, or the notion of the morally worthy person, as somehow primary or central. Furthermore, this framework leaves little room for theories that connect the relevant notions in other ways than defining, or deriving one or more of them from some notion taken as basic or primary.[46]

The framework also almost exclusively focuses on what I have called morality in the narrow sense, a fact that I think explains the general stance taken by Sidgwick in the quote that began this section. 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.

Thus, Shapiro's interpretation makes it clear why and how Descartes, who focuses on morality in the broad sense, and Sidgwick, who focuses exclusively on morality in the narrow sense, can be said to be preoccupied with very different ethical concerns. This explanation is not open to either proponents of the 'standard reading' or proponents of Marshall's reconstruction since they take both Sidgwick and Descartes to be concerned with morality in the narrow sense. This does not decisively decide the issue since it might well be that Sidgwick was simply unaware of parts of his predecessor's output but an explanation along these lines would have a problem accounting for Sidgwick's use of the word 'proper', a problem that does not arise on Shapiro's interpretation (and therefore we should *ceteris paribus* prefer Shapiro's interpretation to the alternatives).

Grace Neal Dolson

More's debt to Descartes has not gone unnoticed by philosophers and historians of philosophy throughout history. Grace Neal Dolson—in an article entitled "The Ethical System of Henry More" published in *The Philosophical Review* in 1897—remarks: "[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'âme*. So close is the parallelism that there is no need to trace it in detail".[47] Dolson goes on to note that

> More, in common with the other Cambridge Platonists, followed Plato in his Neo-Platonic aspect, Aristotle, and Descartes. No other writers of

> modern times are referred to at much length, though two or three, among them Bacon, are quoted occasionally; but the worthies of the ancient world have a prominent place. Cicero, Marcus Antoninus, Zeno, Plutarch, Epictetus, and a host of others are brought in to clinch all arguments, and two or three appear on nearly every page.[48]

Dolson's analysis becomes 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:

> 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.[49]

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. Dolson's reaction to Sidgwick's classificatory system (and the understanding of what ethical theory is ultimately about, *i.e.* 'ethics proper' as restricted to morality in the narrow sense) that it embodies is difficult to explain for proponents of either the 'standard reading' or Marshall's reconstruction since they are forced to say that Descartes, and therefore also, presumably, More where engaged in virtually the same project. Dolson's strong reaction is easier to handle for Shapiro since her account of Cartesian ethics sees it as fundamentally different to Sidgwick's in a way that would make the classificatory categories suitable for the latter sit badly with Cartesian ethics as she understands it. Shapiro's account can thus handle Dolson's reaction more easily than its main competitors and is therefore *ceteris paribus* to be preferred.

Conclusion

In an effort to illustrate how reception history can act as a tie-breaker in cases where two or more mutually exclusive rational reconstructions are otherwise on a par 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. What has been given here is obviously only the beginnings of an argument in favour of Shapiro's account that draws on reception history in the manner suggested. In order to argue convincingly for Shapiro's superiority over her main rivals in this manner a much fuller reception history would have to be supplied. Still, 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 in the history of philosophy.

The need for a fuller reception history gestured at above points to an important limitation of the current proposal: in order to argue convincingly for one reconstruction over its competitors in this manner would require going through a wide range of the most important cases of the kind here exemplified, a substantial workload to say the least. The method of argument suggested would thus be unwieldy if taken to extremes and historians seeking to utilise the method should thus do well to try to limit their argument to prominent episodes in the reception history in question (although I cannot here even begin to indicate how I think that such a selection ought to be carried out and motivated).

The cases I have gone through in the above should thus be seen as examples of how I think that an argument of this kind ought to be carried out. Thus, the comments on the cases given here constitute the beginnings of an argument rather than a fully-fledged defence of Shapiro's interpretation along these lines. This limitation does, I believe, give us some indication of where to go next. A number of interesting research questions are generated, such as, *e.g.*, 'Are there other instances in the Anglophone reception history of Cartesian ethics where the 'standard interpretation' or Marshall's reconstruction fares better than Shapiro's or does the same pattern re-emerge?', 'Does the same hold for other contexts such as *e.g.*, the German or Swedish reception of Cartesian ethics?', 'How does the reception of Cartesian ethics tie in with the reception of other elements

of Cartesian philosophy and does this broader focus have bearing on the plausibility of the three reconstructions discussed here?', and so on.

Concerns regarding reception history should obviously not overshadow, or even compete with, 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.[50]

Notes

1. For a classic articulation of this charge of anachronism and an elaboration of the point pressed here see Richard Rorty: "The historiography of philosophy. Four genres" in Richard Rorty: *Truth and progress. Philosophical papers* 3, 247–273.

2. Quentin Skinner: "Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas" in *History and theory* 8:1 (1969), 3–53, 52.

3. For further systematization regarding this tension see *e.g.*, Terence Irwin: *The development of ethics. A historical and critical study; Volume I: From Socrates to the Reformation* (Oxford, 2007), Ch. 1 esp. §6; Marcel van Ackeren: "Philosophy and the historical perspective. A new debate on an old topic" in Marcel van Ackeren (ed.): *Philosophy and the historical perspective* (Oxford, 2018).

4. Richard Rorty puts the same point more eloquently in his "The historiography of philosophy", 251: "[s]uch enterprises in commensuration are, of course, anachronistic. But if they are conducted in full knowledge of their anachronism, they are unobjectionable".

5. See Michael Frede: "The study of Ancient philosophy" in Marcel van Ackeren & Jörn Müller (eds.): *Antike Philosophie Verstehen – Understanding Ancient philosophy* (Darmstadt, 2006), and van Ackeren, "Philosophy and the historical perspective" respectively. The debate, such as it stands is largely concerned with what contextual factors one ought to pay attention to and when. Frede, who can be said to occupy one end of this spectrum, argues that the historian of philosophy ought first to consider reasons in the text itself when reconstructing an argument and that it is only when this fails that the historian in question is allowed to appeal to the history of philosophy and only when this is not enough that the non-philosophical context can be appealed to. Van Ackeren, by contrast, argues (plausibly, to my mind,) that the historian of philosophy stands a better chance of understanding a given position or argument if contextual factors are considered from the outset.

6. CSM I, 122–128; AT VI, 22–28. Abbreviations for Greek authors follow Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott and Henry Stuart Jones (ed.): *Greek-English lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford, 1968). References to Aristotle use Bekker numbers. References to Plato utilize Stephanus numbering. References to Descartes's works are to John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, volume 3 including Anthony Kenny (trans.), *The philosophical writings of Descartes*, 3 vol. (Cambridge, 1988), cited as CSM(K) followed by volume and page number as well as to Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (ed.): *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols. (Paris, 1983), cited as AT followed by volume and page number.

7. Grace Neal Dolson: "The ethical system of Henry More" in *The Philosophical Review* 6:6 (1897), 593–607; 597.

8. In addition, the cases considered here must be regarded as forming part of the reception history of Cartesian ethics and must therefore be accounted for by any and all that seek to utilise the method under consideration. Given that the cases at hand form part of the comprehensive reception history of Descartes's ethics they are thus not arbitrary.

9. The neglect can, at least in part, be explained by (i) the fragmentary way in which Descartes approaches the subject of ethics in his more famous works, (ii) the reasonable, but probably mistaken (*cf. e.g.* CSM I, 3; AT 10, 215–217 and CSM I, 186; AT 9, 14; CSM(K), 289; AT 4, 440–442) assumption that this reflects the emphases Descartes himself placed on the topics in question, and (iii) that Descartes's ethics, from a contemporary viewpoint, stands as an anecdotal phenomenon in relation both to the historical influence of Cartesian metaphysics and to the historical influence of the ethical systems that preceded and followed Descartes's (see Isabelle Wienand: "Descartes' morals" in *The South African Journal of Philosophy* 25:2 (2006), 177–188. There is good reason for the general emphasis given that other parts of Descartes's philosophy (most notably, perhaps, his philosophy of science and metaphysics) has had much greater impact on intellectual history. For exceptions to this general trend see *e.g.*, Lilli Alanen: *Descartes's concept of mind* (Cambridge, 2003); Deborah Brown: *Descartes and the passionate mind* (Cambridge, 2006); John Cottingham: "Cartesian ethics. Reasons and the passions" in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 50:195 (1996), 193–216; John Cottingham: *Philosophy and the good life. Reason and the passions in Greek, Cartesian and psychoanalytic ethics* (Cambridge, 1998). For an exception see *e.g.*, Christopher Tilmouth: "Generosity and the utility of the passions. Cartesian ethics in restoration England" in *The Seventeenth century* 22:1 (2007), 144–167.

10. CSM I, 122–128; AT VI, 22–28.

11. *E.g.*, Lisa Shapiro: "Review of *Descartes's moral theory*. By John Marshall" in *Philosophical Review* 110:2 (2001), 270–272; Lisa Shapiro: "Descartes's ethics" in Janet Broughton & John Carriero (eds.): *A companion to Descartes* (Oxford, 2008); 445–463; Michèle Le Doeuff: "Red ink in the margin" in *The philosophical imaginary* (Stanford CA, 1989), 57–100; CSM I, 122–128; AT VI, 22–28. CSM I, 186; AT 9B, 14. *cf.* CSMK, 289; AT 4, 440–442.

12. Le Doeuff: "Red ink in the margin", 62; Shapiro: "Descartes ethics", 449–450.

13. CSM II, 15; AT 7, 22.

14. John Marshall: *Descartes's moral theory* (Ithaca NY, 1998); John Marshall: "Descartes's *Morale par Provision*" in Byron Willston & Andre Gombay (eds.): *Passion and virtue in Descartes* (New York, 2003).

15. Shapiro: "Review of *Descartes's moral theory*", 272. *Cf.* Julia Annas: "Being virtuous and doing the right thing" in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 78:2 (2004), 61–75.

16. CSMK, 233; AT 4, 115.

17. Cottingham: *Philosophy and the good life*, 7–14.

18. See Julia Annas: *The morality of happiness* (Oxford, 1993); Annas: "Being virtuous and doing the right thing".

19. CSM I, 179; AT 9B.

20. CSM I, 186; AT 9B, 14. *Cf.* CSMK, 289; AT 4, 440–442.

21. CSMK, 289; AT 4, 441. *Cf.* CSMK, 368; AT 5, 290–291.

22. *Cf.* Marshall: *Descartes's moral theory*.

23. Martial Gueroult: *Descartes' philosophy interpreted according to the order of reasons* (Minneapolis MN, 1985), 179.

24. See Annas: *The morality of happiness*; Julia Annas: "Virtue as a skill" in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 3:2 (1995), 227–243; Julia Annas: *Intelligent virtue* (Oxford, 2011); Martha Nussbaum: *The therapy of desire. Theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics* (Princeton NJ, 1994); Pierre Hadot: *Philosophy as a way of life. Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Case (Oxford, 1995); John Sellars: *The art of living. The Stoics on the nature and function of philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Bristol, 2009).

25. CSMK, 289; AT, 441.

26. Aristotle, *NE*$1097^{a}24$, $1097^{a}15$–24, $1097^{b}16$–20, $1097^{b}6$–16, and $1097^{b}16$–20, respectively. I have here chosen to portray the relations between the formal criteria as rather strong. It is by no means clear how we should read Aristotle in this passage but I hope that nothing of what I say in what follows depends on this strong reading.

27. *E.g.* Epicurus and Aristippus *pace* the hostile portrayal by Xenophon at *Memorabilia* II.1, III.8. *Cf.* Pl. *Phd.* 59C, Aristotle, *Rhet.* $1199^{a}7$–9. *Cf. e.g.* Annas: *The morality of happiness*; Tad Brennan: *The Stoic life. Emotions, duties, & fate* (Oxford, 2007). See Cicero, *Fin*. III. 30, for an example of a brief comparative listing of positions. These trade-offs are key to understanding why Epicurus regarded the virtues as merely instrumental goods, that is, if the virtues fail to deliver the good (pleasure) we should "say goodbye to them" *TD* III. 41–42 (LS 21L), Athenaeus 546F=LS 21M=Us. 409.70, *Cf.* Cicero, *Fin.* II. 69=LS 21O. For an example of an argument to the effect that only the virtuous life could also be a happy one, see Cicero, *Fin.* III. 23. For more on this as well as on how classical eudaimonism thus understood differs from the broader notion of 'perfectionism' see Frits Gåvertsson: *Perfection and fiction. A study in Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy* (Lund, 2018), esp. Ch. 1.

28. Annas: *The morality of happiness*, 7–10.

29. See Frans Svensson: "Happiness, well-being, and their relation to virtue in Descartes' ethics" in *Theoria* 77 (2011), 238–260; Frans Svensson: "Non-eudaimonism, the sufficiency of virtue for happiness, and two senses of the highest good in Descartes's ethics" in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23:2 (2015), 277–296.

30. CSMK, 256; AT 4, 252.

31. CSMK, 256–258, 262; AT 4, 252, 263–265, 282; Gueroult: *Descartes' philosophy interpreted according to the order of reasons*, 293n1. *Cf.* CSM I, 122–5; AT 6, 23–28.

32. *E.g.* Shapiro: "Review of *Descartes's moral theory*"; Shapiro: "Descartes's ethics"; Tom Sorel: "Morals and modernity in Descartes" in Tom Sorell (ed.): *The rise of modern philosophy. The tension between the new and traditional philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz* (Oxford, 1993), 273–288; CSM I, 380; AT 11, 438. *Cf.* CSMK, 258; AT 4, 226; CSM I, 124; AT 6, 26; CSMK, 326; AT 5, 85.

33. CSMK, 256; AT 4, 252–253. *Cf.* CSMK, 256–257; AT 4, 263.

34. Shapiro: "Descartes's ethics", 445, 450; *Cf.* Anthony Levi: *French moralists. The theory of the passions 1585–1649* (Oxford, 1964); Donald Rutherford: "Descartes vis-à-vis Seneca" in Steven K. Strange & Jack Zupko (eds.): *Stoicism. Traditions and transformations* (Cambridge, 2004), 177–197; Donald Rutherford: "Reading Descartes as a Stoic. Appropriate action, virtue, and the passions" in *Philosophie antique* 14 (2014), 129–155.

35. See Jon Miller: *Spinoza and the Stoics* (Cambridge, 2015).

36. J. E. Saveson: "Descartes' influence on John Smith, Cambridge Platonist" in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20:2 (1959), 258–263; Tilmouth: "Generosity and the utility of the passions"; Susan James: *Passion and action. The emotions in seventeenth-century philosophy* (Oxford, 1997).

37. Henry More: *The immortality of the soul, so farre forth as it is demonstrable from the knowledge of nature and the light of reason* (London, 1659), sig. A4r; Henry More: *An account of virtue: or, Dr. Henry More's abridgement of morals, put into English*, trans. Edward Southwell (London, 1690), 84; CSM I, 356; AT 11, 387.

38. More: *An account of virtue*, 158.

39. More: *An account of virtue*, 29, 217.

40. CSMK, 257; AT 4, 264–265. *Cf.* CSM I, 122–125; AT 6, 23–28.

41. Henry Sidgwick: *Outlines of the history of ethics for English readers* (London, 1885), 266, emphasis added.

42. Sidgwick: *The methods of ethics* (London, 1874), 91–92; *Cf.* Henry Sidgwick: "*Ethical studies.* By F. H. Bradley (Oxford: King & Co., 1876)" in *Mind* 1:4 (1876), 545–549; Sidgwick: *The methods of ethics*, 89–95.

43. On this see Roger Crisp: "Sidgwick and the boundaries of intuitionism" in Philip Stratton-Lake (ed.): *Ethical intuitionism: re-evaluations* (Oxford, 2002), 56–75.

44. Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe: "Modern moral philosophy" in *Philosophy* 33:124 (1958), 9.

45. See *e.g.* William Klaas Frankena: *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs NJ, 1963), 13; John Rawls: *A theory of justice*, revised 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1999), 21.

46. Martha Nussbaum: "Virtue ethics a misleading category" in *Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999), 163–201.

47. Dolson: "The ethical system of Henry More", 597.

48. Dolson: "The ethical system of Henry More", 598.

49. Dolson: "The ethical system of Henry More", 606–607.

50. Earlier versions of this paper were read at a symposium on Values, Virtues and Reason at Lund University in may 2015 and at the third annual OZSW conference hosted by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in December 2015. I thank the participants at these events for fruitful discussions. In addition, I want to thank Johan Brännmark, Charlotte Christensen-Nugues, Jakob Green Werkmäster, Jonas Hansson, Oscar Ralsmark, Jeroen Smid, and Frans Svensson, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their perceptive comments.

Abstract

Readings, reconstructions, and reception: three case studies of Anglophone reception of Cartesian ethics. Frits Gåvertsson, PhD in Practical Philosophy, Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University, Sweden, frits.gavertsson@kultur.lu.se

I argue that reception history can have a, limited but important, role to play as tie-breaker in the evaluation of reconstructions of historical philosophical arguments and positions. In an effort to exemplify the proposed methodology 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 have greater historiographical resources than its main competitors when it comes to the reception of Descartes's moral philosophy in an Anglophone context on three occa-

sions: the appeal to Descartes made by Henry More, Henry Sidgwick's abrupt dismissal, and the ensuing reaction to Sidgwick found in Grace Neal Dolson. These cases, although far from exhaustive, go some way towards showing, I maintain, how reception history can be utilized to inform and support rational reconstruction of philosophical texts.

Keywords: reception history, moral par provision, Descartes, Henry More, Grace Neal Dolson, Henry Sidgwick