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NOTES ON “THE VIRTUE OF SCIENCE AND THE SCIENCE OF VIRTUE”

Daniel P. Maher

BENE VIXIT, BENE QUI LATUIT. Descartes chose this line from Ovid’s *Tristia* (III.4.25) as a personal motto, which I translate as “He lived well who hid well.”¹ It seems, then, that Descartes’ art of living involves hiding and, according to the portrait of Descartes that Thomas Hibbs presents in this volume, Descartes’ art of writing hides his preoccupation with the art of living. If we overlook the primacy of the question of the good life for Descartes, we risk obscuring “the unity in his various projects” (*25).² By discovering or restoring the centrality of this question, Hibbs finds the key to unraveling how Descartes combines his well-known antipathy toward the philosophical and theological tradition with his unduly neglected Socratism, which ties him irrevocably to that tradition. And because that tradition includes Christianity, Descartes’ focus on the good life necessarily implicates him in theological matters, at which point his view of the good life slips out of focus or, better, at which point Descartes blurs our access to that view in its relation to Christian faith. Thus, we come to see the reason that the precise character of Descartes’ understanding of the good life could be both central to his thought and yet neglected in contemporary scholarship.

Descartes exercised greater diligence in obscuring any tension or conflict with the Catholic Church than he did in concealing his attack on Aristotle, which he seemed eager to veil only insofar as he suspected it might offend those churchmen whose support he wanted.³ Hibbs explores these themes with an impressive command of Descartes' published and unpublished writings, and although his portrait is not finished in every respect (e.g., he refrains from weighing in on the relation between the provisional and the final morality), he invites us to think anew about Descartes in relation to the fundamental issues of classical philosophy. I find it a most agreeable task to comment on his chapter—a task I see as requiring me neither to dissect Hibbs' portrait nor to provide an alternative. Instead, with these remarks I intend to probe the three focal points of Hibbs' chapter and to encourage further consideration along the same path he has cleared.

Hibbs divides his essay into three parts: "Recovering and Overcoming Socrates," "Descartes' New Science of Virtue," and "Theology, the Sovereign Good, and Ironic Philosophy." The three parts converge, and he integrates the central theme of each in a single sentence near the end: "In this way, Descartes' overcoming of Socrates, his new science of virtue, is simultaneously a strategy for bypassing the debate between Athens and Jerusalem" (*41). This formulation encapsulates the parts of the essay as neatly as one could hope. With the convergence of these three themes clearly in mind, let us proceed to a consideration of the main theme of each part of the essay.

THE NATURE OF CARTESIAN IRONY

It seems most appropriate to begin at the end and focus especially on the theme of irony. According to the argument, Descartes' "focus on the question of the best way of life" puts him irreconcilably at odds with the tradition of Christian faith (*39). Descartes habitually confines theology to dealing with mysteries that exceed our understanding and with the practical question of how to get to heaven. Thus neutered, theologians should have nothing to say about the proper concerns of the various arts and sciences, including philosophy, and are at best useful to Descartes for the approbation he hopes to win from them, inasmuch as ecclesiastical authority influences those not governed by reason. Hibbs leads us to see, nevertheless, that co-existence without conflict between Christian

theology and Cartesian philosophy proves impossible because Descartes conceives the best way of life as to be achieved not through grace but by Descartes' own efforts. Philosophy as a way of life has become not just a pursuit but a possession, especially in the new science of nature (*40). In this Descartes distinguishes himself from Montaigne, whose more skeptical complacency does not present the same challenge. According to Hibbs, the *Meditations on First Philosophy* not only contains the principles of the new science of nature⁴ but also advances "the articulation and realization of the best way of life" (*40). Descartes' confidence in his grasp of the human good enables him to avoid open engagement with theology. There is no gap in his philosophy that theology might fill, he has no taste for open confrontation, and therefore he limits himself to treating theology only ironically (*40–41).

The most difficult elements here concern the relation between the new science of nature and Descartes' science of virtue (a topic to which I return below). The first theme that demands attention is Descartes' irony, by which he keeps the Sorbonne theologians and others at bay. Whereas Socrates seems always to have been known for his irony, Descartes has avoided this reputation—or at least today Descartes is not so widely associated with irony. And this suggests his irony deserves closer attention. As Hibbs notes, Descartes praises Socrates for *candor* in confessing his ignorance and criticizes Aristotle for disingenuous pretensions to knowledge. In the third part of the *Discourse on Method*, likening himself inexplicitly but unmistakably to Socrates, Descartes describes the desire to combat his own reputation for wisdom, which he supposes may have arisen due to his "confessing more frankly" than is customary what he does not know and to his not "boasting of any doctrine."⁵ In the same breath, he eschews irony and assures us that, "being proud" (*ayant le coeur assez bon*), he wishes not to be taken for something other than he is. On the same note, in the first part of the *Discourse*, he mentioned that he hoped everyone would be grateful for his frankness.⁶ Descartes' irony occurs side by side with a celebration of sincerity that enables him to insinuate the lack of any need for irony, because everyone can—by means of the method—know the truth, or so it appears.⁷

This movement in Descartes' thought toward general enlightenment stands in some tension with the irony he directs at least toward the theologically minded. In what seems to be another striking allusion to Socrates (or Plato) in the sixth part of the *Discourse*, Descartes expresses his unwill-

ingness to be completely forthcoming with the principles of the science of nature he has discovered. He complains about certain contemporaries who take Aristotle as their authority and attempt to use him to solve difficulties he never addressed. They are like ivy that not only can ascend no higher than the trees on which it depends but also tends not to remain at that height but often turns and descends. Perhaps Descartes has in mind theologians for whom Aristotle serves as the principal philosophical authority. Whoever they may be, Descartes says one can convince these people of nothing because "the obscurity of the distinctions and principles they use enables them to speak of all things as boldly as if they knew them, and to defend whatever they say."⁸ They are like blind men, and to converse with them one would need to abandon the superiority afforded by sight and descend "to the bottom of some extremely dark cave" (*dans le fond de quelque cave fort obscure*).⁹ Descartes' own principles are so clear and so evident that, were he to publish them, it would be like opening windows and letting daylight into the cellar. Descartes' enlightenment would be *sunlight* in the cave.

Three elements especially deserve attention here. First, the cave or cellar is not conceived as the natural or inescapable home of all educated people. It is the place to which a clear-sighted person must descend in order to compensate for the disadvantages afflicting these Aristotelians with "only mediocre minds."¹⁰ Second, even when the daylight enters, these interlocutors will still see nothing, because their blindness does not result merely from the darkness of their location. Some people are blinded from within, and Descartes seems uninterested in reaching at least some of them. As he indicates in *Meditations*, Descartes demands a reader who has abandoned attachment to the senses and prior opinions; he does employ a kind of protreptic argument to lead his readers to methodical doubt, but even then he does not engage ordinary opinions so much as he undermines or incinerates them.¹¹ Third, Cartesian principles do at least provide the light of day for any mind free of all prejudices, which thus promises enlightenment to all who are willing to conduct their reason rightly. The *cave* may not be Plato's cave, but perhaps there is a cellar at the foundation of the edifice of the sciences as Descartes reconstructs them. If so, Descartes seems willing to let in the daylight rather than be in the position of needing to compel someone who has seen the sun to return to a darkened cellar. Metaphors aside, Descartes appears to prefer enlightenment to Platonic acquiescence concerning the limited openness of political life to knowledge.

To bring these remarks on irony to a point, I note that the light shed by Descartes' principles seems to be both for and not for everyone's benefit. After all, he did not publish *Le Monde* (the treatise containing these principles), although he advertises its existence in the sixth part of the *Discourse* as he explains his decision to reverse his prior resolution to publish it (a practical decision, incidentally, in flagrant violation of the second maxim of morality). Ultimately, he published the *Discourse* instead, which he presents as a story or a fable, the whole of which therefore participates in "the necessary indirection of storytelling."¹² In the *Discourse*, Descartes speaks ironically to the learned and at least affects frankness with his popular audience. By simulating (in some passages) the equality of all minds and dissimulating his own superiority, Descartes makes the extent of his irony much more difficult to discover; he seems to invite the reader to see through his irony much less than does Plato or Socrates. It seems less protreptic, and indeed in Hibbs' reading Descartes' refusal to take received opinion seriously implies a rejection of the genre of protreptic writing (*32). Even so, Hibbs emphasizes in the first part of his essay that Descartes is concerned to write in a manner conducive to provoking rather than enervating thought (*29). If Descartes does intend to do this, we could benefit from a more precise taxonomy of Cartesian readers. How many kinds of readers does Descartes envision, and what are his aims with each?

A few further observations may help clarify this question. It seems to me that Descartes has neither a strategy for nor any interest in enlivening the minds of the blind Aristotelians shuffling around in his cellar. This seems to be the force of Hibbs' appropriate emphasis on the use of irony to keep theology away from direct contact with philosophy, but the complexity and the range of Cartesian irony requires further consideration. At the least we should note that his irony pleases much more than does the Socratic variety. As Richard Kennington has observed, everybody enjoys the first sentence of the *Discourse*, whether he sees the irony or he does not.¹³ If Locke is correct, pain moves us to change our condition but pleasure inclines us to stay as we are. Does Descartes exercise irony principally for our benefit or his own? Finally, in an intriguing passage in the first part of his paper, Hibbs connects irony to temporality and to method and claims that Descartes directs irony "only toward those unaware of the method or toward the former self of the narrator" (*30). Further elaboration of this claim would lead to interesting and helpful reflection on the particularity of Descartes' narrative and the universality of his intention (cf. *30).

THE SCIENCE OF NATURE AS EXTENSION

A second theme, which surfaces most clearly at the juncture of the first and second parts of Hibbs' essay, is the certainty of the new science of nature. Hibbs presents Descartes as dissatisfied with the zetetic conception of philosophy that appears to be embraced by Socrates or by Montaigne. "The key insight of Socrates' entire life, the awareness that made him wiser than others, provides for Descartes merely an occasion to underscore the defects of his own education" (*31). Hibbs shows beautifully how Descartes likens his own opponents to the sophists with whom Socrates contended (*31). My concern lies with the character of his surpassing Socrates. Hibbs quotes David Lachterman, who says that Cartesian method constrains its objects such that "their very intelligibility becomes identical with their susceptibility to methodical treatment."¹⁴ One could find a great deal of support for the claim that Descartes thinks the essence of material beings is identical with their mathematically knowable features.

But perhaps this is part of his irony. Perhaps Descartes constrained the human *erôs* for knowledge of the whole to something more pedestrian and achievable (a suggestion that seems to be entertained but underdeveloped near the end of the essay). A steady will in the face of "the distracting effect of wonder"¹⁵ may enable us to concentrate our energies on what we *can* know. We can satisfy the mind's desire to know at the same time that we satisfy the needs of the body, principally health, provided that we rigorously follow the method and do not get lost in search of first causes, those noble but to us barely knowable principles (*41). One can see the appearance of a version of this line of thinking in Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Much as Locke does not think that natural science is genuinely demonstrable (and Locke knew of "the incomparable Mr. Newton"),¹⁶ so Descartes might conceive his physics as a science that does not apprehend the real essence of material things. It might be instead a science constricted to that part of nature that is conformable to the human mind and subject to mastery, although that part (quantity) is understood *not* to be ultimate in things.

Francis Bacon seems to be the inspiration for this line of thinking. He criticized the ancients for flying too swiftly from consideration of a few particulars to first principles. He substituted a slow and steady ascent in the direction of the *summa lex* in all of nature, even if one had to admit that the first and most universal principle(s) remained beyond our grasp.

For his part, Descartes speaks similarly in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. Rule Eight announces the need to limit investigation to those things that can be intuited by our intellect. Knowledge of the limits of achievable inquiry “is just as much knowledge as that which reveals the nature of the thing,” and it so “abundantly” satisfies curiosity that it would be irrational to inquire further.¹⁷ The proto-critique of pure reason that Descartes sketches in this rule is accompanied by this assertion: “We should then turn to the things themselves; and we should deal with these only in so far as they are within the reach of the intellect.”¹⁸ In this manner Descartes sketches the combination of a limited science of nature with the abundant satisfaction of the human desire to know.

It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from Descartes’ early, incomplete, and unpublished *Rules*,¹⁹ but we are compelled to wonder about the extent to which Descartes regarded his science of nature as the fulfillment of the classical *erôs* to know the first principles of nature. In one reading, Descartes gives himself a knowable object that enables him to pass beyond the skepticism of Socrates and Montaigne, and he *wittingly* ignores and invites the rest of us to ignore any desire to know the whole. We find satisfaction in achieving a human science in place of the frustrations accompanying the apparently vain pursuit of the divine science Aristotle described—wisdom through knowledge of the first and most universal causes. In this interpretation, the Cartesian life of the mind consists in the carrying out of the project described in the *Discourse*, and in view of the image of philosophy as a tree, Descartes himself would miss out on the principal benefit of philosophy.²⁰

In another reading, this is all part of Descartes’ irony. He distracts most of those who are attracted to knowing with this intoxicating tale of the ability to comprehend all of nature, while he hides from them the fact that he offers comprehension only of an abstraction—quantity. This enables him to guarantee some success in the pursuit—namely, success for those whose desire to know is satisfied by the knowledge of laws of nature, which serve as rules of operation for the expansion of power, without insight into the nature of things. To the extent that the new science of nature becomes the source of untold humanitarian benefits, Descartes is in a position to give philosophy the reputation of being beneficial to ordinary people and thereby to reorder the relation between philosophy and non-philosophers (society or the political community).²¹ In this reading, we are forced to take very seriously the distinction in the sixth part of the

Discourse that Descartes makes between himself and any followers who adopt and execute his method. Descartes, the inventor of the method that others merely follow, withdraws behind yet another mask to live a life he declines to reveal. In either of these readings, we are more likely to overlook philosophy entirely.²² The philosophical life, as classically conceived, is discredited by comparison to the new human possibility: the scientific life, which emerges as the successful-because-humanitarian offspring of philosophy. Philosophy as search for wisdom recedes from view. In Descartes' understanding of his own life, does *scientific* wisdom in this sense displace philosophical pursuit of wisdom in the classical sense?

THE CHARACTER OF DESCARTES' PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE

The new science of nature is intimately connected to the new science of virtue, as Hibbs has argued persuasively, and for this reason my remarks in the last section have already begun to bleed over into this one. The precise character of the connection between natural science and virtue remains somewhat elusive. Descartes speaks again and again in the *Discourse* of the contentment, tranquility, and happiness that characterizes his life, which either is the life of an inquirer after the truth (that is, a philosopher in the traditional sense, as the fourth maxim of the provisional morality tends to suggest)²³ or is, as Hibbs has presented it, the life of a man who possesses wisdom (*40). If it is the latter, could a philosopher be satisfied or content with a life contemplating the simple necessities that matter must obey—matter understood as extension and as excluding goods or ends, which is how Descartes characterizes the principles of his physics?²⁴ As much as Descartes promises that his new science of nature will lead (in the future) to technical devices for the mastery of nature, he also stresses his own current satisfaction even in the absence of those practical benefits. He does not mourn his inability to enter the technological Promised Land. Is Descartes genuinely contemplative of nature as constrained by method? Is he genuinely tranquil or just tranquilized?

Alternatively, is the object of his contemplation something more traditional and more Socratic than might first meet the eye? I have in mind here the Baconian precedent. Bacon admits that the new method or the *New Organon* does not generate itself and does not justify its own goodness. His new method is the only adequate method for dealing with nature, but "the logic now in use" is very properly applied to civil matters.²⁵ That is,

Bacon's argument with his predecessors as to the goodness of the new approach to nature is an argument that cannot be had scientifically but must be had by appeal to traditional political and moral categories. Descartes' *Discourse* has essentially the same nature: a civil or popular argument in defense of the goodness of a new method.

Perhaps, then, Descartes turns out to be rather like his philosophical predecessors after all. The argument of the *Discourse* (most emphatically its sixth part) does not take its shape from the new method or from the provisional morality (except possibly from the fourth maxim); it is instead a prudential, dialogical, even classical bit of reasoning. In order to engage in it, Descartes must take seriously, at least provisionally, the opinions of the non-Cartesians among whom he lives. The sixth part of the *Discourse* addresses the reasons that have made him write,²⁶ and so this text concerns his end as a philosophical author. To put all of this in the form of a question, are the good life and the new science of virtue devoted to contemplation, technical benefits, hedonism in the Lockean sense, or what? What is the end animating Descartes?²⁷

NOTES

1. See Descartes' Letter to Mersenne, April 1634, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43 (hereinafter cited as CSM-K, with page numbers; the first two volumes of this work are cited as CSM, with volume and page numbers). See also *Oeuvres de Descartes*, vol. I, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996), 286.2–3. (Subsequent references to Descartes' works in this edition will identify volume, page, and line numbers.) Descartes' motto reflects a sentiment famously expressed in *Cogitationes privatae: -sic ego, hoc mundi theatrum conscensurus, in quo hactenus spectator exstiti, larvatus prodego* (thus, about to set out on this theater of the world, in which hitherto I have been a spectator, I go forth masked) (*Oeuvres de Descartes* X.213.5–7).

2. Page numbers cited parenthetically in the body of this paper indicate a reference to Hibbs' contribution to this volume, "The Virtue of Science and the Science of Virtue."

3. For example, see the famous Letter to Mersenne, 28 January 1641 (CSM-K, 173; *Oeuvres de Descartes* III.297.31–298.7). Compare Descartes, Letter to Mersenne, 11 November 1640 (CSM-K, 157; *Oeuvres de Descartes* III.233.15–26).

4. See the letters cited in previous note.

5. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Richard Kennington, ed. Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2007), 31–32; *Oeuvres de Descartes* VI.30.21–28.

6. *Discourse*, 17; *Oeuvres de Descartes* VI.4.18–20.

7. "In this I perhaps will not appear too vain, if you consider that since there is only one truth concerning each thing, whoever finds it knows as much as can be known about it,

and that a child, for example, instructed in arithmetic, having made an addition according to the rules, can be assured of having found, regarding the sum, all that the human mind can find" (*Discourse*, 26–27; *Oeuvres de Descartes* VI.21.6–13). Hibbs also notes the egalitarian dimensions of Descartes' virtue of generosity (*37).

8. *Discourse*, 53; *Oeuvres de Descartes* VI.70.28–71.1.

9. *Discourse*, 54; *Oeuvres de Descartes* VI.71.5. Kennington is not the only translator to render the French *cave* as "cave," thereby suggesting Plato's cave. French translations of the *Republic* typically use *caverne* because *cave* means not "cave" but "cellar," as Hibbs has it (*31). Still, the connection with Plato's image does not depend upon the word *cave* but on the character of our sight and our blindness. In fact, Descartes' substitution of *cave* for *caverne* suggests that the darkness at issue is not natural but somehow man-made. Much as ivy climbs no higher than the top of the tree and often descends after having reached the top, Descartes' contemporary Aristotelians end in obscurities that derive from their own misuse of Aristotle. The differences between Plato's image and Descartes' image help reveal Cartesian irony more clearly.

10. *Discourse*, 53; *Oeuvres de Descartes* VI.70.28.

11. In the Letter to the Sorbonne Theology Faculty, attached to the *Meditations*, Descartes says that his arguments "require a mind which is completely free from preconceived opinions and which can easily detach itself from involvement with the senses" (*requirunt mentem a præjudiciis plane liberam, & quae se ipsam a sensuum consortio facile subducat*). CSM 2:5; *Oeuvres de Descartes* VII.4.28–30. In the sixth meditation Descartes does engage ordinary opinion under the label "the teaching of nature," but he has by this point eviscerated it as a source of knowledge for human beings; rather, certain knowledge begins from the light of nature (see the third meditation, ninth paragraph). The teaching of nature remains relevant as an uncertain guide for practical affairs.

12. Glenn Arbery, d'Alzon Visiting Professor at Assumption College, used this phrase in a lecture on Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* to emphasize the fact that even this novel, which seems overtly didactic, remains a novel in which the author speaks only through the narrative. The clarity with which Descartes expresses parts of his message should not induce us to lose sight of his pervasive indirection. (For his comments on histories and fables, see fifth, seventh, and eighth paragraphs of *Discourse*, part 1.)

13. Richard Kennington, "Descartes's *Discourse on Method*," in *Discourse*, 61.

14. David Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 175. Hibbs quotes this passage on page *32.

15. Richard Velkley, "Masks of Mastery: Richard Kennington on Modern Origins," *Political Science Reviewer* 31 (2002): 21. I am greatly indebted to Velkley's essay for the central idea discussed in the rest of this paragraph and for his interpretation of Kennington's published and unpublished work.

16. John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 10.

17. CSM 1:28, 30; *Oeuvres de Descartes* X.392.10–13, X.393.13–21, X.396.21–25.

18. CSM 1:32; *Oeuvres de Descartes* X.399.6–7.

19. "Between the *Regulae* and the composition of the *Discours* in 1636 Descartes all but completed the physical treatise, *Le Monde*. . . . It is in this pre-*Discours* and post-*Regulae* interval that he most probably turned to the writings of Bacon in which he found the stress on utility, the arts as model of beneficence, and mastery of nature, all of which are absent in the *Regulae* and *Le Monde*, and thematic in the conception of philosophy in

his first publication, the *Discours*. The structure of the Cartesian philosophy is best understood as the attempt to unite two originally diverse lines of thinking, the mathematical science of nature of the *Regulae* and *Le Monde* and the utility-mastery theme of Baconian origin." Richard Kennington, "Descartes and Mastery of Nature," in *Organism, Medicine, and Metaphysics*, ed. Stuart F. Spicker (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1978), 210.

20. Preface to the French edition of *Principles of Philosophy* (CSM 1:186; *Oeuvres de Descartes* IX.14.23–15.5).

21. See Kennington, "Descartes and Mastery of Nature," 201–23; Richard Kennington, "René Descartes," in *On Modern Origins*, ed. Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 187–204.

22. See Velkley, "Masks of Mastery," 9.

23. Descartes speaks of "three or four" maxims. The first three maxims guide action rather directly, but the fourth stands on a different plane insofar as it involves the choice of a life devoted to the pursuit of truth. That life of inquiry is presented as if it were identical to the resolute attachment to the method (mentioned several times in the first two parts of the *Discourse*). It is this attachment that leads him to embrace the first three maxims. As Kennington was known to say, Descartes' provisional morality incorporates a non-provisional conception of the good. For another estimation of the non-provisional dimensions of the morality, see Robert Spaemann, "La morale provisoire de Descartes," *Archives de Philosophie* 35 (1972): 353–67.

24. See *Discourse*, part 5, and the sixth meditation.

25. See the end of the long first paragraph in *The Great Instauration*. In various writings, including the *Distributio Operis* (or "Plan of the Work," published with *The New Organon*), Bacon asserts the necessity for an argument on the nature of the arts and sciences in order to win faith in his new method. *The Advancement of Learning*, in its two versions, is as close as Bacon came to providing the missing argument.

26. *Discourse*, 15; *Oeuvres de Descartes* VI.1.16.

27. See Letter to Princess Elizabeth, 18 August 1645 (CSM-K, 261; *Oeuvres de Descartes* IV.275.1–13). In that letter Descartes says our final end may be either the supreme good at which we aim or the contentment that results from possessing it.