

Toward a Cartesian Epistemic Rule Consequentialism¹

This paper proposes a reading of the *Meditations* as the tortuous trajectory toward a rule consequentialist epistemology; the *Meditations* tell the story of the meditator's passage from an unreflective to a reflective stance which contains three levels: rule-extraction², rule-adoption, 2nd nature rule-compliance.

The view defended in this paper stands in opposition to the deontological reading of Descartes proposed by Noa Naaman-Zauderer in her recent book, *Descartes' Deontological Turn*³. According to Naaman-Zauderer the C&D rule is binding not because of the value of a further goal but because it is experienced as stemming solely from us. The experience of perfect freedom resulting from feeling our intellect perfectly unified with our will binds us to act by refraining our assent from ideas that are perceived less than clearly and distinctly. To support her position Naaman-Zauderer holds that, if blame were about results, it would be inappropriate when true judgments are formed. But blame is not inappropriate when true judgments are formed *accidentally*⁴. So, claims Naaman-Zauderer, blame is not about results.

In my view, this conclusion is too strong and a more moderate one is more in keeping with Descartes' overall thought. I contend that for Descartes blame is about *improperly arrived at results*; that at least part of the bindingness of the rule stems from the value of the goal (i.e. truth). To substantiate my claims I propose an alternative account of the C&D rule, account which brings to light Descartes' reliance and emphasis on results. On my interpretation, results have both a methodological as well as an adaptive feedback function. Descartes needs results in order to discover the C&D rule; once this rule is in place, results serve to buttress the rule's bindingness and to confirm compliance with it. Only once the meditator has become versed in applying the C&D rule can he dispense with the double-checking of the outcomes of his acts of assent and move into something resembling Naaman-Zauderer's "deontological" phase.

The guiding thread of my account will be Descartes' distinction between *acts of will before and after they are elicited*⁵. A careful survey of the *Meditations*, the two letters to Mesland⁶, the *Principles* and the *Passions* leads to the following systematic reconstruction of Descartes' views of the will: starting from an unreflective, instinctive use of his free will the agent eventually comes to reflect on completed acts of will. This happens *after* having accepted certain beliefs and is possible due to the ability to attentively consider things which is part of the agent's rational nature. Once this reflective stance is taken, the agent goes: from *after* (i.e. completed acts of will) to *before* (to preconditions of willing and, at a later stage, to freedom markers⁷) to *after* (results). Then, the reflective agent moves from the new *after* (from dissected results) to *before* (preconditions of correct results, i.e. rules for getting to the truth) to *after* (double-checking the

¹ This way of using the term "epistemic rule-consequentialism" has no connection with the epistemic rule-consequentialism attributed to Alvin Goldman in contemporary epistemology. See *Epistemology and Cognition*, Harvard University Press, 1986.

² Especially the clarity and distinctness rule, henceforth the "C&D rule"

³ Naaman-Zauderer, N., "Descartes' Deontological Turn", Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁴ (AT VII,59-60; CSM II, 41)

⁵ (AT VII,59-60; CSM II, 41)

⁶ 2 May 1644 and 9 February 1645, respectively

⁷ We will return to the issue of freedom markers below.

efficiency of applying the rules). From a broad application of the *before/after* criterion to acts of will in general (without attempting to track any specific features) we are led to a more specific application of this distinction, narrowing it down to identifying *freedom before/after* acts of will are elicited. Part III of this paper contains an analysis of this distinction.

The *before/after* distinction is, first, a way of distinguishing between a “prima facie” and an “all things considered” perspective on the freedom of our acts of will. All *before* evaluations are prima facie but not conversely since we can take into account only the results of our acts of will: both first-person *before* and third-person *after* appraisals are prima facie. Prima facie appraisals are incomplete and employing them exclusively leads to taxonomy mistakes which I will call “inauthentic freedoms”. Second, to arrive at an all-things-considered perspective, our acts of will must be assessed in both procedural and results-based terms. The importance of procedural considerations for Descartes is clear from his emphasis on the right order of steps of inquiry, in both the *Discourse*⁸ and the *Meditations*⁹. From a Cartesian procedural standpoint, we are always to blame for beliefs and actions arrived at accidentally. Furthermore, an all things considered, procedural as well as results-based, assessment reveals that we can also be praised or blamed for the truth/falsity and rightness/wrongness of our beliefs and actions.¹⁰ When both the procedural and the proper results conditions are met, all things considered assessments yield “authentic freedoms”.

The authentic varieties of spontaneity and perversity refer, respectively, to acts of assent and refraining from assenting to clear and distinct ideas insofar as these ideas were reflectively and deliberately evaluated by the agent. Authentic indifference consists of rendering no judgment when reasons on both sides are balanced. Authentic spontaneity and indifference warrant praise while inauthentic indifference and authentic perversity result in blame ascriptions. In the theoretical sphere, praise is appropriate for: (1) refraining from formulating any judgment in situations of epistemic balance; and (2) true judgments arrived at after making sure that the ideas that prompt our will are indeed clear and distinct. Blame comes in degrees; agents are: (i) blameworthy for (both true and false) judgments arrived at starting from a situation of epistemic balance; and (ii) even more to blame for refraining from assenting to clear and distinct ideas which withstood scrutiny.

I conclude, contra Naaman-Zauderer, that the analysis of the *before/after* (acts of will are elicited) criterion culminating in the authentic/inauthentic freedoms distinction lends support to a rule-consequentialist interpretation of Descartes’ epistemology.

⁸ (AT VI, 18-20; CSM I, 120)

⁹ (AT VII, 155-159; CSM II, 110-112)

¹⁰ (AT VII, 59-60; CSM II, 41)