Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves

Early Modern French Thought II

MICHAEL MORIARTY

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

Note on Translations and References xiv
List of Abbreviations xvii

Introduction 1
Moralistic 'Psychology': Critiques of Seventeenth-Century Writing 5
Ethics and Psychology 12
Psychology Without Ethics? (i) Montaigne 19
Psychology Without Ethics? (ii) Literature, Again 25
Psychology Without Ethics? (iii) The New Philosophies 32
Descartes's Ethics: (i) Humanity and the Divine Order 34
Descartes's Ethics: (ii) Virtue and Happiness 45
Conclusion 54

PART ONE. HUMAN NATURE

1. **Approaches** 61
Human Nature: The 'Descriptive' Approach 62
Talking about 'Character' 70
Interiority in La Bruyère 76
Women and Children Last 85
The Problematic Approach 95
The Fall 99

2. **Original Sin** 109
Aquinas on Original Sin 111
The State of Pure Nature 113

Senault: The Corruption of Nature by Sin 118
Pascal 125
Malebranche: Old Theology, New Philosophy 133
Malebranche on the Two States of Humanity 144
Malebranche: Mothers, Children, and the Transmission of Sin 150
By Way of Conclusion 154

PART TWO. SELF-LOVE AND CONCUPISCENCE

3. Early Modern Religious Perspectives 159
Self-Preservation: The Stoics and Others 161
Friendship and the Self 162
Jansenius on Concupiscence and Self-Love 171
Self-Love and the Fall: Pascal, Senault 185
Self-Love, Pleasure, and Interest 191
Self-Love and Others 197
The Problem of Disinterestedness 206
Enlightened Concupiscence and Self-Love 217

4. La Rochefoucauld on Interest and Self-Love 225

5. Malebranche's Synthesis 249
The First Inclination: Love of the Good in General 251
The Second Inclination: Love of Ourselves 253
The Third Inclination: Love of Our Neighbour 256
Love of Self and Love of Order 257

PART THREE. PROBLEMS OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

6. Forms of Self-Knowledge 275

7. Literary Explorations 288

8. Self-Knowledge and Self-Ignorance in Context 305

9. La Rochefoucauld and Self-Knowledge 316

10. Religious Moralists 328

Mind and Body 329
Desire and Passion 339
Self-Love and Self-Knowledge 344
Narcissism 347
Blindness and Lucidity 350
Imperceptible Thoughts 367
Nicole's Theory of 'General Grace' 367
'Imperceptible' Thoughts: Nicole 369
Thought and Language 371
Freedom 374
'Imperceptible' Thoughts: Lamy 376
Fighting Illusion 379

Conclusion 387

Bibliography 405
Index 421

Introduction

This book is a continuation of a project, the first instalment of which was *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). The point of departure of the whole project was a sense of the 'modernity' (in the sense of 'contemporaneity', rather than in an opposition to 'postmodernity') of some aspects of the work of early modern thinkers such as Pascal or La Rochefoucauld—that is to say, their exploration of what, in the anachronistic language of 'theory', might be called 'decentred subjectivity', or, in more ordinary language, of a self at odds with and only imperfectly known to itself, a self with something rather like an 'unconscious'. This initial perception, while not altogether discarded, needed to be corrected by a greater awareness of the risks of anachronism and of the historically prior discourses with which these writers certainly engaged (such as Augustinian theology).

At the same time, this exploration of early modern thought had to take account of the perception, widespread in circles committed to 'theory', that early modernity was chiefly to be defined with reference to the emergence of a new 'Cartesian' form of subjectivity, an articulation of knowledge and power around the figure of a knowing and hence powerful 'subject'. It was argued in *Early Modern French Thought* that this was only one strand in the early modern vision of human nature and of human beings' relation to the world, and that, even as an account of Descartes, it is partial and potentially misleading. The texts studied belonged for the most part to the sphere of philosophy, especially metaphysics (in the broad early modern sense that incorporates the study of knowledge as a preliminary to investigating being). The concern was with the critique of experience—that is, of the image of ourselves, our bodies, other people, and the physical world that seems naturally to occur to us—to force itself on us—as we live and think our lives. The thinkers studied, Descartes, Pascal, and Malebranche, were shown to be working against the grain of that experience, to be striving to disclose what it conceals, but to reveal also the element of truth that it both contains and screens.

As regards Descartes, I went beyond the metaphysical texts and considered those belonging to what he would have called 'la morale' (the treatise on the passions and the letters to Elisabeth), partly because my aim, echoing that of other commentators, was to show that we could not confine ourselves to the *Meditations* without risking a distorted and limited conception of Descartes's account of selfhood or 'subjectivity'.[1] Pascal was examined chiefly with reference to those sections of the *Pensées* that specifically engage with philosophical rather than theological questions: here too, however, it was necessary also to consider texts whose preoccupations are moral and political, since Pascal refuses any attempt to consider human nature in isolation from moral norms and political and social frameworks. As regards Malebranche, I treated of those sections of *De la recherche de la vérité* whose subject matter is primarily our cognitive faculties and how we should direct them (books one to three and also book six), and had less to say on books four and five, which deal with the inclinations and the passions; I also considered works whose title announces their metaphysical preoccupations (again in the seventeenth-century sense of 'metaphysical'): the *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques* and the *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et sur la religion*. In the present volume, I shall deal with other sections of Pascal's and Malebranche's works (Descartes is discussed also, in this Introduction), and with a broader range of moral and religious writers, some more 'literary' than others. The concerns now will be those of 'la morale' in the seventeenth-century sense, which includes a good deal of what we would call 'psychology': all these terms are examined below. The dominant themes will be those of self-love and self-knowledge.

---

[1] I was following, for instance, Susan James, who remarks, 'By treating the *Meditations on First Philosophy* as Descartes's philosophical testament, scholars have created a one-sided interpretation of Cartesianism in which the division between body and soul is overemphasized and sometimes misunderstood' (*Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 106). For other works that display a similar orientation, see my *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 70 n. 46.

The purpose of the study is twofold. First, from the point of view of intellectual history. We rightly perceive Nietzsche and Freud as outstanding demystifiers of psychological illusion, of both the individual's and the species's self-image, and Marx as the great critic of the illusions invested in social relationships. Yet if we seek precursors of their critiques, we do not find these only in the camp of the secular Enlightenment, whose work all three prolonged, as well as challenging. This book aims to demonstrate how the early modern Augustinian tradition, sometimes but not always infused with Cartesianism, offered powerful critical analyses of human desire, motivation, and relationships between self and others. It is not the case that the religious perspective occluded the social realm, nor that 'Cartesian dualism' imposed a perception of an atomistic individual subject reduced to a pure mind. Secondly, as regards literary history, I try to show how writers generally classed as non-literary (theologians and philosophers) offer rich psychological insights comparable to those we find in the literary canon of the period: but also to challenge a general perception of seventeenth-century writing as psychological in a narrow sense, as proffering an essentialist view of human nature that obscures the working of social relationships. The two purposes are therefore convergent.

I have used the term 'early modern' in this and the earlier book. The label is certainly open to question.[2] It may seem to carry a good many presuppositions about what it is in which 'modernity' consists. The one most relevant here is concerned with institutions and conventions of knowledge. The writers from the late sixteenth or the seventeenth centuries discussed here do not for the most part operate within the scholastic model of intellectual enquiry, based on commentary of authoritative texts and disputation *pro* and *contra* about questions raised by these. Those scholastics mentioned are brought in for purposes of contrast. (Of course, scholasticism itself was changing and developing: Francisco Suárez's *Disputationes metaphysicae* (1597) broke new ground as a free-standing treatise on metaphysics rather than a commentary on Aristotle's work.) Some of them are crucially influenced by Descartes and his philosophical method, as well as his specific philosophical positions (one of them actually is Descartes). Even a book that does present itself as a work of exegesis of an authoritative text, Jansenius's immensely influential theological treatise *Augustinus*, deliberately attempts to rescue St Augustine from the traditions and conventions of scholastic interpretation. The *Augustinus* and the *Discours de la méthode* might be felt to have little in common: but they agreed in breaking, each in its different domains, with Aristotelian approaches to the questions they discussed. Some of the writers studied are therefore working with powerful theoretical models (Cartesian philosophy or Augustinian theology, or both), but outside the scholastic context; others, however, have found a space where, although they draw on existing models, they use them more as prompts for their own thinking than as sources of truth in their own right (we could say this of Montaigne or La Rochefoucauld). This is the basic sense I am using the label 'early modern' to convey.

---

[2] Its pertinence is examined and sometimes questioned by contributors to a forthcoming number of the journal *Paragraph*, entitled 'Theory and the Early Modern', edited by John O'Brien and myself.

No general narrative is therefore propounded here of the emergence of an early modern 'self'.[3] But what can be said, at this stage, is that the selves we find will, for the most part, be coupled intimately to a body, and interacting with a world of bodies; directed by basic underlying inclinations and suffused by surges of passion; self-seeking, but constantly alienated from themselves, swerving away from their real good; self-loving but unable to support that self-love except by the constitution of phantom 'selves'; condemned to endless illusions about themselves.

---

[3] Two such narratives in particular shall be noted here. Charles Taylor's deservedly well-known *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) traces the emergence of modern forms of subjectivity, especially in philosophical texts, stressing particularly the displacement of an older vision of ethics, in which human behaviour and values are measured against a transcendental rationality and goodness enshrined in the order of the universe, by a modern emphasis on humans as

Moralistic 'Psychology': Critiques of Seventeenth-Century Writing

The writers of the French seventeenth century have, indeed, long been admired for their psychological acumen. But so established was this view that twentieth-century iconoclasm, as embodied by two major critics, Jean-Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes, turned it into a demerit. Their confidence in the possession of a position from which to criticize the past, and in the possibility of aligning writing with a progressive politics, may seem very alien in the early twenty-first century. But the criticisms are none the less substantial and significant, and it is fair to suppose that they were not without influence, so they will repay some attention.

Sartre's charge is that seventeenth-century literature is essentially moralistic ('moralisateur'). He does not mean that it is naively didactic, but that it confines itself to the moral realm, because it takes for granted established solutions to religious, metaphysical, political, and social problems.[4] That is to say, the

---

creating their own values. Reason becomes a regulator of human procedure, rather than being defined by its substantial content. More recently, Jean Rohou's *Le XVIIe Siècle: Une révolution de la condition humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 2002) provides a splendidly wide-ranging yet well-focused account of the social and cultural transformations of the period, drawing mostly but not at all exclusively on French material, from a very wide range of sources. His theme, not dissimilar to Taylor's, is the emergence of a new relationship between man and the world, and, in parallel, new conceptions of human nature and personality: man is no longer to conform himself to a divine order exhibited in nature, but to treat nature as a field for the exercise of his own productive and transformative power. Of particular relevance to this study is Rohou's stress on the emergence of the conception of human beings as defined by the pursuit of self-interest, of which more in later chapters.

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 104.

literature recognizes no kind of freedom but a purely moral transcendence of passion: to transform religious or philosophical ideas and values, or political and social relationships, is simply unimaginable. No doubt this is why Sartre speaks of its presenting the reader with a silent image of himself to contemplate and to recognize (as distinct, say, from engaging him in dialogue that might eventuate in ideological challenge or political action).

Sartre's analysis finishes on an upbeat note: the seventeenth-century writer's work exerts an undoubtedly liberating effect, in that it liberates the reader from himself. But any euphoria here is tinged with pessimistic harmonies. The liberating effect is highly circumscribed, restricted to a class public. The writer is not complicit with the oppressive class; but he is totally assimilated by it. He does not commit himself to the liberation of any concrete category of the oppressed, because he cannot form a conception of the universal human being that goes beyond the actual individuals that happen to possess power (p. 104).

This specific critique needs to be placed in the context of Sartre's more general analysis of literary and social development. In the medieval period, he assures us, we have clerks writing solely for other clerks (pp. 90-4).[5] By the seventeenth century, however, a broader public has emerged. The writer can still enjoy a 'conscience heureuse', an unproblematic sense of his activity, provided he is so imbued with the ideology of the privileged classes that he can conceive no alternative. His function is no longer to be an official guardian of dogma, like the medieval clerk: he is simply required not to challenge it; but the idea of doing so does not seem to enter his head (p. 94). Complicit with his public, he accepts the ideology of the elite without criticism (p. 98).

---

[5] This is, to say the least, inadequate even as a simplification. Medieval writers and audiences existed in many forms, as is amply demonstrated by Sarah Kay, 'Part I. The Middle Ages: From the Earliest Texts to 1470', in Sarah Kay, Terence Cave, and Malcolm Bowie, *A Short History of French Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13–95.

If we take 'ideology' in a rather restricted sense of 'basic socio-political assumptions', this analysis has a certain validity. Most seventeenth-century French writers accepted at least outwardly the existing order of things: a hereditary monarch at the apex of a social hierarchy determined by birth, with at the top those aristocrats whose rank was founded in principle on military service to the Crown (personal or ancestral), followed by those who held judicial or administrative office; beneath them, the common herd of those without nobility, in which the higher echelons (professional men and substantial merchants) enjoyed a certain status; below these, small tradesmen, well-to-do farmers, and craftsmen, with peasants and manual labourers at the bottom. Then again most French men and women of the period, including most writers, accepted at least outwardly the Roman Catholic faith, and, since the Church generally functioned, politically speaking, as a prop of the French monarchy, one could, at a pinch, include this faith within the ideology of the privileged classes. (In general, French Protestants were also loyal to the Crown, until the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes drove some into dissidence.)

Beyond this point, the Sartrean analysis starts to lose its value. For one thing, this 'acceptance' of the established ideology has different modalities: it can be naive or detached. Pascal accepts the social order because order of some kind is better than anarchy, but no particular social order is founded in reason or divine will: they are all projections of earlier social conflicts. A similar critical edge is to be found in the social thought of Malebranche. Again, there are writers whose religious professions are entirely orthodox, but couched in such a way that the kindred spirit may recognize a certain scepticism, a detachment of the mind from the beliefs the mouth professes (La Mothe Le Vayer is a case in point). Of course, one can say that, when the chips are down, detached acceptance and naive acceptance of the established order tend to come to the same thing, unless detachment can convert itself into radical challenge. But when *are* the chips in fact down? They certainly were in Sartre's time, the time of the Occupation. But even the Fronde, the unrest and intermittent civil war that lasted from 1648 to 1653 did not engender a crisis of the established order like that of the English Civil War, forcing people to adhere to their most fundamental loyalties. It seems preferable, from a historical point of view, to recognize and gauge degrees of ideological commitment.

But, secondly, it is simply false to say that writers did not criticize the established ideology.[6] One of the core elements in the ideology of the French aristocracy is honour: the sense of personal dignity that must be defended even at the risk of one's life. Pascal's attack on duelling in the fifth *Provinciale* specifically rejects the value of honour as false, as an idol. But this is not just the paradox of an eccentric genius: the same theme can be found in other moralists.[7] Now, of course, for Sartre, that would prove nothing: religious writers, for one thing, do not count, because, obviously, they are adhering to the ideology of the privileged, just like La Bruyère, who criticizes the treatment of the peasantry from within, not from outside, the ideology he shares with his public (p. 97). But what this shows is that Sartre is wrong to speak of *the* ideology of the privileged classes. We might speak, if we chose to revive the language of Marxism, of a dominant ideology combining feudal and Christian elements, and ultimately functioning to sustain the rule of the dominant class: but the combination is unstable (partly for the social reason that clergy and nobility are distinct social groups), and different writers can identify with different fractions of the dominant class.[8] However, this leaves out the whole question of gender, and the *querelle des femmes*. In that case, there is hardly the kind of unproblematic submersion of writers in *an* established ideology of which Sartre speaks. Nor can one possibly assert, as Sartre does, that writers took the solution of all religious problems for granted in an age that produced the Jansenist controversy, by which many secular writers were affected, and which involved a clash between radically different visions of human nature and capacities. These simply cannot be lumped together in a single Christian ideology. Nor can we forget Protestants, or dissident or sceptical writers.

---

[6] If one were instead to apply the Althusserian theory of ideology, as an identification or recognition of oneself in relation to various institutions, practices, and discourses, rather than a set of ideas or beliefs, the claim would be easier to sustain. One may doubt, piecemeal, the official beliefs to which one is expected to adhere without renouncing loyalty to the system that promulgates them if one cannot imagine oneself as anything other than a French Catholic. Until society can provide alternative positions, like that of the eighteenth-century *philosophe*, with which to identify oneself, dissent will remain for the most part clandestine, and many who doubted must have felt they had no option but to keep their doubts to themselves.

[7] See e.g. Jean-François Senault, *L'Homme criminel ou la corruption de la nature par le péché selon les sentimens de saint Augustin* (Paris: Veuve J. Camusat and Pierre Le Petit, 1644), 613; La Bruyère, *Les Caractères*, ed. Emmanuel Bury, Le Livre de Poche Classique (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2004), 'De la mode', 3, and 'De l'homme', 129. Rohou discusses shifting attitudes towards duelling, even on the part of aristocrats (*Le XVIIe Siècle*, 148–9, 172–4, 230–2, 303–6).

These, it might be said in Dr Johnson's words (he was speaking of Voltaire's strictures on Shakespeare), are the petty cavils of petty minds: Sartre was one of the great thinkers of the twentieth century, not a literary historian. Very true: but it is because his insights into literary history are accredited by his philosophical achievements, and because, indeed, they contain an important measure of truth, that their shortcomings need to be pointed out.

We find the same themes taken up in Barthes's account of La Rochefoucauld. We cannot, incidentally, view Barthes's writings on the French *moralistes* simply as a marginal aspect of his work, to which he might be supposed to have devoted little attention. The pieces on La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère are substantial essays—that on La Bruyère in particular is brilliantly innovative and insightful—and their value is recognized by specialist critics. So they are worth taking seriously. The *Maximes*, he concedes, is a critical work, but the challenge it offers is not really dangerous, because it is not political, merely psychological (and also sanctioned by the 'Christian climate' of thought). Its criticism is harsh, but also inadequate: it defines the limits a caste must impose on its own questioning if it wishes this to be both purifying and risk-free—the limits of what, for three centuries, would be called 'psychology'.[9] Psychology then is a substitute for, and a screen for, the political. It goes with conformity to a religious outlook (again, presented as monolithic) and a fundamental class limitation of perspective.[10] But Barthes's diagnosis of 'psychology' as class-bound takes a different form elsewhere. He clearly (and rightly) perceives La Rochefoucauld's class attachments as aristocratic, as his talk of 'caste' shows. But 'psychology' features on the charge-sheet in his critique of Racine as well. Racine, he says, failed, throughout his career, to write a pure tragedy, one in which interaction with the gods is all-determining, because he could never get rid of the corrupting 'psychological' element, which pertains not to tragedy but to the bourgeois drama (or melodrama) of which Barthes sees Racine as the founder. For Phèdre is sometimes presented as guilty (in accordance with a tragic conception), sometimes as jealous (in keeping with 'une psychologie mondaine').[11] The 'psychological' viewpoint is seen as pernicious because it throws a veil over the political and social history that has produced human beings and been produced by them. It thus obscures the very possibility of changing history (and with it 'psychology') by modifying social and political structures. It is thus no accident (to use the old Marxist formula) that it should have proved so congenial to bourgeois culture. This seems plausible enough if, to revive the eternal contrast, one reflects on the profound political reflection that underpins the plays of Corneille, whereas those of Racine might seem to subordinate political to emotional forces (though I think this view is a simplification). Racine's theatre was thus less congenial to the progressive literary sensibility of the middle-to-late twentieth century, with its relish (Brechtian or Hegelian) for the spectacle of human beings making history, and therefore being capable of unmaking it.[12]

---

[8] Of course the higher clergy tended to be recruited from the ranks of the nobility, but, once a young nobleman, or woman, had entered the ecclesiastical state, he or she passed into a distinct social group, and was called upon to assume responsibility for a distinct ideological code. The very language of dominant ideology and dominant class would be challenged by many seventeenth-century historians. I have tried to justify their pertinence in *Taste and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 24–38.

---

[9] Roland Barthes, 'La Rochefoucauld: *Réflexions ou Sentences et maximes*', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Éric Marty, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1993–5), II, 1346. The essay was originally published in 1961.

[10] Barthes's rejection of 'psychology' is discussed more generally in my *Roland Barthes* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 45–6.

[11] 'Dire Racine', in *Sur Racine*, *OC* I, 1082. 'Mondaine' here means both 'worldly' in the religious sense, and 'associated with polite or fashionable society'.

In connection with La Rochefoucauld, then, 'psychology' is aristocratic; in connection with Racine, bourgeois. There is no serious inconsistency in Barthes's position here: the psychological perspective might have been developed in aristocratic culture, and appropriated by the bourgeoisie for its own use. But there is an interesting instability of another kind in his analyses. On the one hand, he is claiming that Racine, like La Rochefoucauld, is hopelessly complicit with a reductive and ideologically conservative psychological perspective on reality. On the other, the bulk of *Sur Racine*, the essay 'L'Homme racinien', is written on the assumption that we need to rescue Racine from that perspective. Hence Barthes's attempt to displace the dreary clichés of secondary-school psychology: there are, in fact, no characters in Racine's theatre (it is pointless to ask if Andromaque is a flirt or Bajazet really manly): there are only situations.[13] This displacement of 'character' by 'situation' seems to be inspired by existentialist thought, which also tends to oppose the two terms.[14] Immersed in a powerful solution of anthropological-psychoanalytic-existentialist concepts, and read in terms of situation rather than character, Racine emerges as no longer a proto-bourgeois psychology-merchant. But it might be the case that other writers of the period cannot escape that taint. Take La Bruyère's *Les Caractères*. Barthes notes that the concept of 'character' renders the text rebarbative to modern assimilation, because the word is one we cannot use with conviction: it seems either to denote features so universal as to be trivial or to belie the complexity of the actual person.[15] The implication here is that 'character' is written into the text, instead of projected on it, so that we cannot reread it in terms of 'situation'. As regards La Bruyère, then, we need to analyse whether his analysis of 'character' is 'essentialist', a screen making 'situation' invisible, or whether, on the contrary, it solicits us into recognizing a situation as such. If this were sustainable, it would tend to blunt the force of Barthes's critique. I shall discuss this question below.

---

[12] Bernard Dort, author of an excellent study of Corneille (*Corneille dramaturge* (Paris: L'Arche, 1972 (1st pub. 1957)), was a collaborator of Barthes's in the 1950s on the Brechtian journal *Théâtre Populaire*. Serge Doubrovsky's remarkable *Corneille et la dialectique du héros* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) is Hegelian in inspiration. Lucien Goldmann would be an exception to this, since he sees Racine (and Pascal) as embodying a tragic world view that constitutes a more advanced stage of ideological development than the rational individualism he attributes to Corneille (and Descartes) (*Le Dieu caché: Étude sur la vision tragique dans les 'Pensées' de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959 (1st publ. 1955)), 32–49)).

[13] Barthes, *Sur Racine*, *OC* I, 998.

[14] See e.g. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe, 2 vols.* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976 (1st pub. 1949)), II, 483; Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Etre et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 398–400. Beauvoir is arguing that certain behaviour patterns traditionally identified as part of a female 'character' must be grasped as responses to a situation. Sartre allows a certain pertinence to the notion of individual character, while arguing that it can never be the term of an analysis: we invoke it only to transcend it ('dépasser'), by seeking to grasp the individual's behaviour, again, as responding to and modifying a situation.

Ethics and Psychology

So far I have merely described the field of the present study in the most general terms: seventeenth-century texts containing ethical and psychological reflection.

'Psychological', however, is a shorthand expression, since early modern culture does not recognize an independent field of knowledge corresponding to what we call 'psychology', the study of the human mind and its workings. Renaissance writers treated it as a branch of natural philosophy, to be studied with reference to Aristotle's *De anima* and *Parva naturalia*.[16] 'Psychological' discussion can be found in writings of many genres: there is, for instance, a political discourse of the passions (fear and love, contempt and hatred) in Machiavelli's *The Prince*. But the abstract analysis of the human mind and its workings at this period is most fully represented in the discourse of ethics or moral philosophy (*morale*). The scope of this discipline in early modern culture will appear more clearly if we look at its institutional implantation.[17]

---

[15] Barthes, 'La Bruyère', *OC* I, 1337.

[16] Katharine Park and Eckhard Kessler, 'The Concept of Psychology', in Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988), 455–63 (p. 455).

Traditionally, in the medieval period, philosophy, including moral philosophy, was studied in the university arts course, which served as a preparation for the higher more specialized studies of law, medicine, or theology. But, in France, the teaching of philosophy tended, in the sixteenth century, to be devolved to the new *collèges de plein exercice*, residential colleges of the university teaching independently of the faculty of arts. This reinforced philosophy's links with the study of Greek and Latin language and literature, also taught in the *collèges*, a development in line with the humanist pedagogical ideal, while weakening its links with the more specialized higher studies. Similar establishments were founded elsewhere in France, and these served as a model for the colleges founded by the Society of Jesus from the 1560s onwards, where two years of philosophy followed six years' study of the humanities.[18] In the first part of the *Discours de la méthode*, Descartes evaluates and criticizes the teaching he received at the Jesuit college of La Flèche. He mentions ethics ('les écrits qui traitent des mœurs') as a distinct subject, separate from philosophy (by which he means logic, physics, and metaphysics), no doubt because it was often taught separately; and he speaks of reading ancient ethical authors.[19] Stephen Gaukroger has noted, however, that much Jesuit moral teaching consisted in casuistry, the study of the practical application of moral principles to particular cases (p. 61).

---

[17] The emphasis in what follows is on institutions. But for a general account of the intellectual background of early modern philosophy, as distinct from its institutional dimension, see Stephen Menn, 'The Intellectual Setting', in Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), I, 33–86. There is a valuable presentation and selection of (mostly French) early modern philosophical texts in Roger Ariew, John Cottingham, and Tom Sorell (eds.), *Descartes' 'Meditations': Background Source Materials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[18] Richard Tuck, 'The Institutional Setting', in Garber and Ayers (eds.), *Cambridge History*, I, 9–32 (pp. 15–19). For a more detailed account of the *collèges* and their Jesuit successor establishments, in particular La Flèche, where Descartes was educated, see Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 32–61. The fullest treatment is by L. W. B. Brockliss, *French Higher Education in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

In general the teaching of moral philosophy in universities and colleges was still dominated by the Aristotelian tradition, in France as elsewhere.[20] Now moral philosophy, as in Kant, can bracket out the study of actual human attitudes and desires ('psychology'). But this does not apply to the Aristotelian variety, as can be shown both from the *Nicomachean Ethics* itself and from early modern works of moral philosophy within the Aristotelian tradition.

True, Scipion Dupleix (1569–1661), who was writing technical philosophy in French long before the appearance of the *Discours de la méthode*, tells us that moral philosophy is not concerned with the soul or its faculties in themselves, only in so far as these are the subject in which habits, actions, passions, and affections inhere. He identifies the concern of ethics as human actions, in so far as these can be regulated by moral virtue ('honnesteté') and decency ('bien-séance').[21] His own treatise follows the subject matter of the *Nicomachean Ethics* fairly closely, though importing material from theology, as in the discussion of heroic virtue in Book VII, or the reference to original sin (I, Preface, 2–3) and to man's corrupt inclinations (I.7, 84). He discusses the good in general, the sovereign or ultimate good, the nature and divisions of moral virtue, and then particular virtues or kinds of virtue. He also discusses issues raised by non-Aristotelian theories, such as the Stoic theory of passion (III.10, 350–1; III.11, 367–8). He has to treat the passions anyway, since these are the subject matter of virtue, though not its whole matter, since virtue also pertains to actions of the soul such as speech (III.10, 344); but his treatment of them (III.10–11, 341–70) is not extensive, and he does not discuss them individually. There is thus relatively little here of 'psychological' interest.

---

[19] Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, I, AT VI, 6, 7–8: *OP* I, 573, 575. See also the notes on this section in the edition of the *Discours* by Étienne Gilson, 6th edn. (Paris: Vrin, 1987 (1st pub. 1925)), 116–19.

[20] Jill Kraye, 'Conceptions of Moral Philosophy', in Garber and Ayers (eds.), *Cambridge History*, II, 1279–1316 (pp. 1279–80).

[21] Scipion Dupleix, *L'Éthique ou Philosophie morale* (Paris: Laurent Sonnius, 1610), 33.

But, even though ethics does not investigate the nature of the soul as such, Aristotelian ethics rests on a certain image of the soul, as a hierarchy of powers. It has, Aristotle explains, both an irrational element and an element capable of reason. The former is subdivided into a purely vegetative element, which operates independently of reason, and an appetitive element (what the schoolmen called the 'sensitive appetite'), which resists reason, but can be made amenable to it.[22] Therefore Aristotle's ethics must take account of the relations between the rational and the irrational elements, and it does: for he makes virtue to consist in a disposition involving a certain relationship to the passions (II.v.2–4 (1105^b–1106^a)). And, though he does not discuss the passions at length in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (he does so in Book II of the *Rhetoric*), we find that his early modern commentators often fix on them as a topic for discussion. Probably they are influenced by the moral-philosophical section of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*, where there is extensive discussion of the passions in general and in particular (IaIIae, qq. 22–48). An example is the important commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* by the Coimbra Jesuits (in particular, Manuel de Góis), where the discussion of Aristotle is enriched by references to more recent writers (the Stoics, Cicero, Augustine, Boethius). Of the nine 'disputations' it comprises, one is devoted to the nature of the passions in general, analysing the received definition of them as movements of the sensitive appetite, arising from an apprehension of good or evil, and accompanied by some non-natural bodily change.[23] If we take a textbook of ethics, rather than a commentary, such as the *Ethica* of the Cistercian Eustache de Saint-Paul (Eustachius a Sancto Paulo, d. 1640), we find that, like Aquinas, he treats of the passions in general and in detail.[24] In other words, Aristotelian ethical discourse at this period has a definite 'psychological' content. This may be discerned also in the discussion of another stock Aristotelian topic: the distinction between voluntary and non-voluntary actions (*Ethics*, III.1). Aristotle denies that acts inspired by passions such as anger and desire are involuntary (III.i.21–7 (1111^{a}–^{b})). The commentators tend to agree: but at least the topic requires them to consider the sense in which we can be held responsible for passions we may not have directly chosen to indulge.[25] None the less, it might be said, this ethical tradition is not renowned, as Augustine or Montaigne is, for the subtle analysis of the play of individual feelings. But it is then surprising to come upon a passage in which Eustache de Saint-Paul deals with a conventional enough topic, the corruption of habits through the failure to exercise them. When we cease to exercise a virtue, he says, it is almost always the case that the opposite habit takes effect in acts of the will, even if only hidden and secret ones—often so secret that they escape the attention of the person in whom they take place.[26] This notion of the inaccessibility of

---

[22] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. and trans. H. Rackham, 2nd edn., Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), I.xiii.9–18 (1102^a–1103^a). Since the *Nicomachean Ethics* alone is discussed here, I henceforth refer to it simply as *Ethics* in the notes.

[23] *In libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum, aliquot conimbricensis cursus disputationes* (Lisbon: Simon Lopes, 1593), reprinted as Manuel de Góis, *Moral à Nicomaco,*

---

de Aristóteles, ed. and trans. António Alberto de Andrade, Curso conimbricense, 1 (Lisbon: Istituto de Alta Cultura, 1957), Disp. VI, q. 3, a. 1, 190–2.

[24] Eustachius a Sancto Paulo (Eustache de Saint-Paul), *Ethica, sive Summa Moralis disciplinae in tres partes divisa* (Cambridge: William Morden, 1654). This is a separate edition (they are quite common) of the second part of the author's *Summa philosophiae quadripartita*, dealing with logic, ethics, physics, and metaphysics, first published in 1609. On the importance of this textbook, see Ariew, Cottingham, and Sorell, *Descartes' 'Meditations'*, 68.

[25] The topic is discussed by, e.g. Dupleix, *L'Éthique*, III.7, 303–18; Eustachius a Sancto Paulo, *Ethica*, III.1, disp. 1, qq. 1–4, 55–63; Tarquinius Gallutius, SJ, *Explanatio et quæstiones in Aristotelis Moralium Libros*, 2 vols. paginated as one, *In Aristotelis libros quinque priores moralium ad Nicomachum nova interpretatio, commentarii, quæstiones* (Paris: Sebastien Cramoisy, 1632), *In Aristotelis libros quinque posteriores moralium ad Nicomachum nova interpretatio, commentarii, quæstiones* (Paris: Sebastien Cramoisy, 1645), III.1; I, 441–75.

[26] 'Vix fieri posse ut cessante alicujus virtutis actione oppositus illi habitus per occultos saltem & secretos ipsius voluntatis actus non producatur. [. . .] Quia tamen actus illi

psychological states or processes is not in Aquinas's examination of the topic (*ST* IaIIae, q. 53, a. 3), but it will be found, as will be seen, in many other texts of the seventeenth century, from different intellectual traditions. Perhaps this passage of Eustache could be seen as an example of how the Aristotelian tradition was not immune to the influence of such writers as Montaigne or Charron.

So far, then, we have attempted to gauge the extent to which psychological discussion finds a place in ethical discourse. But we must now follow the opposite route, and attempt to show how ethical concerns subtend and shape psychological exploration. As has been noted, Aristotle divides the soul into an irrational and a rational part. This division serves to ground an ethics based on the subordination of animal appetites to the intellectual faculties that constitute the highest part of the soul. In obeying reason, we are acting in accordance with what is best in us.[27]

Aristotle appears to suggest that this theory is widely accepted, in schools beside his own.[28] Indeed, it can be traced back to Plato. The famous simile of the charioteer in the *Phaedrus* whose task it is to manage two horses, one noble, the other base, is given in more abstract form in Book IV of the *Republic.* There Plato distinguishes between rational and appetitive parts of the soul, to which he adds the third element of *thumos*, sometimes translated as 'high spirit', whose natural function is to assist the mastery of reason over appetite.[29] In the early modern period, Aristotle's influence would still have been the stronger, but the specifically

---

sæpenumero adeò occulti sunt & taciti, ut eos ipse etiam in quo sunt non advertat' (Eustachius a Sancto Paulo, *Ethica*, II.1, disp. 2, q. 4, 45–6).

[27] Aristotle, *Ethics*, IX.viii.5–7 (1168^{b}–1169^{a}). Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*), IIaIIae, q. 25, a. 4, *ad* 3.

[28] *Ethics*, I.xiii.9 (1102a): see H. Rackham's note, p. 62 n. 2.

[29] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246–8, 253–6, in *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters*, trans. and intr. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); *Republic*, IV.14–15 (439d–441c). The translation 'high spirit' is that of Paul Shorey (Plato, *The Republic*, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946)).

Platonic teaching would have found its way into the culture through non-Platonic texts, such as Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*. Cicero restates the distinction between rational and appetitive parts of the soul with specific reference to Plato.[30] There his aim is to refute the Stoic denial of the soul's immortality (I.xxxii.78–9). Elsewhere, though, he cites the Platonic distinction to reinforce Stoic teaching. For when arguing that Stoicism offers more effective strategies for dealing with pain than Epicureanism (II.xix.44–5), he alludes to the division between the rational and irrational elements in the soul as an indication that we must learn to govern ourselves in accordance with reason, for instance, when we are trying to cope with suffering (II.xxi.47–50). Nature, he says, has given the mind (*mens*) dominion over the soul as a whole (*totus animus*) (III.v.11). We find a professed Stoic like Seneca repeating this doctrine. We acquire external goods for the sake of the body; we nurture the body for the sake of the soul (*animus*); the ancillary parts of the soul, through which we move and nourish ourselves, were given us for the sake of the principal part. The principal part itself is divided into rational and irrational elements: the latter is subordinated to the former. Just as the divine reason has authority over all things and is subordinate to none, so our reason is supreme within us, being derived from the divine reason itself. And, if this is so, it follows that happiness consists in this alone: the perfection of reason within us.[31] Here then we have a particularly clear attempt to ground ethics in a hierarchy of faculties itself derived from a divine order outside the self.

The most powerful philosophical traditions from antiquity (leaving Epicureanism aside)—namely, Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and the eclecticism of Cicero—thus bequeathed to the early modern period a conception of the soul as a hierarchical structure of faculties, so that the good life consisted in embodying that hierarchy in our own behaviour: that is to say, in ensuring that the best and noblest part of ourselves, the reason, gave the law to the rest. In other words, to divide, as we nowadays tend to, 'psychology', understood as the study of the nature and workings of the mind, from ethics, a vision of the good life for man, is to put asunder what early modern thinkers arguably thought of as intrinsically, indeed, divinely, joined together. A historical purist might therefore eschew the very word 'psychology'. In what follows, however, I shall occasionally use the term to denote an interest in the qualities and workings of the mind (passion, motive, character) apparently for its own sake, without any necessary connection with moral evaluation. I need to do this in order to make the very point that in early modern moral discourse they tend to be seen as necessarily connected, but at the same time to leave open the possibility of a certain disconnection emerging.

---

[30] Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, ed. and trans. J. E. King, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971 (1st pub. 1927)), I.xxxiii.80.

[31] Seneca, *Epistles* (*Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, ed. and trans. Richard M. Gummere, 3 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1917–25)), XCII, 1–2.

Psychology Without Ethics? (i) Montaigne

It has indeed been contended that such a disconnection takes place in the early modern period. This could be argued with respect both to literary texts, especially but not only those of the *moralistes*, and to the new philosophies of mechanistic inspiration.

The term *moraliste* is conventionally used to refer to a body of French writers (the list varies but it usually runs from Montaigne to the eighteenth-century writer Vauvenargues) considered remarkable for their insights into human behaviour, feeling, and motivation. But both its definition and its application are problematic. For some critics, what marks a writer as a *moraliste* is that his or her scrutiny of human nature eschews a normative perspective. Odette de Mourgues puts the matter succinctly: 'The French moralist studies man within the world of nature and reason in a non-metaphysical non-religious way. Moreover, he is not a *moralisateur* and has no system of ethics to propound.'[32] How we define *moraliste* depends a good deal on the range of writers to whom we apply it. Thus Odette de Mourgues see the *moraliste* perspective, defined in the sense just quoted, as characteristic of French classical literature in general: she cites La Fontaine, Racine, and Madame de Lafayette, as well as La Rochefoucauld, in illustration (*Two French Moralists*, 98). That is to say, the label is indifferent to genre: it denotes a structure of feeling, to use Raymond Williams's term, ascribed to a number of roughly contemporary, mostly literary, writers. On the other hand, if we use the word *moraliste*, as does Louis van Delft, to denote an identifiable genre of writing, defined by formal characteristics (generally in prose, non-fictional, fragmentary) as well as subject matter and attitude, then we shall have to recognize that its content admits normative as well as descriptive elements (van Delft, *Le Moraliste classique*, 87–108). In any case, the following study does not confine itself to writers recognized as *moralistes*, but admits theologians and philosophers, whose discourse is often explicitly didactic. None the less, it is worth discussing the specific case of Montaigne, since it has been so emphatically asserted that he separates his analyses of human behaviour from normative ethics (Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 13, 77–8, 189–95). (La Rochefoucauld is treated in later chapters; as for La Bruyère, it is plain that he does deal in prescriptive or normative utterances, whether or not this is seen as a departure from the *moraliste* perspective (de Mourgues, *Two French Moralists*, 98, 104).)

---

[32] Odette de Mourgues, *Two French Moralists: La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 4. See also Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*,

It is true that Montaigne seems to affirm his independence of ancient ethical discourses, installing himself as a principle or point of departure of his own search for knowledge.[33] 'J'aymerois mieux m'entendre bien en moy qu'en Cicéron. De l'experience que j'ay de moy, je trouve assez dequoy me faire sage, si j'estoy bon escholier'

---

rev. edn. 1967, trans. from the German by Robert Rovini (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 13, 77–8, 189–95. The fullest discussion of the terminological issue here is Louis van Delft's: he reaffirms the normative content of much *moraliste* discourse (*Le Moraliste classique: Essai de définition et de typologie* (Geneva: Droz, 1982)).

[33] See Ian Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 69–85.

(I had rather understand myself well in myself than in Cicero. In my own experience of myself, I find the wherewithal to become wise, provided I were a good student).[34] We might, likewise, find a manifestation of modernity in the expressed anxiety of influence (III.5, 'Sur des vers de Virgile', VS 874), the insistence on the personal testimony: the work would have been better if he had carried it out where there were educated people to help and correct him, but it would have been less his: 'et sa fin principale et perfection, c'est d'estre exactement mien' (and its main goal and perfection is to be mine through and through) (VS 875). But this would be to overlook the layers of irony in the text: having affirmed his aim to produce a work that is fully his, Montaigne goes on to speak of his 'condition singeresse et imitatrice' (apish and imitative character) (VS 875). If you are naturally a borrower, you can represent yourself fully only in a text full of borrowings.[35] In fact, the Montaignian self is permeated by a pre-existing language, and written language functions alongside the self as a principle of his activity (Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*, 82, 86–8).

If Montaigne's discourse is so interpenetrated with the discourse of others, or the Other, we should be chary of seeing him as breaking absolutely with traditional ethical frameworks. It is true that, if we think of ethics first and foremost in terms of law and obligation, this seems to concern Montaigne relatively little. In 'Sur des vers de Virgile' (III.5) the handling of the topic is remarkably non-judgemental: sex is instead treated as a domain particularly rich in opportunities to encounter oneself, to assay, or essay, oneself.

---

[34] Montaigne, 'De l'experience', *Les Essais*, ed. Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier, 3 vols. (paginated as one) (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), III.13, 1073. All references will be to this edition, abbreviated to VS, followed by the page number. Each volume corresponds to one of the three books of *Essais*.

[35] On quotations in Montaigne, see Terence Cave, 'Problems of Reading in the *Essais*', in I. D. McFarlane and Ian Maclean (eds.), *Montaigne: Essays in Memory of Richard Sayce* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 133–66 (pp. 144–53). Cave lists other discussions of the topic on p. 164 n. 9. See also his *Pré-Histoires: Textes troublés au seuil de la modernité* (Geneva: Droz, 1999), 123–7, for an analysis of the relationship between expressions of 'subjectivity' and the procedure of *imitatio*: the writer claims ownership of his thoughts and discourse, though they overlap with those of a predecessor.

Christian morality is not there endorsed: it is not even implicitly brought into view by denunciation or challenge. It seems simply absent, as if it applied to Martians rather than to ourselves. The Stoic distinction between the honourable (*honestum*) and the base or shameful (*turpe*) is similarly bracketed out.[36] Montaigne cites an anecdote of the Stoic philosopher Panaetius: when asked if falling in love was appropriate to the wise man, he replied that, leaving the wise man out of it, none of us should commit ourselves to something that enslaves us to others and renders us contemptible in our own eyes. Montaigne, in response, draws a typical distinction: yes, love can have that effect, and then Panaetius is right, but love is not so destructive to all minds: he claims that, when himself in love, he held on to some sense and discretion, and that a measure of debauchery and dissolution did not involve him in the worse vices of ingratitude, treachery, malignity, and cruelty. In itself love is a futile occupation, indecent, shameful, and unlawful ('messeante, honteuse et illegitime') (III.5, VS 891); but, properly managed, it can be, at least for some characters, conducive to the health of both mind and body (VS 891–2).

But to equate the ethical with the passing of absolute judgements of good or bad, right or wrong, honourable or shameful, is to narrow its scope. Much more pertinent to Montaigne is the Aristotelian conception of ethics in terms of virtue rather than law, even if he reworks the conception of virtue in important ways.[37] A comment of Alasdair Macintyre's on Aristotle is illuminating here: 'Aristotle takes the *telos* of human life to be *a certain kind of life*; the *telos* is not something to be achieved at some future point, but in the way our whole life is constructed' (*After Virtue*, 175). This possibility of constructing one's life as an ordered and integrated whole is central to Montaigne's ethics, as a famous passage shows:

---

[36] On the Stoic identification of moral worth (*honestum*) as the sole good, and baseness (*turpe*) as the sole evil, see Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, ed. and trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, and London: Heinemann, 1983), III.iii.11.

[37] I. D. McFarlane. 'The Concept of Virtue in Montaigne', in McFarlane and Maclean (eds.), *Montaigne*, 77–100. On the tension between an ethical system founded on virtue and one founded on law, see Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn. (London: Duckworth, 1985), 168–70, 278.

> Avez vous sceu mediter et manier votre vie? vous avez fait la plus grande besoigne de toutes. [. . .] Composer nos meurs est nostre office, non pas composer des livres, et gaigner, non pas des batailles et provinces, mais l'ordre et tranquillité à nostre conduite. (III.13, 'De l'expérience', VS 1108)
>
> Have you succeeded in thinking out and managing your life? Then you have carried out the greatest work of all. [. . .] To compose our behaviour is our task, not composing books; gaining not battles and provinces, but order and tranquillity in our conduct.

Thus, to revert to the passage just discussed from his essay on Virgil, Montaigne is not rejecting on principle the application of moral judgements to sexual behaviour, but suggesting that passions and relationships can be managed in such a way as to set aside what might seem to be shameful or wrong in them, and release their potential benefits. The same sensibility is at work when he opines that he finds love most attractive, as a spectacle, in adolescence: its very blunders and setbacks impart a kind of grace absent from love in maturity (III.5, VS 895–6). But the psychological is not apprehended separately from the ethical: passions and desires are seen as colouring and shaping the whole of our lives, and as requiring to be judged in that perspective: they are not studied as discrete mental processes. Montaigne's ethics display a fundamental affinity with the Aristotelian approach, of the happy life as one that fulfils human potential on all levels (intellectual, physical, moral, and social). More particularly, he endorses the Aristotelian notion that the reason that should regulate our behaviour is relative and proportional to different persons or circumstances.[38]

Terence Cave throws further light on the status of the ethical in Montaigne, when he observes that 'in his own reading of texts,

---

[38] Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*, 53. On the proportionality of moral reason to different agents, see *Ethics*, II.vi.4–15 (1106^a–1107^a): virtue consists in the observance of a mean, but a mean relative to us, not an intrinsic mean such as an arithmetical average.

Montaigne's frame of reference is predominantly ethical', and goes on to gloss this as follows: 'The vast collection of anecdotes, examples and sayings which he culls from other texts has the function above all of illustrating the infinite variety of forms of human behaviour. It is the training-ground of the judgement, seen here as a faculty of moral discrimination.' ('Problems of Reading', p. 137) 'Discrimination' here involves the exploration of the relationship between an author's writing and his life, and the discernment of 'the underlying mechanisms or patterns of human behaviour' (p. 139). The emphasis here is on the kind of psychological analysis that some have seen as independent of norms: but in fact, Cave argues, the quality of the literary text 'is judged on the one hand by its consonance with its author's life, on the other by the extent to which it is functional in suggesting norms of moral behaviour to the reader' (p. 139). It would thus appear that, even if Montaigne is chary of laying down the moral law, he does not constitute the concrete study of passions and desires as an object of value-free exploration.

Montaigne's *Essais* occupy an ambiguous generic position. 'His writing appears to a modern reader to lie awkwardly across the divide between imaginative literature and intellectual reflection'—not surprisingly, since he was producing a new genre, rather than locating himself in an existing generic space.[39] He borrows concepts from philosophy, and lards his discourse with allusions to philosophers; he sometimes follows philosophical procedures of argument. Yet he scorns systematic thinking or doctrinal alignment, and produces a fragmentary, endlessly proliferating text, instead of a methodical treatise aiming at definite conclusions.[40] Moreover, in his affirmation of himself, or his self, he invites the reader to encounter and interrogate his or her own affects, character, selfhood: an experience more commonly associated with the reading of literature than with that of philosophy. It is natural then to prolong the question of the relationship of psychology to ethics into the consideration of literary texts. At the same time, Montaigne's work had an undoubted philosophical impact, in damaging the prestige of established scholastic philosophy. In this way, it was a negative preparation for the development of the new mechanistic philosophies, which will be considered after further discussion of literature.

---

[39] Terence Cave, 'The Early Modern Period: 1470–1789', in Kay, Cave, and Bowie, *Short History*, 135.

[40] On Montaigne's problematic relation to philosophy, see Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*.

Psychology Without Ethics? (ii) Literature, Again

The label 'literature' itself is open to question as anachronistic. Though *littérature* is used in French in the seventeenth century, it tends to mean a personal attribute, the fact of being well read ('a man of great literature'). Only in the eighteenth century is it widely applied to denote a body or bodies of writing. *Belles-lettres* is the preferred seventeenth-century term to denote a canon of texts particularly valued not as sources of truth or moral improvement but as models of good writing for the reader to assimilate. [41] But the vogue of this term itself bears witness to Alain Viala's analysis of the emergence over the seventeenth century of a relatively autonomous literary field.[42] There is good reason to think that contemporaries tended to distinguish works, however 'serious', aimed primarily at the pleasure of the reader or spectator from those aimed primarily at disclosure of the truth or persuasions to good conduct. I use the word 'literature' descriptively, as a convenient designation for the former category (which is not to say that the works of philosophy or moral reflection studied here do not also contain some remarkably beautiful writing).[43]

[41] See Philippe Caron, *Des 'belles-lettres' à la littérature: Une archéologie des signes du savoir profane en langue française (1680–1760)* (Paris: Société pour l'Information Grammaticale and Louvain: Peeters, 1992), esp. 160–2, 186–90, 255–72.

[42] Alain Viala, *Naissance de l'écrivain: Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris: Minuit, 1985). He discusses terminology ('gens de lettres', 'poète', 'auteur', 'écrivain', 'belles-lettres', 'littérature') and the values attached to each term (pp. 270–90).

[43] It might be anachronistic to use the term *literature* not descriptively, but hermeneutically, to disclose something about the text of which it is itself unaware—as if one were putting forward a concept of literature that yielded the result, say, that Malebranche's works are really literature and La Bruyère's not.

To return now to the question of the relation of psychology and ethics in the literary text: we have to be mistrustful here of sweeping generalizations. In Corneille, the analysis of passion and motive is almost always attached to evaluation, and this in itself affects the reader's sympathies. Take a character like Maxime in *Cinna*.[44] When his confidant Euphorbe proposes that he should betray the conspiracy against Auguste in which he and Cinna are both involved, in the hope that Auguste will reward him with the hand of Émilie (whom he and Cinna both love, but who loves Cinna), Maxime shows considerable understanding both of his own emotional needs and of Émilie's likely reaction to this treachery. It is not enough to marry her; he wants her love, and she could never love a man who betrayed her lover and his own republican principles by turning informer.[45] At the same time, the reader (and even the spectator, if the actor is doing his job) is aware that his objections are not properly ethical. True, he is revolted by the idea of jeopardizing the other conspirators, but seems to be reassured by Euphorbe's suggestion that Auguste will probably spare them anyway (ll. 757–68). So he allows practical considerations as to the outcome to determine a decision that seems to require strictly ethical evaluation. The same is true of his interpretation of Émilie's likely attitude: the point is not that it would be wrong on his part to pursue a woman whose lover he had given up to certain death; the obstacle is that she would not forgive him. He continues to raise practical objections: what if Cinna were to denounce Émilie? Auguste would condemn her, rather than giving her to him (ll. 785–8). Moreover, we are made aware that resentment (at being manipulated, as he sees it, by Cinna) is an important factor in Maxime's reactions (ll. 717–29). Thus the scene stages partial psychological insight on the part of Maxime, inasmuch as we see him evaluating possible courses of behaviour and emotional reactions; and it encourages psychological insight in the spectator, in that it suggests that Maxime is really attracted to the course of action Euphorbe recommends, since practical obstacles and possible solutions are his main apparent concern. He is motivated by passion (resentment) rather than the sense of public duty he would no doubt invoke to justify his betrayal. (Were Auguste a clearly legitimate authority, there might be a duty to reveal the conspiracy against him: but at this point in the play there is a genuine doubt as to whether Auguste should be regarded as a legitimate monarch or a tyrannical usurper. Only his clemency at the end validates the former alternative.) But this insight into Maxime's motives is surely intended to solicit an ethical evaluation, and an emotional movement of repugnance on the spectator's part: this is not the way an honourable man should think, such disloyalty is detestable, Maxime will surely be punished for it . . . *Tout comprendre* here is not at all *tout pardonner*: on the contrary, comprehension assists evaluation, the application of a pre-given ethical code according to which betraying a friend is as such contemptible. Again, with the heroic characters in Corneille (Rodrigue or Polyeucte), their self-analysis is designed to show them thinking their way through to a higher moral level. Here too the 'psychological' material is designed to illustrate the ethical realm, to display ethical values in action. The view that Corneille's heroic ethic is morally indifferent seems to me doubtful.[46] It is true that Corneille's discussion of Aristotle's requirement that characters should be 'good' can be read as implying this.[47] Corneille argues here that 'good' cannot mean 'virtuous', since so many ancient and modern plays depend on wicked or weak characters. It must refer, he suggests, to 'le caractère brillant et élevé d'une habitude vertueuse, ou criminelle' (the splendour and intensity of a virtuous or wicked habit), inasmuch as it befits the character. Thus a wicked character, like his own Cléopâtre in *Rodogune* (1647), can be good in this sense: we admire the greatness of soul behind her actions, even though we detest them (*OC* III, 129). But the point, it seems to me, is not that Corneille's aesthetic is amoral, or that it solicits an amoral response: rather, it solicits a complex ethical response. The 'grandeur d'âme' Corneille attributes to Cléopâtre is not an amoral intensity of being: it is the literal French translation of *magnanimitas* (Aristotle's *megalopsychia*): that is to say, it is in itself a virtue, which ought to have been linked with the other virtues to achieve its full perfection, and the fascination of Cléopâtre is that she can display this virtue in combination with such extreme vice.[48] There is no simplistic conflation of moral virtue and appeal to the spectator in Corneille: the plays require a nuanced and critical evaluation of the behaviour and the passions they exhibit. But the ethical aspect of that evaluation is irreducible. True, Corneille is adamant that the purpose of poetry is first and foremost to please and that its moral utility is subordinate to that; but he admits that utility is a by-product of pleasure produced in the proper fashion and that a certain moral content is indeed part of the pleasure the art procures (*OC* III, 117, 119–22).

---

[44] *Cinna* was first performed in 1642, and the text published in 1643. Future references to dates of plays refer to first publication rather than first performance.

[45] Pierre Corneille, *Cinna*, III.i.769–80, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton, 3 vols., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1980–7). All references to Corneille's works are to this edition. Future references to this scene are by line numbers only.

---

[46] Lucien Goldmann takes this view, holding that in the individualist world of Corneille's theatre vice and virtue are strictly equivalent, and that the only structurally grounded value is power of personality, an 'eminently amoral category' ('Le Problème du mal: À propos de *Rodogune* et de l'*Annonce faite à Marie*', in *Structures mentales et creation culturelle*, 10/18 (Paris: Anthropos, 1970), 131–44).

[47] Corneille, *Discours de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique, OC* III, 129; Aristotle, *Poetics*, XV.1–3 (1454^a), in Aristotle, *The Poetics*, 'Longinus', *On the Sublime*, ed. and trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe, Demetrius, *On Style*, ed. and trans. W. Rhys Roberts, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, and London: Heinemann, 1982 (1st pub. 1927, rev. edn. 1932)).

---

[48] Aristotle's discussion of *megalopsychia* (greatness of soul) is in *Ethics*, IV.iii.1–34 (1123^{b}–1125^{a}). To be sure, Cléopâtre falls short of this ideal in many respects, both general and particular. Aristotle insists that the great-souled man possesses all the virtues (IV.iii.14–16, 1123^{b}–1124^{a}). She does not. She practises dissimulation and she bears grudges, both of which he thinks unworthy of the great-souled man (IV.iii.28, 1124^{b}; IV.iii.30, 1125^{a}). But she is not without virtue: she has courage, for instance. Moreover, she conforms to his dictum that 'power and wealth are desirable only for the honour they bring' (IV.iii.18, 1124^{a}), in that, although passionately devoted to royal authority, she can envisage its loss with equanimity as long as she can go out in a blaze of glory (*Rodogune*, II.i.411–14). What she wants above all is autonomy, not to be at another person's mercy (ll. 415–22): in this too, she resembles the great-souled man, 'incapable of living at the will of another' (*Ethics*, IV.iii.29, 1125^{a}). In truth, the point is not to locate her on a graduated scale of magnanimity, but to suggest that she displays, intensely, a kind of perverted magnanimity that, shorn of its link with the other virtues, inspires her, as Corneille says, to crime. For a study of the concept of magnanimity in Corneille, especially *Nicomède*, see Marc Fumaroli, *Héros et orateurs: Rhétorique et dramaturgie cornéliennes* (Geneva: Droz, 1990), 323–49.

One could argue that the link between psychological and ethical is broken in a later play by Corneille, *Othon* (1665), with its harsh scrutiny of how, in a dysfunctional system, the interwoven calculations of political and emotional interests suffocate not just ethical ideals but even genuine feeling. No doubt, the play's sombre atmosphere testifies to the Tacitist trend in seventeenth-century culture to which it has been linked by Peter Burke: Tacitus was often praised, though sometimes condemned, for his penetrating analyses of causes and motives.[49] (Even in *Rodogune*, the theme of dissimulation (II.i.395–406), could be seen as Tacitean.) Rightly, again, Burke stresses the Tacitean affinities of Racine's *Britannicus* (p. 160) (indeed, Racine proclaims his debt to Tacitus in the preface[50]). What Burke identifies as especially interesting to seventeenth-century intellectuals in Tacitus was 'not so much a particular doctrine as a style; a taste for discussing men as they really are, not as they ought to be'; a 'taste for realism in analysis, which can coexist with both approval and disapproval of the actions analysed', and which was gratified by Machiavelli as well as Tacitus (p. 166). On this showing, Tacitus would be another contributor to the realist or naturalistic strand of thinking (along with Machiavelli, Gracián, and Hobbes) to which La Rochefoucauld has been held to be tributary.[51]

In general, though, it would surely be accepted that, for Corneille, to render human behaviour intelligible, to depict characters engaging with their passions, is to exhibit failure or success in attaining moral excellence, in fulfilling the specifically human potential to think through and direct our actions by a rule of reason—not an abstract moral imperative but a practical sense of the opportunities and obligations that arise for an agent of a certain category in certain situations. But most readers of seventeenth-century literature would accept that many canonical texts from the last third of the century display a dislocation of the psychological from the ethical.[52] It is a familiar enough point, but it still needs rehearsing here: whether we think of the characters of Racine's theatre or of those of Madame de Lafayette's novels, we find them characteristically unable to regulate their passions by reason. (The Princesse de Clèves both exemplifies and eludes this generalization.) This no doubt has something to do with the emergence noted above of a relatively autonomous literary field. For part of what this autonomy means is that the pleasure of the reader or spectator emerges as the paramount value, and this in itself tends to validate an interest in 'psychology' for its own sake, or rather for the sake of its impact on the reader, independent not only of particular ethical theories, but of a general teleological ethical framework in which human nature as it is assessed against a picture of what it should be. As a result it becomes possible to identify a distinctive literary perspective of the kind discussed by Odette de Mourgues in her characterization of the French *moraliste*.

---

[49] Peter Burke, 'Tacitism', in T. A. Dorey (ed.), *Tacitus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 149–71 (Corneille is mentioned on p. 158).

[50] Racine, *Britannicus*, Préface, in *Œuvres complètes: I. Théâtre-Poésie*, ed. Georges Forestier, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 372–6; the debt is accentuated in the later version of the preface (pp. 443–5).

[51] Louis van Delft, *Littérature et anthropologie: Nature humaine et caractère à l'âge classique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 124. Burke also detects a Tacitean flavour in the *Maximes* ('Tacitism', 157).

Of course, one can trace a historical fault-line separating Corneille from the writers of a later generation such as Racine and Lafayette; one may stress the psychological impact on the French dominant class of the Fronde and its failures, of the curbing of nobiliary autonomy by the absolutist state. It might also be tempting, given the preoccupations of much of this book, to argue for the influence of Augustinian pessimism, of a view of human nature where weakness and subjugation by passion are the dominant features, and free will highly circumscribed. But this is not the particular path I wish to follow at present. For it is not precisely or only because they are unable to govern their passions by their reason and will power that one finds a divorce between the ethical and the psychological in the characters of Racine and Madame de Lafayette. There is no such divorce in the Augustinian schema itself: on the contrary, weakness and error are there interpreted as sins alienating us from a divine moral order, proofs of a Fall and of the need for redemption. What is striking about, say, *Andromaque* (1668) or *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) is not that the characters fail to subdue their passions by reason, but that it is not even clear from the texts themselves what ethical norms should be brought to bear on their plight, with what values they should identify. The texts may be saying that passion as such is doomed to illusion and frustration, which would be the lesson of Stoic philosophy. But they may also be inviting us to contemplate with fear and pity the situation of those whose doom is rather that fate deprived them of the chance to gratify their passions. This is why one can speak of a divorce between the psychological and the ethical here.

---

[52] See Terence Cave's succinct and lucid discussion in Kay, Cave, and Bowie, *Short History*, 154–7. The themes of self-deception and unconscious motive, foregrounded by Cave, are touched on in later chapters of this book.

No such divorce exists in most of the texts studied in this book. The matter of 'psychological' analysis is viewed through ethical and usually theological optical instruments. But the above discussion of texts where this is arguably not the case is justified because the point has to be made that neither the separation of the 'psychological' from the 'ethical', nor the subordination of the former to the latter, can be claimed to typify French writing of the later seventeenth century. We cannot, I think, use works where subordination prevails (say, works of Augustinian theology or moral reflection) as a key to the interpretation of those (like *Andromaque* or *La Princesse de Clèves*) where separation appears to take place, especially when we are dealing with literary texts, that, qua literary, could operate at a distance from an ethical framework. With these, we can use the Augustinian anthropology (or some other) to trace possible significations, but not to validate these as correct.

It is time now to turn to the philosophers' more systematic and abstract investigations of the relation between ethics and the workings of the human mind.

Psychology Without Ethics? (iii) The New Philosophies

Alongside the survival of traditional, mainly Aristotelian teaching, seventeenth-century moral philosophy sees the emergence of a conception of moral philosophy as 'a systematic science, grounded on logically rigorous deductions from self-evident principles' rather than on classical or Christian authority.[53] In particular, the mechanistic revolution in thought tended to privilege efficient over final causality in the study of nature. This move could be repeated in the human sphere. This is strikingly true of Hobbes. He espouses a mechanistic account of psychological processes, volition as well as sensation: 'As in Sense, that which is really within us is [. . .] only Motion, caused by the action of externall objects [. . .] so, when the action of the same object is continued from the Eyes, Eares, and other organs to the Heart; the reall effect there is nothing but Motion, or Endeavour; which consisteth in Appetite, or Aversion, to, or from the object moving.'[54]

This he links with an abandonment of the whole ancient and Christian teleological ethical framework, according to which our moral life had to be conceived in relation to the pursuit of a supreme or sovereign good, transcending individual preferences:

> Whatsoever is the object of any mans Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth *Good*: and the object of his Hate, and Aversion, *Evill*; And of his Contempt, *Vile* and *Inconsiderable*. For these words of Good, Evill, and Contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common Rule of Good and Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves. (I.6, 39)
>
> For there is no such *Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme,) nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers. (I.11, 70)

---

[53] Kraye, 'Conceptions of moral philosophy', 1279.

[54] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1st pub. 1651), ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), I.6, 40.

Moreover, it is arguable that Hobbes's thought had some effect on seventeenth-century French writers such as La Fontaine or La Rochefoucauld.[55]

Like Hobbes, Spinoza challenges any attempt to preserve an ethical doctrine founded on a supposed specificity of human nature, in virtue of which we are exempted from the laws of the material universe. On the contrary, he argues, what applies to nature applies to human kind. He criticizes discussions of the emotions based on a false conception of human nature as an empire within the empire of nature as a whole: human acts and appetites obey the same laws as the rest of nature and can thus be discussed by the same methods as we would apply to lines, planes, and bodies.[56] He reduces finality, the end for which we supposedly act, to appetite (*Ethics*, IV, def. 7). But this is emphatically not to isolate the psychological as a separate sphere: the analysis presupposes his metaphysical system established in the first two parts of the *Ethics*, and it will issue in the formulation of precise ethical imperatives in the last part. What is, arguably, new is the order in which he works: no more than Hobbes does he begin by identifying an ultimate good for mankind, and then working back to specific imperatives. Good and evil are relative notions, formed by comparison, not absolute values (IV, Preface); what is good is what we know for certain will be useful to us (IV, def. 1). But, unlike Hobbes, he therefore does not reduce the good to whatever an individual happens to think of as good: for, when I know for certain what is good for me, I do not just 'happen to think' of it as good. The mind acting according to reason understands that nothing is useful to it, or in other words good, but what conduces to understanding (IV.26–7), and thus in the end we can go so far as to say that the knowledge of God is the supreme good (IV.28). The famous remark quoted above in which he speaks of studying acts and appetites as if he were dealing with lines, planes, and bodies does not imply that the analysis treats them as ethically neutral. On the contrary, the passions are confused ideas, in which the mind is passive (III, General Definition of the Affects: Explanation), whereas the mind is active in so far as it possesses adequate ideas and is led by reason (IV.24, and cf. III.3). In other words, the 'psychological' is analysed not within a positivist or objectivist perspective, but within an ambitious metaphysico-ethical scheme of values. Indeed, Spinoza has been convincingly argued to be deeply indebted to the Stoic tradition.[57]

---

[55] Quentin Skinner, 'Hobbes and his Disciples in France and England', in *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), III, *Hobbes and Civil Science*, 308–23, shows the extent of Hobbes's immediate influence in France, as borne out by his correspondence with members of scientific circles. Connections with writers outside those circles are more difficult to establish. La Fontaine's line 'Ne vous êtes-vous pas l'un à l'autre des loups' ('Les Compagnons d'Ulysse', *Fables*, ed. Marc Fumaroli, 2 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1985), XII.1, l. 94) is usually taken to be an allusion to Hobbes's 'Homo homini lupus' (*De cive*, Preface), but this of course does not necessarily prove any more significant connection.

[56] Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics* (1st pub. 1677), Part III, Preface; see *Ethics* (*Éthique*, Latin text with a French translation by Bernard Pautrat (Paris: Seuil, 1988)).

The investigation of human passion and motivation in two 'modern' thinkers of the seventeenth century has thus been divorced from a teleological ethical perspective. It has not yet become an autonomous science of 'psychology', in that it is subordinated to politics (Hobbes) or to a metaphysical but non-teleological scheme of ethics (Spinoza). The bonds between the 'psychological' and the ethical, however, have been loosened, even if, as in Spinoza, the purpose is rather to knit them up again more tightly.

Descartes's Ethics: (i) Humanity and the Divine Order

In Descartes, on the other hand, we might expect to find a mechanistic approach to the physical aspect at least of psychological processes, capable of being studied independently of an overarching ethical schema. True, Descartes still accepts much of the scheme of values of traditional ethics: understanding how passions work will help us regulate them. The exposition of psycho-physical mechanisms is always conjoined with the discussion of how we ought to be behave, how we can best operate the mechanism. Each of the three parts of *Les Passions de l'âme* (1649) ends with ethical considerations: at the close of Part One, Descartes considers how the soul can obtain control of its passions (§§45–50); Part Two ends with an examination of how desire in particular can be regulated, by the cultivation in particular of 'inner emotions of the soul', especially the self-satisfaction that comes from virtue, as a preservative against the passions stimulated by outside objects (§§144–8); Part Three, which of course also contains the crucial disquisition on *générosité* (§§152–6, 161), concludes with a 'general remedy for the passions' (§§211–12). On the other hand, the mechanistic approach apparently precludes a teleological perspective: in *Les Passions de l'âme* Descartes does not ask what kind of fulfilment is postulated by the kind of creature we are, towards what end we, as a species, are inclined by our basic qualities and dispositions. Indeed it has been argued that he puts ethics altogether on a new basis, stripping the universe, so to speak, of its capacity to embody the values to which we should aspire, and '[situating] the moral sources within us'.[58] The expression is Charles Taylor's, and here we must take account of the powerful analysis of the development of Western ethics he puts forward in *Sources of the Self*, for in it Descartes plays a pivotal role. But to grasp what is at stake in Taylor's analysis of Descartes, we need to glance at his overarching set of categories.

---

[57] Susan James, 'Spinoza the Stoic', in Tom Sorell (ed.), *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 289–316.

Taylor distinguishes 'procedural' from 'substantive' conceptions of ethics: 'I call a notion of reason substantive where we judge the rationality of an agent or their thoughts and feelings in substantive terms. This means that the criterion for rationality is that one get it right.' (p. 85) Thus, to take Taylor's example, someone who believes that the best life is one in which one fulfils the most sensual desires is simply wrong—or, in other words, not fully rational. A procedural notion of reason breaks the link between being rational and being right. 'The rationality of an agent or his thoughts is defined by how he thinks, not in the first instance by whether the outcome is substantively correct' (p. 86). And Taylor takes the Cartesian notion of clear and distinct ideas as an instance of this view. What matters first and foremost is that we have a procedure for attaining truth, and the truth so attained is validated by the conformity of its means of attainment to the procedure.

---

[58] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 143. I ought to say that, despite my disagreement with aspects of Taylor's analysis, I have found it immensely illuminating.

This distinction is then brought to bear along historical lines. The ancients thought of practical reason in substantive terms: it required a 'sense or vision of the good', the perception of 'an order which in some sense is in nature' (p. 86).[59] The moderns, be they Kantians or utilitarians, have taken the procedural route. They no longer recognize an order 'which in some sense is in nature' and which 'determines what ought to be done'. Primacy is given instead to the agent's own desires or will, and how far these can be rationally justified depends not on the content of that attempted justification but on the procedure by which it is arrived at (p. 86). The psychological life, the life of passions, thoughts, and decisions, is not subordinated to an ethical structure built into the personality itself in the form of a hierarchy of powers. It is a mechanism that we have to regulate as effectively as possible. Taylor pursues this idea in a searching analysis:

> Descartes's ethic, just as much as his epistemology, calls for disengagement from world and body and the assumption of an instrumental stance towards them. (p. 155)
>
> Rationality is no longer defined substantively, in terms of the order of being, but rather procedurally, in terms of the standards by which we construct orders in science and life. [. . .] The judgement now turns on properties of the activity of thinking rather than on the substantive beliefs that emerge from it. (p. 156)

The result is 'an internalization of moral sources', since the 'sources of moral strength can no longer be seen as outside us in the traditional mode' (p. 151).

---

[59] Taylor's chapter on Plato (pp. 115–26) expands on this idea.

> When the hegemony of reason becomes rational control, it is no longer understood as our being attuned to the order of things we find in the cosmos, but rather as our life being shaped by the orders which we construct according to the demands of reason's dominance, i.e. the 'jugements fermes et déterminés touchant la connaissance du bien et du mal' [*Passions*, §48] which we have resolved to live by. (p. 155)

Instead, the virtuous man, in the Cartesian schema, acts in order to maintain 'the agent's sense of his own dignity as a rational being' (p. 152), which is what Descartes means by 'genérosité' (p. 155). Thus Descartes emerges as a key figure in the development of the antithesis Taylor aims to put in question, between human beings, with their projects and values, and an intrinsically meaningless reality. The term 'instrumental' is important, as is 'disengaged', because it enables Taylor to connect Descartes to a whole more recent controversy, since Romanticism, about 'the disengaged instrumental view of life' (pp. 499–513). But this controversy is beyond my scope: the question is purely with Descartes's ethics. To connect back with the terms of my discussion, if Descartes is indeed to be placed on the 'procedural' side of the fence, it would follow that his 'psychology' was not subordinated to an 'ethics' in the sense of a vision of the good for human nature.

I am not quite convinced, however, that Descartes evacuates the substantive content of rationality to the extent suggested by Taylor. True, the famous definition of 'générosité' stresses the procedure by which moral truth is attained, and the efficacy with which we act on our perceptions of it:

> La vraie générosité, qui fait qu'un homme s'estime au plus haut point qu'il se peut légitimement estimer, consiste seulement partie en ce qu'il connaît qu'il n'y a rien qui véritablement lui appartienne que cette libre disposition de ses volontés, ni pourquoi il doive être loué ou blâmé sinon pour ce qu'il en use bien ou mal, et partie en ce qu'il sent en soi-même une ferme et constante résolution d'en bien user, c'est-à-dire de ne manquer jamais de volonté pour entreprendre et exécuter toutes les choses qu'il jugera être les

> meilleures. Ce qui est suivre parfaitement la vertu. (*Les Passions de l'âme*, §153, AT XI 445–6: *OP* III, 1067)[60]
>
> True magnanimity, which makes a man esteem himself as highly as he may legitimately do so, consists only in this: partly, in his knowing that there is nothing that truly belongs to him barring this free disposition of his volitions, and no reason why he should be praised or blamed except in so far as he makes good or bad use of these, and partly, in his feeling inside himself a firm and steady resolution to make good use of them, that is, never to lack the willpower to undertake and carry through whatever things he shall judge to be the best. This is what is meant by following virtue perfectly.

The will is not simply an appetite, as it was for Aquinas, nor is it a form of love, as for Augustine: stress is laid instead on its productive power, its enabling us to undertake and execute.[61] One can see why this might be characterized as an 'instrumentalist' conception, as equally why Descartes's ethics might be seen as procedural rather than substantive in content. But Descartes's ethics cannot quite be reduced to the instrumental or procedural approach. It has some kind of content, even if it is not 'substantive' in the sense of a vision of the good as realized in the intelligible structure of the universe as a whole. For in these passages Descartes is not defining virtue as such, but the *pursuit* of virtue ('suivre la vertu'). Naturally, he defines the pursuit, a process, in procedural terms. But that does not imply that he thought of virtue in itself as the product of a procedure. What he is saying is rather that one who (sometimes) performs virtuous actions, moral duties, may not necessarily be pursuing virtue. He may not really know why he is acting in that way, or he may lack the will-power always so to act. To that extent, he would not be entitled to the legitimate self-esteem Descartes terms 'générosité'. This line of argument is borne out in the dedicatory letter to Elisabeth that precedes the *Principles*. Here Descartes distinguishes true and apparent virtue, and then again between two kinds of true virtue. Apparent virtues, first of all, are in fact vices, that, being rarer than their contrary vices, are falsely esteemed more highly than the mean in which virtue consists.[62] To fear danger too little is rarer than to fear it overmuch, and so rashness is mistaken for a virtue, and often makes more of an impact on people's minds than true courage. As for true virtues, there is a difference between those derived from an exact knowledge of the truth, and those accompanied by ignorance and error, as when piety is inspired by fear, or courage by despair. Such virtues are always accompanied by some imperfection, whereas those founded on the pure knowledge of the good are pure and perfect, and can indeed be subsumed under the single name of wisdom (AT IX-2, 21–2: *OP III*, 87–8).[63] The imperfect virtues, though, are still genuine, even if the agent's relationship to them is faulty. It seems plain that virtue exists outside ourselves, and is not created by us.

---

[60] Cf. Descartes to Elisabeth, 18 Aug. 1645, AT IV, 277: *OP* III, 598; *Les Passions de l'âme*, §§48, 148, AT XI, 367, 442: *OP* III, 992, 1064. Rohou situates Descartes in a narrative of the evolution of the term *générosité* (*Le XVIIe Siècle*, 302–3; cf. pp. 141–8, 177–82, 230–46).

[61] For St Thomas, the will is the intellectual appetite (as distinct from the sensitive or animal appetite), by which we pursue what we conceive to be good for us: *ST* Ia, q. 82, a. 5. For Augustine, 'will' is synonymous with 'love' in the sense that a good, or evil, will is a good, or bad love (*De civitate Dei* (*The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. George E. McCracken et al., 7 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press and London: Heinemann, 1957–72)), XIV.7).

Consider also a possible objection to Cartesian ethics. It would apparently legitimize the world view of a systematic libertine: the kind of character one might find in de Sade. For he or she acts systematically and consistently in accordance with a firm judgement of good and bad. True, this is a flagrant inversion of the ordinary judgement of good and bad: none the less, it is a judgement the agent has made, and on which he or she acts with an exemplary resolution that permits the greatest self-satisfaction. But it is hard to imagine that Descartes would recognize this as an application of his ethical code. The fact is that the hypothetical Cartesian libertine has taken formulations like these just quoted in which Descartes explains what he means by 'suivre la vertu' as if they were offering a complete definition of virtue. They are not: they are simply glosses explaining how the Cartesian concept of virtue differs from the ordinary kind, by being more stringent. That is to say, it requires there to be an element of personal judgement on which to base our actions, as well as a determination to pursue the chosen kind of action through thick and thin. Thus, someone who does not think for himself or herself is not really virtuous, nor is someone whose performance of moral duties is half-hearted or contingent on favourable circumstances. But that does not mean that Descartes dispenses with the notion of acting in conformity to a moral law. 'Thinking for oneself' is a necessary condition of forming the correct ethical judgements, but it is not necessarily offered as a sufficient condition. Take, for comparison's sake, the case of established beliefs in the sphere of non-moral truth. The difference between the Cartesian meditator and the ordinary person is not that the latter thinks $2 + 3 = 6$, when the former knows $2 + 3 = 5$. The difference is that the meditator knows why he can say with certainty that $2 + 3 = 5$, whereas the ordinary person just takes it for granted. Of course, in certain areas, the meditator's views differ from the ordinary person's, as regards the nature of the relationship of mind and body, for instance. But, from Descartes's point of view, if the ordinary person were capable of meditating, he or she would come to the same conclusion: it is true, at a certain level, that good sense is the most widely shared thing in the world (*Discours de la méthode*, I, AT VI, 1–2: *OP* I, 568); whereas the libertine's is essentially an anti-morality: it depends on everyone else being enslaved to their false values. So there is no reason to think that Descartes upheld an ethical conception that could be adapted to authorize individuals to form judgements in flagrant contradiction to those commonly accepted and incapable of being universally adopted. Rather, it looks as if he accepted that there must be some substantial content to virtue, over and above the procedural requirements that we form our judgements ourselves and execute them with resolution. It would seem, in the absence of any indication to the contrary, that this content does not differ from that of the virtues as traditionally conceived, though there is one aspect of virtue—concern for the public good—that Descartes particularly stresses, as will presently be shown. But in any case, to return to the terms of our argument, if the above is correct, he is not sponsoring an approach to psychology indifferent to ethical considerations of a traditional kind.

---

[62] It might seem strange to hear Descartes speaking in such Aristotelian accents: but he had a much higher respect for the ancients' moral philosophy than for their metaphysics. They built their moral philosophy on mud and sand, but it still took the form of magnificent palaces (*Discours de la méthode*, I (AT VI, 7–8: *OP* I, 575)). The praise is tinged with irony, but it is not all irony. In the letter to Elisabeth of 18 Aug. 1645, discussed presently, he attempts to reconcile the pagan philosophers' different conceptions of the sovereign good (AT IV, 275–7: *OP* III, 596–7). He never discusses metaphysical problems in relation to other philosophers' solutions. This attempt to synthesize and reconcile in the domain of moral philosophy is itself traditional. Thus, in *De finibus*, Cicero argues that the difference between Stoic ethical positions and those of the Old Academy and the Peripatetics are more verbal than substantial (III.iii.10, IV.xx.56–xxii.62). He was followed by Augustine (*De civitate Dei*, IX.4), who likewise attempts to minimize the Stoics' and Peripatetics' divergence in regard to the passions.

[63] Descartes is here holding to the traditional thesis of the interdependence of the virtues. See e.g. *ST* IaIIae, q. 65, a. 1.

Then again, we need to pay attention both to Descartes's metaphysico-theological framing of his ethics and to the relative autonomy of ethics within his system. Descartes lays more stress on providence than Taylor's account leaves room for when he contrasts Descartes's conception of reason from that of the Stoics (*Sources of the Self*, 147). The letter to Elisabeth of 18 August 1645, in which Descartes severely criticizes Seneca's *De vita beata*, seems to bear out Taylor's position. Descartes seems not to see the link in Stoic thought between living according to nature and living according to reason, between our own nature as rational creatures and the order of the world established by God, which reason helps us to grasp. He therefore does not think that Seneca has shown how beatitude derives from submission to the order of things, or, in more Christian terms, the will of God.[64]

But the point is, perhaps, not that there is no connection between the two but that Seneca has failed to show it. In his next letter but one to Elisabeth, Descartes discusses the first part of his twofold definition of virtue: the need to 'discerner ce qui est le meilleur en toutes les actions de la vie' (to discern what is best in all the actions of life) (to Elisabeth, 15 Sept. 1645, AT IV, 291: *OP* III, 605). The word 'discerner' seems to imply that the good is not determined or constructed by us. The first requirement is 'la connaissance de la vérité' (the knowledge of truth), and we must note here that this relationship to truth is substantive, in Taylor's terms, not procedural. If we do not know that there is a God, it will not matter how well we have endeavoured to reason by the method: we must have got it wrong (just as a would-be Cartesian who failed to grasp the proofs of the existence of God, but tried otherwise to follow the method could not claim any certain knowledge).[65] But this knowledge of God is more than a guarantee of further metaphysical and scientific deductions: it has its own benefit, in inclining us to love God and submit to his will.

---

[64] To Elisabeth, 18 Aug. 1645, AT IV, 271–4: *OP* III, 593–4, and see 593 n. 2.

> Cela nous apprend à recevoir en bonne part toutes les choses qui nous arrivent, comme nous étant expressément envoyées de Dieu; et parce que le vrai objet de l'amour est la perfection, lorsque nous élevons notre esprit à le considérer tel qu'il est, nous nous trouvons naturellement si enclins à l'aimer, que nous tirons même de la joie de nos afflictions, en pensant que sa volonté s'exécute en ce que nous les recevons. (AT IV, 291–2: *OP* III, 605–6)
>
> This teaches us to take in good part everything that befalls us, as being expressly sent us by God; and because the true object of love is perfection, whenever we lift up our mind so as to consider him as he is [that is, perfect], we find ourselves naturally so inclined to love him that we even find joy in our afflictions, when we think that his will is being carried out in the fact of our receiving them.

---

[65] Taylor (*Sources of the Self*, 86) acknowledges the importance in Descartes's system of the 'substantive truth' that God exists: I want to emphasize it rather more. In the *Second Replies*, when arguing (as he had in Part IV of the *Discours de la méthode*, AT VI, 37–9: *OP* I, 610–11) that an atheist can have no certain knowledge, Descartes asserts that it is entirely irrelevant whether he may imagine that he has a demonstrative proof of the non-existence of God, since these so-called demonstrations are false (AT VII, 141/IX, 111: *OP* II, 565). Since these demonstrations are hypothetical, apart from the one put forward for the sake of argument by the objectors (*Second Objections*, AT VII, 125/IX, 99: *OP* II, 545) and briefly refuted by Descartes (*Second Replies*, AT VII, 141–2/IX, 111: *OP* II, 565–6), it is clear that Descartes sets much more store by the substantive falsity of their conclusion than by the procedures by which it has been reached.

Descartes's wisdom, then, begins no less than Stoicism in acquiescence in the providential order; what is more, though the physical universe is not the embodiment of a scheme of value that can be ethically assimilated, God himself exists as the Good who is, for the sake of what he is, the object of love. The Good has not disappeared from Descartes's moral universe, though from the physical universe it may seem to have done. Even from there it has not in fact disappeared entirely: at least, the physical universe of Cartesian science is not to be taken purely as a value-neutral entity. Properly considered, it can provide some spiritual benefit. The limited universe of the medieval world view fosters an anthropocentric image of it, as created purely for our benefit, and this inclines us to seek a this-worldly fulfilment. The grandeur of the universe revealed by Cartesian science helps us overcome this parochialism. But, even more importantly, the real distinction between soul and body itself has moral implications. For if our soul is capable of existing without the body, if it is a 'nobler' kind of being, its contentments are not confined to this life, and this helps us to detach ourselves from the world and to overcome the fear of death (to Elisabeth, 15 Sept. 1645, AT IV, 292: *OP* III, 606). Here, then, there is, despite the break in cosmology, some affinity with the Stoic and Aristotelian–Thomist anthropologies: we possess a faculty higher than mere sensation, and to search for contentment through sensation would be amputating ourselves of what is best in us (the word 'nobler' is a revealing indication of the persistence of this hierarchical view of being). There is no longer a hierarchy of value *within* the soul; but the soul retains its primacy of value over the body. If this is so, then, we cannot altogether follow Taylor in identifying Descartes's ethics as procedural in nature.

The mechanistic philosophy requires Descartes to adapt some traditional ethical themes, such as the mastery of the passions, because it gives him a new theory of how the passions work. But, unlike Hobbes, he does not attempt to rethink ethics altogether in terms of the mechanistic philosophy. The mechanistic perspective is alone valid within physics, but it cannot be generalized beyond that context. Thus Descartes explains, in the same letter to Elisabeth, that an injury, say, should be scientifically understood in mechanistic terms, as the result of bodies moving in blind acquiescence to the laws of motion (that is how Spinoza would have us view it). But Descartes acknowledges that in another perspective we should consider it as expressly visited on us by God. The two perspectives are not reconcilable to our finite minds, but each is valid in its sphere. To be sure, the image of the tree of knowledge depicts ethics as a branch issuing from the trunk of physics, itself rooted in the truths of metaphysics.[66] But this does not mean that ethical perspectives are wholly subordinated to those of physics: on the contrary. When Descartes discusses whether we should seek for final causes in nature, he tends to link it to the question whether the world has been created for our sake. Scientifically speaking, the answer to both questions is no.[67] But, when he discusses these questions, Descartes tends to draw a distinction between the scientific and the moral perspective, and, within the latter, the answer is different. It is a good and pious thought, from a moral point of view ('in Ethicis'), to think that God has made all for our sake (*Principles*, III.3, AT VIII, 81/IX-2, 104: *OP* III, 222). This encourages us to love God and feel grateful to him; what is more, it is true in so far as there is nothing we cannot make use of, since to consider it affords exercise for the mind and gives us a reason to praise God. Likewise, in the letter to Hyperaspistes he admits that we can say that all things were created for God's glory: this is true in ethics, and in relation to the human species, since we are all bound to praise God for all his works.[68]

There is, besides, an exception to Descartes's dismissal of the search for final causes in nature—namely, the human being as a compound of soul and body. From a mechanical point of view, we can understand the process of sensation in its physical aspects, in terms of the stimulation of nerve filaments connecting the sense organs to the brain. But we shall not understand it fully, if we do not go further and conclude that the cerebral motions that deliver particular sensations to the mind do so in order to preserve us in being. The senses have been implanted in us by nature for this purpose, and thus assure us of God's power and goodness (Meditation VI, AT VII, 87–8/IX, 69–70: *OP* II, 233–4/501). But this imparts an ethical dimension to the philosophical distinction between the error of seeking in the senses the principles of our knowledge and the truth that they function to conserve the union of mind and body. Empiricism, then, is a kind of ingratitude: a perversion of the God-given function of our various capacities. The instrumental judgement that we should use our abilities each for its proper function is enriched by the appeal to a divine purpose in nature, even if our grasp of such purpose is strictly limited and partial.

---

[66] *Principles*, letter-preface to the French edition, AT IX-2, 14: *OP* III, 779–80.

[67] *Principles*, III.2–3, AT VIII, 80–1/IX-2, 104: *OP* III, 222–3; to Hyperaspistes, Aug. 1641, §10, AT III, 431–2 (translation in *OP* II, 370); *Fifth Replies*, IV.1, AT VII, 374–5: *OP* II, 821.

[68] To Hyperaspistes, §10, AT III, 431: *OP* II, 370. Cf. also to Chanut, 6 June 1647, AT V, 53–5: *OP* III, 738–9.

In this acknowledgement of different perspectives, both valid, but incapable of being entertained simultaneously, there is an affinity with Descartes's assertion, in the letter to Elisabeth of 28 June 1643, that we cannot simultaneously entertain the conception of the distinction between soul and body, and that of their union, although we have, in different contexts, to think both (AT III, 691–5: *OP* III, 44–8). This suggests that we cannot hope to derive Descartes's ethical system in its entirety from his philosophy of nature and dualistic metaphysics. It still has recourse to traditional moral sources, the doctrine of a beneficent creator who has, from a certain point of view, made the universe for us and for his glory.

Descartes's Ethics: (ii) Virtue and Happiness

On the other hand, one might argue that by accepting an Epicurean account of the supreme good Descartes selects the ancient tradition that most radically divorces ethics from an order of value embodied in the universe. He writes to Elisabeth that:

> Épicure n'a pas eu tort, considérant en quoi consiste la béatitude, et quel est le motif, ou la fin à laquelle tendent toutes nos actions, de dire que c'est la

volupté en général, c'est-à-dire le contentement de l'esprit. (18 Aug. 1645, AT IV, 276: *OP* III, 597)

Epicurus was not mistaken, when considering what beatitude consists in, and what the motive or goal is towards which all our actions tend, to say that it is pleasure in general, that is, the contentment of the mind.

Descartes notes that Epicurus' pleasure should not be interpreted as meaning sensual gratification, and this pleasure that is the supreme good is unattainable without virtue (as indeed some Epicureans taught) (AT IV, 276–7: *OP* III, 597).[69] But, in point of fact, he is not exclusively committed to Epicureanism: on the contrary, he is attempting to synthesize the three main ancient schools, Aristotelian, Stoic, and Epicurean. Aristotle was right to see the sovereign good as composed of all the perfections of which human nature is capable, those of the body as well as the soul, and Zeno the Stoic was right to see that virtue has a special place among goods in that it alone depends wholly on our own free will (AT IV, 275–6: *OP* III, 596–7). The trouble is that, although the knowledge of duty is capable of inducing us to carry out good actions, right action cannot be an end in itself, for the ultimate end of all our actions is beatitude, and this can be defined only in terms of pleasure ('cela ne nous feroit toutefois jouir d'aucune béatitude, s'il ne nous en revenait aucun plaisir') (AT IV, 276: *OP* III, 597). If we combine the Stoic and Epicurean approaches, while bearing in mind the Aristotelian doctrine that happiness must include the body as well as the soul (which rules out a hardline Stoic view), we have the solution: the supreme good is happiness—that is, pleasure; but we cannot attain pleasure except through virtue, since only over virtue do we have full control. We need to know the true path to true pleasure, as Descartes explains by means of an analogy. In an archery competition, unless the prize is displayed, the sight of the target is not a sufficient incentive to shoot; yet, if you fail to hit the target, no amount of desire for the prize will do. So virtue, the target, needs a prize to make it desirable, and the prize is contentment; but, conversely, there is no contentment without virtue:

---

[69] Torquatus takes this view in Cicero's *De finibus*, I.xviii.57–61. Jill Kraye notes that this becomes a commonplace of seventeenth-century defences of Epicureanism ('Conceptions of Moral Philosophy', 1295–8).

> La vertu, qui est le blanc, ne se fait pas fort désirer, lorsqu'on la voit toute seule; et le contentement, qui est le prix, ne peut être acquis, si ce n'est qu'on la [la vertu] suive. (AT IV, 277: *OP* III, 597).
>
> Virtue, which is the bull, is not especially attractive when seen on its own; and contentment, which is the prize, cannot be gained, if we do not pursue virtue.

But if contentment is the prize of virtue, who is the prize-giver? There are two ways of dealing with this question, to which, since he does not ask it, Descartes gives no answer. One is to argue that the question mistakenly separates the natural fruit of an activity from the activity itself. For the first-class archer the true prize is not the bag of gold, or whatever, offered by the local squire, but the satisfaction of seeing the arrow thud into its target, despite all the obstacles of distance, wind, pressure. The point would be that we are so constituted that the successful performance of an activity, the successful exercise of our powers, brings satisfaction, irrespective of any extrinsic gain. This might be how Descartes would answer the question: but it is a very Aristotelian answer (see *Ethics*, X.iv.5–11 (1174^b–1175^a)). The other answer would be to say that God is the prize-giver in that he has established the link between virtue and pleasure. Indeed, in a sense the answers merge, since Descartes would not accept any notion of nature as a power independent of God. Thus Descartes's synthesis of the ancient ethical systems, his coupling of pleasure as the supreme good with virtue as the only means of attaining it, remains within a traditional perspective on happiness as depending, in virtue of a divine dispensation, on human beings' fullest exercise of their natural powers. Nor is this happiness exclusively the reward of virtuous action: for we can experience the greatest happiness possible in this life more directly by the contemplation of the divine majesty, a foretaste of the happiness promised by faith (Meditation III, AT

VII, 52/IX, 42: *OP* II, 205/454). In locating the supreme happiness in contemplation, Descartes, again, is at one with Aristotle (*Ethics*, X.vii.1–9 (1177^a–1178^a)). In many ways, then, Descartes's ethical perspective is more traditional than it might seem.

As I suggested earlier, the definition of the pursuit of virtue just quoted indicates the procedure to be followed in the quest for virtue, but is not intended to specify the 'matter' or content of virtue, still less to establish the procedure for its own sake as part of a generalized instrumental approach to ethics. As far as the matter of virtue goes, it seems to be specified in the first instance by the perspective in which Descartes presents issues of morality as distinct from physical philosophy: that is, our dependence on and obligations towards God. But there is another dimension: our relationship to other human beings, and here I think it is arguable that Descartes strikes a new note. One is so used to the perception of Descartes in terms of an isolated ego sceptical of the very reality of other people, reducing the passers-by to spectres or automata (Meditation II, AT VII, 32/IX, 25: *OP* II, 188–9/426–7), that it is almost disconcerting to observe how much his ethics depends on relationships with others.

Thus in the sixth part of the *Discours de la méthode* he speaks of 'la loi qui nous oblige à procurer, autant qu'il est en nous, le bien général de tous les hommes' (the law that obliges us to procure, as far as we are able, the general good of all human beings) (AT VI, 61: *OP* I, 634). Then again he goes on to speak of 'tous ceux qui désirent en général le bien des hommes, c'est-à-dire tous ceux qui sont en effet vertueux, et non point par faux semblant, ni seulement par opinion' (all who desire in general the good of human beings, that is, all those who are virtuous truly, rather than by a false appearance or merely in other people's opinion) (AT VI, 65: *OP* I, 637–8). To be useful to no one is to be worthless (AT VI, 66: *OP* I, 638). This does not prove that a hermit, say, is worthless: for all we know, he may indeed be benefiting us by his prayers. But someone whose 'virtue' terminates in himself, as a mere set of good personal habits, and does not significantly benefit others, would not earn Descartes's approbation.

As is well known, Descartes held that the eternal truths were free creations of God: I see very clearly that all the lines of a circle drawn from the centre to the circumference are equal, but God could have created a world in which they are not so.[70] Descartes would presumably hold the same of moral laws (as, in the fourteenth century, did Ockham): it is God's decree, not an intrinsically necessary relationship, that makes murder wrong. What differentiates the moral from the metaphysical is that clear and distinct perceptions are less requisite in the former than the latter. A confused sense that the world needs a cause outside itself is entirely worthless metaphysically. A confused sense that I ought, say, to do good to other people may help me to be a decent person, if not to attain the heights of virtue as earlier defined. This is brought out in another passage that sets out the relationship between virtue and the benefit of other people.

Après qu'on a ainsi reconnu la bonté de Dieu, l'immortalité de nos âmes et la grandeur de l'univers, il y a encore une vérité dont la connaissance me semble fort utile: qui est que, bien que chacun de nous soit une personne séparée des autres, et dont, par conséquent, les intérêts sont en quelque façon distincts de ceux du reste du monde, on doit toutefois penser qu'on ne saurait subsister seul, et qu'on est, en effet, l'une des parties de l'univers, et plus particulièrement encore l'une des parties de cette terre, l'une des parties de cet État, de cette société, de cette famille, à laquelle on est joint par sa demeure, par son serment, par sa naissance. (To Elisabeth, 15 Sept. 1645, AT IV, 292–3: *OP* III, 607)

After we have thus recognized the goodness of God, the immortality of our souls and the greatness of the universe, there is a further truth the knowledge of which appears to me very profitable; to wit, that, although each of us is a person separated from all the rest, and whose interests are thus in some sense distinct from everybody else's, we should none the less bear in mind that we cannot exist on our own, and that we are, in fact, one of the parts of the universe, and more particularly still one of the parts of this earth, one of the parts of a particular state, of a particular society, of a particular family, to which one is joined by one's dwelling place, by one's oath of allegiance, and by one's birth.

---

[70] To Mersenne, 27 May 1630, AT I, 151–3: *OP* I, 268. Taylor notes that the new mechanical science was partly impelled by an anti-teleological morality: a voluntaristic conception of God's power to define good and evil that Descartes revives in his doctrine of God's creation of the eternal truths (*Sources of the Self*, 161).

This basic identification of oneself as part of a larger whole yields a general moral law: 'Et il faut toujours préférer les intérêts du tout, dont on est partie, à ceux de sa personne en particulier' (And we should always put the interests of the whole of which we are a part above those peculiar to ourselves) (AT IV, 293: *OP* III, 607). This law requires to be applied 'avec mesure et discrétion' in the light of a calculation of relative loss, or risk, and gain, which may sometimes take an apparently egoistic form: thus, if a man is worth more by himself alone than the rest of his townsfolk put together, he would not be right to wish to save the town at the cost of his own life (AT IV, 293: *OP* III, 607). There seems to be something horribly cold-blooded about the last sentence. But Descartes is not, I think, suggesting that this judgement about value is purely subjective, or that anyone would be entitled to make it about themselves. On the contrary, he goes on to speak with admiration of those who sacrifice their lives for the public good. The phrase 'se vouloir perdre pour la sauver' is ambiguous, but I take the dilemma to be not whether one should put one's life at risk *in order to* save the city (like the legendary Roman general Decius, who rushed alone into the midst of the enemy because he knew it was fated that Rome would win the battle if he was killed) but whether one should sacrifice it *in the hope of* saving the city.[71] Should a scientist carrying the unpublished formula for a new and powerful medicine who can escape from a city under siege none the less seize a rifle and join the last handful of defenders at the barricades? It is a real dilemma, but only an extreme form of a difficulty Descartes explicitly discusses elsewhere, in Part VI of the *Discours de la méthode*: our moral duties, he says, extend further than the present time, so that it may be right to refrain from doing something that might help the living with the intention of doing something else that will bring a greater benefit to our descendants (AT VI, 66: *OP* I, 638).

---

[71] The Decii (three generations of the family appear to have sacrificed themselves for victory) are mentioned in *Les Passions de l'âme*, § 173, AT XI, 461–2: *OP* III, 1081 (and see note). But Descartes's analysis makes no mention of fate: they hoped to inspire the Romans to victory or were certain of future glory.

In any case, Descartes condemns the systematic commitment to one's own exclusive advantage (answering by implication the question raised earlier as to whether the libertine could recognize himself or herself in Cartesian ethics), and praises self-sacrifice for the good of others. If we subordinated everything to our own interests, we would harm others whenever we could gain by doing so, and could never be said to be virtuous. But, if we consider ourselves as part of the public, we take pleasure in doing good to all, even risking our lives in a good cause. This consideration is the source of all genuine heroism. What is striking here is that no clear and distinct idea of one's duty to the public is required for the action to be laudable: even a confused sense that we owe more to the public than to ourselves is sufficient (AT IV, 293–4: *OP* III, 607–8).[72] In any case, religion tends to sharpen this awareness of our duties to others:

> Et on est naturellement porté à l'avoir, lorsqu'on connaît et qu'on aime Dieu comme il faut: car alors s'abandonnant du tout à sa volonté, on se dépouille de ses propres intérêts, et on n'a point d'autre passion que de faire ce qu'on croit lui être agréable; en suite de quoi on a des satisfactions d'esprit et des contentements, qui valent incomparablement davantage que toutes les petites joies passagères qui dépendent des sens. (AT IV, 294: *OP* III, 608)
>
> And we are naturally inclined to have it, if we know and love God as we should: for then abandoning ourselves entirely to His will, we strip ourselves of our own interests, and have no other passion than that of doing what we think agreeable to him; as a result of which we have a mental satisfaction

---

[72] Cf. *Les Passions de l'âme*, §95, AT XI, 400: *OP* III, 1026, where Descartes analyses courageous behaviour that seeks no gain or glory: the underlying sense that it is good to be brave or skilful enough to tackle the danger seems not to require explicit awareness. The passage is discussed in my *Early Modern French Thought*, 86–7.

and contentment incomparably superior to all the fleeting little joys that depend on the senses.

The passage throws considerable light on Cartesian ethics. We can rise above our interests, and it is meritorious to do so (for the self-satisfaction that results is surely represented here as the by-product or perhaps the reward rather than the goal of the action). We can do so for religion's sake, but also for other people's, for the good of the public, the community or commonwealth, to which we belong. (This assertion of our duty to the public is typically Stoic.) There is, then, after all, a law of human nature, and virtue consists largely in obedience to it: the law that commands us to envisage our actions in relation to the good of the whole to which we belong. The conception is somewhat utilitarian in that, between two actions both of which may benefit our fellow creatures, we should choose that which will bring the greater benefit (but Descartes nowhere implies that this might involve transgressing commonly accepted moral norms). The point of reference here is no longer a cosmic order transcending humanity—Taylor is right about that—but a human community, or, in the fullest perspective, the human race itself, which we may and should seek to benefit. On the other hand, the social order reflects a divine dispensation: for God has so contrived it that, even if everyone put their own interests first, and neglected charity, they would none the less benefit others more often than not (to Elisabeth, 6 Oct. 1645, AT IV, 316–17: *OP* III, 619). The reason for this is that those who are reputed helpful receive assistance from others, even from those they have not personally helped, and the advantages of this outweigh the trouble taken in pleasing other people (to Elisabeth, Jan. 1646, AT IV, 356: *OP* III, 636).

Descartes thus takes his place in the lineage of those early modern thinkers who sought to reconcile individual and public interests via the conception of a divinely established order.[73] But he is not putting forward an 'invisible-hand' argument to the effect that the system of social relationships ensures that in working for our own interests we happen to promote the good of the public, whether we realize it or not. His point is that a rational calculation of one's own interests and pleasures would lead one to pursue them by doing good to others.

---

[73] See Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Lucien Goldmann argues that

Of course, thus interpreted, Descartes could be reinscribed within a Taylorian narrative of the refocusing of nature away from a cosmic onto a human order. Nor has my purpose been to reject Taylor's interpretation of Descartes lock, stock, and barrel, though I think it underestimates the elements of continuity and tradition linking Descartes's thought to that of earlier periods. In any case, we are now in a position, perhaps, to return to the problem out of which this excursus on Descartes has grown, which was, whether early modern thought, especially that most influenced by the new mechanical philosophy, involves a separation of the psychological from the ethical, especially if the latter is identified with an order of value embodied in the universe itself, to which man is required to conform. We saw that such a separation does take place, in different ways, in the thought of Hobbes and Spinoza. In Descartes also we saw that something of the kind occurs, since the mechanistic account of the passions tends to imply the equivalence of ethical conduct with self-management, rather than the bringing of oneself into conformity with any cosmic order or inbuilt tendency of human nature. He stresses the ethical value of acting for the benefit of the community more than that of conforming to a moral law of right and wrong: not that he rejects such a moral law, but he does not emphasize it. This stress on the public good, although no doubt influenced by Stoicism, is thoroughly compatible with a reorientation of the ethical vision towards concrete this-worldly benefits to be propagated among humanity: a vision characteristic of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, Descartes does, as we saw, assert that a true knowledge of God naturally inclines us to love him and to submit to his providence; and he interprets his

Descartes's ethic is radically incompatible with his fundamental individualism ('Le Problème du mal', 136–9), overlooking, I think, the role of God as a mediation between the individual and what exists outside him or her, which applies in the ethical realm as well as the metaphysical.

dualism in terms of a metaphysical hierarchy of value (the mind is nobler than the body), which itself has moral implications (therefore we should seek the contentment of the mind as superior to that of the body). So there are some traces of the vision of a cosmic order and of the ethical perspective on anthropology that still operate in his thought. And this is especially clear if we compare him to Spinoza, who seeks to liquidate all residues of the conception of a personal providential deity and of an order of value embodied in the universe.

Conclusion

It will be seen that relationships in early modern literature and thought between psychological analysis and ethical norms are complex and variable. Enough has been said to suggest that we cannot separate a kernel of 'psychology' from the husk of morality and proceed to discourse freely on seventeenth-century accounts of the passions, motives, and character, irrespective of any ethical (or for that matter religious) considerations: for this would be to condemn oneself to a fully-fledged anachronism, and obscure any possibility of historically and generically based discrimination between the position of different writers.

Up to now, I have discussed literary texts (chiefly plays) as well as texts of philosophy (Montaigne, as was noted above, existing in a kind of space between the two). It is important to note how the two areas overlapped in early modern French culture. But obviously I cannot hope to consider the whole of French literature of the seventeenth century in terms of all the ethical and psychological perspectives current at the time. The literary texts selected are those that seem most relevant to the aim of this book: that is, to prolong into the ethical and psychological spheres the preoccupations of *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion*—for the need to struggle with the deceits of experience was seen as no less acute in these areas than in that of metaphysics.

In the metaphysical realm, the impulse to challenge the promptings of spontaneous experience came partly from the new science, and from the Cartesian response to the challenge of Pyrrhonism, but partly, I argued, from the revival of Augustinian theology. The general perspective in which we might consider that revival is discussed in Chapter 2 of the earlier book, to which the reader is therefore referred, and I do not wish to repeat myself here. On the other hand, I said comparatively little there of the content of Augustinian theology. I need to remedy that omission here, but also to put that theology in the context of more general questions about conceptions of human nature in seventeenth-century France. These conceptions are therefore the subject of Part One. But, since much seventeenth-century thinking about 'human nature' was conditioned by the theological doctrine of original sin, Part Two examines that doctrine more closely, as developed by St Augustine, reformulated by St Thomas Aquinas, and then re-presented by early modern Roman Catholic theologians, mostly of an Augustinian persuasion. Part Three explores two crucial elements in the Augustinian portrayal of original sin, the conceptions of concupiscence and of self-love, while Part Four deals with a particular effect of self-love: ignorance, confusion, and self-deception as to our dispositions and motivations.

These general concerns condition, then, the choice of material. I have eschewed the option of invoking philosophical or theological concepts to make sense of literary texts that do not clearly invoke or allude to them. Thus, when discussing perspectives on human nature in the first chapter of Part One, I include La Bruyère, since *Les Caractères* explicitly mobilizes the concept of human nature. The focus is gradually narrowed to the Augustinian vision, which is further explored in the chapter on original sin. The doctrine of original sin no doubt had a role in shaping literary perspectives, but one seldom if ever finds secular writers explicitly invoking it (a few references in La Rochefoucauld are noticed elsewhere, but these were not kept in published versions of the *Maximes*). Hence this chapter contains no discussion of literature. Part Two deals with concupiscence and self-love. It contains a chapter on La Rochefoucauld, since he actually uses the term *amour-propre* (though emphasizing it less in later than in earlier versions of the *Maximes*) as well as the related term *intérêt*, but no other literary writers are considered: the emphasis is on theology and philosophy, on texts that discuss the concept of *amour-propre* rather than illustrating it in narrative or dramatic form.[74] In Part Three, on self-knowledge, however, literature reappears, since we find playwrights and novelists *explicitly* engaging with the theme. This is evidenced by their use of the verb *se tromper* in the analysis of feelings and attitudes (it seems to bear the genuinely reflexive sense of 'deceiving oneself', rather than the common intransitive sense of 'being mistaken'). Again, the term 'hypocrisy' is foregrounded within Molière's plays as a key to the understanding of character and behaviour, and the question whether hypocrisy may be unconscious is thus relevant. Therefore there is some discussion of literary texts' explorations of the phenomenon of self-deception, before I turn to theological and philosophical attempts to analyse and explain it.

I have already, for comparative purposes, paid some attention to writers from outside France (Hobbes and Spinoza). Likewise, I discuss some texts from before (and occasionally after) the early modern period (the theology, for instance, of St Augustine or St Thomas Aquinas) where these provide the essential frame of reference for other texts discussed. Most of the texts, however, are French and from the seventeenth century. Of course, it is possible to argue that ideas in early modern Europe should be studied on a transnational basis, since European thought was not confined within national boundaries. This is perfectly true, and therefore, when I discuss philosophy and theology, I take account of non-French authors (a Spaniard like Suárez or a Fleming like Jansenius). On the other hand (quite apart from the fact that I know the French domain best), the concern here is with the ideas as textually embodied, and it is certainly the case that national and vernacular bodies of writing were emerging in this period, which often behaved as self-sufficient. To be sure, it is possible to trace international influences in La

---

[74] The concept of *amour-propre* has been used to illuminate the work of Molière by Pierre Force, *Molière ou le prix des choses* (Paris: Nathan, 1994), 101–29, and that of Racine and Madame de Lafayette by Rohou, *Le XVIIe Siècle*, 437–49.

Rochefoucauld, as was noted above. But one of the privileges of the literary text is to cover its own tracks, and to explain itself in its own terms, whereas philosophical writing tends to define itself against existing positions, whether or not it refers to their upholders by name. We can read Corneille's comedies without knowing their Spanish sources, and we could make a certain sense of the *Maximes* even if we had never heard of Hobbes, or Gracián, or Augustine's critique of pagan virtue; whereas, although Locke tends not to mention Descartes's name, he clearly expects his reader to recognize the existence of a body of thought affirming the notion of innate ideas. Again, international movements of ideas take different forms in particular cultures. Neo-Augustinianism was an international trend even within Roman Catholicism: its French followers read Jansenius, but also the Irish theologians Conrius (Conroy) and Sinnich.[75] But the Jansenist controversy in France had its own dynamic, with one French-language polemic responding to another. So to follow the thread of the topics discussed here chiefly through French texts seems justifiable. But it is high time to move to the topics themselves.

---

[75] Pascal used the *Trias* of Sinnich (Paulus Erynachus) in his work for the *Écrits sur la grâce* (*Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Le Guern, 2 vols., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1998–2000), II, 1213). In the text of the *Écrits*, he cites Conrius with approval (*Écrits sur la grâce*, XV, *OC* II, 312 (and see the corresponding note, p. 1248 n. 3)). Presumably he was introduced to them by Arnauld. The title of Conrius's *Peregrinus Jerichuntinus* ('The Jericho Pilgrim') may have suggested the simile of the man set upon by robbers in the second *Provinciale*, although the ultimate source is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30–7). See *OC* I, 602–3 and 1149 (p. 602 n. 2).