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DESCARTES' METHOD OF HUMOUR

Is Descartes' *Discourse on Method* a humorous essay? Perhaps a reader's answer to this question depends upon a particular frame of mind. This may also have been the case for Descartes, especially in view of the new philosophical course he was charting. It is not surprising that he might need several layers of meaning in an endeavor inflated with so many ambitions. The *Discourse* was, at once, a first publication, a declaration of independence from the philosophical tradition, a critique of classical education, and a proposal for the "first principles" of a new epistemology. Finally, as I shall try to illustrate, the style of the essay served an evident need to maintain at least a private sense of humility in the face of these audacious goals.

The biographical and critical literature on Descartes most often treats him as an intense, serious-minded man. There seems to be an inclination to discover in his personality and his writings the dark urgency of a prodigious genius.¹ This may well be true. Nevertheless, in what began as a casual re-reading of the *Discourse*, I was struck by the impression of a pervasive humour that is intermingled with the lofty philosophical intentions. This reading disposed my sympathy and defense on behalf of a thinker whom I had somehow been led to believe was difficult, confused, and confusing. The literature, and my own teachers, could not help but speak of Descartes in terms of "dichotomies", "dilemmas", and an overwhelming anxiety concerning a distinction of the mind and body that was nothing to me if not reminiscent of classical and Christian categories. It may have been my own fault that I expected my second reading to expose a muddled, simple-minded, or conspiratorial dimension to Descartes' philosophy. It was, therefore, much to my surprise when I quickly discovered that his prose is lucid, straightforward, and vigorous. Indeed, the first page suggested that his writing is light, and

by the time I had finished Part VI, I was convinced that his humour was of a profound sort.

How to convey the humour of Descartes? The first line of the *Discourse* indicates that something was afoot in the French *esprit*:

Good sense is of all things in the world the most equitably distributed; for everyone thinks himself so amply provided with it, that even those most difficult to please in everything else do not commonly desire more of it than they already have.²

It is not difficult to imagine the reaction of Descartes' lay and Jesuit professors upon reading that. It is an uncompromising, but a funny, opening to an essay that will repeatedly attack his schools and his teachers as pedantic, self-serving, and superficial. As well as a critique of scholastic philosophers, the passage can also be seen as a blow directed at the Church hierarchy, which had only recently required Galileo to recant the product of his scientific work.³

Certainly, if the opening sections of the *Discourse* were the work of an Englishman, the humour and pointed wit would be obvious.⁴ The quotation above, for example, illustrates what has come to be regarded as the intentionally restrained tone of understatement when stating what is actually meant to be an outlandish or false assumption. The understatement, however, while carrying an "obvious" assumption, intends to pique the very ones who surely disagree:

We cannot but recognize how difficult it is, while relying on the labors of others, to achieve what is truly perfect.⁵

Yes, it is "difficult", says Descartes, to achieve what is truly perfect. Especially when one must rely upon one's teachers. This manner of diversion in the *Discourse* has been sometimes regarded as irony, or even a form of bitter contempt.⁶ But Descartes' humour is too light, as if he were merely twitting the sensitive ears of his teacher-pedants—did the French schools have any other kind?—who must surely have belaboured the erudition of the classical and canonical thinkers to the exclusion of the new movements in science, as well as all other literate and oral traditions of human experience. This may well account for his decision to write in the "vulgar tongue":

And if I write in French, which is the language of my country, in preference to Latin, which is that of my teachers, this is because I hope that those who rely on their unspoiled natural reason will be better judges of my opinions than those who give credence only to the writings of the ancients. As for those who com-

bine good sense with study, they will not, I feel sure, be so partial to Latin as to refuse to listen to the reasons I expound.⁷

Descartes seems to eschew the derivative scholarship of his teachers, who rigorously subjected themselves to the authority of the "great" philosophers and devoted themselves to new glosses of old thoughts. His method suggests the opposite approach—abstract contemplation or "cognition"—which in itself is a swipe at his mentors. But this humour is neither bitter nor aggressive. Indeed, it is the opposite of the "defensive superiority" of the modern French humour: the touch of tragedy along with the darker tone of smilingly hopeless, condescending certitude and finality.⁸

Descartes does not seem to ridicule, but almost to *entertain*⁹ with his words, as if he were intending his tone and even his argument for a broad readership. One could compare this, perhaps, with the appeal and humour of Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*.¹⁰

Can it be asserted, therefore, that Descartes is "playing" with his reader?¹¹ In this view, Descartes is a humourist of truth, certitude, and perceptive grace. The humour may ultimately be seen as perceptive humility, considering the rather modest position that one necessarily assumes in *thorough doubt*, with a quite conscious sense of *holding* something ungraspable (i.e., that which is *all but* imperceptible, the ground of consciousness) in the face of overwhelming uncertainty.¹² He does not meet the argument of others, but quite plainly goes around them in a way that appears to disregard inferiority and simple error. Taking the philosophical tradition so lightly, he appears to meet the essentials quickly at the roots, underneath the familiar vocabulary of profound and difficult questions:

As to philosophy, I shall say only this: that when I noted that it has been cultivated for many centuries by men of the most outstanding ability, and that none the less there is not a single thing of which it treats which is not still in dispute, and nothing, therefore, which is free from doubt. I was not so presuming as to expect that I should succeed where they have failed. When, further, I considered how many diverse opinions regarding one and the same matter are upheld by learned men, and that only one of all these opinions can be true, I accounted as well-nigh false all that is only probable.²³

If a humorous strategy be warranted, we may more fully understand why Part VI of the *Discourse* is somewhat dry and apologetic when compared with the earlier portions. Descartes' indirect reference in Part VI to the censure of Galileo's *Dialogues on the Two Great Systems of the World* and his

admission that he had postponed publication of his own philosophy of nature (*Le Traité du monde*) since its completion in 1633¹⁴ suggest that he hoped to avoid a similar inquiry into his own work. The caution indicated by his withheld writings implies an appropriate tone of pious deference. Moreover, the references to unpublished works in the later parts of the *Discourse* creates a useful ambiguity in the event of an inquiry for censure.¹⁵

Although Part VI is burdened with a review of the method, a rather defensive apologia for earlier investigations, and an introduction to his scientific research, we are still treated to Descartes' wit. For example, in the opening paragraph: "I will not say that I agreed with the [Galilean] theory in question", but on the other hand, "I found in it nothing to be prejudicial either to religion or to the state".¹⁶ Avoiding the dilemma swiftly, but with perhaps more courage than his critics normally allow, he playfully suggests that the real difficulty for Galileo was that his theories were false: "Nothing therefore . . . would have prevented me from considering it, if reason had persuaded me of its truth".¹⁷

There are certain other examples of humour:

... reformers will be found to be as numerous as heads, so convinced is everyone of his own abounding good sense. My speculations were indeed pleasing to me; but I recognize that other men have theirs, which perhaps please them even more.¹⁸

A final quotation from Part VI illustrates how Descartes retains an element of droll humour even when he is most squarely on the defensive:

Hardly ever, therefore, have I met with any critic of my opinions who has not seemed to me less rigorous or less impartial than myself. Nor have I ever observed that previously unknown truth has been discovered by way of the disputations practiced in the Schools.¹⁹

There can be little doubt that Descartes has a strategy in aiming his humour at the scholarly tradition. The pointed wit, bordering on ridicule, appeals to a readership outside of the schools; it disarms potential critics, perhaps additionally serving as a divided appeal to lay and Church scholars; it undermines the august sanctity of traditional philosophy, thus breaking down the reader's reluctance to countenance an entirely new and fundamentally different approach to philosophy. Descartes' understatement, his alternating modesty and immodesty, his outrageous assumptions parading as truisms,²⁰ and his inverted exaggerations are part and parcel of the argument for a

revolutionary epistemology. The message is, unmistakably, that judging from the manifest failure of the traditional scholastic labours, one must admit how difficult perfection is to attain. Thus, not only does Descartes deny the perfection of the regnant philosophical tradition—natural reason in the Thomistic sense—but actually uses that tradition as proof of imperfection! In the same summary dismissal, Descartes also takes a turn at the laws of nations and the modes of traditional and natural authority adduced to them:

Their laws have been determined for them mainly by embarrassments due to the crimes and quarrels which have forced their adoption.²¹

This, it should be remembered, was spoken against the background of Christian natural law, the consolidation of the idea of divine right of kings, and even the Aristotelian idea of experience informing reason and justice.

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If we should care to establish a humorous dimension to the *Discourse*, it will be ultimately self-defeating to argue that Descartes' style is fraught with seductive strategy. It may, indeed, be enough to appreciate his writing with a deeper sense of his "presence" in the treatise. And if we are to admit that there are important philosophical and psychological implications in the ideal of serious playfulness, then Descartes' humour might be understood as a commentary upon, or indeed, a component of an epistemological method that is more open, flexible, or "phenomenal" than is normally credited to him.²²

A variety of passages from the *Discourse* will substantiate the humorous tone as authentic. The following phrase, for example, illustrates both the characteristic aim and tone of his wit with a juxtaposition that cannot be mistaken for anything else than playful humour:

we have . . . therefore of necessity been long governed by our sensuous impulses and by our teachers.²³

This bit of impudence is echoed in the next paragraph:

In respect, however, of the opinions which I have hitherto been entertaining, I thought that I could not do better than decide on emptying my mind of them one and all.²⁴

The problem for Descartes is resolved by an egotism offered as self-deprecation and a humble last resort:

I was, however, unable to decide on any one person whose opinion seemed worthy of preference, and so had no options save to look to myself for guidance.²⁵

Finally, to illustrate that this alleged levity must have been quite self-conscious, we have only to listen to Descartes' remark as to why in fact he has come to write out his method, since "so many outstanding men" had come to "no success" in discovering a philosophy "more certain than the vulgar".

. . . I would not, even yet, perhaps, have ventured to undertake it, had I not learned of a widespread rumor that I had already carried it through to completion. [The rumor] must have been owing to my confessing my ignorance more candidly than those who make claim to learning are wont to do. . . . But being honest enough not to appear different from what I really am, I thought that I must by every means in my power strive to render myself worthy of the reputation in which I was being held.²⁶

This, it would seem to me, is a very wry and conscious humour. It introduces, if read properly, a dimension of humility and modest credibility to the *Discourse* and its obviously revolutionary intentions. There can be little doubt that Descartes certainly had the aspect of modesty about his work. The humorous reading may serve as a corrective in perceiving the quality that is unmistakably present in the essay:

Truth we discover little by little, on some few issues; and it obliges us, when called upon to speak of other matters, frankly to confess our ignorance of them.²⁷

To read Descartes with a heightened sensitivity to his good humour, and thus to appreciate his literary accomplishment all the more, does not require a revolutionary interpretation of his philosophy. It is to be expected that Cartesian rationalism will not become unbalanced by the master's humour. It can also be anticipated that the critics of Cartesian philosophy will not be satisfied that a hearty chuckle can reintegrate the mind and body. Humour, indeed, may not account for, nor rectify, the epistemological dilemmas encountered in a philosophy that establishes first principles upon a paradigm of perception that disembodies the act of knowing and seems to condemn the phenomenon of *embodied* conscious existence—the very ostensible ground of Descartes' method—to an "irrational", frozen, and insensate paralysis.²⁸

For Cartesian or critic, however, it may be reasonably assumed that a reading of the *Discourse on Method* which incorporates the element of humour will be mutually acceptable. Long understood to be zealous, tendentious, and not a little rash in scope, while pretending perfect piety, the *Discourse* is also an essay on doubt and humour. If the essay is not appreciated in the light of these latter aspects, it is unlikely that either exponent or critic of Descartes' philosophy will perceive the dramatic and comedic²⁹ complement between the

playful and the serious which imparts breadth, balance, and a profound tension to his "method of rightly conducting the reason".

NOTES

1. Leon Roth, *Descartes' Discourse on Method*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937, pp. 30-35. Also, Norman Kemp Smith, *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1963, Ch. I.
2. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, in *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, N. K. Smith, trans., New York: The Modern Library, 1958, p. 93.
The humour, as perceived by the present writer, does not appear to be the result of an eccentric or erroneous translation. The translation by Smith has been used here because it seems to be the most accurate and concise. The translation by John Veitch (London: Everyman's Library, 1912) conveys an equally humorous impression, although it has a more literal, disjunct, and archaic tone. In Descartes' original text, the *Discourse begins* (as translated above): "Le bons sens ["la droite raison" in *Larousse classique*] est la chose du monde la mieux partagée: car chacun pense en être si bien pourvu, que ceux même qui sont les plus difficiles à contenter en toute autre chose n'ont point coutume d'en désirer plus qu'ils en ont." *Classique Larousse* edition, Paris, p. 13.
3. The *Discourse on Method* was completed in 1636, and appeared in print in 1637. The Inquisition condemned the works of Galileo in 1633. See text, *infra*, p. 5.
4. Hobbs' *Leviathan* (1651) actually seems to offer an example, on the very subject of the "essential" equality of man, in the first two paragraphs of Chapter XIII: "Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning their Felicity and Misery."
5. *Discourse* (Smith trans., cited hereinafter), p. 101.
6. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *History of Modern Philosophy in France*, reprint ed., Chicago: The Open Court Pub. Co., 1924, p. 6.
7. *Discourse*, p. 143.
8. My summary stereotypes must be taken for what they are: impressionistic and perhaps only slightly true.
9. Used in the sense of the full etymology of *entretenir*: to keep up, to maintain (a conversation), to keep up relations with, to foster, to keep alive. Cf. *Larousse classique* and *Larousse Anglois-Français*.
10. The same could be said of Russell's style in his essay on the political philosophy of Hegel in *Philosophy and Politics*, London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1947.
11. Cf. the discussion of "play" and "serious play" in Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. III, *Plato and Aristotle*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana Univ. Press, 1957, pp. 232-35.

12. This view does not prevent us from granting that this small "holding"—*cogito ergo sum*, essentially, "consciousness"—had immense importance for Descartes (it gave him a science and a God) and for the Cartesian tradition (which received "substance lapsing insubstantial").
13. *Discourse*, p. 98.
14. *Discourse*, p. 129. Part VI is formally intended to serve as an introduction to the three essays in the method: *Meteors*, *Dioptric*, and *Geometry*. The summaries of his postponed philosophical studies in Parts IV, V, and VI of the *Discourse* seem not only to be an introductory bridge between the method, itself, and the three scientific essays, but also to assert the breadth of his philosophical investigations.
15. Several scholars have noted Descartes' disinclination towards martyrdom. Cf. L. Lévy-Bruhl, *op. cit.*, p. 1; A. D. Lindsay, "Introduction", *Discourse on Method*, London: Everyman's Library, 1912, pp. xii-xiii; and L. Roth, *op. cit.*, Ch. II, pp. 13f.
16. *Discourse*, p. 129.
17. The remainder of this paragraph may also be playful, as Descartes explains in a series of non sequiturs why he has delayed publishing his treatise on the philosophy of nature.
18. *Discourse*, p. 130.
19. *Discourse*, p. 136.
20. E.g., "the equitable distribution of good sense" is a particularly barbarous assumption aimed at the cherished esoteric learning of the schools.
21. *Discourse*, p. 102.
22. Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, Dorian Cairns, trans., The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, Sections 1 and 3.
23. *Discourse*, p. 102.
24. *Discourse*, p. 103.
25. *Discourse*, p. 105. Note how this passage employs a kind of autobiographical "fiction" which reads as an apologetic; yet such a literary form stands as a parallel argument, a necessary prerequisite, and, indeed, presents the motivation for the method of doubtful cognition that he is about to expound.
26. *Discourse*, p. 117.
27. *Discourse*, p. 138.
28. Maurice Merleau-Potny, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith, trans., London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, pp. vii-ix; 207ff; and 369ff.
29. *komoidia*, "a singer in the revels."