
Descartes's Paradoxical Politics

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In his *Discours préliminaire* to the *Encyclopédie*, the French *philosophe* d'Alembert penned the following tribute to Descartes:

He can be thought of as a leader of conspirators who, before anyone else, had the courage to arise against a despotic and arbitrary power and who, in preparing a resounding revolution, laid the foundations of a more just and happier government, which he himself was not able to see established.¹

Descartes's
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From this statement one may gather that Descartes was not only a political thinker, but one of a particularly revolutionary bent. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, Descartes had less to say about politics than any of the major philosophers, and the little he did say was of a markedly conservative, even reactionary nature.² This fact did not, however, deter subsequent writers from finding the seeds of revolt and liberalism in Descartes's philosophy. Indeed, the Revolutionaries of 1789 acknowledged Descartes as a forerunner, and the Marquis de Bouillier (cousin of Lafayette) even proclaimed him as the inspiration behind the Declaration of the Rights of Man.³

¹ Jean Le Rond D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. Richard N. Schwab (Indianapolis, 1963), 80.

² See Blandine Barret-Kriegel, "Politique(s) de Descartes?," *Archives de Philosophie*, 53 (1990), 371-88.

³ See A. Boyce Gibson, *The Philosophy of Descartes* (New York, 1932), 62. Even prior to the French Revolution, Descartes was first among those slated for inclusion in the Pantheon, the repository of France's *grands hommes*. At the dedication in July 1791 his name (if not his bones) was interred along with the remains of Voltaire and Mirabeau. As Simon Schama writes, Descartes was "represented as

If the Revolutionaries can be excused for republicanizing Descartes, why would a *philosophe* like d'Alembert credit his conservative countryman with overturning the political order in France and laying the groundwork of a new and better government? Conversely, given his apolitical (even anti-political) orientation, why have scholars spoken of Descartes's "political philosophy" and dedicated books and articles to the subject?⁴ More fundamentally, in what way is it possible to speak of Descartes as a political thinker, and what was his actual contribution to political thought? Given his pivotal role in the history of philosophy and profound impact on intellectual culture, such questions speak not only to the student of political ideas, but go to the very roots of modern civilization. In Descartes we find the birth

someone persecuted by kings, forced into the fugitive life of the independent philosopher. The imprisonment and exile of Voltaire and Rousseau fitted conveniently into the same pattern." *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989), 546, 566-67. The identification of Descartes as the intellectual progenitor of the French Revolution has persisted into more recent times. Michelet, the nineteenth-century French historian, traced the Revolution back to Descartes; and even Nietzsche called "the father of rationalism . . . the grandfather of the Revolution." *Beyond Good and Evil* [1886], trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1973), 144. Twentieth-century scholars frequently perpetuated the affiliation. As one writes, Descartes's "*philosophie des idées claires et distinctes impliquait une réforme profonde des institutions politiques et même de la structure sociale: la Révolution française était en germe dans la révolution cartésienne.*" Henri Gouhier, "Le Nouvel Humanisme selon Descartes et la Politique," in *Cristianesimo e Ragion di Stato*, ed. Enrico Castelli (Rome, 1952), 82. Another calls the French Republic the "daughter of Descartes," and despite the philosopher's failure formally to express himself on politics, "*il n'est point trop osé d'avancer que les principes fondamentaux de la République se trouvent en germe dans la Discours de la Méthode.*" Paul Schrecker, "La République, Fille de Descartes," *La République Française*, 1 (1944), 26. Hannah Arendt locates the nexus of Descartes and the French Revolution in "Cartesian doubt—*je doute donc je suis*—[which] had become the principle of the political realm, and the reason was that Robespierre had performed upon the deeds of action what Descartes had performed upon the articulations of thought." *On Revolution* (London, 1963), 97-98.

⁴ Interest in Descartes's politics and the political implications of his philosophy has largely been restricted to Continental scholars. The two most comprehensive studies are by Pierre Guenancia, *Descartes et L'Ordere Politique: Critique Cartésienne des Fondements de la Politique* (Paris, 1983); and Antonio Negri, *Descartes Politico, O Della Ragionevole Ideologia* (Milan, 1970). Among those writing in English only Kennington (1987), Schall (1962), and Keohane (1980) have dealt substantively with Descartes's political thought. Those interested in this literature should consult these footnotes, which represent a relatively complete bibliography of relevant scholarship.

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pangs of the modern—the tensions, ambiguities, and contradictions of a society in the midst of an intellectual revolution. Descartes’s political thought embodies this struggle no less than the awkward co-existence of reason and revelation in his general philosophy. And while the latter has dominated scholarly discussions, the former is arguably of equal significance given the sharp contrast between Descartes’s reactionary conservatism and the revolutionary liberalism he is said to have inspired.⁵ In what follows I will underscore this contrast through an analysis of the two sources commonly looked to in reconstructing the French philosopher’s “political thought”—the *Discourse on Method* and his correspondence.⁶ It will be seen that Descartes can be spoken of as a political thinker in only the most qualified sense, and that his own politics—in conjunction with the political implications of his philosophical project—are ultimately inconsistent and paradoxical. This conclusion suggests that Descartes’s status as an eminently *progressive* force in Western culture stands in need of qualification.

Politics Denied

As a preliminary to a close reading of the *Discourse on Method* and the correspondence, it will be useful to summarize the central tenets of Descartes’s orientation towards the political. First, *Descartes personally disavows politics*. In a letter from his correspondence with Elizabeth, Princess of Bohemia, he writes: “I lead such a retired life, and have always been so far from the conduct of affairs, that I would be no less impudent than the philosopher who

⁵ The link between the philosophy of Descartes and the liberalism of the French Revolution has been found in the former’s anti-traditionalism and in his individualism and rationalism. On one hand, Descartes’s attack on tradition and authority in the intellectual sphere was seen to have a corollary in the political. On the other, his stark individualism and rigorous rationalism supplied the basis for a new conception of society and government. This said, it remains the case that Descartes was himself a *de facto* absolutist and a defender of the political status quo who abjured the discussion of politics as unbecoming a philosopher and a private citizen.

⁶ Internal citations from the *Discourse on Method*, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (New York, 1985), refer to section and page numbers respectively. Quotations from the correspondence (unless otherwise noted) appear in *Descartes Philosophical Letters*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford, 1970). The source text for the original French is *Descartes, Oeuvres et Lettres*, ed. André Bridoux (Paris, 1953).

wanted to lecture on the duties of a general in the presence of Hannibal if I took it on me to enumerate here the maxims one should observe in a life of public service.”⁷ Similarly, in the *Discourse* Descartes emphatically denies that his ideas on intellectual reform imply any parallel in the realm of politics. “If I thought the slightest basis could be found in this *Discourse* for a suspicion that I was guilty of this folly [suggesting political reforms], I would be loathe to permit it to be published. Never has my intention been more than to try to reform my own ideas, and rebuild them on foundations that would be wholly mine”(II:10). From these views Descartes never wavered.

Second, *politics for Descartes is not a part of philosophy proper*. Writing to Elizabeth he observes: “I do not doubt your Highness’ maxim is the best of all, namely that it is better to guide oneself by experience in these matters [of ruling or dealing with others] than by reason. It is rarely that we have to do with people who are as perfectly reasonable as men ought to be, so that one cannot judge what they will do simply by considering what they ought to do; and often the soundest advice is not the most successful.”⁸ Given man’s less-than-fully rational nature, his conduct (individually and collectively) is not subject to strict philosophical (read: scientific) analysis. It is therefore meaningless to speak of political “truths,” for “[t]ruth can be discovered only little by little, and in a few subjects” (VI:46), and for Descartes politics is not one of them. Politics, then, is primarily a matter of “experience” as opposed to “reason.”⁹ If politics can be called a “science” at all, it is a *prudential* science: it is “the art of the possible,” often requiring an acquiescence in the lesser of two evils. As he informs the Prin-

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⁷ Descartes to Elizabeth (Jan. 1646), 194-95.

⁸ Descartes to Elizabeth, 195.

⁹ The non-philosophical (or non-scientific) status of politics in Descartes is underscored by Jean-Pierre Cavaillé. For Descartes “the domain of politics is both vehemently rejected outside the area of philosophical concern, and consequently *a fortiori* from scientific investigations, and simultaneously studied implicitly, indirectly touched upon, through a discourse whose stated objective is to remain absolutely removed from politics.” “Politics Disavowed: Remarks on the Status of Politics in the Philosophy of Descartes,” trans. R. Scott Walter, *Diogenes*, 138 (1987), 120. Cavaillé’s article is perhaps the best account of Descartes’s politics available in English, and closest in aim and spirit to the present essay. On Descartes’s “total separation between reason and authority,” see also Karl Jaspers’s illuminating discussion in *Three Essays: Leonardo, Descartes, Max Weber*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1964), 148-53.

cess, "In all the affairs of the world there are many reasons pro and many reasons contra; and so we must dwell principally on those which make us approve what we cannot avoid."¹⁰

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Third, *Descartes accepted the established authorities, secular and sacred*. In the *Discourse*, the first rule of his *morale par provision* is "to obey the laws and customs of my country, constantly retaining the religion in which, by God's grace, I have been brought up since childhood . . ." (III:15). That this rule is only "provisional" did not lessen Descartes's commitment to its injunction: he never modified the rule, and placed it "aside with the truths of the Faith . . ." (III:18).

Fourth, *Descartes held that only the sovereign (or his appointed deputies) should be concerned with politics and public morals*. In response to a query regarding his failure to address moral or political questions, Descartes expressed his belief that "only sovereigns, or those authorized by them, have the right to concern themselves with regulating the morals of other people."¹¹ Apparently, he maintained this view on both practical and principled grounds. On one hand, "everyone is so convinced of his own good sense that there might be as many reformers as individuals . . ." (VI:39). On the other, Descartes appears to subscribe to the "divine right" theory of sovereignty, and speaks of "those whom God has established as sovereigns over his peoples . . ." Moreover, he did not believe those outside the immediate circle of power were capable of grasping the nature of governance or qualified to judge the wisdom of policy.¹²

Finally, *Descartes was a conservative to the point of reaction*. In the *Discourse*, he acknowledges the presence of "defects" in current institutions, but considers even "the slightest reform of public affairs" so complex and risky as to cast grave doubts on its desirability (II:9). Best to let custom, which "has no doubt inured us to

¹⁰ Descartes to Elizabeth (Sept. 1646), 204.

¹¹ Descartes to Chanut (Nov. 1647), in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham, et al., vol. 3 (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), 326.

¹² In his letter on Machiavelli's *Prince*, Descartes rejects the Florentine's assertion that "one must be a private citizen in order to discover the office of a prince." On the contrary, the "chief motives of the actions of princes often depend on circumstances so unique that one cannot imagine them if one is not oneself a prince or has not been long privy to a prince's secrets." "For this reason," he informed Elizabeth, "I would be ridiculous if I thought I could teach anything to your Highness on this topic." Descartes to Elizabeth (Sept. 1646), 203.

many [defects],” provide a remedy, for “[c]ustom has perhaps even found ways to avoid or correct more defects than prudence could have done.” And even when custom fails to ameliorate the flaws and abuses of institutions, the latter “are practically always more tolerable than would be a change in them” (II:9-10). For this reason, Descartes “cannot at all approve those mischievous spirits who, not being called either by birth or by attainments to a position of political power, are nevertheless constantly proposing some new reform” (II:10). This attitude shares some important affinities with the “classical” conservatism of Burke, but the suggestion that defects in the political and social order are largely beyond the competence of the governing authority is a view that Burke, as a conservative *reformer*, would not have accepted.

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The Discourse on Method

Having summarized Descartes’s attitude towards politics, we may now consider the text typically used to explore the political implications of his philosophy, the *Discourse on Method* (1637). Part two contains the only explicit mention of politics in the entire Cartesian corpus. The remaining five parts take the form of an intellectual autobiography in which Descartes chronicles his early search for truth and outlines the method to attain it. On occasion he suggests that the application of this method will have important, indeed, monumental social consequences. He begins by noting that “[g]ood sense is mankind’s most equitably divided endowment . . .” (I:1). By this Descartes means that “the ability to judge correctly, and to distinguish the true from the false—which is really what is meant by good sense or reason—is the same by nature in all men; and that differences of opinion are not due to differences in intelligence, but merely to the fact that we use different approaches and consider different things” (I:2).¹³ Taken literally this passage affirms that all men are equally endowed with

¹³ In his later writings and correspondence, Descartes somewhat modified this view, observing that (as Geneviève Rodis-Lewis notes) “*L’égalité du bon sens ou raison n’exclut pas l’inégalité des esprits.*” More specifically, “*Descartes a précisé l’inégalité des entendements et l’imputation du jugement même spéculatif à la volonté, infinie en tous.*” “Liberté et Égalité Chez Descartes,” *Archives de Philosophie*, 53 (1990), 421. Such refinements, however, were poorly calculated to dampen the “revolutionary doctrine” preached at the outset of the *Discourse*. M. Whitcomb Hess, “A Note on the Individualism of Descartes,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 35 (1938), 183.

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native reason and capable of arriving at the truth; a kind of epistemic equivalent of Jefferson's "self-evident" truth that "all men are created equal."¹⁴ Given that Descartes considered reason the most exalted of human faculties, indeed, the *only truly human* faculty—for "no actions can be reckoned human unless they depend on reason"¹⁵—does not his cognitive egalitarianism imply a *political* corollary? Descartes did not draw this conclusion, but some of his successors (as well as more recent observers) have.¹⁶ For if reason "is fully present in each one of us," is it not reasonable that all people should be viewed as equals and entitled to equal treatment and rights? Descartes shows no signs of mak-

¹⁴ The egalitarian implications of Descartes's doctrine of cognitive equivalence have not gone unnoticed. "Since reason is a universal human quality," writes Petru Comarnesco, "it is certain that the point of departure of . . . Cartesian social ethics may be called democratic . . ." The fact that "the organization of the Cartesian society implies or aims at an intellectual aristocracy" does not necessarily undermine the democratic thrust of this teaching, for even the egalitarian Jefferson believed society should be directed by its "natural aristocracy." "The Social and Ethical Conceptions of Descartes," *Ethics*, 52 (1942), 499-500. See also Bertrand de Jouvenel, *Sovereignty: An Inquiry into the Political Good*, trans. J. F. Huntington (Chicago, 1957), 225-30.

¹⁵ Descartes to Regius (May 1641), 102.

¹⁶ Rousseau, in particular, comes to mind, whose conception of the *volonté generale* presupposes a universal ability to cognize the common good. The "general will," writes J. L. Talmon, "is in the last resort a Cartesian truth." *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (New York, 1960), 29. See also Witold Marciszewski, "Epistemological Foundations of Democratism in Cartesian Philosophy," *Poznán Studies*, 5 (1979), 77-86. More generally, Descartes's *method* was seen to have important implications for other disciplines, including the political. In his preface to *Histoire de l'Académie royale* (1699), Fontenelle observed that "[t]he geometrical method is not so rigidly confined to geometry itself that it cannot be applied to other branches of knowledge as well. A work on politics, on morals, a piece of criticism, even a manual on the art of public speaking would, other things being equal, be all the better for having been written by a geometrician." Quoted in Paul Hazard, *The European Mind, 1680-1715*, trans. J. Lewis May (Cleveland, 1963), 132. Antonie Léonard Thomas, in his panegyric on the French philosopher (1765), called it "a great enterprise only to judge of all customs, usages, and laws after the great maxim of Descartes, according to the evidence. A truth exists by itself and is in nature, and the act of judging is nothing else than the talent of opening the eyes." Quoted in Kingsley Martin, *French Liberal Thought in the Eighteenth Century: A Study of Political Ideas From Bayle to Condorcet* (New York, 1962), 231. In his *Discours sur les progrès successifs de l'esprit humain* (1793-94), Condorcet argued that political liberty follows side by side with scientific discovery, and characterized the most recent epoch of human history as commencing with the *Discourse on Method* and ending with the fall of the Bastille. See Martin, *French Liberal Thought*, 289-90.

ing this connection, and provides only the most oblique indication that a basic equality of intellect has any social or political implications whatsoever.

There are two other features in part one of the *Discourse* that merit our attention. One is his remarks on *customs*. In the course of recounting his education, Descartes underscores the value of travel in contrast to mere book-learning. Travel is important because “[i]t is good to know something of the customs of various peoples, in order to judge our own more objectively, and so that we do not make the mistake of the untraveled in supposing that everything contrary to our customs is ridiculous and irrational” (I:4). The unstated implication is that one’s native customs are not necessarily better or more “rational” than others, and in fact may be worse. Yet the result of the young thinker’s travels was not greater clarity on the objective value of different cultures, but greater skepticism. For in observing “the customs of other men, I found nothing there to satisfy me, and I noted just about as much difference of opinion as I had previously remarked among philosophers. The greatest profit to me was, therefore, that I became acquainted with customs generally approved and accepted by other great peoples that would appear extravagant and ridiculous among ourselves, and so I learned not to believe too firmly what I learned only from experience and custom” (I:7).

At the least, Descartes’s observations point to what we today call *cultural relativism*; at most they imply a radical critique of accepted customs and usages, thus anticipating Montesquieu’s satirical masterpiece, the *Persian Letters*. Yet it was not Descartes’s concern to size up the varied cultural practices of his fellow Europeans. Rather, the palpable incongruence he observed in men’s customs taught him to doubt the world of *experience*, allowing him gradually to jettison “many errors which would obscure the light of nature and make us less capable of correct reasoning” (I:7). It also led Descartes to turn inward, “to study my own self,” a path which culminated in the famed *Meditations*. Finally, Descartes’s theoretical relativism on matters of culture led him to adopt the practical conformism expressed in the first rule of his provisional morality: “to obey the laws and customs of my country . . .” As in the case of his epistemic egalitarianism, Descartes’s cultural relativism was fraught with radical implications, but he chose to embrace only the most conservative corollary.

Cultural relativism led to practical conformism.

The other pregnant theme in part one concerns the practical implications Descartes *did* see as issuing from the adoption of “correct reasoning” and the “true method.” For Descartes, “correct reasoning” is essentially *mathematical* reasoning, and the “right method” is based on pure mathematics. And while Descartes found mathematics intellectually gratifying, he considered it a sterile enterprise if not applied to the social world and in the service of mankind. Hence, mathematics “can serve as much to satisfy the inquiring mind as to aid all the arts and to diminish man’s labor . . .” (I:4). Like most students who gravitate towards mathematics, Descartes was initially impressed by “the certainty and self-evidence of its proofs . . .” (I:5). He did not, however, “see its true usefulness and, thinking that it was good only for the mechanical arts, . . . was astonished that nothing more noble had been built on so firm and solid a foundation.” Just what this something “more noble” *is* Descartes does not say—at least not here. Was it a general system of physics? An iron-clad proof for the existence of God? In the *Discourse* he does provide a clue, but we must skip ahead to see what he had in mind.

In part six, titled “Some Prerequisites for Further Advances in the Study of Nature,” Descartes considers the wisdom of publishing his views on physics given the controversy aroused by the appearance of Galileo’s *Sistemi del mondo* a few years earlier. Descartes did suppress his treatise *Le Monde* in light of Galileo’s condemnation, yet in the *Discourse* he defends his physical theories on the basis of their *benefit to mankind*: to suppress these theories would be to sin against humanity. For “I noticed how far they might lead and how they differed from the principles accepted up to this time, [and] I thought that I could not keep them hidden without gravely sinning against the rule that obliges us to promote as far as possible the general good of mankind” (VI:39-40). But how can a theory of physics, however valid, be of direct use to mankind, outside of simply augmenting our knowledge of the natural world? Just as Descartes rejects mathematics for its own sake, so too physics. On the basis of his discoveries, he became convinced that “it is possible to reach knowledge that will be of much utility in this life; and that instead of the speculative philosophy now taught in the schools we can find a practical one, by which, knowing the nature and behavior of fire, water, air, stars, the heavens, and all other bodies which surround us, as well as

we now understand the different skills of our workers, we can employ these entities for all the purposes for which they are suited, and so make ourselves masters and possessors of nature" (VI:40). Here Descartes adopts the project and even the language of Bacon, whom he admired and favorably reviewed.¹⁷ And while he did not approach Bacon as a publicist of progress, he unequivocally embraced the spirit of the Chancellor's "philosophy of works."

Like Bacon, Descartes sought to forge an alliance between natural philosophy and practical life through the application of theoretical knowledge to the enhancement of man's material existence. We have seen that Descartes believed this project would "aid all the arts and diminish man's labor," but he also thought it capable of something "more noble." This higher purpose is not mere improvement or amelioration, but true *mastery*—not only through "the invention of an infinity of devices to enable us to enjoy the fruits of agriculture and all the wealth of the earth without labor, but even more so in conserving health, the principal good and the basis of all other goods in this life" (VI:40). While Descartes dismissed political utopians, his notion that applied science could create a world of endless abundance *without labor* illustrates that, *au fond*, he too was utopian.¹⁸ Similarly, his belief that medical discoveries "might rid ourselves of an infinity of maladies of body as well as of mind, and perhaps also the enfeeblement of old age,"

¹⁷ Descartes praised Bacon's *Great Instauration* and *New Atlantis* in anonymous reviews. See Richard Kennington, who identifies the English thinker as the bridge between modern political philosophy (inaugurated by Machiavelli) and modern philosophy (inaugurated by Descartes). "Descartes," in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 3rd ed. (Chicago, 1987), 421-22, 437-38.

¹⁸ As Friedrich Heer writes, "Descartes passionately denied that he had anything in common with the great utopians like Campanella and Bruno, whom he condemned as innovators . . ." (See Descartes to Beckman [Oct. 1630], 16-17.) Yet "[h]e could not conceal elements of the utopianism and the will to power of the baroque age, which has infiltrated his thinking . . . There is a dictator hidden in Descartes, who imposed his laws on things and dictated to them how they were to be." *The Intellectual History of Europe: The Counter-Reformation to 1945*, trans. Jonathan Steinbert (Garden City, 1966), 129-30. The utopian (and autocratic) implications of Descartes's scientific project are also underscored by Joseph Cropsey, "On Descartes' *Discourse on Method*," in *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics* (Chicago, 1977), 278; and Cavaille, "Politics Disavowed," 121-23.

reveals an unbounded faith in the power of science to revolutionize the human condition.¹⁹

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Given the remarkable advances in science since Descartes's time, it would appear that he was not so much a utopian as a prophet. A plethora of labor-saving devices have been invented, material abundance has been created, and medical science has vastly improved the quality of life. (It was the last of these to which Descartes aimed to dedicate his life, identifying "[t]he preservation of health . . . [as] the principal end of my studies . . .")²⁰ What is peculiar, however, is his failure to perceive a parallel advance in the realm of politics, or how social and political reforms might facilitate his project of mastery and the betterment of mankind. Unlike his Enlightenment successors, Descartes apparently did not believe in a "science of politics," which had (in the words of Alexander Hamilton) "like most other sciences . . . received great improvement" since the time of the ancients.²¹ Hume, for example—no less a sceptic than Descartes—could speak of "eternal political truths, which no time nor accidents can vary," and considered the consequences flowing from "particular forms of government . . . almost as general and certain . . . as any which the mathematical sciences afford us."²² Similarly, Hamilton (writing as "Publius") spoke of "certain primary truths, or first principles" of political reasoning, which he placed on a near par with "the maxims in geometry . . ."²³ Descartes would presumably have rejected such assertions as vain and importunate. Still it is curious that Descartes prophesied a scientific revolution with unparalleled social ramifications without drawing the slightest inferences for politics. In failing to do so, Descartes was not so much inconsistent as *incomplete*—his far-sighted view of science was bound in by a political myopia.

¹⁹ Along with its function of raising a nation above barbarism and refining its civilization, philosophy is praised by Descartes for its capacity to bring about such transformations. For these reasons "the greatest good that a state can enjoy is to possess true philosophers." *Principles of Philosophy*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1 (1985), 180.

²⁰ Descartes to [Marquess of Newcastle] (Oct. 1645), 184.

²¹ Alexander Hamilton, et al., *The Federalist Papers* [1788], ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York, 1987), No. 9.

²² David Hume, "That Politics May be Reduced to a Science" [1742], in *Political Essays*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, Eng., 1994), 9, 5.

²³ Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 31.

With the preceding observations in mind, we are now prepared to examine part two of the *Discourse*, the only place in which Descartes discusses government in his published *oeuvre*. These remarks are brief and take the form of a preface to his “principal rules of the method.” First, Descartes observes “that frequently there is less perfection in a work produced by several persons than in one produced by a single hand” (II:7). Whether in the design of a building or entire towns “it is not easy to do a good job when using only the works of others” (II:8). The same, Descartes avers, holds true for political systems. For it appears that “peoples who were once half savage, and who became civilized by a gradual process and invented their laws one by one as the harmfulness of crimes and quarrels forced them to outlaw them, would be less well governed than those who have followed the constitutions of some prudent legislator from the time that their communities were founded.” But why should a society living in accordance with an original constitution necessarily be better governed than one slowly perfected over time? Descartes’s answer is that (as in the case of Sparta) all its laws “tended to the same end.” This—and “not . . . the goodness of each of its laws, in particular, seeing that many of them were very strange and even contrary to good morals”—explains why “Sparta was such a flourishing community . . .”

While the tendency to idealize Sparta had been a commonplace since the Renaissance, Descartes’s admiration has more to do with his rage for symmetry than a prejudice for the ancients. His objection to a society that gradually improved its laws over a long period (such as England) is the same as his objection to poorly arranged cities, viz., “that chance and not the decisions of rational men had so arranged them” (II:8). Yet the notion that states such as Sparta are superior because they were founded by a single legislator on the basis of a rational plan is curious, for it implies that politics *is* a reason-based science, at least as far as constitution- and law-making are concerned. The suggestion is reinforced by a passage in which Descartes notes that the very “diversity” of political regimes is evidence of imperfection, and that there is actually only *one* correct form of government.²⁴ This observation could

²⁴ James Schall states that “[n]owhere does Descartes imply that accord in civil affairs will be the result of his philosophic method,” yet this passage appears to represent a notable exception. “Cartesianism and Political Theory,” *Review of Politics*, 24 (1962), 263-64.

easily be mistaken for a passage from Plato, the father of “scientific” politics.²⁵ So is politics a philosophical science or not? Descartes’s strict definition of philosophy, and his few remarks on politics suggest the latter. Yet here he implies that politics—at least in part—is subject to rational, scientific treatment.²⁶ If he is not simply inconsistent on the matter, then he is certainly unclear and equivocal.²⁷

Returning to the example of town-planning, Descartes notes that a city never tears down all its houses in order to beautify the streets, yet individuals are often compelled to raze their homes when threatened with collapse. On the basis of this example, he is “convinced that a private individual should not seek to reform a nation by changing all its customs and destroying it to construct it anew, nor to reform the body of knowledge or the system of education” (II:9). While the analogy is hardly persuasive, it does underscore Descartes’s belief that reform—political, social, educational—is not the business of private persons, but the exclusive prerogative of the sovereign. Yet for one who was highly critical of the current system of education and sought to revolutionize the prevailing body of knowledge, Descartes’s prohibition on privately initiated reform is puzzling indeed. As for the realm of politics, Descartes was wary of reform even when initiated by the proper authorities. Not only does he emphasize the danger and difficulty of reform, he underscores the complexity of the social

²⁵ The link with the Greek philosopher is suggested by Comarnesco, who observes that “Descartes, like Plato, seems . . . to incline toward an aristocracy founded upon democracy and having at its head, perhaps, a philosopher-king. And like Plato—the Plato of the *Laws* and not of the *Republic*—Descartes, the rationalist, believes in laws rather than in customs, in certain fundamental principles rather than in human beings.” “Social and Ethical Conceptions of Descartes,” 500.

²⁶ Paul Rahe avers that Descartes was simply “disingenuous” in denying that his intentions extended to anything beyond the reformation of his own thoughts, and calls the “program of reform” announced at the end of the *Discourse* “far more radical than anything that could be attributed to the legendary Spartan legislator.” *Republics Ancient and Modern: New Modes and Orders in Early Modern Political Thought* (Chapel Hill, 1994), 350n. For a similar reading of Descartes’s equivocal intentions see Cropsey, “Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*,” 274-90.

²⁷ Descartes, it would appear, was not only ambiguous on the status of politics, but equivocal in his whole conception of certainty. As Desmond Clarke notes, “he sometimes claims that his explanations are certain,” but also “recognizes that they are not absolutely certain . . .” “Descartes’ Philosophy of Science,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge, Eng., 1992), 275.

order and the fragility of existing institutions. “For public affairs are on a large scale, and large edifices are too difficult to set up again once they have been thrown down, too difficult ever to preserve once they have been shaken, and their fall is necessarily catastrophic.” Again, Descartes strikes a Burkean chord, but his phobia towards even “the slightest reform of public affairs” goes well beyond the gradualist approach of the British statesman.

It should be recalled that Descartes is not discussing politics for its own sake, but in order to provide a defense for the radical reform of his *own* ideas. Since he proposes to “reject them [the received opinions of his youth] completely,” and resume or replace them “when I had determined how they fitted into a rational scheme” (II:9), he found it necessary to assure his readers (viz., the authorities) that his thought experiment was a strictly individual concern with no threatening political consequences. Given the fact that his theoretical teachings *did* provoke controversy—he was called before the magistracy in Holland and his books were eventually condemned by the Catholic Church—it is perhaps understandable why Descartes went to such lengths to profess his “orthodoxy” on matters of religion and politics.²⁸ This raises an interesting question: had Descartes been able to express himself freely on such matters would he have done so?

As a man who cherished his privacy to the point of obsession, a philosopher who, above all, “desire[d] to live in peace,”²⁹ it is unlikely that he would have entered the lists of theological and political controversy. Yet on one occasion Descartes did involve himself in controversy—the uproar surrounding the teaching of

²⁸ Attacks on Descartes’s philosophy provided further grounds for maintaining his silence on matters of morals, religion, and politics. Having angered the Utrecht dons, who could find “no pretext in [my writings] for slandering me,” Descartes opined that had he “dealt with morality after all that, they would never give me any peace.” Similarly, “[a] certain Father Bourdin thought he had good reason to accuse me of being a sceptic, because I refuted the sceptics; and a certain minister tried to argue that I was an atheist, without giving any reason other than the fact that I tried to prove the existence of God.” Given the Catch-22 he found himself in, “[i]t would be pointless for me to have only those opinions which agree as closely as possible with religion and which are as beneficial as possible for the state: for my critics would still try to convince people that I had opinions which are opposed to both.” With ironic resignation, Descartes concludes that “the best thing I can do henceforth is to abstain from writing books.” Descartes to Chanut (Nov. 1646), *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 3, 299-300.

²⁹ Descartes to Mersenne (April 1634), 26.

his philosophy at the University of Utrecht. The opposition to Descartes's doctrines, which commenced in the early 1640s, was led by Gisbertus Voetius, the University's preeminent professor of theology. As the attacks became increasingly hostile, Descartes felt compelled to strike back, and penned an open letter to Voetius, whom he (as one observer has written) branded "a benighted bigot, ignorant of science and philosophy, who abused his power as *rector magnificus* of the university to obstruct scholarship."³⁰ It was this inflammatory letter to "the most pedantic fellow in the world"³¹ that led to a summons by the Utrecht magistracy.

A tacit endorsement of resistance to established authority.

The implications of this *cause célèbre* for Descartes's political views are not altogether clear,³² but it does suggest a tacit endorsement of resistance to established authority—he did, after all, exhibit a measure of defiance towards the Dutch authorities, and appealed to the French ambassador for protection. Moreover, Descartes expressed great disappointment in what he perceived as a growing intolerance in a nation he had sought out for its liberty. In his correspondence, "Descartes remarked that the United Provinces no longer provided the tranquility necessary for philosophizing 'in freedom' which he came there to find. Instead of enjoying calm he found himself entangled with a 'troupe de théologiens' intent on vilifying him in the eyes of the public."³³

In entering the fray at Utrecht did Descartes abandon his earlier injunction against private individuals challenging established authorities or reforming existing institutions? Did he not break his vow "to write of none [opinions] that might prove disadvantageous to anyone" (VI:39), and violate his pledge "not . . . for anything in the world, to maintain them against the authority of the

³⁰ Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477-1806* (Oxford, 1995), 585.

³¹ Descartes to Mersenne (Nov. 1640), 81.

³² In his chapter on "the Utrecht Crisis," Theo Verbeek explores Descartes's attack on Voetius for its broader import, finding that the French philosopher "inclines to the view that the Church and its representatives should submit themselves to the authority of the magistrate." *Descartes and the Dutch: Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637-1650* (Carbondale, 1992), 28. Elsewhere, however, Verbeek underscores the *ad hominem* nature of Descartes's comments, concluding "*on ne peut pas savoir si ce qu'il disait en fait, par exemple sur les relations entre l'Église et al Magistrat, était réellement ce qu'il pensait.*" "Le Contexte Néerlandais de la Politique Cartésienne," *Archives de Philosophie*, 53 (1990), 357. See Letter to Father Dinet, *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2, 384-97; and Letter to Voetius, vol. 3, 220-24.

³³ Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 587.

Church"?³⁴ Of course, Descartes did not believe his opinions could truly disadvantage anyone, being "based on very certain and evident proofs . . ." ³⁵ He was aware, however, that the proliferation of his principles, the truth of which "destroy the principles of Aristotle,"³⁶ would forever doom the false teaching of the Schoolmen. In this sense, Descartes *was* a radical reformer—albeit a surreptitious one—in spite of his assertion that no private individual should attempt "to reform of the body of knowledge or the system of education." Moreover, his defense of his "freedom" to philosophize and publish his opinions suggests a commitment to free expression of one kind or another—a commitment far removed from his professions of deference to the established authorities. In sum, the Utrecht affair provides further evidence of the inconsistent nature of Descartes's "politics."

*A radical,
albeit
surreptitious,
reformer.*

The remainder of part two of the *Discourse* is concerned with the four rules of method Descartes adopted to guide his search for truth, but has no real bearing on his earlier remarks. He does, however, draw a parallel between the need for parsimony in logical precepts and the value of parsimony in a state's legal code. For "just as the multitude of laws frequently furnishes an excuse for vice, and a state is much better governed with a few laws which are strictly adhered to," so the rules of inquiry should be restricted to a minimum (II:12). Descartes was not original in this observation, but it does reflect his view of the relation between law and governance. The notion that too many laws result in unnecessary (and frivolous) disputes and that laws should be few (and intelligible to the many) would later be championed by populists such as Rousseau. Yet there is no indication that Descartes meant his remark to be taken in a populist vein. His emphasis on the rule of law is generic in nature and has been common both to democratic and authoritarian regimes. Interestingly, however, he attributed the unparalleled "liberty" which prevailed in Holland to the "severity" of its criminal code.³⁷

³⁴ Descartes to Mersenne (April 1634), 26.

³⁵ Elsewhere in his correspondence, Descartes refers to "the harmless principles of [my] physics," for which the "Regents [at Utrecht] are so worked up against me . . ." Descartes to Chanut (Nov. 1646), *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 3, 299.

³⁶ Descartes to Mersenne, (Jan. 1641), 94.

³⁷ See Schall, "Cartesianism and Political Theory," 262. As Cropsey writes,

A limited notion of "liberty."³⁸ Such remarks raise the question of what Descartes meant by "liberty." For a man who only wished to carry out his life's work in peace, "liberty" meant simply "security and repose . . ." We have seen, however, that Descartes also valued a degree of intellectual freedom and religious tolerance. (Part of Descartes's troubles with the Utrecht authorities was owing to his Catholicism.) Even if expanded to include a measure of intellectual and religious freedom, his understanding of "liberty" is quite limited and idiosyncratic. It does, however, help explain his conservatism, and what has been said of Aristotle applies no less to Descartes: "he, too, craved a society that would be static enough to permit a scientist and philosopher like himself to work in peace and quiet."³⁹

As for the rules of method themselves, there is little on face to suggest anything more than a series of precepts for guiding scientific inquiry. Yet on closer inspection there is some hint that "all things knowable to men" might result from their application (II:12). While the subject under discussion is mathematical science, Descartes implies that logical rules may render *all* subjects intelligible, which one may assume would include the subject of *statecraft*. Indeed, it is the perceived *universalism* of this method that "pleased [him] most," for "it enabled me to *reason in all things*" (emphasis added) (II:14). His remarks on Sparta and his belief that there is only *one* correct form of government support this construction. Similarly, his assertion that "there is only one true solution to a given problem, and whoever finds it knows all that anyone can know about it," implies the possibility of a Cartesian science of politics.⁴⁰ Elsewhere, however, Descartes undermines this view,

Descartes's "description of the Dutch regime is laconic but weighty, and as close to enthusiastic as he allows himself to become." "Descartes' *Discourse on Method*," 276.

³⁸ See Étienne Gilson, *La Doctrine Cartésienne de la Liberté et la Théologie* (Paris, 1913); Marie-Dominique Philippe, "Réflexions sur la Nature et l'Importance de la Liberté dans la Philosophie de Descartes," *Revue Thomiste*, 60 (1952), 586-607; Edgar Wolff, "Conscience et Liberté chez Descartes et chez M. Sartre," *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, 145 (1955), 341-48; Augusto del Noce, "Cartesio e la Politica," *Rivista de Filosofia*, 5 (1950), 3-30; R. Serano, "De la Liberté chez Descartes," and J. Segond, "La Liberté Divine et la Humaine: Prélude Cartésien a l'Existentialisme," *Les Études Philosophiques*, 5 (1950), 201-22; 223-32.

³⁹ Walter Agard, *What Democracy Meant to the Greeks* (Madison, 1965), 221.

⁴⁰ The desire to encompass all knowledge through the application of a single method was particularly strong in Descartes. As Gilson writes, "[a] young mathematician in the ardor of his first scientific triumphs conceives the possibility,

maintaining that politics is essentially a matter of “experience” and not subject to philosophical “reason.” Once more the reader is left wondering whether or not Descartes believed politics could ever be placed on a scientific basis.

In part three of the *Discourse* Descartes articulates his famous “provisional code of morality,” which in lieu of certainty on morals and customs he adopts as a guide for his practical conduct. The first maxim, “to obey the laws and customs of my country,” has already been remarked upon. The other three rules are of some relevance to Descartes’s moral theory, but have little or no bearing on his political views.⁴¹ He does, however, refer to “our corrupt times” (III:15), a tacit admission that the morals (and politics?) of Europe were in need of reform. Yet Descartes eschews all meddling in such matters, and places political and moral reform solely in the hands of the sovereign. Even in matters outside the official laws and customs, he defers to local practices, for “[w]hile there may be, no doubt, just as reliable persons among the Persians or the Chinese as among ourselves, it seemed more practical to pattern my conduct on that of the society in which I would have to live;” that is, “to follow the most moderate and least excessive opinions to be found in the practices of the more judicious part of the community”

Deference to local practices.

Descartes can hardly be faulted for adopting this practical stance, particularly in light of his desire “to follow . . . the most reliable judges” (III:15). His deference, nonetheless, speaks to an innate conservatism toward the established social order—a conservatism which rests uneasily with the radical implications of his cultural critique and rationalist method.⁴²

even the necessity, of applying generally to all problems indiscriminately the method which has lately brought him such dazzling success.” “The Distinctiveness of the Philosophic Order,” in *A Gilson Reader*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, 1957), 51.

⁴¹ While there is some disagreement as to whether (and to what degree) Descartes even developed a moral theory, he does identify morals (along with medicine and mechanics) as one of the “three principal” branches of philosophy. See Émile Boutroux, “Du Rapport de la Morale a la Science: Dans la Philosophie de Descartes,” *Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale*, 4 (1896), 502-511; and John Marshall, *Descartes’s Moral Theory* (Ithaca, 1998). I make no attempt here to consider the political implications of Descartes’s “moral” theory.

⁴² The incongruity between Descartes’s radical method and his conservative politics is noted by Nannerl Keohane. “Descartes’s new method, which at first

Parts four and five of the *Discourse* add virtually nothing to Descartes's social ideas—even broadly construed—and the principal social implications of part six have been explored above. The *Discourse* ends with a restatement of Descartes's ultimate goal and a final disclaimer regarding his intentions. His sole aim is "to acquire some knowledge of nature, of such a sort that we may derive rules of medicine more certain than those which we have had up to the present" (VI:50). Conversely, he disavows "any other plans, especially those which can be useful to some only by harming others . . ." Just what such "plans" might be Descartes does not say, but they certainly did not include an investigation of politics.

On Machiavelli's Prince

Outside of the *Discourse*, Descartes broached the subject of politics on only one other occasion—in a letter to Princess Elizabeth, with whom he frequently corresponded between 1643 and 1649.

Prior to her departure from Holland, Elizabeth asked Descartes to give his opinion of Machiavelli's *Prince*. It was therefore only at the request of a princess (albeit exiled) that Descartes ever turned his attention to political questions in anything like a sustained manner. Given the letter's unique status it is surprising that those who have written on Descartes's "politics" have not given it greater consideration.⁴³ I will attempt to supply this deficiency with a summary and analysis of his remarks, considering their implications for his "political philosophy."

As might be expected, Descartes neither fully endorses nor wholly rejects the teaching of *Il principe*, which had created quite a stir in sixteenth-century Europe, and was (along with Machiavelli's other writings) placed on the *Index* of condemned writings

glance appears to have such a subversive potential in social thought (and was used to such ends by several Cartesians with radical propensities), was seen by Descartes himself as bolstering rather than undermining established authority." *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1980), 211.

⁴³ A few Continental scholars have discussed Descartes's letter on the *Prince* and his relation to Machiavelli in some detail. See Pierre Mesnard, "Excursus, la Morale et la Politique: Le Prétendu Machiavélisme de Descartes," in *Essai sur la Morale de Descartes* (Paris, 1936), 190-212; and Augusto del Noce, "Spiritualità Cartesiana e Machiavellismo," in *Umanesimo e Scienza Politica*, ed. Enrico Castelli (Rome, 1951), 105-127.

in 1559. The Church's ban did not, however, prevent Descartes from finding in the *Prince* "many maxims which seem excellent," viz., "that a prince should always avoid the hatred and contempt of his subjects, and that the love of the people is worth more than fortresses."⁴⁴ These, of course, are the most benign of Machiavelli's maxims, and Descartes's approval fell well within the political orthodoxy of his time. Yet Descartes hastens to add that the *Prince* contains "many others which I cannot approve." Machiavelli's greatest error, he maintains, is his failure to "sufficiently distinguish between princes who have come to power by just means, and those who have usurped it by illegitimate methods; and that he recommends indiscriminately maxims that are only suitable for the latter." A legitimate ruler, Descartes suggests, will not have to resort to wickedness in order to maintain his power, while usurpers "are commonly compelled to continue their course of crime, and would be unable to defend themselves if they took to virtue."

Descartes agrees that such princes will be "hated by the many" and driven to "do great harm," but he rejects the notion that *all* princes must act in a malign manner in order to preserve their state. In short, Descartes takes issue with the entire panoply of "tyrannical maxims" espoused in the *Prince*, and suggests that "quite contrary maxims should be proposed for the instruction of good princes," presuming they come to power through just means. Never, however, does he say that those who gain power through injustice should be opposed or deposed. Indeed, he claims that "[a]lmost always" the means of attaining power "are just, provided the princes who use them think them to be." This last clause is particularly notable, for it implies that the question of justice resides in the *mind* of the prince, and not in any external, objective standard. Descartes provides two reasons for this view: first, "because justice between sovereigns does not have the same bounds as justice between individuals"; and second, "in these cases God gives right to those to whom He gives power."⁴⁵

The first rationale is strikingly Machiavellian, for it implies a separation of morals and politics, or at least posits a bifurcation of

⁴⁴ Descartes to Elizabeth (Sept. 1646), 199-204.

⁴⁵ The broader implication of this view is noted by Schall, who observes that for Descartes "the task of politics is to guarantee by force a calm and peaceful social and political order. Whoever possesses the force to guarantee this order, has that power by right." "Cartesianism and Political Theory," 264.

justice into separate (private and public) realms. It also assumes that the issue of “who should rule” is not one left to the determination of subjects or citizens, thus recapitulating the prohibition on private individuals having a say in public matters. The second rationale supports the view that Descartes adhered to the “divine right” theory of sovereignty.⁴⁶ Yet in suggesting that whoever actually holds power—however obtained or used—does so with the sanction of God, he went beyond the traditional (hereditary) theory and returned to the doctrine of Augustine, who insisted that even tyrannical regimes—“wicked and most vicious though they be”—must be obeyed.⁴⁷ For Descartes, then, justice is not the proper relation between ruler and ruled, or even fair-dealing among sovereigns. Rather, justice is, on one hand, whatever God wills to happen, and on the other, the subjective mind-set of the prince, for even “the most just actions become unjust when those who do them think them so.”⁴⁸ A more subjective—indeed, inadequate—notion of public justice can hardly be imagined.

From here Descartes proceeds to develop a distinction between a sovereign’s relations with “subjects, friends, and enemies.” In addressing the last, he is at his most Machiavellian, claiming a prince “is permitted to do almost anything, provided that some advantage to oneself or one’s subjects ensues.” He even adopts the language of the Florentine, sanctioning the fusion of “the fox with the lion,” the use of “artifice as well as force.” For Descartes *les ennemis* are “all those who are neither friends nor allies,” and he even defends a “preemptive strike” when in the perceived interest of the ruler: “one has a right to make war on such people when it is to one’s advantage and when their power is increasing in a suspicious and alarming manner.” The only limit he places on a ruler in dealing with “enemies” is the use of feigned friendship as a means of destroying an adversary. With this prohibition, Descartes parts company with Machiavelli on the grounds that

⁴⁶ On the ambiguities in Descartes’s theological politics see Pierre Guenancia, “Dieu, Le Roi Et Les Sujets,” *Archives de Philosophie*, 53 (1990), 403-20.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. George E. McCracken, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), II:19.

⁴⁸ “Such a position,” Schall writes in response to this passage, “could happen in the Cartesian system only if the external order was subject to a law other than reason.” “Cartesianism and Political Theory,” 263.

such a policy is “directly hostile to society,” for “[f]riendship is too sacred a thing to be abused in this way.”

In view of his general attitude towards the treatment of enemies, the “friendship” exception rings somewhat hollow. It is reminiscent of John of Salisbury, who gave qualified sanction to the assassination of tyrants, but prohibited the use of poisoning as the means of death.⁴⁹ As regrettable as it may be, it is sometimes necessary to feign friendship in order to bring a menacing party to justice. In such cases, as Machiavelli says, the ends may justify the means. By failing to recognize this, Descartes belied the idiosyncratic nature of his thinking on politics.

As for a ruler’s allies, Descartes takes a more defensible, but ultimately, problematic stand. In treating allies, “a prince should keep his word to them strictly, even when it is to his own disadvantage,” a maxim Machiavelli would have scornfully rejected. Yet like his view towards “enemies,” Descartes pushes his policy towards allies to an extreme, claiming that “no disadvantage can outweigh the utility of a reputation for keeping one’s promises.” He does make an exception (invoking “the law of nations”) in cases where a ruler “would be altogether ruined” by keeping his word. Yet what ruler (or nation) has ever been driven to the brink of ruin before he broke a promise to an ally? Again, Descartes’s exalted conception of friendship (and reputation) appears to have clouded his political judgment.

Descartes next considers a ruler’s relations with neighboring states, with the majority of which he should “be on friendly terms.” He does, however, caution against having “strict alliances” with stronger powers, “[b]ecause however loyal one intends to be oneself, one should not expect the same from others; one should count on being cheated whenever one’s allies find it to their advantage.” With this observation Descartes returns to the Machiavellian world of *Realpolitik*, and tacitly subverts his earlier injunction on strictly adhering to one’s alliances. If one cannot rely on others to honor their commitments, why should a prince feel compelled to honor his? Moreover, weaker nations are often forced by necessity to align with their stronger neighbors, and have often found it advantageous to do so. Like the Florentine, Descartes

⁴⁹ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, trans. Cary J. Nederman (Cambridge, Eng., 1990), 58, 65.

falls into the error of universalizing the conditions of his time, without seeing that changed circumstances would require changes in policy.

*A Machiavel-
lian prescrip-
tion toward
those who
pose threat
to the ruler.*

On the matter of a ruler's subjects, Descartes divides them into "great people and common people." The former, however, are not identified as the higher nobility, but simply as "all those who can form parties against the Prince." A prince must insist on their fidelity or be prepared to "employ all his efforts to bring them low." Indeed, "[i]f they should show any tendency to disturb the peace, he should treat them as he would foreign enemies," in which case he "is permitted to do almost anything;" a maxim on which "all politicians agree." This is Descartes at his most *authoritarian*.⁵⁰ In his reference to *les grands* there is no sense of the reciprocal rights and duties which (at least in principle) marked relations between monarch and nobility in the feudal age. Rather we find an adumbration of absolutism, and the harbinger of the Sun King's famous pronouncement *l'état c'est moi*.⁵¹ As for *le peuple*, the prince should (*pace Machiavelli*) "avoid their hatred and contempt," namely, by "dispens[ing] justice strictly according to their custom—that is, in accordance with the laws with which they are familiar—without excessive rigor in punishment or excessive indulgence in pardoning." This last proviso is reasonable enough, but Descartes (like Hobbes) provides no mechanism for assuring the one or the other, and (more importantly) no remedy for the abuse of power.⁵²

⁵⁰ See Karl Buddeberg, "Descartes und der Politische Absolutismus," *Archiv für Rechts und Sozialphilosophie*, 30 (1936), 541-560.

⁵¹ Ironically, Louis XIV sensed the subversive nature of Cartesianism and attempted (unsuccessfully) to prohibit its teaching in the universities under his authority. See Schrecker, "La République," 26.

⁵² As prophets of the "new science," each of whom believed he possessed the one true philosophy, Descartes and Hobbes looked upon the other as an inferior rival. Hobbes is said to have remarked that the Frenchman was a fine mathematician, but had no aptitude for philosophy. Descartes, for his part, called the author of *De Cive* "much more astute in moral philosophy than in metaphysics or physics." While a monarchist himself, Descartes firmly rejected Hobbes's principles—"tres-mauvaises & tres-dangereuses"—for "he supposes all persons to be wicked, or gives them cause to be so." Descartes suggests that "more virtuous and solid" maxims would better serve the cause of monarchy. Descartes to [Unidentified] (1643), *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 3, 230-31. Descartes's divergence from Hobbes on this point is supported elsewhere in his correspondence, where, for example, he emphasizes the subordination of individual egoism to the collective good. See Descartes to Elizabeth (Sept. 1645), 172-73; and (Oct. 1645), 181. This said, it is interesting to note (as Rahe relates) that the similarities "[i]n

In what follows, Descartes adds a few touches to his portrait of absolute monarchy. First, a prince should not delegate too much authority to his ministers: “he should leave them to pronounce the most odious condemnations and display his own concern with everything else.” Nor should he ever suffer his dignity to be compromised, but guard his honor and demand the deference due a prince. In public he should perform “only important and universally commendable actions,” while his pleasures should be taken in private, “and never at anyone else’s expense.” “Finally, he should be immovable and inflexible.” True, a prince should consult with his appointed deputies and solicit the advice of those qualified to give it. “But once he has announced his decision, he must be inflexible in holding to it *even if this does him harm*; for it can hardly be as harmful to him as the reputation of being light and inconstant” (emphasis added).

Once again, Descartes begins with a (more or less) reasonable position, and then pushes it beyond its proper limits. Constancy is undoubtedly a virtue in rulers, but not necessarily for its own sake, for the sake of mere “reputation,” or to the point of inflexibility. On the contrary, it is precisely when a decision *begins to harm* a ruler (or his subjects) that it may be necessary to reverse or adjust one’s course. Inflexibility certainly has a place in politics, for example, in the case of bedrock principles, but in ordinary policy it is a sign of weakness and often leads to disaster—a lesson the Bourbons would bitterly learn. The bankruptcy of absolute monarchy, not the individualistic liberalism of the revolutionaries, is the true legacy of Descartes’s *political* teaching.⁵³

Reasonable positions pushed beyond proper limits.

method, substance, and tone,” between Hobbes’s *De Cive* and Descartes’s publications (and private opinions) were so striking that “not long after *De cive* first appeared as an anonymous tract in 1642, Samuel Sorbière confronted the author of *The Discourse on Method* and the *Meditations* on the supposition that he had composed Hobbes’s political treatise as well.” Descartes, who was amazed Hobbes could avoid the censors, denied authorship; yet the Englishman must have sensed something of his rival’s animosity, for “[w]hen Sorbière traveled to Amsterdam to seek a publisher for the second edition of *De Cive*, Hobbes warned him not to let Descartes know the purpose of his visit lest the French philosopher try to prevent publication.” *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 140, 386n. See also Carl Schmitt, “Der Staat als Mechanismus bei Hobbes und Descartes,” *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie*, 30 (1936), 622-632.

⁵³ As Gibson observes, the “affiliation [of Descartes and the Revolution] is one of bare fact, and has no necessary philosophical significance. The French Revolution may have been wrong when it traced its aspirations back to Descartes. It

The rest of the letter on the *Prince* addresses two of Machiavelli's most controversial maxims: "that since the world is very corrupt a man who tries always to be good is bound to come off badly, and that a prince, for his own defense, must learn to be wicked when the occasion demands." Descartes rejects both doctrines, assuming a "good man" is not defined as either credulous or obsessed with changing a people's religion. A *homme de bien*, rather, is "one who does all that true reason tells him, [and] it is certain that the best thing is to try to always be good." The emphasis on "true reason" recapitulates the troubling issue of the relation between "reason" and "politics." Earlier Descartes defined justice in terms of the subjective disposition of the prince—what *he believed* to be just. Now he appears to erect a wholly objective standard for a prince's decisions. Given his high-toned version of "divine right" monarchy, it is perhaps possible to reconcile these seemingly incompatible standards; that is, a prince *should* act according to true reason, but since his decisions cannot be questioned, it is most important that he *believe* he is acting justly—cold comfort for those subject to the real injustices of a self-righteous tyrant.

Descartes also addresses the related issue of whether a prince "may be hated for good actions no less than for bad ones," a maxim affirmed in the *Prince*. A prince, he observes, may be "envied" for his good deeds, but the principal source of envy is not the common people, but the "grandees or . . . their neighbors, to whom the same virtues which cause fear cause envy." Hence, "[n]o prince should ever abstain from well doing in order to avoid that sort of hatred; and the only kind which can harm him is the hatred arising from the injustice or arrogance which the people judge him to have." While Descartes differs with Machiavelli on the matter of being hated for good actions, he echoes the Florentine in siding with the rulers and the people against the nobility. The people (or at least a majority thereof) do not fear or envy a prince who is temperate and just, and are even willing to bear "undeserved evils . . . if it is thought that the prince from whom they come is in some way forced to inflict them and does

is by no means self-evident that the application of Cartesian method to politics will lead to a belief in bourgeois democracy. Moreover, Descartes would have disapproved of the application, and been horrified at the results." *Philosophy of Descartes*, 62n.

so with regret." Why? "[B]ecause it is thought to be just that he should prefer the general utility to that of individuals." Without denying the occasional need to sacrifice individual interests to the good of the whole, is it not rather glib to claim that those who must bear the sacrifice will do so graciously?

Descartes does recognize a special difficulty "when there are two parties to be satisfied who judge differently what is just . . ." "In such a case," he proposes, "it is reasonable to accord something to both sides without trying to bring instantly to reason people unaccustomed to listen to it." This spirit of compromise is, in principle, admirable, as is the suggestion that "the people" be gradually brought to an understanding of policy through a process of persuasion. Yet because the means thereof will necessarily issue from the ruling authorities—admitting no debate or dissension—such efforts are better described as *propaganda*. Moreover, Descartes believes that "the common people will put up with whatever it can be *persuaded* is just, and is offended by whatever it *imagines* to be unjust" (emphases added). Again, Descartes reverts to a subjective notion of justice, concluding that "[t]he arrogance of princes, that is the usurpation of authority or rights or honors thought undue, is odious to the common people," not because it *is* unjust, but "only because it is *regarded* as a species of injustice" (emphasis added).

From this survey of Descartes's letter on the *Prince* a few conclusions may be drawn. The most general is that Descartes was himself a Machiavellian of sorts.⁵⁴ And if we take the *Prince* to represent but one side of the Florentine's political thought (the other being the *republican* teaching of the *Discourses*⁵⁵) the French philosopher turns out to be a greater advocate of absolutism than Machiavelli. Moreover, Descartes's sovereign rules with the sanc-

*More
absolutist
than
Machiavelli.*

⁵⁴ Rahe opines that Descartes was even more Machiavellian than his letters to Elizabeth suggest, for "[h]ad Elizabeth not declined his proposal that they continue their correspondence regarding Machiavelli in cipher, the French philosopher would undoubtedly have been even less critical of his Florentine predecessor than he was . . ." *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 355n.

⁵⁵ Descartes does make one reference to the *Discourses* in his correspondence, finding "nothing bad in it." Yet in agreeing with Machiavelli's "*principle précepte*," i.e., that a prince should "eliminate one's enemies completely or else make them into one's friends, without ever taking the middle way," he adopts one of the more ruthless teachings of the *Prince*. Descartes to Elizabeth (Oct. or Nov. 1646), *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 3, 297.

tion of God, something the Florentine never bestowed on rulership. The points of similarity, however, are striking. First, Descartes follows Machiavelli in severing morals and politics, or at least endorses a different standard of conduct for subjects and rulers. His standard for the latter is essentially that of Machiavelli—*raison d'état*—although he is not as consistent in its application. Descartes also shares something of Machiavelli's militarism and gives qualified support to the use of deception and force when to a prince's advantage. Furthermore, the Frenchman takes a similarly cynical view towards justifying the actions of a ruler in the eyes of his subjects. Descartes believes, like his predecessor, that in politics "perception is reality," a view which gave his concept of justice a notably subjective bent. Finally, both Descartes and the author of the *Prince* exhibit a marked authoritarianism, and fail to embrace a concept of *rights* (individual or corporate) which a ruler (or government) is obliged to honor. The former does condemn the more notorious Machiavellian precepts, and maintains that a ruler can be "good" without hazarding the hatred of his subjects or the safety of his state. On the whole, however, Descartes shares many of the basic assumptions of the Florentine about politics, and the Cartesian sovereign is, essentially, Machiavelli's prince with a conscience.

Conclusion

It has been the aim of this study to clarify Descartes's status as a political thinker through an account of his spare remarks on politics, and an analysis of the political implications of his philosophy. In addition to confirming the general characteristics of his political orientation, our review of the *Discourse on Method* and the correspondence reveals a thinker mired in ambiguity and inconsistency. As for the *Discourse*, Descartes adopted an egalitarian attitude toward human understanding, but failed to perceive the social and political implications of such a view. He recognized the relativity of cultures and the corruption of European morals, but drew only the most conservative conclusions. He perceived that the application of the new science would revolutionize the material conditions of life, but saw no need for corresponding changes in the social and political order. He denied that politics was a subject of science, but at times suggested it might (in some form) be

Political implications of Descartes's philosophy ambiguous.

placed on a scientific footing. He admonished those who would attempt to reform educational institutions, but condemned “the speculative philosophy now taught in the schools” and dedicated his life to developing “a practical one” to replace it. He preached a doctrine of submission to authority, but openly protested his treatment by the Utrecht establishment. He applauded the “liberty” he found in Holland, but attributed it to the “severity” of its criminal code. It is perhaps too much to say that Descartes simply contradicted himself on these points. Yet he was far from coherent in his principles or consistent in his actions at the crossroads of philosophy and politics.

As for his stated views on politics (as opposed to the political implications of his philosophy), there is far less ambiguity. Descartes was himself alternatively quietist and reactionary, absolutist and authoritarian. While it would be inaccurate to label him a disciple of Machiavelli, he did share a number of the Florentine’s assumptions about political power and statecraft, however inconsistent he was in their application. Yet because he adopts a somewhat more benign perspective than that articulated in the *Prince* (and due to his emphasis on reason), it is perhaps better to think of Descartes as a forerunner of the eighteenth-century proponents of *enlightened despotism*. That d’Alembert and the French revolutionaries embraced him as an enemy of tyranny and a friend of freedom is ironic indeed. It is a fitting legacy, however, for it underscores the truly paradoxical nature of Descartes’s “politics.”

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