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POLITICS DISAVOWED

REMARKS ON THE STATUS OF POLITICS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF DESCARTES

I. DENEGATION OF POLITICS

Only rarely does Descartes deal with specifically political questions, and then when he does so, it is only by denial, to justify his refusal to “become involved” in politics.¹ All the texts show that this attitude of rejecting politics is not dictated primarily by prudence,

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

¹ *Discours de la méthode* (Oeuvres complètes, Adam et Tannery, t. VI, p. 15); “And if I thought that there was the slightest thing in this writing through which I could be suspected of such folly (namely of planning a political reform), I would be very sorry to allow it to be published”. To Elisabeth, May 1646 (Oeuvres, Ferdinand Alquié, t. III, p. 653): “... I have always been so removed from the control of affairs that I would not be less impertinent than that philosopher who wanted to teach the duty of a captain in the presence of Hanibal, if I undertook to write here the maxims that should be observed in civil life”. To Elisabeth, Sept. 1646 (FA III 670): “...I would deserve to be mocked if I thought I was able to teach something to Your Highness in this matter”.

the rule in this century of intolerance, but by a concern for philosophical consistency. This denial, as we will be attempting to establish, seems conditioned by fundamental options of Cartesian philosophy. For the moment we will only examine the theoretical effects of this refusal to write about politics other than by denial; such effects seem to us to consist in the exclusion of politics outside the realm of knowledge and its problematic inclusion into that of morality. And although it has been possible to speak of a “political Descartes”,² it is completely against his stated intentions. This Descartes would be political in spite of himself. In fact, such an approach can only consist in a political interpretation of this denial, in a political reading of the texts that reject, or more often pass over in silence, politics as such. Although a reading of this kind can be at best a hazardous one, we will not attempt to challenge its legitimacy,³ for it is certainly possible to affirm that the work of Descartes is ridden and wrought by the question of politics (just as all philosophical thought, in one way or another, must of necessity confront political reality), but it is not without importance to begin by noting that it is never touched upon other than indirectly, obliquely, through the use of theoretical devices whose finality is not political. Most often these are questions seen from a moral point of view, such as individual commitment within the community,⁴ that

² Antonio Negri, *Descartes Politico, o della ragionevole ideologia*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1970.

³ The ideas of Descartes have given place recently to a variety of political analyses. Remaining only in the French-language sector, we can cite the work of P. Guenancia, *Descartes et l'ordre politique* (P.U.F. 1983), in which Descartes appears in some respects as a precursor of human rights. Cf. for example p. 228: “Make no mistake, the idea of equality that almost all modern political theories presuppose is not the one that, issued from rationalism and principally from Cartesianism, will serve to elaborate protocols for the defence of individual and universal rights against the attacks of political powers”. In a similar vein, F. Georges (“La Confirmation de l'esprit”, article published in *La Liberté de l'esprit*, Oct. 1984, Balland, p. 46) writes: “The institution tells me what exists outside myself, it teaches me what must be known in this respect. It answers with the truth, it guarantees the *adaequatio rei et intellectus* ... it reposes on the expropriation of the *cogito*”. A completely opposite opinion is found in B. Pélégri (in *Figures du Baroque*, Colloque de Cerisy, P.U.F. 1983, n. 21) who, attacking the “rage” and the “ravages of Cartesianism”, fumes as vehemently as he is superficial against the “arbitrary norm, of a fearsome good faith, which doubts everything except itself (Reason is me, therefore I am correct), elevated to a principle of government by a centralizing and absolutist power jealous of its prerogatives and that continues to control mentalities”.

⁴ To Elisabeth, 6 Oct. 1645 (FA III 619): “I admit that it is difficult to measure

lead Descartes to the very boundaries of politics, to that conflictual zone in which every theory of moral action collides with the practical requirements of politics. But Descartes recognizes no veritable specificity, no positive status in politics, to such a point that it appears in his works not so much as a domain foreign to morality as one which, within morality itself, resists and becomes a problem.

1. *Political utopia as analogy of philosophy*

In this manner 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. A very interesting example of this textual ambiguity is given in the *Discourse on Method*.⁵ The denial of politics is there effected by a critical reflection on an analogy borrowed from politics, expressly chosen to show the urgency of a radical reform of knowledge and especially to bring out clearly the fact that such a reform can only be the fruit of individual enterprise. This political analogy derives from an architectural metaphor in the text, one that is omnipresent in Descartes, who designates philosophy as a “structure” the perfection of which depends on the solidity of its foundations (philosophy being this truly ideal architecture resting on nothing less than the mind itself of its conceiver). “In this way we see that buildings designed and completed by a single architect are generally more beautiful and better ordered...”⁶ Throughout this long analogical reflection on his own philosophical vocation and, thereby, on the nature of his philosophical project, Descartes shifts from the image of architect to that of urban engineer who designs entire cities, to finally arrive at the archtype of the founder of the State.

exactly to what point reason orders that we interest ourselves in the public”. Likewise, 15 Sept. 1645 (FA III 607): “... if a man is worth more, by himself, than all the rest of his city, he would have no reason to want to lose himself in order to save it”.

⁵ AT VI 11-15.

⁶ *Ibid.* 11.

The new cities designed by a single engineer are more regular and more in conformity with reason than the “old cities”, whose plans seem to have been drawn up by chance alone, and, likewise, “peoples ... civilized ... little by little ... cannot be as easily organized under an orderly form of government as those who from the beginning have been assembled and who have observed the constitutions of some prudent legislator”.⁷ And Descartes, to illustrate his argument, refers to the “State of true religion”, founded by God alone and, “to speak of human things”, to Sparta, which received from Lycurgus, from its beginning, its definitive constitution.⁸

Considering this double analogy (urbanistic and political) in itself, it seems that we are able to deduce from it that Descartes aspired to an ideal society, utopian and autocratic, governed by unchangeable laws instituted once and for all by a single legislator. Replaced in its historical context, it would in fact be a sort of rationalist idealization for absolutism which, almost everywhere, was at that time becoming stronger in Europe and for which certain important places completed around that time in France seem to have served as urbanistic model.⁹ At first impression, a utopist conception of politics can seem consistent with Cartesian science and the principles that ensure its validity. For modern science, as conceived by Descartes, is truly a sort of utopia, an autonomous system based on the thinking subject, and its mathematical apodicticity, experienced as the certitude of thought, shelters from contingencies, just as the laws of the utopian legislator make it possible to preserve the ideal State from all reform and thereby from every effect of history.¹⁰ It might in this way seem legitimate to the reader of the *Discourse on Method* to take literally this philosophical utopia, which is in fact an analogy of a philosophical utopia, and therefore to make such a type of politics depend on the utopia of science. In other words, the temptation is strong to accredit the analogy as such and to assign to the author the intention of integrating politics into science or even of surreptitiously promoting the political sovereignty of the philosopher.

⁷ *Ibid.* 11-12.

⁸ *Ibid.* 12.

⁹ Cf. E. Gilson, *Notes et commentaires au Discours de la méthode*, Vrin, 1967, p. 167. On this passage from DM, cf. also Guenancia, *op. cit.*, p. 44-48.

¹⁰ On the general characteristics of political utopia, see G. Lapouge, *Utopie et Civilisation*, Weber, Paris, 1973.

But, a few lines later, Descartes is very careful to proscribe any such reading. He returns to this analogy to affirm in substance that it is impossible to derive good politics from true science and that nothing in the political realm is more detestable than utopia. In short, that philosophy and politics, whatever analogical relationships may be possible, are incommensurable.¹¹ Utopia is heuristic as analogy and makes it possible to contribute to giving science this new status that it acquired with Descartes, but he warns his reader that, taken in its real sense, that is returned to the political context from which it emanated, utopia is nothing more than an unreasonable and dangerous dream. And it is necessary to understand that this critical return is neither a reversal nor a retraction. Descartes was here seeking above all to prevent an error in interpretation, that is, reading the *Discourse on Method* politically.

But before seeking to learn why the intellectual reform, for which Descartes served as promoter, was in fact incompatible with a reform (in the radical sense that he meant) of politics, it seems helpful here for us too to return to the role played by analogy in the text, in that it seems to us that, beyond Descartes, it illuminates certain fundamental aspects of the relationships that modern science since its origins has maintained with politics.

In the economy of the Cartesian text, the use of utopian analogy allows both presenting science as utopia and placing politics beyond science, beyond utopia, in the real area of social practices. But it is appropriate at the same time to note that in the course of the discursive process leading him to the declaration of the rules of his method, which engage a new definition of science as no longer being regulated by the object but by the subject of knowledge (a Copernican revolution of knowledge), Descartes deliberately refers to a political model, and specifically to politics in its most idealized form, that is the form most removed from politics as it is actually practiced, just as the critical part of the text proves.¹² Such a reference to utopia, in a text in which the status of modern science

¹¹ AT VI 14-15.

¹² AT VI 13: "It is true that we cannot see why we should tear down all the houses of a city for the sole purpose of redoing them in another manner"; p. 14: "... they (the imperfections of the "political structures") are almost always more bearable than their change would be..."

is at stake, is not a fortuitous one and cannot remain with effect. Philosophical discourse creates a space for political utopia, as a correct analogy for science, and thereby as one of the still possible consequences of science, even if this space for political utopia in the Cartesian text is immediately filled in, rejected, covered over by the utopia of science. The disavowed utopia remains one of the potential results of Cartesian science, first of all because it is an integral part of the referential apparatus through which the modern *episteme* acquires its definition. Utopia, in other words, is one of the founding myths of science. Once it has been established, science rejects the images and dreams out of which it was born (and the Cartesian text is exemplary from this point of view), but utopia reappears recurringly in history, as a political project justified through science. Because political utopia is itself one of the models for nascent science, it can then take as model victorious science. Each time political utopia turns back toward science to give itself legitimacy, it finds itself as both active agent and rejected myth of modern knowledge. Testimony to this return from the myth is abundantly provided by the proliferation of political utopias with a scientific reference beginning at the end of the seventeenth century, but even more so in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹³ This dialectic of political utopia, inasmuch as it reappears mediated by the science for which it is first one of the models, leads us to think that the specifically Cartesian attitude, which aims at rejecting utopia *a priori* and with it every form of politics as a production of science, is even more paradigmatic of modern scientificity. For the true utopia of science consists, perhaps, in its secret desire to supplant politics, to substitute itself for it, as the text of Descartes may suggest in certain respects. And from the beginning modern science has encouraged the pretence of its being able to bring about the happiness of the human race—with no aid from politics nor from morality—thanks to the developments in technology and the medical progress that it makes possible. Descartes is much more prudent, depreciating happiness (in that it depends only on “things that are outside us”; and the happiness provided by the technical productions of science responds well to this definition) in favor of beatitude, which “consists ... in a perfect contentment of spirit and

¹³ Cf. Lapouge, *op. cit.*

internal satisfaction".¹⁴ But, if we remain simply at the level of science, it is no less possible to interpret this denegation of politics, which accompanied the creation of science, as the weakened expression of a desire to go beyond and to render superfluous politics, or even more to assimilate politics, to dissolve it into the quantitative uniformity of its mathematical universality.¹⁵ For is there need for reflection and political commitment within the realm of scientific utopia? The arrival of the utopia of science necessarily coincides with the end of politics. This could be in the final resort the meaning of this appearance, at once exorcised from political utopia in the *Discourse on Method*, as a model for science and more generally for a philosophy that turns away from and, it must be said, loses interest in politics.

But after we have risked tracing this historical perspective of scientific thinking as the utopian end of politics, working from the analogical reference to political utopia in the Cartesian text, we will now have to seek, within the strict framework of Cartesian philosophy, the foundation for this rejection of politics.

2. *Apolitism of the subject*

Descartes insists above all on the fact that a political reform involves all of society, and for this reason can only be considered an extremely serious and hazardous undertaking, whereas his philosophical reform involves only the individual, abstracted from his socio-political environment and considered as an autonomous being, free and endowed with reason. Descartes does not at all aspire

¹⁴ To Elisabeth, 4 Aug. 1645, FA III 587-588.

¹⁵ Cf. the project for a universal language of 1629 (20 Nov., FA I) that Descartes made depend on the appearance of true philosophy, and he esteemed possible, but improbable. This project, as soon as it had been announced, was rejected by Cartesian prudence and common sense as utopian: "It would be necessary that every one live in an Earthly Paradise, which is only true in novels". But it is also supposed here, with the denial of utopia, that the universal adoption of true philosophy would not fail to transform the world of mankind into a paradise, into a Garden of Eden, like that language, inspired from universal mathematics. The ideal society for science, the utopia of realized science, is the utopia of a society without politics. On the languages of utopia, cf. A. Pons, *Critique*, no. 387-388, Aug-Sept. 1979.

to change relationships between individuals within society, but he wants to transform radically his own relationship to himself. "My intention never extended any further than an attempt to reform my own thinking against a background that is fully my own".¹⁶ The project of philosophical reform is limited to the individual alone and rests solely upon him as well. It is necessary to determine what is the metaphysical understructure implied here that Descartes was attempting to uncover. Cartesian philosophy establishes its first principle in the autofoundation of the thinking subject. It is not possible to understand this identity of thinking and being other than in the first person, in the individual's reflection on himself: I think, therefore I am. The systematic calling into question of every truth received from others (breaking down the shaky walls of common opinion and of authority), to the sole benefit of the use of individual reason, is the precondition for the metaphysical foundation of the structure of knowledge. The metaphysical discovery of man¹⁷ is only possible by abstraction from his social being: to comprehend the true nature of man, which is to think, we must begin by separating him from those accidents in him that are history, politics, cultural heritage, social life. In other words he must be stripped of all conviviality. The collective man is metaphysically second, unessential in relation to the thinking individual. Other people, according to Descartes, most often separate me from myself; they create a screen between the individual and his own rational nature. Common opinion, whose being called into question initiates the philosophical operation, can be defined by Descartes as the alienation of the subject into the collective. On the path to method, one moves toward truth necessarily alone.

Within this perspective Descartes requires his reader to make a critical appropriation of his thinking which alone can allow him to acquire his intellectual and moral autonomy.¹⁸ At the beginning of the *Recherche de la vérité*, Descartes sets as his objective "to open to everyone the means for finding in himself, and, without borrowing anything from any other person, all the science that is

¹⁶ DM AT 15.

¹⁷ To borrow the title of the very beautiful book by F. Alquié, *La Découverte métaphysique de l'homme chez Descartes*, P.U.F. 1966.

¹⁸ DM AT 4; *Recherche de la vérité*, FA II 1139.

necessary for him to lead his life.”¹⁹ The other person thus remains the one from whom the ideal is not “to borrow anything”, to whom I refer myself only if I wish to: because to be I do not need the other person to be, but only to think that I think. Even if I share with others the universality of reason and the infinity of liberty (twofold condition for the communication of knowledge and for moral practice), others are ontologically foreign to me. Each one “can by thinking exclude from himself... every other substance that thinks or that is extended.”²⁰ And this separation of thinking substances seems to make it *a priori* impossible to have a consistent theory of collective action which, in order to develop, must postulate the irreducibility of collective being to individual being, in other words requiring an intersubjectivity inhibiting precisely the Cartesian concept of subjectivity. By conceiving of himself as a separate substance, the thinking subject cuts himself off from the world of men just as he cuts himself off in other ways from the natural world.²¹ Cartesian metaphysics opens up an ontological break between individuals, making it impossible to constitute a theory of political action.

Considered as one of the areas in which the free wills of individuals, who are strangers to one another, react, politics is destined, according to Descartes, to an unmitigated indetermination, both ontological and epistemological. It is this world of “particular circumstances”²², of the accidental, of the contingent, this theatrical²³ world of historical events that escapes

¹⁹ FA II 1106.

²⁰ *Principes de la philosophie*, I art. 60, FA III 128.

²¹ The modern subject breaks its relationship with nature and with others with the same movement; Aristotelian definitions of man as “rational” animal and political being (*zoon politikon*) are abandoned. Metaphysically separating thinking from the body means detaching the individual from his socio-political environment, especially since it is true that it is primarily through my body that others are substantially present to me.

²² To Elisabeth, Sept. 1646, FA III 670.

²³ This metaphor of the theatre of the world (*Préambules* Fa I 45, DM AT VI 28; *Passions de l'âme*, art. 147), a common idea of baroque and classical culture, for Descartes presumes a negative conception of politics. In the world of men I am an actor in a theatre. Social relationships, far from being essential for the metaphysical subject, are exterior to him and derive from fiction, just like the playing of actors on a stage. Subjectivity assists the spectacle of the world and participates in it, but without ever appearing unmasked. And could it, since it is

in large measure from reason and for which, by definition, no science is possible.

From that can be measured how much individual reform, at once metaphysical, scientific and moral, projected and accomplished in the *Discourse on Method* is foreign to politics. Not that the Cartesian reform, by establishing the method “to lead reason correctly and to seek the truth in science”²⁴, had a universal aim. But this universality of science leaps beyond the real conditions of social life, doomed to the irrationality of the casual and the customary. United in the exercise of reason and thus in the apprehension of truth, individuals regain their metaphysical singularity in “civil life”, where it is not possible to regulate oneself to act other than on experience and not on reason, where “one is required to run risks and to submit oneself to the power of fortune”, where others remain foreign to me.²⁵

It is in this perspective that Descartes stigmatizes those “muddled and upsetting moods”²⁶ that are pleased to project utopian social and political reforms. If these would instead seek to reform their muddled minds and to cultivate their own reason, they would no doubt be cured of their unease. For only a reform of self, making it possible to acquire wisdom, can provide peace and happiness. In other words, if these utopians were to become philosophers, they

part of its nature to be separate from each and every one, withdrawn into its pure interiority? In article 206 of *Passions de l'âme*, Descartes advises following the “false opinions of people” with regard to “the exterior of our actions”. Politics is the domain of the exteriority of actions, the domain of external actions: that of theatricality. Exteriority emanates from moral interiority (it is an effect of the free determination of the reasonable individual), but to a great extent it escapes him in that the other remains fundamentally different. In the theatre the liberty of the thinking subject is manifested, but its effects remain foreign, strange. My acts, in reality, become other, they become what others make of them, they become the acts of others, they no longer belong to me, they enter into history. (I enter into history at most as a character). Politics is the theatre of morality, but in the Cartesian perspective, this is not at all the same as defining politics as the place in which morality is realized and accomplished, but the place in which it will be lost, or where it becomes unreal, or where it becomes an appearance among appearances instead of an ontological affirmation of liberty.

²⁴ Full title of *Discourse on Method*.

²⁵ Cf. To Elisabeth, May 1646 (FA III 654): “... it is better to base oneself on experience than on reason, since we rarely have to deal with perfectly reasonable persons.” Cf. also DM 14.

²⁶ DM 14.

would lose interest in politics and would seek to follow the third moral maxim, adopted by Descartes in the *Discourse on Method*, which demands always trying to change one's desires rather than the order of the world:²⁷ a free renunciation of that which cannot depend in any way on the will of the individual alone, as, for example, the recreation of a society. For, by the will, Cartesian morality exalts this power we have to refuse that whose possession does not depend on us alone but on external circumstances, and happiness offered to the individual through social political reforms is naturally of this kind.²⁸

The exercise of philosophy and moral practice here seem fundamentally foreign to political concerns²⁹ ultimately even incompatible with them,³⁰ whether this be expressed by an intellectual interest in the organization of man into societies based on the polis or by a desire to seek to transform the polis actively.

Upon reading the *Discourse on Method*, it seems that for Descartes there is no possible continuity between philosophy and politics, reform of self and reform of the city, whether this be undertaken as a dream by a fanciful mind or actually accomplished by a head of state. But Descartes does not call into question the legitimacy of the political profession,³¹ whether the person who

²⁷ DM 25.

²⁸ DM 26: "... let us consider all the goods that are outside of us as likewise being beyond our power..." Cf. N. Grimaldi, *L'Expérience de la pensée dans la philosophie de Descartes*. Vrin, 1978, p. 204-211: "L'exercice de cette troisième règle consiste donc à opposer un refus infini qui nous est refusé".

²⁹ It is in this way that Descartes does not hesitate to declare somewhat abruptly to Christina of Sweden, 20 Nov. 1647 (FA III 747): "But I am assured that Your Majesty is more concerned with your virtue than with your crown; I shall hardly fear at this point to say that it does seem that there is anything but this virtue that is rightfully to be praised."

³⁰ In sum the prince, in any case Machiavelli's, is to be "pitied", as Descartes writes to Elisabeth (Oct.-Nov. 1646) after she herself had admitted that she preferred "the condition of the poorest peasant in Holland" to that of the prince or his ministers. But both recognize that all princes are led to act more or less in the manner that Machiavelli counsels. This means recognizing the divorce of morality from politics, and the prince ultimately appears as the one whose political role poses an obstacle to moral serenity.

³¹ As N. O'Keohane says so well (*Philosophy and the State in France*, Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 203), for Descartes, "politics is the business of sovereigns, not private individuals". On this point the thinking of Descartes coincides with that of absolutism, and with what Louis XIV would understand by the "profession of being king" (cf. his *Mémoires pour l'instruction du Dauphin*).

exercises it be called thereto by his “birth” or simply by “fortune”. To the contrary, in his long letter on Machiavelli, as we will be seeing, he attempts to provide a basis for this legitimacy. Elsewhere³² Descartes does not hesitate to derive regulation of *mores* from political power. The moral subject, from then on, becomes the subject of the prince.

In this discontinuity between philosophy and politics, we seem to be able to detect a silent crisis of Cartesian philosophy inasmuch as moral autonomy (the free affirmation of subjectivity) and the exercise of political power seem difficultly compatible. Since the ontological autonomy of the thinking subject is opposed to the recognition of a social being, politics, excluded by metaphysics, reappears as an internal problem of moral philosophy when the latter comes up against political reality.

II. THE MORALIZATION OF POLITICS

Descartes recognizes no independence for politics, and it is from a moral point of view that he criticizes the political philosophies of Hobbes and Machiavelli in the pages he devotes to them.³³ Whereas Machiavelli attempts to describe political reality with his cynicism and brutality, by directing his analysis in particular toward the prince who establishes a state by force (and by refusing the pertinence of a distinction between the legitimate obtaining of

³² Letter to Chanut, ambassador of France in Sweden (FA III 749): “... it is only allowed for sovereigns, or for those authorized by them, to become involved in regulating the customs of others”. It can be noted that Descartes thus esteems that religious institutions, at least of their own initiative, should not intervene in the moral education of the people. And this laicization of morality is completely in agreement with the spirit of Cartesian philosophy. But that such a task should rightfully fall only to sovereigns, thus to the political power, seems to contradict the properly Cartesian idea of moral autonomy and to overturn the subordinate relation that makes politics depend on morality. It is no doubt necessary to distinguish, as Descartes does not do in this text, between the manners of morality, the customs of a given community and the ethical requirements of individuals (their moral reason). The normative power of the sovereign would concern only the first of these, and the philosopher, who deals with morality in the strict sense, would in no way compete with the prince. But reading these lines, it seems above all that Cartesian morality, even though virtually democratic (since it is up to each one to overcome his autonomy), remains an aristocratic morality. Only great persons are truly capable of generosity, and it is up to the political authority to give other men, who obey customs without transcending them morally, proper rules of conduct.

power and its illegitimate appropriation), or else by revealing the betrayals, the dissimulation and the crimes that accompany the normal exercise of power, Descartes, on the other hand, adopts a two-fold attitude of censure with regard to political Machiavellianism and of moral justification of Machiavellian politics. In other words he undertakes a moralization of politics such as it appears in the scathing writings of the Florentine scribe. And at the same time that he rises up against the immoralism of Machiavelli's prince, he attempts to give a moral legitimacy to the most crying injustices of political power.

In these texts the divergence between Descartes and political philosophers is first of all methodological and doctrinal. To the political postulate concerning the maliciousness of man in Machiavelli and Hobbes, Descartes opposes the moral postulate of the justice of the prince. Doing this is, for him, a means of inhibiting any emancipation of politics and, moreover, of remedying the threat of a subordinate relationship that, in his eyes, causes politics naturally to depend on morality.

1. *The presumption of maliciousness*

In the few lines he devotes to *De Cive*, Descartes reproaches its author for supposing "men to be mean", and he also "disapproves" the political maxim in Machiavelli that, since "the world is highly corrupt", orders the prince to maliciousness, "when the occasion requires it".³⁴ By supposition Descartes here means much more than a simple hypothesis, but a true principle upon which is based the entire theoretical structure of Hobbes as well as all of Machiavelli's analyses, for whom, in fact, the maliciousness of man is both a profound conviction³⁵ and a tactical and pragmatic supposition. In

³³ He makes but few remarks on the *De Cive* of Hobbes (in P*, 1643? FA III 61). However, he devotes a long letter to *Machiavelli's Prince* (To Elisabeth, 16 Sept. 1646, FA III 665-671). He returns briefly to Machiavelli in a later letter in which he mentions his reading of the *Discorsi* (To Elisabeth, Oct. Nov. 1646 FA III 680-681).

³⁴ Respectively, in P* (see preceding note) and to Elisabeth (FA III 669, quotation from Ch. 15 of *The Prince*).

³⁵ Machiavelli repeats this constantly; cf. for example *The Prince*, ch. XVII: men "are ungrateful, changing, secretive... men are evil."

the *Discourse on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, he states that it is necessary for whoever “establishes a state and gives it laws to suppose that all men are evil and always ready to manifest their maliciousness every time they find an occasion to do so.”³⁶ And what is true for the prince who wishes to establish a State is also true for the philosopher who wants to elaborate a theory of politics emancipated from theology and from morality. For Hobbes, in fact, maliciousness serves to designate the destructive nature of human passions left to themselves (without any moral or religious connotation being given to the term), and plays the role of an anthropological principle.³⁷ In the Hobbesian system, maliciousness is first of all a theoretical hypothesis, that of the situation of man in the natural state, characterized by the war of everyone against everyone. But it is also an empirical observation: it suffices to observe the behavior of men with one another in civil society where their passionate nature, even though mastered by sovereign authority, is no less determinant. Finally maliciousness becomes a pure and simple fact when political sovereignty collapses and civil war breaks out. In summary, like the natural condition of man, maliciousness is a theoretical hypothesis, which is confirmed by political experience and which thereby assumes the force of an anthropological principle.

For Descartes, from the moral perspective that is his own, to admit the natural maliciousness of man is a “bad and dangerous”³⁸ principle, in that it gives good reasons for flaunting morality. Amoralism as a theoretical principle is an effective guarantee of immorality. Just as Hobbes could have written more “advantageously and more solidly” in favor of the monarchy, “by employing more virtuous maxims”, Machiavelli should have begun by distinguishing “the princes who acquired a state through just means from those who usurped one through illegitimate means.” It is his failure to distinguish the just and unjust, the right from brute force, that leads the Florentine scribe to declare “quite tyrannical precepts” such as those ordering pillage, treason and dissimulation.

³⁶ *Discorsi*, L I ch. III.

³⁷ This is the “natural inclination that men have to harm one another” (*De Cive*, 1st section).

³⁸ In P*, FA III 61.

In other words, according to Descartes, tyranny derives from Machiavelli's moral indifference, from his political amorality. Politics cannot be good at the expense of morality.

2. *The supposed justice of the prince*

Nevertheless, Descartes recognizes the overall correctness of Machiavelli's analyses and the pragmatic pertinence of most of his precepts. The effective³⁹ truth of politics is that described by Machiavelli: he who wishes to rule should not hesitate to use lies and violence, to combine the fox and the lion, to join artifice to force.⁴⁰ But Descartes does not go so far as to develop a moral criticism of the mechanisms of power, nor does he set himself up as censor or denigrator of princes. To the contrary he attempts to give a moral legitimacy to the political phenomena described by Machiavelli, such as the usurpation of power, the rule of dissimulation or the cynical use of ministers, all of which seem to reduce morality to pure affectation.⁴¹ Although Descartes stigmatizes Machiavelli's amorality, he embraces his realism, but by attempting to discover a moral sense in him. To succeed in this undertaking he takes the methodologically opposite point of view to that of political theoreticians, by supposing the justice of the prince there where Machiavelli and Hobbes saw a raw political fact that is ultimately justified by the passionate nature of man, that is, his native maliciousness. "To instruct a good prince, no matter how recently entered into the state, it seems to me that one should propose to him quite contrary maxims and suppose that the means he used to establish himself were just".⁴² Unlike Machiavelli Descartes postulates the morality of the prince, even when he seizes

³⁹ To use one of the key concepts of Machiavelli's political anthropology, cf. Ch. XV of *The Prince*.

⁴⁰ FA III 667: Descartes is referring to the Machiavellian precept (Ch XVIII of *The Prince*) and uses it himself, even though limiting its application only to enemies. "One should also distinguish between subjects, friends or allies and enemies. For, with regard to the latter, one has permission to do just about anything..."

⁴¹ *The Prince*, ch. XVIII: "It is not necessary for a prince to have every good quality ... but ... he must appear to have them."

⁴² FA III 666.

power by force. This supposition is no doubt disconcerting, but it would be false to interpret it as an apology in disguise for the use of might which, in addition and subsequently, would make right. His intention is just the opposite, to affirm the primacy of morality in all realms of action, including politics. On every occasion, as Descartes says later, one should try to be “a man of good”.⁴³ Machiavelli attempts to show, on the contrary, that politics possesses its own rules that escape the jurisdiction of morality. The supposition of Descartes is, in a certain sense, the exact opposite of the Machiavellian postulate of the corruption of man. Machiavelli instructs the prince that he cannot preserve himself from iniquity and that he must suppose all men to be evil, to such a point that if he were to find a single good man, he should treat him as if he were evil. Descartes affirms, on the contrary, that the tutor of the young prince should presume him to be just, even when he seems to have given proof of injustice by seizing power by force and when he has, in fact, perhaps acted unjustly. The teaching recommended by Descartes is eminently moral since it consists in presenting to the prince an exemplary image of himself, one from which injustice is banned. Descartes conceives the prince as he should, in fact, be.

It seems to us that this didactic supposition can be explained through the doctrine of generosity that Descartes declares in his *Passions de l'âme*, which crystallizes the ultimate state of his morality. Generosity is that nobility, that greatness of spirit,⁴⁴ “that makes a man esteem himself to the highest possible point to which he can legitimately esteem himself”,⁴⁵ that is as an absolutely free being. Generosity is expressed by the “firm and constant resolution” of using his will well,⁴⁶ in Kantian terms by the purity of moral intention. Descartes, unlike Machiavelli (some of whose precepts he also says lack generosity⁴⁷), seems to accord the prince a natural

⁴³ In his letter, he defines such a man of good in this way (p. 669). “He is the one who does everything that true reason dictates...” True reason here has the specifically moral meaning that Descartes gave it at this time. Cf. To Elisabeth, 1 Sept. 1645 (FA III p. 602): “The true office of reason is to examine the proper value of goods whose acquisition seems to depend in some manner on our conduct.” On the various definitions of reason in Descartes, cf. Alquié, *op. cit.*, p. 326-329.

⁴⁴ PA art. 161.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 153.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Second letter (FA III 681). From this point of view, the Machiavellian “virtuoso” can seem to be the antithesis of the generous Cartesian. In the context

generosity through the confidence he has in him, and as tutor he chooses to accredit the morality of his apparent exactions. The generous pedagogy of Descartes consists in esteeming the prince “recently entered in the state”⁴⁸ as he should esteem himself and to obligate him thereby to remain just, in the manner that the generosity of his tutor has taught him to do, or to become so if he has in fact failed to be just.

It is no less true that, as such, the political act of usurpation, the perpetration of “odious crimes” or the transfer of culpability to the person of his ministers—in short, many political acts whose effectiveness and political legitimacy Descartes recognizes,⁴⁹—remain as such unjust and difficultly reconcilable with generosity. In fact politics, as it appears to Descartes through the interpretation he makes of the modern theoreticians Hobbes and Machiavelli, opposes every attempt at moralizing with an unmitigated resistance.⁵⁰

Both through conservative conviction and in order to remove the danger that threatens the integrity of morality and to eliminate all politically problematic aspects from his philosophy, Descartes ultimately makes of politics a practice reserved only to sovereigns inasmuch as they benefit from the direct intervention of divine providence. At once reduced to a simple pragmatic question of power and hypostasized by the divine right that is accorded to it, politics is definitively removed from the realm of philosophy and from science.

of the morality of Descartes, he is the man with unlimited pride, pride being the vice and passion of those whose self-esteem is fed by their insatiable desire to enjoy goods, the possession of which could not depend on their will alone. The proud are “those who try to humiliate others and who are slaves to their desires ... with their souls constantly agitated by hatred, envy, jealousy and anger.” (PA art. 157). And this analysis of pride applies, it seems to us, to the Machiavellian virtuoso, such as he appears in the light of the criticism that Descartes makes of *The Prince*. The low regard for others, the supposition of their being evil, leads quite naturally to political cynicism and to tyranny.

⁴⁸ FA III 666.

⁴⁹ FA III 668.

⁵⁰ Cf. H. Gouhier, *Le nouvel humanisme selon Descartes et la politique* (in *Cristianesimo e Ragion di Stato: Atti del Secondo Congresso Internazionale di Studi Umanistici*. Fratelli Bocca. Rome-Milan 1953). “Le principe moral est mis en échec par une nécessité de fait”. (p. 84).

III. CONFISCATION OF POLITICS

Descartes recalls, upon several occasions, that politics is the exclusive privilege of sovereigns, and private citizens have no business becoming involved of their own initiative in the affairs of State, whether as agent, as counsellor to the prince, as observer or as theoretician.⁵¹ For Descartes, as for many of his contemporaries,⁵² a radical cleavage separates the sovereign from his subjects (the State, identified with the sovereign, from the society he rules). Politics properly pertains to the prince, and his subjects, unless they are called to it both by birth and by their prince, are absolutely subject to politics at the same time that they remain foreign to it.⁵³ Politics is a closed realm, enveloped in the secrets of State, beyond the limits of the judgements of private persons and beyond the reach of philosophy. But this does not mean recognizing a real autonomy for politics, nor according it an actual transcendence with regard to science and morality. Prerogative of the prince, politics is nevertheless not a supreme science. To the contrary it is reduced to a simple pragmatic exercise of power, enfeoffed to morality. Thus when Descartes, seeking to legitimate the apparently most illegitimate political acts, writes that “justice between sovereigns has other limits than justice between private persons”, he does not mean to affirm that the justice of sovereigns is essentially different from the justice of private persons, only that it has “other limits”. Politics does not escape from morality, but its exercise implies a shifting and an enlargement of the limits of ordinary morality. Thus to decree the injustice of princes is primarily committing an error of perspective consisting in judging politics from the point of view of private morality, bringing politics within the narrow framework of morality. The political function implies that infractions are made in common morality without it being possible to call this “amoral” or “immoral”. The reason of State, to which Descartes seems to refer implicitly upon several occasions in his letter,⁵⁴ is thus not freed

⁵¹ DM AT VI 13-14; To Elisabeth, May 1646, FA III 653; also Sept. 1646, FA III 670.

⁵² Cf. N. O’Keohane, *op. cit.*, Ch. 8: “Orthodox Absolutist Theory and the *Métier du Roi*”.

⁵³ It goes without saying that such separation and such confiscation of politics is a property of absolutist doctrines.

⁵⁴ FA III 669.

from moral reason; it is its political transposition. Unlike private persons, who need only conduct their own lives (and the philosopher's morality has no other purpose than to assist them), the role of the prince is to govern States, and he needs, upon every occasion, to take into account the interests of society and not of individuals. But the secrets of the reason of State are impenetrable, and it is impossible for private persons, ignorant of the political details and circumstances, to know if the prince is acting in favor of or in detriment to the collective interest. Unlike Machiavelli, who maintains, in the preface to his work, that "one should be of the private state to know the office of prince well", Descartes affirms that the "principal motives for the actions of princes are often circumstances so particular that, unless one is oneself a prince or unless one has for a long time been party to their secrets, one could not imagine them".⁵⁵ For Machiavelli the situation of observer makes possible a clairvoyance and an impartiality that the role of actor renders quite difficult if not impossible. The political analyst knows more about politics than the politician who is its agent. Descartes, on the other hand, regards politics as inaccessible to the eyes and the analyses of private persons; the reason of State is the secret of the monarch who acts in function of extraordinarily complex data that he alone knows.

In addition to the secret of State there is also that of the moral conscience of the prince, the sole knowledge of which, by definition impossible, would make it possible to discern with certainty the justice of his acts. The reason of State (the reason of the State = the prince) is not infallible; it can err and remain just. It is possible that the prince fail in what he undertakes, that he place his States and his crown in jeopardy, that he act to the detriment of public utility, but that he nevertheless remains morally irreproachable, so that, as Descartes wrote to Princess Elisabeth, "we need only respond with our thoughts and the uprightness of our will".⁵⁶

Finally, one and the other of these secrets, of State and of conscience, share in a third one that envelopes them and from which they proceed—that of divine providence. And it is not too much for God to establish this presumption of justice, retained despite the apparent refutation by the facts. In his letter on Machiavelli,

⁵⁵ FA III 668.

⁵⁶ To Elisabeth, 6 Oct. 1645, FA III 612.

Descartes based the postulate of the justice of the usurper-prince on divine right: "Justice between sovereigns has other limits than that between private persons, and it seems that in these encounters God gives right to those to whom he has given might".⁵⁷ In these encounters, that is in these highly political acts, at the top of the list of which is the establishment of States, God guarantees the justice of the sovereign, precisely at the moment when politics seems to mock morality and to become emancipated. Politics then appears to be the privileged realm of morality, where God provides both might and right. In other words, having recourse to God makes it possible to calm the moral scandal brought on by the discretionary exercise of political power. But it is nevertheless necessary to note that this special status granted to it does not at all liberate politics from morality, for the ultimate criterion for judging the rightness of an action remains the moral purity of the sovereign. Just after his reference to divine right, Descartes is quick to add that, whatever the aid given by God to princes, "the most just actions become unjust when those who perform them think them to be so". This maxim is true for every man and is addressed to the sovereign as well as to the humblest of his subjects. In this is affirmed, once more, the identification of politics and morality. In other words, Providence takes nothing away from the absolute liberty of the political figure and, thereby, from his moral responsibility. This limitation of the divine right precludes all political theodicy, any theological justification for its immoralism. If a sovereign uses the power that God has given him to act against his conscience (and his infinite liberty gives him the ability to do so), he removes himself from the state of right and becomes unjust. The prince does not have the right to use his force other than for making justice reign. In Descartes, then, we do not find that political cynicism, sanctified by God, that characterizes the theories of the clericalism of the state:⁵⁸ the monarch enjoys divine rights only if he fulfills morality (if he is driven by justice, if he is of "good will").

But it is no less true that this twofold operation, of expanding morality to the preferences of the prince and the recourse to divine providence, removes politics definitively from the judgement of the

⁵⁷ To Elisabeth, Sept. 1646, FA III 666.

⁵⁸ Cf. P. Mesnard, *Barbosa Homen et la conception baroque de la raison d'État* (in *Cristianesimo e Ragion di Stato*, *op. cit.*).

people and from the philosopher's inquiries. And if the sovereign seems morally responsible for his acts, this responsibility is not that of a man before other men, but of a man confronted by his conscience and, indirectly, a man standing before God, to the extent that the sovereign must be worthy of the right and the power that are conferred on him.

It is interesting to point out that through this recourse to divine right, the status of politics can be compared, in Cartesian philosophy, with that of theology, equally problematical.⁵⁹ As the domain of revelation, theology evades reason, it is in the order of faith and cannot be the object of knowledge. Theology bears witness to an unrational superior being, God not being subject to eternal truths and consequently to the laws of reason, which he freely created.⁶⁰ And politics goes beyond reason to the extent that its controller, the prince, is in a certain manner the minister of the will of God for the organization of men in society. But at the same time—and this is the source of its total ambiguity—politics is an empirical practice, beyond rationality, and in that it is the domain of contingencies and historical events, of particular circumstances where it is not possible to act other than by aiming for the apparent and the probable, with prudence, and in the absence of all certitude. Because of its extreme empiricity and its participation in the mysteries of Providence, politics is both too confused and too enlightened, too low and too high to be the subject of a science and to have a place within the study of philosophy.

Confiscated by the prince and by God from whom derive the right and the power of the prince, reduced to a technique of power subordinated to moral ends, politics, at once eminently respectable and negligible from a scientific point of view, is to a certain extent that about which nothing can be said, neither as His Majesty's subject nor as philosopher.

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⁵⁹ Cf. H. Gouhier, *La Pensée religieuse de Descartes*, Vrin 1979, in particular p. 217 sq. Cf. also J.. R. Armogathe, *Theologia Cartesiana* (Nijhoff, The Hague, 1977), and J.L. Marion, *La Théologie blanche de Descartes* (P.U.F., 1981).

⁶⁰ Doctrine of the creation of eternal truths, cf. Letters, spring 1630, FA III 254-269.