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The Review of Politics, Vol. 24, No. 2. (Apr., 1962), pp. 260-282.

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Cartesianism and Political Theory

James V. Schall

POLITICAL theory never stands by itself. Any theoretical explanation of politics depends on attitudes and positions which stem from metaphysics, theology, ethics, or science. An understanding of the political thought of a man, then, will require some insight into the relationship between his politics and the presuppositions on which it is based. To write about the political theory of Descartes, however, presents special difficulties, for Descartes cannot be considered an important political thinker in his own right. His actual references to politics are scant. His influence on later thinkers did not arise from his thought about politics. Nevertheless, in political theory Descartes must be considered, for it was Descartes who set the patterns of speculative thought after him, including thought about politics. After Descartes the scientific and mechanical orientations of thought replaced the traditional Christian and Aristotelian molds in which politics had been considered.

Almost the only scholars who have commented on the influence of Descartes in political theory have been professional Cartesian scholars. Laberthonnière in *Études sur Descartes* held that Descartes was simply a conservative who separated man's public life from his private life. It did not matter what kind of external order existed since it could not affect man's true life anyhow.¹ On the eve of World War II, M. Whitcomb Hess found Descartes to be a champion of individualism against totalitarianism. Descartes' insistence on personal realization of truth stood in opposition to any attempt of the state to dictate truth to an individual.² Maxime LeRoy found Descartes to be anything but a conservative or an individualist. For him Descartes was a revolutionary seeking to undermine the traditional world.³ Henri Gouhier rejects this view because he believes that for Descartes the rational and the temporal orders are completely separate. To attempt to make the historical

¹ P. Laberthonnière, *Oeuvres de Laberthonnière: T. II, Études sur Descartes* (Paris, 1935), 102-116.

² M. Whitcomb Hess, "A Note on the Individualism of Descartes," *The Journal of Philosophy*, XXXV (1938), 186-88.

³ Cf. Henri Gouhier, "Le nouvel Humanisme selon Descartes et la Politique," in *Christianesimo e Ragion di Stato*, ed. Enrico Castelli (Roma, 1952), pp. 82 ff.

order become a rational order is to court disaster because history and reason belong to orders that are simply diverse.⁴ Society is a product of history, not reason.

Jacques Maritain believes that Descartes represents a disruptive force in the social order. "Every modern philosopher is a Cartesian in the sense that he looks upon himself as starting off in the absolute, as having the mission of bringing man a new conception of the world."⁵ Descartes introduced a morality which finds man's problems outside himself, in technology. Man is improved when the techniques are improved. For Maritain, the Cartesian impact on politics foreshadows the terrible specter of the rationalized state where happiness is engineered and order is manipulated.⁶ The distinguished French political thinker, Bertrand de Jouvenel, relates the Cartesian impact to an aspect of democratic theory. If Descartes is right, then the progress of politics in history should lead to unanimity of decision on political affairs. Clear and distinct ideas should be clear and distinct to everyone. Politics, then, is not a problem of authoritative decision on difficult matters, but of direct and equal insight by each and all men into some body of truths. Community thus becomes the statistical sum of all those who see the same truths — which sum should approach unanimity.⁷ Etienne Gilson sees Hobbes as the real channel through which Cartesian thought drifted into political theory. If the state is a clear and distinct idea, it must refer to a substance. This inaugurated the problem of how separate individuals become members of a state which is also another separate being. One substance opposes another substance. Communication in a common project is thus destroyed.⁸

The political attitudes of Descartes himself are found mainly in scattered sections of his letters. There seems to run through the works of Descartes a curious ennui, an attitude of fatigue and sleepiness. This would not be worthy of comment except that it appears to be related to Descartes' political attitudes. "My solitude,"

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82. Cf. also Henri Gouhier, *Essais sur Descartes* (Paris, 1949), pp. 271-80.

⁵ Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, trans. M. L. Anderson (New York, 1944), p. 167.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 182-83.

⁷ Bertrand de Jouvenel, *Sovereignty*, trans. J. F. Huntington (Chicago, 1957), pp. 227-30.

⁸ Etienne Gilson, "The Distinctiveness of the Philosophic Order," *A Gilson Reader*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, N.Y., 1957), pp. 55-56.

he writes, is such that outside of it, it is difficult for me to do anything in the search of truth. It is in that which consists my principal good in this life."⁹ So highly did he value this solitude that he was quite willing to leave his native land, or any other land to find it.

For me, who am not attached to dwell in any place, I have not found any difficulty in changing these provinces, or even France herself, for that land; if I should be able to find there a repose sufficiently assured, then no other reason than the beauty of the land would make me go there.¹⁰

Descartes' concern for solitude and repose leads him to look upon a king and a state in terms of the guarantee they can give that quietude will continue. To guarantee it, he believes that crimes should be severely punished. "For me, who search for nothing so much as security and repose, I am very happy to be in a land [Holland] where crimes are chastised with severity, because the impunity of criminals gives them too much license. . . ." ¹¹ He admits that kings can punish too severely, but crime is his greater fear. This is, indeed why he is so content in Holland, for

what other land is there in which one can enjoy a liberty so complete, where one can sleep with less disturbance, where there are always armies on foot expressly for our protection, where poisonings, treacheries, and calumnies are less known, and where there is a dwelling more restful for the innocence of our ears?¹²

Descartes, therefore, seems to consider that peace and civil order are necessary for his thinking and reflecting.

The most famous statement of Descartes on politics is his letter on Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Descartes found much in *The Prince*

⁹ René Descartes, "À Élisabeth, 9 Octobre 1649," *Descartes Lettres, textes choisis par Michel Alexandre* (Paris, 1954), p. 196. (Hereafter, this edition will be cited as follows: date of letter, *DL*, page. All translations unless otherwise indicated are the author's.)

¹⁰ February 22, 1649, *DL*, p. 191. Cf. also the following similar examples: October, 1648, *DL*, p. 190; June or July, 1648, *DL*, p. 187; January 15, 1650, *DL*, p. 191.

¹¹ December 27, 1647, *DL*, p. 182.

¹² May 5, 1631, *DL*, p. 19. Descartes says in another letter that in the state we should rule by experience and not by reason since men do not act as they should. Cf. "Descartes à Élisabeth, Mai, 1646," *Oeuvres Descartes*. Publiées par Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris, 1901), IV, 412. (Hereafter this work will be cited as *AT*.)

to recommend, but he could not agree that kingdoms established by illegitimate means could prosper.¹³ However, suppose a kingdom was justly established — a fact Descartes seems to have thought to have been normally the case. What then follows?

Instead in order to instruct a good Prince, although newly entered into a state, it seems to me that one ought to propose to him some contrary maxims, and to suppose that the means which serve to establish himself have been just, as, in effect, *I believe that almost all are when the Princes who practice them think them such*; for justice between sovereigns has other limits than between subjects, and it seems that *in these encounters God gives the right to those to whom he gives the power. But the most just actions become unjust when those who do them think them to be such.*¹⁴

Here Descartes contends that laws are just when the Prince thinks they are just and unjust when he thinks them unjust. Such a position could happen in the Cartesian system only if the external order was subject to a law other than reason. Moreover, Descartes holds that God gives the right to govern to those to whom He gives the power. The reason for this seems to be that external peace must be maintained so that whoever has the power to maintain it necessarily must have the right to do so.

Outside some remarks on external and internal politics in this same letter and the important issue raised by the *Discourse*, these attitudes seem to have been the major ones bequeathed to us by Descartes. Can we see in these reflections on politics any connection with the more well-known bases of Cartesian theory? Certainly, there is justification for the positions both of Laberthonnière and Gouhier. Descartes does not appear to be anything but conservative. If the Prince can maintain a calm civil order, Descartes seems to be quite content to live under his regime, for only in a state of solitude and repose can the life given to thought endure. However, Gouhier seems to be correct in maintaining that in Descartes' view the life of experience is simply distinct from the life of thought.

Descartes, then, leaves the civil order to the Prince because it is made up of men who, anyhow, are not for the most part reasonable. Nowhere does Descartes imply that accord in civil

¹³ *AT*, IV, 486. For an extended discussion of this letter, cf. Pierre Mesnard, "Excursus, la Morale et la Politique: Le prétendu Machiavelisme de Descartes," *Essai sur la Morale de Descartes* (Paris, 1936), pp. 190-212.

¹⁴ *AT*, IV, 487. Italics added.

affairs will be the result of his philosophic method. In short, the constant attitude of Descartes toward politics seems to be this: anything that disturbs external peace and order prevents man from philosophic pursuits. Political disorder can interfere with man's life of thought, even though thought is not essentially subject to material conditions. Therefore, 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. As a result, what the Prince thinks to be just as a result of his experience in the nonrational life of man is just.

In order to see the very basic shift in political theory demanded by the Cartesian analysis, it will be necessary to consider the Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic attitudes towards the three basic pillars on which all political theory rests — namely, the relation of the passions to reason, the meaning of liberty, and the nature of the theoretic sciences. Descartes arrived at his own political attitudes, and what is vastly more important, influenced later thought by radically altering the meaning of the passions, liberty, and the theoretic sciences.

Aristotelian political theory was based upon Aristotle's correction of Plato's concepts of the place and nature of scientific knowledge and the nature of the passions. Plato held that concepts such as justice, man, truth, animal, and dog were forms whose true reality existed not in particular states or individuals but rather in separate, perfect forms.¹⁵ Individuals only participated in these forms in an imperfect manner. Theoretic science for Plato depended upon direct insight into the nature and stability of these separate forms, the highest of which, the Good, was so pure and overwhelming that man could only contemplate it.¹⁶ Matter and sensation for Plato impeded the mind's ability to penetrate to the "really real," to the forms. Moreover, man was passive with respect to these forms, they were given. Man was free by submitting to the order of their reality.¹⁷ Political theory for Plato — particularly

¹⁵ Cf. Aristotle *Metaphysics* i. 6, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 987b1-10, p. 701. (Hereafter, reference to Aristotle will be as follows: Aristotle *Title of Work* Book Number. Chapter Number. Bekker Number. Page number of this edition.)

¹⁶ Plato *The Republic* 517, trans. H. D. P. Lee (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1955), p. 282. (Hereafter references to Plato will be cited as follows: Plato *Title*, page number of classical edition, page of translation being used.) Cf. also Plato *Laws* 965b, Loeb, II, p. 555; 903c and d, *ibid.*, pp. 363-65.

¹⁷ Plato *Republic* 590-92. 367-69.

in the *Republic* — was the result of these facts. The mass of men who lived by their senses alone were incapable of seeing the true order of reality in the separate forms; hence they could not see their own true good. What was needed was a group of men unencumbered by the passions or by economic conditions. Freed from these cares, these men could penetrate to the order of the real as seen in the Good and the separate forms. These guardians, following their vision, could then establish a true and perfect political order based on the order of reality itself.¹⁸ This new political order would then bring true liberty and security to the whole people.

Aristotle accepted Plato's idea that the forms were something discovered or given in nature, but he located them in things themselves, not in separate forms.¹⁹ As a consequence, Aristotle was willing to admit the importance and necessity of sense knowledge as a bridge to reality. The senses now acquired their own legitimate task in knowledge without which function the mind could not know. Aristotle still maintained the primacy of reason over the senses, but he recognized a direct relationship between the two. The rule of the intellect over the senses was not, therefore, "despotic" as in Plato, but "political" because the senses had their own legitimacy and autonomy in true knowledge — a conclusion Plato could not accept.²⁰

The consequence of this position was that for Aristotle reason has a natural rule over the senses, but the senses must be ruled as powers which have their natural and legitimate functions. The Aristotelian state, then, can admit to its membership citizens who live by experience and sensory knowledge, for they too have access to the true order of things. Plato could not have admitted this because for him true knowledge was not derived from the senses in any manner. But even though Aristotle recognized the need and validity of sensory knowledge as a conduit to reality, he still remained at one with Plato in acknowledging the primacy of theoretic knowledge, the knowledge of things "that cannot be otherwise."²¹ Man was not the highest being for Aristotle; he did not cause all that could be known. Since there were realities man could know, but which he did not make, the political order could not

¹⁸ Plato *Republic* 380-81. 118-19.

¹⁹ Aristotle *Metaphysics* vii. 8. 1033b19-34a8. 794-95.

²⁰ Aristotle *De Anima* iii. 7. 431a1-b19. 593-95; *Politics* vii. 14. 1333a17-34a11. 1297-99; *Politics* i. 5. 1254b1-36.1132-33.

²¹ Cf. Aristotle *Posterior Analytics* i. 2. 71b14-16. 111.

be the highest order because the political order was under man's free control.²² The political authority could not, therefore, presume to be the criterion of the theoretic order. Man was free from the political order, then, in all things that pertained to the theoretic order. Mathematics, philosophy, and moral truths were, consequently, valid independently of the political society. Man was free because he knew of truths beyond politics.²³

Since Aristotle had admitted the validity of sense knowledge as a necessary means through which man must grasp the nature and meaning of the theoretic order which he discovers but does not make, he was forced to dispute Plato's idea that the objects of the senses were mere reflections or images of the true reality. Tangible beings were themselves the realities even though they were not the causes of what they were. Consequently, Aristotle was able to hierarchize the objects of sensible reality according to the degree to which they manifested activity.²⁴ The hierarchy arose from observation and analysis of data supplied by the senses and was not deduced from a theoretic order of separate, logical forms as with Plato. Aristotelian theory, then, was able to recognize the activity of man in forming the political community as the highest type of activity naturally open to a being containing matter in its essence. This was the highest good because it produced a good of the highest quality and extent, the common good. Thus, if man were the highest being in reality, politics would be the highest good.²⁵

But because Aristotle recognized the primacy of the theoretic sciences — a recognition based primarily on the view that the multiplicity of existing beings were not in fact and could not be produced even in the imagination by human art — he maintained that politics was a proper and necessary activity of man, though not the highest or the best. Man was free only if he recognized his dependence on the theoretic order, even though Aristotle recognized man's continual temptation to free himself from this dependence.²⁶ "What man is," "what politics are" are facts of the theoretic order, the order that man finds but does not make. Man's

²² Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* vi. 7. 1141a16-b12. 1027-28.

²³ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* x. 7. 1177b16-78a9. 1105. Cf. also Charles N. R. McCoy, "The Turning Point in Political Philosophy," *The American Political Science Review*, XLVI (1950), 683.

²⁴ Aristotle *De Anima* ii. 5. 416b32 ff. 564 ff.

²⁵ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* vi. 7. 1141b16-23. 1027-28.

²⁶ Aristotle *Metaphysics* i. 2. 982b28-32. 692.

political life, therefore, is a process whose ends are fixed by nature. In this, art differs from politics. The artist is free to establish the ends and goals which he intends to make, the politician creates only the means since the ends are fixed by whatever established the theoretic order.²⁷ In conclusion, then, Aristotle places the theoretic sciences over the practical sciences; while among the practical sciences he distinguishes art from morals and politics because the ends of morals and politics are fixed by nature. Freedom, therefore, is not an absolute in Aristotle in the sense that man can do what he wishes. Man can, indeed, do as he wishes in the sense of possibility, but not in the sense of ought. Man is to understand what he is and freely recognize this fact he discovers.

Post-Aristotelian moral theory was basically Epicurean or Stoic. McCoy has well observed that behind all of these later theories was "the doctrine that man ought to be completely self-sufficient and independent."²⁸ How these new theories affect Aristotelian and Platonic theories is obvious, for they tend to deny the primacy of the theoretic order, or better perhaps, especially in the case of the Stoics, to identify human reason with the divine reason and at the same time to free man from the uncertainties of sense knowledge. Natural law for the Stoics was actually a device which made all men equal by eliminating their dependence on particular political duties and obligations. Equality for the Stoics is grounded in the idea that all men are exempt from particular political laws so that their natural reason can itself rationally order life. "The stoic doctrine of the equality of all men consists very precisely in a self-dependent reason which does not in any sense 'find' the laws of nature but is itself the source of the laws of nature."²⁹ Political theory could now become universalist for the Stoics. The brotherhood of all men was a natural consequence. Order and uniformity are the great Stoic virtues.

Christianity was born in a Stoic world. As Cassirer has pointed out, there was much in Stoicism that was attractive to Christianity. St. Paul's fear of the "old man" was not unlike the Stoic distrust of the passions. Stoic universalism was quite compatible with the Christian desire for universal salvation in the Kingdom

²⁷ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* ii. 4. 1105a27-b4. 956.

²⁸ McCoy, *The American Political Science Review*, p. 681.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 682.

of God which saw no difference between Jew or Gentile, Barbarian or Greek, slave or free. The one basic doctrine of the Stoics that Christianity could not accept was "the asserted absolute independence of man, which in Stoic theory was regarded as man's fundamental virtue. . . ." ³⁰ The Stoic virtue became for Christians the real vice and disorder. In this respect, Christians were naturally much more open to Platonic or Aristotelian traditions that admitted man's dependence on a theoretic order independent of man's construction. The political order, therefore, could never be absolute since man had a destiny beyond the temporal state. Through St. Augustine and St. Thomas, Christian thinking gradually came to base its philosophic analysis on Platonic or Aristotelian systems rather than on the Stoic position. This process was aided by the eventual decline of Rome which stood for uniformity, equality, and order and by the gradual rise of feudalism which stressed inequality, diversity, and hierarchy.

The mediaeval structure was based on a concept of all-embracing teleology. The natural as well as the supernatural orders had a finality. There was hierarchy and distinction in all phases of life, in nature, in science, in politics, in the Church. The supernatural and theoretic orders reigned supreme. Morality ruled art. Man was free because he knew the structure of the world and his place in it. At the same time, mediaeval society did not forget those aspects of life it held in common with Stoicism. In spite of the extreme fractionalization and hierarchization of society caused by feudalism, over and above all stood the Church and the Empire. ³¹

The theoretic unity of this society was broken by the rise of the natural sciences, by the transfer of the universal power of the Emperor to the national kings, by the expansion of the world horizons to America and the Far East, by the Renaissance and the Reformation. The theoretic works that most clearly announce the new world are, in Cassirer's words, "Galileo's *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences* and Machiavelli's *Prince*." ³² These two works are indicative of modes of thought that mark "them as two great

³⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (Garden City, 1944), p. 24.

³¹ Cf. Sir Ernest Barker, "Mediaeval Political Thought," *The Social and Political Ideas of Some Great Mediaeval Thinkers*, ed. F. J. C. Hearnshaw (London, 1923), p. 12; Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe* (New York, 1957), p. 228.

³² Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (Garden City, 1955), p. 162.

and crucial events in modern civilization."³³ The peculiar feature of these and similar works is the reappearance of concepts and attitudes in both natural science and politics that were previously noted to be characteristic of post-Aristotelian theories, namely the growing autonomy of the individual and the gradual subsumption of the theoretic into the practical order so that man was no longer able to be subservient to laws he did not himself make.³⁴

E. A. Burtt has clearly traced the effect of physical theories on the mediaeval structure. The world existed for man according to the mediaeval conception and it was intelligible in terms of substances, accidents, finality, qualities, and relations. Explanations were in terms of purposes.³⁵ With the rise of scientific thinking, these concepts made no sense. Reality came to be treated "in terms of forces, motions, and laws, changes of mass in space and time, and the like."³⁶ "True explanations, of man and his mind as well as of other things, must [now] be in terms of their simplest parts."³⁷ The real world is no longer one of substances and qualities, but of atoms which have mathematical attributes and move in channels stated in mathematical concepts. Final causality is replaced by explanations based on the smallest elements and efficient causality.³⁸ These physical theories, however, still admitted the natural order was not a man-made order. Galileo, it is true, mathematicized reality so that he could maintain the human understanding of reality was identical with the kind of knowledge God had of this same reality. But man was still subject to a natural order outside of himself.

What Kepler and Galileo had done in the physical sciences

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Cf. R. I. Markus, "Method and Metaphysics: The Origins of Some Cartesian Presuppositions in the Philosophy of the Renaissance," *Dominican Studies*, II (1949), 376; Charles N. R. McCoy, "The Logical and the Real in Political Theory: Plato, Aristotle, and Marx," *The American Political Science Review*, XLVIII (1954), 1066. One of the first thinkers to take note of this trend was Karl Marx. Cf. Karl Marx, "Difference de la Philosophie de la Nature chez Democrite et chez Epicure," *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, traduites par J. Moliter (Paris, 1952), I, pp. 1-5.

³⁵ E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (Garden City, 1954), pp. 18-19. Cf. also Thomas P. McTighe, "The Meaning of the Couple, Complicatio-Explicatio in the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* (1958), pp. 206-14.

³⁶ Burtt, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 303.

had already been performed by Machiavelli in politics. Machiavelli "destroyed the cornerstone of this [scholastic] tradition — the hierarchic system."³⁹ He eliminated purpose and, therefore, hierarchy from political life. What the Prince should do simply to remain in power was the real criterion of his activity. "For how we live is so far removed from how we ought to live that he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done, will rather learn how to bring about his own ruin than his preservation."⁴⁰ The meaning of this concept should not be lost. For Aristotle reason ruled over the senses and passions even though the senses had their own legitimate objects and powers. The rule of reason was to be made constant through habit. Machiavelli admitted both reason and passion in man, but for him reason was not to rule the passions continually. Rather the two were to alternate.

You must know, then, that there are two methods of fighting, the one by law, the other by force: the first method is that of men, the second of beasts; but as the first method is often insufficient, one must have recourse to the second. It is therefore necessary for a prince to know well how to use both the beast and the man.⁴¹

Here we no longer stand with the tradition that subordinated the animal in man to the rational. Indeed, rational activity for Machiavelli means that man at times must use his animal passions with their full force, unchecked by reason. Thus, as McCoy points out in a brilliant article, "if law is proper to man, and if man acts like man by virtue of his ability to make prudent use of animal conduct, it should follow that law is nothing more than a superior kind of force," — to which McCoy wryly adds, "and it does follow. . . ."⁴²

Now if force and its maintenance become the prime factors in political life by virtue of the independence of the passions from the rule of reason, politics becomes an art, not a prudence and a morality. The prince is now free to determine the very ends of politics. One of the basic suppositions of Aristotelian theory — that the ends of man in the political order are part of theoretic

³⁹ Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

⁴⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince and Discourses* (New York, 1950), p. 56.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴² Charles N. R. McCoy, "The Place of Machiavelli in the History of Political Thought," *The American Political Science Review*, XXXVII (1943), 634.

science and hence outside of man's power to change — is undermined. Machiavelli believed, contrary to Christian doctrine, that men were by nature evil. "Whoever desires to found a state and give it laws, must start with assuming that all men are bad and ever ready to display their vicious nature whenever they may find occasion for it."⁴³ For men to act correctly they need to be forced. Without coercion "they never fail to carry confusion and disorder everywhere."⁴⁴

Machiavelli then transforms these ideas into a scientific theory. Since men everywhere acted the same way, history revealed the constant pattern of human life. Since the rule of the prince was really that of force, then it followed that man always tended to do the same things both when subject to force and when free of it. History became cyclic and therefore scientifically predictable.

Wise men say, and not without reason, that whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past; for human events ever resemble those of preceding times. This arises from the fact that they are produced by men who have been, and ever will be, animated by the same passions, and thus they must necessarily have the same results.⁴⁵

Gone, then, is any idea of virtue and freedom based on reason and the recognition of the theoretic order. The revolution that the natural scientists were to effect in the concept of the hierarchized universe was prefigured in politics by Machiavelli.

The over-all significance of Machiavelli's thought can, perhaps, be seen more clearly by recalling St. Thomas' question "utrum sit aliqua lex fomitis?"⁴⁶ The burden of the question revolves around the problem of a law of sin. St. Thomas points out that there can be levels of law in creatures. Man is both animal and man. For man to act as a man means that he directs his animal nature to the ends of man himself. But if he fails to act according to his reason, what happens is that he acts according to the law of his lower nature which is contrary to man's dignity but still a type of law.⁴⁷ The significance of this line of thought *vis-à-vis*

⁴³ Machiavelli, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 112.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 530, 103.

⁴⁶ S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Summa Theologiae* (Taurini, 1950), I-II, q. 91, a. 6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Machiavelli is worth noting. For by depriving reason of its proper rule over the passions, man tends to be governed by the general inclinations proper to beasts. The rule of beasts by their natural instincts is natural and as a result cyclic. When Machiavelli postulates that man really is ruled by his passions both in himself and by his political ruler, he in effect reversed the Aristotelian priority of reason over the passions. Political life, as a result, was deprived of liberty precisely because the order of human activity became a necessary one, founded on the cyclic nature of animal instincts.

We are now in a position to recognize the exact scope of Descartes' influence on political theory. If the relationship between reason and the passions forms one of the fundamental, historic starting points for political thinking, then anything that changes the relationship between these two powers will also demand another type of political theory. Likewise, the meaning of liberty and of the theoretic sciences governs the understanding of the autonomy of the political order. On these three issues, Descartes provided a new and revolutionary foundation for the political sciences.

The Cartesian theory of the passions is intimately related to the revival of Stoicism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴⁸ But Descartes' understanding of the passions did not involve him in the problem of how to control them by reason. His system has a different orientation. Descartes' key work in this whole area is his famous treatise *Le Monde*. This is a work that endeavors to deal with the very problem that has vexed so much of modern philosophy, that is, the validity of sense knowledge and hence the authenticity of intellectual knowledge. We should note, Descartes tells us, the difference between the thought we have of light which comes through the eyes and that which is in the object that produces this sensation of light. Normally, men are quite convinced that "the ideas which we have in our thoughts are entirely similar

⁴⁸ The most instructive studies of this relationship are the following:

1) Ernst Cassirer, Chapt. iii, "La Renaissance du Stoïcisme dans la Morale des XVIe et XVIIe Siècles," *Descartes, Corneille, Christine de Suède*, traduit par Madeleine Francés et Paul Schroecker (Paris, 1942), pp. 72-85.

2) Julien-Eymard d'Angers, "Sénèque, Epictète et le Stoïcisme dans l'Oeuvre de René Descartes," *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*, III (1954), 169-96.

3) V. Brochard, "Descartes stoïcien," *Études de Philosophie ancienne et de Philosophie moderne* (Paris, 1954), pp. 320-26.

to the objects from which they proceed.”⁴⁹ But Descartes doubts this. He has several experiences — the relation of words to things, the sense of touch, motion, qualities — which indicate that things are not as he perceives them.⁵⁰

In order to avoid all the difficulties which arise from sensation, Descartes narrates a fable which purports to be a detailed description of the physical world, both of nature and of man. In this description, Descartes supposes that God recreates the world in the infinite void, a world which eliminates all the problems arising from sensation, motion, qualities, and the passions.⁵¹ We are to forget prime matter qualities and forms so that only pure extension remains along with the movements given by God. These movements are so arranged and ordered by the laws of nature that they explain all that happens in the true world. Now this imaginary world, explaining all that happens in it, could be understood by anybody. Moreover, God could, in fact, actually create this world which we can create in our imagination, “for it is certain that He can create everything which we can imagine.”⁵²

The men of this imaginary world are composed of body and soul. The body is a machine which God has made as nearly like real men as possible.⁵³ Descartes then gives a lengthy explanation how such a body could move and operate in a normal human fashion on purely mechanical principles. The machine thus perfectly imitates the actions of a true man.⁵⁴ Seeing this machine, anyone would believe that this human machine operated only from the disposition of its organs like a clock, so that no vegetable or animal soul was needed to explain life.⁵⁵ This really amazing treatise sets the stage for all of Descartes’ further descriptions of the body — with this one significant difference, Descartes seems

⁴⁹ René Descartes, *Le Monde*, AT, XI, 3. Cf. also Meditation III, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (New York, 1955), I, 161. (Hereafter this translation will be cited as *The Philosophical Works*.)

⁵⁰ Descartes, *Le Monde*, AT, XI, 4-10. Cf. also Meditation I, *The Philosophical Works*, I, 145.

⁵¹ Descartes, *Le Monde*, AT, XI, 31 ff.

⁵² “Car il est certain qu’il [God] peut créer toutes les choses que nous pouvons imaginer.” *Ibid.*, 36. The same principle is also found in Meditation VI, *The Philosophical Works*, I, 185, 190.

⁵³ Descartes, *Le Monde*, AT, XI, 119 ff.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 120, 202.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

to forget in the later treatments that the machine world and the machine man are imaginary.

In his *La Description du Corps humain*, Descartes remarks that there is nothing more useful than for man to know himself. From infancy we have been accustomed to believe that the body obeyed the will, one of the powers of the soul. This misconception led us to think the soul was the source of all movement in the body. But the soul is distinct from the body because it thinks. Corporeal motions are not caused by the soul but by disposed organs.⁵⁶ To explain how this is possible, Descartes reverts to the machine built just like a man. He describes tubes, spirits, and the like in order to explain movement on a mechanical basis.⁵⁷ With this background, Descartes writes his major work on the passions. He points out that it is necessary to rewrite the whole ancient position on the passions. The fundamental principle that explains the theory of the passions is the man-machine theory — no longer imaginary but quite affirmative and real.

All that we experience as being in us, and that to observation may exist in wholly inanimate bodies, must be attributed to our body alone; and on the other hand, that all that which is in us and which we cannot in any way conceive as possible pertaining to a body, must be attributed to our soul.⁵⁸

Descartes then repeats in elaborate fashion the cause of movement and sensation and bodily functions.⁵⁹

Descartes recognizes the need to explain how the body and the soul apparently act together. He postulates the pineal gland theory since it seemed to be the only single organ in the brain which could incorporate into one, actions coming both from the body and the soul.⁶⁰ As a result the action of the will on the body and of the body on the will was always indirect, caused by the animal spirits that flowed through the gland. Internal strife simply meant that the organ was agitated by different spirits at the same time. Controlling the passions seemed to mean that we should habitually learn to relate the proper physical reactions of an emo-

⁵⁶ Descartes, *La Description du Corps humain*, AT, XI, 224-27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁵⁸ René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, Pt. I, art. ix, *The Philosophical Works*, I, 331.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Pt. I, arts. iv-xxi, 332-41.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Pt. I, art. xxxii, 346. Cf. also *ibid.*, Pt. I, arts., xxxiv-1, 347-56; Pt. III, arts., cxxi-cxxii, 425-27.

tion with their corresponding thought. Descartes sets up a kind of occasionalism between the movement in the body and the corresponding movement in the soul. He does not admit mutual causality.

The philosophical significance of the concept of the man-machine is far-reaching. Descartes has here set up a method whereby the products of his imagination, the mechanical world and the man-machine, can actually become the real world. Moreover, Descartes has a philosophical reason for this transition from the imaginary to the real. This reason is rooted in the Cartesian theory of liberty. By its instrumentality, Descartes is able to re-create the whole physical world with his own unaided reason. The imaginary world is indeed the world created by Descartes himself. The world of Descartes was definitely a construct.⁶¹ The man-machine in Descartes was in a sense God-given. God could create all man could imagine. Yet it was not God but Descartes who conceived the man-machine and the world-machine. Since the man-machine becomes more and more the fact in the later works, and not explicitly a construct as in *Le Monde*, is it not legitimate to suspect that Descartes is telling us that God did create what Descartes had imagined?

The Cartesian analysis of the passions, as Brochard pointed out, abandoned the Aristotelian distinction between the sensitive

⁶¹ This general elimination of any real givenness in Descartes, I realize, seems to go counter to such significant passages as the Sixth Meditation in which he attempts to demonstrate the existence of bodies — which demonstration apparently demands some existential givenness. Yet, it seems to me the key passages in the Sixth Meditation are the following which parallel *Le Monde*: "For there is no doubt that God possesses the power to produce everything that I am capable of perceiving with distinctness, and I have never deemed that anything was impossible for Him, unless I found a contradiction in attempting to conceive it clearly." (*Philosophical Works*, I, 185.) ". . . I know that all things which I apprehend clearly and distinctly can be created by God as I apprehend them . . ." (*Ibid.*, 190).

Now logically, it might seem that the power of God is broader than the conceptions of Descartes. But in practice, as our discussion of liberty in Descartes implies, everything that appears to be given is ultimately reduced to a God whose powers and actions are controlled by Descartes' mind. I am inclined to think that the so-called "rationalism" of Descartes which would seem to argue to a real givenness always finds its objects reduced to a theory of divine liberty which empties any real stability or solidity in a given object. Finally, what God freely creates somehow turns out to be what Descartes freely imagines or thinks. In other words, I find it difficult to see any specific instance where a "given" is really and radically independent of Descartes himself.

and rational souls.⁶² Descartes was left with pure extension and thought. The intermediary functions of the senses were eliminated. The avenues to reality did not come through sensation:

. . . any man who rightly observes the limitations of the senses, and what precisely it is that can penetrate through this medium to our faculty of thinking must needs admit that no ideas of things, in the shape in which we envisage them by thought, are presented to us by the senses. So much so that in our ideas there is nothing which was not innate in the mind . . . except only these circumstances which point to experience. . . .⁶³

As a result of this analysis, political theory loses its moorings in the real. Indeed, there is really no more room left for political theory as such. For if man by definition is a rational animal so that politics is the science that deals with the highest good of such a creature as a rational animal, then elimination of a proper function of sensation and the passions will leave no room for political theory apart from a strict mechanical or intellectual analysis.

For Descartes, whatever happens in the mechanical side of man is normal and good.⁶⁴ Nature freed from the fetters of authority, left to pursue its own tendencies was not the Cartesian idea as it was for Bruno and other Renaissance thinkers.⁶⁵ Descartes wanted to submit both the world of thought and the physical world to the mind.⁶⁶

The process of the liberation of the human spirit, as with the Renaissance, has entered into a new and decisive step. The heroic ideal acts then in its full force: man has confidence in his proper being, and defends it against all resistance, against all purely exterior limitations. But the rage of the passions is appeased.⁶⁷

But morality without any true understanding of the passions verges over into a utopia. In fact, this is what happened after Descartes.

⁶² Cf. Brochard, *op. cit.*, p. 330. Cf. also Meditation II, *The Philosophical Works*, I, 151.

⁶³ René Descartes, "Notes Directed against a Certain Programme," *The Philosophical Works*, I, 442-43. Cf. also Meditation II, *ibid.*, 157.

⁶⁴ Cf. Cassirer, *Descartes*, p. 97.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁶⁶ Cf. Emile Boutroux, "Du Rapport de la Morale à la Science dans la Philosophie de Descartes," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, IV (1896), 505.

⁶⁷ Cassirer, *Descartes*, p. 99.

Descartes' treatment of man's passions shows that his concept of man stands outside the traditional interpretation. Man is not a rational animal. He is a rational substance joined to a material substance. Descartes was able to accomplish this shift through his theory of liberty. Augusto del Noce, in a very important article, has emphasized this point very clearly: "The originality of the philosophy of Descartes lies in its intention to be a philosophy of liberty, and not simply a philosophy *on* liberty."⁶⁸ A philosophy whose very principle is liberty makes possible the exemption of man from the given fixity of the theoretic sciences. Descartes constructed the whole physical world in *Le Monde* on the theory that God can do whatever Descartes can imagine. For if He could not, His power would be limited. All could be explained in terms of mechanics.

Vital forms are distinguished from non-living forms in possessing an efficient cause of motion within themselves (*De An.*, 415b22ff). But for Descartes there is no such thing as animal motion, distinct from motion externally caused. Animal motion is thus reduced to locomotion, and recognized as the passive effect of an external agent. Hence animals are reduced to machines.⁶⁹

Descartes wanted to eliminate the problem of motion as arising from a soul, since he could not trust sensory knowledge. Once the connection between the external world and thought was broken, Descartes could make thought independent of the senses. In this way, he was able to prove his initial position that the two were independent of each other.

But if this whole theory resides on an analogy or imagination — God, if He wished, could create some world corresponding to Descartes' explanation so that the animal and vegetative souls would not be necessary — Descartes was really no better off in the end than when he began, for the real world might just as well be different from the world he imagined. What Descartes must have was a theory which would give his constructed world of *Le Monde* the same status as the real world. Such an intellectual feat would reduce the theoretic as well as the ethical sciences to

⁶⁸ Augusto del Noce, "Cartesio è la Politica," *Rivista di Filosofia*, V (1950), 15.

⁶⁹ John Wild, "The Cartesian Deformation of the Structure of Change and its Influence on Modern Thought," *Philosophical Review*, L (1941), 51. Cf. also Meditation III, *The Philosophical Works*, I, 160.

art which freely and autonomously governs both the ends and means of what is to be created. This indeed is why Machiavelli is important in the Cartesian development.

The accentuation of the existential theme — the problem of truth posed as indistinguishable from that of my own affirmation as existing — coincides with the isolation of philosophy from the total realization of man. That is, whereas in humanism man realizes himself fully only in community, the social reality is posited by Descartes as exterior to my own realization as a spiritual being. To the Machiavellian separation of politics from any other form of spiritual life corresponds the Cartesian separation which operates, on the contrary, to separate (philosophy) from the spiritual life.⁷⁰

Machiavelli showed how politics could become free of the theoretic order that governed the ends of politics. Descartes carried the process further. He saw how all science could be released from the theoretic order which man did not impose on himself.

“What pleased me most in this method was that I was certain by its means of exercising my reason in all things, if not perfectly, at least as well as was in my power.”⁷¹ Such was Descartes’ intention in the *Discourse on Method*. The first part of the *Discourse* shows how Descartes himself has been exposed to all previous knowledge which only reveals the instability of human learning. The second part decries attempts of individuals to reform the state “by altering everything, and by overturning it throughout.”⁷² Such danger meant that man could only act on himself. Yet since previous knowledge also proved ill-founded, it had to be swept away so that it “might later on be replaced, either by others which were better, or by the same, when I had made them conform to the unity of a rational scheme.”⁷³ The “design was never extended beyond trying to reform my own opinion and to build on a foundation which is entirely my own.”⁷⁴ Descartes’ provisional morality, as well as his constant search for solitude,

⁷⁰ del Noce, *op. cit.*, 8-9.

⁷¹ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, The Philosophical Works*, Pt. II, I, 94.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Pt. II, 89. Cf. also *ibid.*, 81.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

was founded on this attitude.⁷⁵ He simply wanted to "get along" until the rational scheme was formulated.

The fifth and sixth parts of the *Discourse* repeat the physical theories of *Le Monde* and *La Description du Corps humain*. Descartes' physical theories were his real philosophic clues.

For they caused me to see that it is possible to attain knowledge which is very useful in life, and that, instead of that speculative philosophy which is taught in the Schools, we may find a *practical philosophy by means of which, knowing the force and the action of fire, water, air, the stars, heavens and all other bodies that environ us, as distinctly as we know the different crafts of our artisans, we can in the same way employ them in all those uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature.*⁷⁶

This endeavor to become the master of nature is the real meaning of the Cartesian physical theories. But the physical theories, in turn, are not absolute. God could make two plus two equal five as well as four.⁷⁷ God's freedom is limited by no essence. God's power is infinite. As he wrote to Father Mersenne: "... all that which we conceive as distinctly possible is possible and that we conceive distinctly that it is possible that the world has been produced, therefore it has been produced — this is a line of reason that I entirely approve of."⁷⁸ Now what kind of an argument is this? All that is distinctly conceived as possible is possible. But it is possible that the world was produced. *Therefore*, it was produced. Descartes is in full agreement with this line of thought, as well he might, for does not this argument imply that omnipotence lies in man's mind rather than God's? Descartes still believes, of course, "that it would be temerity to think that our imagination has as much extension as His power."⁷⁹ But this loses its practical significance if God produces what man imagines.

The Fourth Meditation and the Reply to the Sixth Objection

⁷⁵ For discussions of provisional morality, cf. Robert Cumming, "Descartes' Provisional Morality," *The Review of Metaphysics*, IX (1955), 207-35; Mesnard, *op. cit.*, pp. 215-30; Henri Gouhier, *La Pensée religieuse de Descartes* (Paris, 1924), pp. 148-51; Petru Comaresco, "The Social and Ethical Conceptions of Descartes," *Ethics*, LII (1942), 493-503.

⁷⁶ Descartes, *Discourse*, Pt. VI, p. 119. Italics added.

⁷⁷ May 27, 1630, *DL*, p. 13.

⁷⁸ September 30, 1640, *DL*, p. 66.

⁷⁹ April 15, 1630, *DL*, p. 12.

set forth the Cartesian theory of liberty in God and man.⁸⁰ In man, liberty is the highest power. In itself freedom in man is like God's though man's power is less. Error arises because the will extends to more objects than the intellect. When man has a clear and distinct idea, he necessarily follows that idea. Indeed, in proportion as man increases his knowledge he reduces his freedom so that perfect knowledge would mean perfect necessity.⁸¹ Man is only indifferent to truth when he does not see it clearly.⁸² The will of God, however, is never so limited by anything it did not create as is man's will. The will of God makes the true to be true and the good to be good.⁸³ This theory sounds like an eventual denial of freedom in man and the absolute exaltation of God. But as we have seen, Descartes radically changes this interpretation when he suggests that God could and did create all man could imagine.

Judgment is a will act. Formal cause does not limit will, rather will creates formal cause. Consequently, with the elimination of formal cause, final cause must be reduced to efficient cause.⁸⁴ Ultimately this will mean that all knowledge is practical.⁸⁵ How does such a theory relate to man's mastery of the physical world? ". . . The free will is of itself the most noble thing which can be in us, in as much as it renders us in some fashion equal to God and seems to exempt us from being His subjects. . . ."⁸⁶ Now since freedom in God ultimately implies exemption from the control of essences such that all essence is actually created by God, then freedom in man must likewise have the same quality. And this is in fact what Descartes postulates in the construction of *Le Monde*, *La Description du Corps humain*, the *Passions of the*

⁸⁰ Descartes, Meditation IV, *The Philosophical Works*, I, 171-79; *Objections*, *ibid.*, II, 248-49.

⁸¹ Cf. Edgar Wolff, "Conscience et Liberté chez Descartes et chez M. Sartre," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, CXLV (1955), 343-48.

⁸² Descartes, *Objections*, "Reply to Objection VI," *The Philosophical Works*, II, 248.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Wild, *op. cit.*, 48-49.

⁸⁵ Cf. M-D Philippe, "Réflexions sur la Nature et l'Importance de la Liberté dans la Philosophie de Descartes," *Revue thomiste*, LX (1952), 596.

⁸⁶ November 20, 1647, *DL*, pp. 181-82. Cf. also R. Serano, "De la Liberté chez Descartes," *Les Études philosophiques* (1950), 201-22; J. Segond, "La Liberté divine et humaine, Prélude cartésien à l'Existentialisme," *ibid.*, 223-32; S. V. Keeling, *Descartes* (London, 1934), pp. 186 ff.

Soul, and the *Discourse on Method*. In these works, Descartes writes not of the world God actually made, but the world constructed by the mind of Descartes. The hypothesis he uses to bridge the gap is again that of the belief that God could do what man could imagine.

The Cartesian theory of liberty, theoretic science, and the passions formed the main intellectual link between Stoic theories and modern science so that man actually became freed from the givenness of things by their over-all applications.⁸⁷ Man and the world became a construct, subject to the human intellect. The passions of man now were ruled by not merely a despotic but a mechanical rule. The link between mind and the world was thereby broken. Sensation lost its autonomy. This meant that pure reason governed independently. Man was no longer free because of the autonomy of the theoretic sciences. He was free precisely because he determined the content of the theoretic sciences themselves.

To this I also added many things touching the substance, situation, movements, and all the different qualities of these heavens and stars, so that I thought I had said enough to make it clear that there is nothing to be seen in the heavens and stars pertaining to our system which must not, or at least may not, appear exactly the same in those of the systems which I described.⁸⁸

Thus, while Descartes does make God's power greater than man's, he also has made man's intellect capable of mastering all that it can conceive independently of the given world.

This whole theory seems, furthermore, to clarify and justify that unfortunately small portion of Cartesian political theory that we do have. The relative independence of the physical world from the intellectual world means that natural rule is not of reason over the passions. Rather it means the absolute rule of the intellect over the constructed body. The prince has power from God and justice in the political world is what the prince thinks just because the political world is what the prince places there. This is why del Noce maintains that the net effect of Cartesianism in later politics

⁸⁷ For a brilliant discussion of this whole issue in political theory, cf. Charles N. R. McCoy, "Ludwig Feuerbach and the Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea," *Laval théologique et philosophique*, VII (1951), 218-48.

⁸⁸ Descartes, *Discourse*, Pt. V, p. 108. Cf. also Preface to Reader, p. 138.

was the absolutism of later centuries.⁸⁹ The repose and solitude which Descartes seeks for himself from a prince naturally comes from force and order. Since this solitude is of prime importance for man, that arrangement of the external order is best which adequately secures it. But the external order is not a given thing. It is something man creates and dominates. Since freedom means freedom from natural essences, any order is possible. The one finally chosen, since it is not a product of reason, must be chosen by force and power.

Descartes, in conclusion, finds his way into political theory not primarily by what he says about politics, but by the way he analyzes the passions, liberty, and the theoretic sciences. His analyses changed the structure in which thought had been conceived. Political thought, then, has a unity and coherence which depends upon the basic postulates on which it is conceived. The most profound changes that have historically taken place in political thought always stem from shifts in these postulates. This is why Descartes must be considered a significant influence in political theory.

⁸⁹ del Noce, *op. cit.*, 13.