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The Provisional Moral Code (*la morale provisoire*) or the Permanent Ethical Stopgap? Inspiration from Descartes and Montaigne*

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The purpose of this article is to refer to Cartesian provisional moral code (*la morale provisoire*) as a pretext for identifying three essential ways towards a more general understanding of “provisional ethics”. First, it will be taken as a response to an urgent need for the *provision* of an efficient moral code of someone who is not yet ready to formulate an ultimate model of a broader system of ethics. The second way underlines an emphasis of the temporariness of a collection of such rules. The final and last approach focuses on an emphasis of an imperfection resulting from the temporariness that is best expressed by the Polish word “*prowizorka*”, in which the issue of “substitution” comes to the fore and only later – the poor quality of a provisional solution. In view of these considerations the question arises whether provisional ethics indeed is merely a vestibule of a mature and complete system, or, to the contrary, the difficulty or inability to build such a system requires an ethical stopgap to become the permanent state. In such a depiction, partly inspired by Michel de Montaigne’s thought, the handling of provisional ethics would approach the category of specifically understood moral “tinkering”.

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1. Ethics or moralism? *Ethica or morale?*

The presentation of the concept outlined above requires the formulation of an important stipulation. The analyses conducted here are not of historical nature (rather hermeneutical) in the sense that they are not focused on the ethical concepts of Montaigne or Descartes but merely make use of them to clarify the complexity of the central problem, namely *provisional ethics*.

The main difficulty in reconstructing the views of both researchers is already related to the basic notion of ‘ethics’. Descartes and Montaigne use the term *morale* which can be explained in two ways depending on the semantic contexts of a given linguistic tradition. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as *morality*, i.e. a set of rules and principles of good conduct, whilst on the other, as *ethics*, i.e. the theory of such behaviour. In the analysed fragments Descartes originally uses the term ‘ethics’ in the sense which can be translated into English as ‘morality’. Hence, in the well-known fragment of the *Discourse on Method* where the project of provisional ethics is formulated for the first time we read:

(...) je me formay une morale par provision, qui ne consistoit qu’en trois ou quatre maxims, dont je veux bien vous faire part¹

However, in a Latin translation, the concept of “provisional ethics” already exists:

(...) Ethicam quamdam ad tempus mihi effinxi, quae tribus tantum aut quatuor regulis continebatur; quas hinc non pigebit adscribere.²

In the English translation a reference to the original French issue (*a moral*) can be found:

Thus, in order that I might not remain undecided in my actions, while reason obliged me to be so in my opinions, and that I might not thenceforth cease to live as happily as possible, I provisionally made myself a moral, consisting merely three or four maxims, which I will gladly impart to you.³

At the same time, in the critical edition of the *Discourse on Method* by E. Haldane and G. T. R. Ross ‘ethics’ reappears:

¹ R. Descartes, *Discours de la methode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la verité dans le sciences*, 1986, p. 26.

² Idem, *Discours de la methode*, in: *Œuvres de Descartes*, 1973, p. 552.

³ Idem, *Discourse on Method and Metaphysical Meditations*, [1908?], p. 27.

(...) I made up for myself a temporary code of ethics, consisting merely of three or four rules, which I should like to include here.⁴

I will not deal with terminological subtleties here, although the distinction between ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ is of fundamental importance. This question arises here, because it relates to the Cartesian understanding of ethics as an element of the philosophical system. While we may treat the maxims formulated by Descartes as simple moral recommendations, the declaration that they are temporary in character and inscribed into a broader system which is still in a development allow us at the same time to treat it as the beginnings of the theory.

The terminological problem is even more evident in the case of the other thinker to whom I refer here as a source of inspiration – Michel de Montaigne. By assuming a sceptical approach, the author of the *Essays* distances himself from construing a systematised ethical theory; to simplify by far – he rather formulates a certain moral position which is strongly supported by the stoic tradition. An indirect argument behind this thesis is the nearly complete absence of the concept of ‘ethics’ in the *Essays*, with the only exception of a single passage from the essay *On Cannibals* (I: 30), in which there is clearly a tension between the moral practice and the “system of ethics”:

Ce prophete parle à eux en public, les exhortant à la vertu et à leur devoir; mais toute leur science ethique ne contient que ces deux articles, de la resolution à la guerre et affection à leurs femmes⁵.

This prophet then addresses them in public, exhorting them to be virtuous and dutiful, but their entire system of ethics contains only the same two articles: resoluteness in battle and love for their wives.⁶

It is worth noting that even in the edition of the *Essays* of 1739, the term *science etique* was accompanied by a footnote explaining this “technical” concept: “morale, concernant les mœurs”.⁷ This may indicate a lack of etymology of the term *ethics* (*ethical system*) in the context of the commonly used *morale* in the French language of the period. In contemporary editions of the *Essays*, this footnote no longer appears.⁸

One more issue remains important – Montaigne’s generally strong attachment to the antique tradition, partly confirmed by the general proportion in his application of certain concepts. Besides the single and

⁴ Idem, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 1911, vol. I, p. 95.

⁵ M. de Montaigne, I:30, *Essais de Michel Seigneur Montaigne*, 1739, v. I, p. 436.

⁶ Idem, *The Complete Essays*, I: 31, 1993, p. 234.

⁷ Idem, *Essais de Michel Seigneur Montaigne*, I:30, 1739, p. 436.

⁸ Idem, *Les Essais*, 2002, p. 323.

isolated *science etique*, as discussed above, also the term *morale* is used by Montaigne very sporadically as his central category is still *vertu*, i.e. virtue.

2. Provisional Ethics

In the outlined perspective – Descartes' ambition to formulate the system of ethics and the sporadic, almost accidental use of the term *ethics* by Montaigne – it seems quite easy to place both thinkers in a clear opposition. Montaigne would then be a moralist, without systematising ambitions, an author of a set of maxims and moral directives, which remains theoretically disorganised. In turn, Descartes, seeking to build a new coherent system of knowledge, would be an ethicist in the sense that he attempts to build a systematic theory of good conduct. However, this is a false opposition, first of all because attempts are made to derive more systematic conceptions from Montaigne's essays.⁹ Furthermore, Montaigne's work is a continuous source of inspiration not only for those who seek comfort in simple maxims of the French art of essay writing lovers but also for philosophers dealing with ethics.¹⁰ On the other hand, the promises made by Descartes are to a large extent broken; he fails to build a system of ethics and the only maxims that will ultimately enter into the canon will be those concerned with his provisional ethics. Partially, he himself admits this by returning years later to the said maxims in *The Letters to Princess Elizabeth* (4 August 1645)¹¹ and commenting on the project of provisional ethics in *The Conversation to Burman* (1648).¹² This second reference is important inasmuch that it has been marked by a significant comment made by the author:

The author does not like writings on ethics, but he was compelled to include these rules because of people like the Schoolmen; otherwise, they would have said that he was a man without any religion or faith and that he intended to use his method to subvert them.¹³

⁹ See D. Quint D., *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy. Ethical and Political Themes in the Essais*.

¹⁰ See J. Shklar, *Ordinary vices*.

¹¹ R. Descartes, *Philosophical letters*, p. 165.

¹² Idem, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. I, p. 95.

¹³ Idem, *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, p. 49. What is important in the context of the above observations, the comment also contains the word 'ethics': "Auctor non libenter scribit ethica, sed propter paedagogos et similes coactus est has regulas adscribere, quia alias dicerent illum esse sine religione, fide, et per suam methodum haec evertere velle". Cf. R. Descartes, *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. V, *Correspondance Mai 1647 – Février 1650*, p. 178. Although on the other hand – again – in French version the

Descartes admits that his unwillingness to write about ethics is linked to his relationship to the tradition in which he grew. The influences of scholasticism at the Jesuit college in La Flèche, the education in which in fact he highly valued,¹⁴ the subsequent clashes with the scholastics and censorship, as well as his partially reluctant attitude towards traditional philosophy,¹⁵ as he saw it, all of this forced him to remain cautious while formulating statements concerning the ethics, which was at that time strictly related to theological issues. That is why we also find in Descartes his declarations of the role of ethics in the overall system of his philosophy, as the ones contained in the introduction to the French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy*:

The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals (...).¹⁶

This role is fundamental, because the ethical system remains in a special relationship to the remaining branches of knowledge, and ultimately serves as the overarching goal of knowledge:

(...) the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom.¹⁷

The problem is that such an enclosed system of knowledge, whose *perfect moral system* would be a crowning achievement, was never accomplished by Descartes. The only thing that has remained from this thought is the provisional moral code.

In order to see the main reason for formulating the maxims of provisional ethics, one has to return to the words that precede the declaration of building a provisional moral code cited above from the *Discourse on Method*:

term «la morale» has been preserved: «L'auteur n'aime pas écrire sur la morale», Idem, *Entretien avec Burman. Manuscrit de Göttingen*, p. 125.

¹⁴ „There is no place on earth where philosophy is better taught than at La Flèche”. R. Descartes, Lettre a ***, in: *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. II, p. 378, in: R. Ariew, *Descartes and the Last Scholastics*, p. 8.

¹⁵ In particular the well-known fragment from the *Discourse on Method*: “there is still no point in [philosophy] which is not disputed and hence doubtful” and “there for the other sciences, insofar as they borrow their principles from philosophy... nothing solid could have been built upon such shaky foundations”, R. Descartes, *Discours de la methode*, in: *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. VI, pp. 7–8, in: R. Ariew, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁶ R. Descartes, “Preface to French Version of the *Principles of philosophy*”, in: R. Descartes, *Descartes, his moral philosophy and psychology*, p. 252.

¹⁷ Ibid.

And finally, as it is not sufficient, before beginning to rebuild one's dwelling-house, merely to throw it down and to furnish materials and architects, or to study architecture, and to have carefully traced the plan of it besides, it is also necessary to be provided with some other wherein to lodge conveniently while the work is in progress.¹⁸

He speaks in a similar spirit in the introduction to the French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy*:

(...) I summarily placed the principal rules of logic and an imperfect morals that one can provisionally use while one as yet knows nothing better.¹⁹

We can therefore assume that the major goal behind the formulation of Cartesian maxims of provisional ethics (the content of which I disregard here), still consists in the necessity to fill in a certain gap created by the lack of a completed and enclosed system of knowledge which would also contain ethical rules, with a simultaneous need for the regulation of actions. In other words, what Descartes aims at is a temporary solution which will eventually be replaced with a final and complete formula. In this context, the adjective *provisional* used in reference to the *moral code* focuses its meanings on the temporal dimension in accordance with the basic understanding as 'a temporary arrangement for the present'. This understanding is connected with the etymology of the verb *provide* which is a combination of two Latin terms: *providere* ('look ahead, prepare, supply, act with foresight') and *provisio* ('foreseeing, foresight, preparation, prevention').

Let us note that focusing the attention on the temporariness of the proposed solution, which is part of a wider scheme of an overall system of knowledge, does not yet necessarily lead to the appraisal of provisional maxims. For example, they may constitute intuitively founded hypotheses, which may, although do not have to, remain valid even once the final shape of the system is established. I emphasise this topic in order to clearly separate the first way of understanding the adjective *provisional* from the other. To expose this difference I have to slightly refine the understanding of this adjective with the help of related concepts used in colloquial language.

3. From 'provision' to 'stop-gap'

While in the original, already cited excerpt from the *Discourse on Method* we deal with the wording directly related to the Latin root *provisio* (*une*

¹⁸ R. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Metaphysical Meditations*, pp. 26–27.

¹⁹ R. Descartes, "Preface...", p. 253.

*morale par provision*²⁰); in the Latin translation of the treatise, temporariness is the only notion that comes to the fore (...*ethicam quam-dam ad Tempus mihi effinxi*²¹). Let us note in this context that in the colloquial languages of different cultural traditions other definitions of provisional solutions appeared which, while being indigenous to a particular tradition, were not necessarily related exclusively to the narrow original meaning that emphasised temporariness. What I have in mind are the following four examples: English – *stopgap*, *makeshift*, French – *bouche-trou*, German – *Ersatz* and Polish – *pro wizorka*.

Let us take a closer look at the concept of the *stopgap*, which has the following meaning:

1684. [f. STOP v. GAP sb.¹] 1. Something that temporarily supplies a need; a makeshift. Also, of a person: One who temporarily occupies an office, etc. until a permanent appointment can be made. 1691. 2. An utterance intended to fill up a gap or an awkward pause in conversation or discourse 1684. 3. *Attrib.* passing into *adj.* 1684. Moral prejudices are the stopgaps of virtue 1827.²²

The fragment of an aphorism by Augustus W. Hare found in the dictionary of 1827, which combines virtue and prejudices, is worth being quoted in whole, as it emphasises the importance of substitution and the effort that must be put in to overcome it:

Moral prejudices are the stopgaps of virtue; and, as is the case with other stopgaps, it is often more difficult to get either out or in through them than through any other part of the fence.²³

Such an approach recalls proverbs emerging in many languages which link habits or customs to human nature. They usually take the following form: “habit is second nature”,²⁴ where what is acquired as a habit imitates a part of the being of an acting subject (imitates not identifies itself with the subject as a habit is merely the *second* nature, the *as if* nature). I chose to develop this topic to highlight the surprising feature of provisional solutions. Indeed, their durability, invariability or even reliability seem surprising. Suffice it to say that Descartes’s *provisional* moral code has not fundamentally changed throughout his whole life.

The understanding of the noun *stopgap* (or *stop-gap*) as a temporary substitute is common in many languages, which is illustrated with prov-

²⁰ Idem, *Discours de la methode pour bien conduire sa raison...*, p. 26.

²¹ Idem, *Discours de la methode*, in: *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. VI, p. 552.

²² *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. II, p. 2138.

²³ A. W. Hare, *Aphorisms and apothegms*, p. 2.

²⁴ See: B. J. Whiting, *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases*, p. 190.

erbs that bring to the foreground the central motif of Descartes's idea: finding of an *ad hoc* substitute in the light of a momentary lack of a final solution and settling for it. Also, a certain necessity to settle for the said substitute is very often stressed, as in the English proverb "beggars can't be choosers",²⁵ or the entire family of proverbs reflecting the content of "all is good in a famine",²⁶ such as Latin "beati monoculi in terra caecorum", Polish "na bezrybiu i rak ryba" ('where there are no fish, crayfish will do'), or modern Greek: "στην αναβροχιά καλό και το χαλάζι" ('during drought even hail is good').²⁷

The French expression *bouche-trou* (literally translated to Polish as 'zapchajdziura' – a thing used to temporarily fill in a gap) is related to the English *stopgap*. We can find them in Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, containing the words: "Le vide du cœur ne s'accommode point d'un *bouche-trou*".²⁸ It is also worth noting that in the classic translation of the novel into English by Isabel Hapgood in 1887 the phrase "a vacancy in the heart does not accommodate itself to a *stop-gap*"²⁹ was used, although in more recent translations it is replaced with the following: "The ravaged heart does not so readily accept *palliatives*".³⁰ This last version to a greater extent emphasises the irreplaceability of the original – a stopgap is not capable of replacing the right measure, just as palliative measures do not substitute medications.

In a similar way, the imperfect substitution is also highlighted by the German word *Ersatz*, which has also become well established in other languages. However, the most interesting case is concerned with the Polish word *prowizorka* ('a building, premises, temporary and transitional equipment; also: a state which is to last for a short period of time, a defined time). It is a rare example of an association of original Latin etymology, the original meaning, with an additional component – not only consisting in bringing to the foreground the idea of temporariness but, most of all, pointing to the poor quality of the provisional solution, as in the aforementioned proverbs. This can be seen in the relationship between *prowizorka* and one of its obsolete meanings – the word *prowizor*:
prowizor from Latin *provisor*; (...) 1. obsolete "former: a pharmacy worker with incomplete university education": Ignacy Łukasiewicz, a Lvov pharmacy *prowizor*, was the inventor of the oil lamp. It was only after several

²⁵ See: G. B. Bryan, W. Mieder, *A Dictionary of Anglo-American Proverbs & Proverbial Phrases*, p. 53.

²⁶ E. Strauss, *Dictionary of European Proverbs*, vol. I, p. 298.

²⁷ See: A. Negris, *A Dictionary of Modern Greek Proverbs*, p. 35.

²⁸ V. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, vol. IV, book 8, ch. VII, p. 813, in: V. Hugo, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 813.

²⁹ V. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. I. F. Hapgood, Planet Ebook, www.planetebook.com, p. 1732.

³⁰ V. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1982, p. 866.

years of practice that the *prowizor* was able to complete his university education, earning a master's degree.³¹

It is only its second meaning, also marked as obsolete, that is explained as:

2. formerly 'a managing person, supervision: A *prowizor* was the head of every Cracow dormitory. *Prowizor* was a person appointed by the Sejm as undertreasurer's assistant in collecting taxes.³²

The first meaning of a 'pharmacy assistant' with time adopted the female form *prowizorka*. In the mid-twentieth century the term was spread in architecture where it was no longer used to refer to a person but an object, more precisely building structures, namely 'provisional low-quality structures'.³³ Therefore, it still preserved the notion of temporariness which is related to contexts known from other languages (*provisional, temporal*), however, over time, the sense of a substitute was more strongly emphasised, of something sufficient but also superfluous, or even accepted as the last resort (Frech *dernier ressort*).³⁴ The thus understood concept not so much introduces a completely new element as it causes a different distribution of accents. It brings the imperfection of a provisional solution to the fore.

This way we have introduced a division into three meanings of the adjective *provisional* when referred to ethics. The first is concerned with an urgent need to provide a moral code that fits in the projected construction of an overall system (*provision, i.e. foreseeing*). The second is a temporal code that will be verified in the future. Thirdly, and lastly, a temporary solution is of mediocre quality which does not measure up to the standards of a perfect ethical system and will be abandoned without regret (*prowizorka*). The application of these distinctive meanings in the new ethics reveals threads that could have remained concealed if we wished to remain only at the level of understanding Descartes's idea exclusively in terms of 'providing of a moral code in temporal conditions'. I will attempt to take a closer look at these issues, with particular

³¹ H. Zgółkowa, *Praktyczny słownik współczesnej polszczyzny*, vol. 33, p. 59.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 58–59.

³³ How deeply rooted in the Polish language it is to associate the meaning of the word *prowizorka* with an architectural cheapness is illustrated with an anecdote taken from tourist guidebooks for the city of Wrocław: according to folklore etymology this word originates from the name of Ignacio Provisore (? -1743), an architect working at the gypsum stuccowork in the Lepoldin Auditorim of the Wrocław University. Cf. Z. Pazda, *Co przewodnik turystyczny mówi we Wrocławiu Włochom o ich rodakach*, „*Italica Wratislaviensia*” 5 (2014), p. 28.

³⁴ See stopgap as „last resort or resource, *dernier ressort*” – Roget's *International Thesaurus*, pp. 435–436.

emphasis on the inspirations coming from the writings of the other main character of this text – Michel de Montaigne.

4. Inspirations resulting from the ‘stopgap’ concept

The basic element of the thought of the author of the *Essays* which becomes evident in the context of the notion of *temporariness* is his scepticism. While Descartes proposes that his maxims are recognised as temporary solutions because he is convinced that he will build a perfect system of ethics, Montaigne would rather deem the building of such a system infeasible. First of all, how could it be performed by a man whose nature is characterised as follows:

Man is indeed an object miraculously vain, various and wavering. It is difficult to found a judgement on him which is steady and uniform.³⁵

Secondly, Montaigne, like old Descartes who can already afford to declare his suspicions towards scholastics dealing with ethics that have accompanied him for years, is far from holding in esteem not only scholastics but also the entire “learnedness”. He devotes to this issue a whole separate well-known essay entitled *Du pédantisme*, and in English – depending on the version – *On the pedantry* or *On schoolmaster’s learning* (I: 25). We find in it a significant reference to Dionysius who has seen through the falsehood of theoreticians who had not been able to practically implement the theory known to them:

Dionysius used to laugh at professors of grammar, who did research into the bad qualities of Ulysses, yet knew nothing of their own; at musicians whose flutes were harmonious but not their morals; at orators whose studies led to talking about justice, not to being just.³⁶

The above-described weakness is mainly attributed to scholars and blooms with particular strength in schools which have a disastrous impact on young people. Instead of helping them develop, to a large extent they spoil them and teach arrogance:

But just look at him after he has spent some fifteen or sixteen years studying: nothing could be more unsuited for employment. The only improvement you can see is that his Latin or Greek have made him more con-

³⁵ M. de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, I:1, p. 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, I:25, p. 156.

ceited and more arrogant than he left home. He ought to have brought it weightier he has merely blown wind into it.³⁷

Generally speaking, learned schoolmasters and thinkers succumb to the passion of accumulating unnecessary knowledge, reproduced and passed on to the next generations, while neglecting the most essential thing – their own moral development:

We work merely to fill the memory, leaving the understanding and the sense of right and wrong empty. Just as birds sometimes go in search of grain, carrying it in their beaks without tasting it to stuff it down the beaks of their young, so too do our schoolmasters go foraging for learning in their books and merely lodge it on their lips, only to spew it out and scatter it on the wind.³⁸

Let us add one more thing to the ones mentioned above: Montaigne's declared attachment to the simplicity and common morality which, according to the author of the *Essays*, is represented by uneducated people:

Let us look to the land and to the wretched people we can see scattered over it, bending low over their toil, ignorant of Aristotle, Cato, example and precept: from them Nature draws every day deeds of constancy and carefully study in our schools.³⁹

All of the above elements together: scepticism towards the possibility of building the knowledge of man, including the ultimate truth concerning righteous deeds; aversion to scholastically cultivated science; tribute to the simple-heartedness of uneducated people and their common morality, and – let us add – attachment to colloquial language, divested of artificial forms, even at the expense of its «coarseness» and «lack of sophistication»⁴⁰ – seem to contradict the project drawn up by Descartes. In such conditions, there can be no question of constructing a perfect and complete system of ethics, which only in the initial phase may and should be replaced by an *ad hoc* set of intuitively recognised moral rules. If we would like to find the courage to speculate on Montaigne's alleged reaction to Descartes's project, whom of course he could not have known, let us formulate the assumption that the author of the *Essays* knowingly and intentionally would have stopped at the stage of

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 154.

³⁹ Ibid., III:12, p. 1178.

⁴⁰ „...there is nothing fluent or polished about my language; it is rough and disdainful with rhetorical arrangements which are free and undisciplined”. Ibid., II:17, p. 725.

the minimalist ‘stopgap’ and abandoned the illusions of building a system of ethics that could crown the tree of all knowledge. An irresolute man, insecure when it comes to himself and the experienced world, the complex matter of human behaviour, the difficulty in applying moral rules in practice, or the artificiality of scholastic language of the learned, all of these things allow nothing else but the said “essays” or “tinkering” serving self-improvement in virtue.

Why did I choose to refer to an additional category of *tinkering* besides the well-grounded idea of Montaigne’s “essays”? There are several reasons for this. The first is Montaigne’s constant communication with moral practice and the need for a specific testing of thought products in action. Virtue is not, according to the author of the *Essays*, merely knowledge of a good conduct but must still be rooted in the conduct through practice:

Even when our trust is readily placed in them, reasoning and education cannot easily prove powerful enough to bring us actually to do anything, unless addition we train and form our Soul by experience for action she will undoubtedly find herself impeded.⁴¹

To a certain extent, this view was also shared by Descartes, who demanded practical development of his theories, although it may also be said that these words are a part of certain rhetorical courtesy and are intended to alleviate the radical tone of postulates voiced in the *Discourse on Method*:

As for the benefit which others might receive from the communication of my thoughts, it also could not be very great, more especially because as I had not yet conducted them so far but that many things needed to be added thereto before putting them into practice.⁴²

However, in my opinion the most forthright passage in which Montaigne gives an indirect testimony to his affinity for the category of tinkering, that is, in fact, the continuous use of makeshift is the presence of metaphors concerning handicraft in his deliberations. This is particularly striking in a place where one should not expect it at all – in the description of the relationship between the characters and minds of people. It is a passage in which Montaigne emphasises the importance of contacts with other cultures as an essential element in shaping our characters and customs:

⁴¹ Ibid., II:6, p. 416.

⁴² R. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Metaphysical Meditations*, p. 81.

For this purpose mixing with people is wonderfully appropriate. So are visits to foreign lands: but not the way the French nobles do it (merely bringing back knowledge of how many yards long the Pantheon is, or of the rich embroidery on Signora Livia's knickers); nor the way others do so (knowing how much longer and fatter Nero's face in on some old ruin over there compared with his face on some comparable medallion) but mainly learning of humours of those people and of their manners, and *knocking off our corners by rubbing our brain* against other people's.⁴³

The expressions used here are striking with their plasticity and, above all, by the fact that they are deeply rooted in the poetics of the language that describes craftsmanship. For what exactly do "knocking off our corners" or "rubbing our brain" mean? Isn't it a metaphorical expression of a continuous adaptation, change, matching, or yielding to the pressure of matter, in this case, of another man? It is also worth pointing out that according to David Quint, the category of concession is one of the axes of ethics of the author of *Essays* right next to obedience.⁴⁴

It seems therefore that a fickle, mutable, unsecured, vain man has no chance or ambition to build in the foreseeable future a ready, perfect, enclosed and complete ethical system; on the contrary, what he chooses is a permanent makeshift. Of course Montaigne does not put forward the thus formulated thesis – I do it for him. I feel empowered to formulate it under the influence of an inconspicuous fragment whose content is concerned with a very specific moral question – drunkenness. This passage – though left without a comment, which I would expect to appear in the context of *tinkering* – reveals a context that constitutes the essence of this discussion. It is a story of a certain unhappy woman:

(...) there was a village woman, a widow of chaste reputation, who becoming aware of the first hints that she might be pregnant, told the women of the neighbourhood that if only she had a husband she would think she was expecting. But as the reason her suspicion grew bigger every day and finally became evident, she was reduced to having a declaration made from the pulpit in her parish church, staging that if any man would admit what he had done she promised to forgive him, and, if he so wished, to marry him. One of her young farm-labourers took courage at this proclamation and stated that he had found her one feasts-day by her fireside after she had drunk her wine freely; she was so deeply and provocatively asleep that he had been able to have her without waking her up. They married each other and are still alive.⁴⁵

⁴³ M. de Montaigne, op. cit., I:26, p. 172.

⁴⁴ Cf. D. Quint, op. cit., pp. 102–144.

⁴⁵ M. de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, II:2, p. 384.

Montaigne treats this tale exclusively as an illustration of his attitude to drunkenness; however, it is impossible not to have an impression that he tells it with a wink and a provoking smile. The described moral problem is not at all trivial – a pregnant widow who cannot justify her condition, just like as an unmarried maiden, should most likely be blamed with the sin of adultery and condemned. However, here the story ends differently: whether by the despair of the heroine or moral perspicacity of the priest who agreed to publicly announce an atypical offer of the widow, the situation is redefined, which was obviously due to the happy ending in the form of marriage. One could say that at least several rules were broken here: extramarital relations were sanctioned and publicly announced, whereas the widow, under the pressure of the situation, probably needed to highly soften the criteria for choosing her second spouse who, after all, was her servant. However, the fairytale ending of the story – «they live married to this day» – seems to change the locally effective principles. This does not mean that they have changed for good – extramarital relations, excessive drunkenness which was the original cause of the wrongdoing, or – speaking of the 16th century – marrying people of a lower status were still not sanctioned. So, what happened? It seems to have been an instance of provisional ethics.

Obviously, such an interpretation, as well as the entire concept of «provisional ethics» in the spirit of Montaigne's «attempts», may seem controversial. For instance, the first controversy is that not every *ad hoc* moral stopgap leads to something good. It is clearly visible in the concept of “experimenting” with the existing moral rules, which is a concept related to the stopgap. The sole expression – «experimenting on oneself» (with drugs, sexual behaviour, transgression of social norms) – already reveals a presumption of exceeding norms due to curiosity, weak will, or other motives. In response, one might say that for Montaigne the criterion of appropriateness of the choice of measures would probably be the strength coming from the well-established *vertu* – the virtue of the doer who, unable to lean on the changing and uncertain world, anchors his moral certainty in his ethically consolidated interior.

Another important controversy that should be considered is the tacit assumption of consequentialism. We open ourselves up to the *tinkering* with moral standards, assuming that the final criterion will consist in the evaluation of the final results of our actions. In the case of the described story, this evaluation is contained in the meaningful words “they live (presumably happily) married to this day”. But does such an assumption not stand in contradiction with the apparently deontological context of Montaigne's neo-stoicism?

Other allegations will come from the critics of the weakness of casuistry, opponents of situationalism, or threats connected with other forms of relativism. These are well known issues and this is not the place to

elaborate on them. Instead, I will only address a few questions that, in spite of everything, may provoke rethinking of the category of an “ethical stopgap”.

So is the “provisional ethics” indeed just an excuse for eloquent ethicists masking the low motives of their immorality? Or maybe the formula hidden in it “works, though it should not” or rather “should be different (for example, there should be other, better-suited means), but it works” is a flick in the nose of pompous preachers, conceited schoolmasters, and hypocritical moralists? Isn’t the use of stopgaps the best, if not the only method of a moral response in the world of complex relationships? What is more, the rapid advancement of knowledge and fast-changing circumstances collide with the language of ethics that cannot keep up with those changes and, in consequence, generate the state of a “moral vertigo” to use the words of Michael Sandel.⁴⁶ Therefore, shouldn’t we make peace with the fact that the only, thing that is permanent in our moral response is that it is subject to constant changes, thus we will always be forced to use stopgaps?

Regardless of what kind of answers we will formulate to the above questions, let us at least consider the contribution of the Polish term *pro wizorka* to the language of philosophy. It is a temporary solution, shaky, casual, uncertain, and not worth repeating, but also – just like the moral superstitions from Hare’s aphorism – a surprisingly effective and paradoxically *durable* one – it may not so much constitute an element enriching the understanding of the classical temporary ethics of Descartes as it is an inspiration for rethinking the category of “tinkering” in ethics. Hopefully, the fact that I have merely managed to sketch this problem will not be an obstacle. In the end it is just a *stopgap*.

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⁴⁶ M. J. Sandel, *The Case against Perfection. Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering*, p. 7.

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Summary

The Provisional Moral Code (*la morale provisoire*) or the Permanent Ethical Stopgap? Inspiration from Descartes and Montaigne

The purpose of this article is to distinguish three essential ways of understanding “provisional ethics” derived from the Cartesian provisional moral code (*la morale provisoire*). The first meaning is connected with providing an answer to the need for the “provision” of a moral code to someone who is not yet ready to formulate a final ethical model established in the system. The other meaning emphasises the temporariness of the set of these rules whereas the third one brings out the imperfection reflected by the Polish word *pro wizorka* (stopgap). These considerations lead to a question whether provisional ethics is indeed merely a vestibule of a mature and complete system. Or, to the contrary, the difficulty or inability to build such a system requires such an ethical stopgap to become a permanent state. In the second depiction, partly inspired by Michel de Montaigne’s thought, the use of provisional ethics would come closer to the category of a specifically understood tinkering.

Keywords

provisional moral code, *la morale provisoire*, Descartes, Montaigne, stopgap, *pro wizorka*