

REPRESENTATIONS OF  
THE SELF FROM THE  
RENAISSANCE TO  
ROMANTICISM

EDITED BY

PATRICK COLEMAN, JAYNE LEWIS, AND  
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*Revising Descartes: on subject and community*

Timothy J. Reiss

That the modern Western idea of the self-possessive, centered, and willful “subject” has its philosophical foundation in Descartes’s cogito is a commonplace of our culture.<sup>1</sup> People in the Western street take subjective individualism for granted. Philosophers deploy as much energy against this Cartesian “error” as they do against its counterpart that divided subjective mind from objective body. They defend it with equal fervor. That the same thinker put the new “subject” to its earliest psychological analysis in his *Passions de l’âme* is probably less widespread a commonplace, only because that analysis has seemed more closely tied to contemporary doctrine and discussion. I want to question these commonplaces.

I shall not, of course, make the foolish claim that the highly intelligent people who have seen such a foundation in Descartes’s work have been wrong for three and a half centuries. The *Discours de la méthode*, the *Meditations*, and the *Principia philosophiae* certainly did elaborate the grounds of a “subject” defining itself in terms, as many put it at the time, of *savoir*, *vouloir*, *pouvoir*, and *faire*: reason, will, power, action. Indeed, the very establishment of such a concept of the “subject” required that it be the source of knowledge and action, the site of a “new beginning.” Descartes himself, on occasion, said as much, even as he faced the necessity to set aside history and memory that such a beginning implied,<sup>2</sup> and as he confronted the problem of the multiplicity of “subjects” – what I am calling *community* – although that term will actually have two meanings: a society grounding “subjects” and one grounded *in* “subjects.” To establish such a source and site was to suppose that the particular history of their development had no importance, for they composed a universal by definition out of history. One could not fully adopt the concept, even less be such a “subject,” that is to say, without assuming such isolation. There lies much of the dilemma: blindness was presupposed; the “subject” so defined had to be its own universal origin.

If one supposes for the sake of this argument that Descartes and others *argued* themselves to such a claim about the “subject,” then the importance of the idea’s own history becomes evident. At the same time, it displaces the “subject” from its axiomatically central position. Furthermore, Descartes’s difficulties with questions of history and community, to which he alludes when writing of a scientific community in the sixth part of the *Discours* and when analyzing political relations in his correspondence with the Princess Elisabeth, can be better understood when we replace them in the context of his developing arguments, and in that of his education and the debates in which he was involved.<sup>3</sup> We begin then to see that this powerful “subject” may well best be characterized as what I call a *passage technique*: a philosophical – or other – means to get from one way of thinking about things to another, using, reordering elements present in that earlier way to respond to new exigencies of context and practice; a means, not an end.

We are, in fact, familiar with such techniques in Descartes: the most immediately obvious is the celebrated *morale par provision*. I argue that these techniques were actually a constant device of Descartes’s thinking, crucial to its development. I also suggest that he found them precisely where we would most expect him to have done so: in that neoscholastic training which he so often praised. In the 1616 dedication to his law theses, even though he regretted its ultimate inadequacy, he first noted how legal training had allowed him to travel across “the vast waters of the sciences and all the rivers that flow from them so plentifully.” More familiar to us is the similar praise of the breadth of his Jesuit education in the “Première partie” of the 1637 *Discours*.<sup>4</sup>

How seriously he took that education is shown by his plans in the early 1640s to make the *Principia* a textbook response to scholastic theses. Indeed, while he agreed that he held many views opposed to those of his Jesuit teachers, he maintained theirs was the best education available. “Philosophy,” he wrote on 18 September 1638 to his close friend, the mathematician Florimond Debeaune, who had sought advice on his son’s schooling, “is the key to the other sciences,” and a good course in the subject should be taken. “There is nowhere in the world,” he added, “where I judge it better taught than at La Flèche.”<sup>5</sup> We should start, then, with some idea of that education.

I want to note how the idea that a private, self-reflexive “subject” could think, act, and exist in isolation had no tradition behind it. Quite to the contrary: one would have to look hard to find anything of the sort before the European seventeenth century. Certainly Descartes’s teachers



held no such view. Their history of constant theological debate and political dispute, a pedagogical practice founded on oral exchange, and an intellectual style embedded in commentary, controversy, and public intercourse, made all their work intensely communal.

Such notions as authorial sovereignty, individual primacy, or pure inquiry held neither for them nor for those whose work they took as the necessary ground of learning. In Aristotle's practice, for example, meaning arose from a dialogue with predecessors and contemporaries. Inquiry itself was the principal element in a life of eudemia, the ground and necessary context of which was social intercourse. The "subject" was a social "subject," not a private one. The concept of *zōon politikón* made community the ground of being. Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, central to Jesuit pedagogy, was held by its author and his followers to teach techniques foundational of the polis. Its vital object was to enable "rational discourse about the intelligible reality of politics." His *Ethics* spoke wholly to communal life.<sup>6</sup> Reading Cicero's letters, dialogues, and speeches, as the Jesuits' pupils did from earliest school days, shows how that Athenian ideal lived on in Roman form.

Ideas of subjective authority and individual inquiry did not hold for Augustine either, for whom meaningful concepts were a recapturing of seeds put in the mind by God, and inquiry a path to the Divine. Nor did they hold for Aquinas, who sought to put these powerful traditions together, and whose concerns were furthered by Descartes's Jesuit teachers at the Collège of La Flèche. They did so by using the extensive Aristotle exegeses generated at Coimbra, Salamanca, Alcalá, and the Collegio Romano, as well as the lay commentaries issuing from Padua, Florence, Rome, and elsewhere. Knowledge and meaning were sought in past agreement and present debate. The first condition of inquiry lay in dialogue and exchange. Such was the age's general style of learning, from conversation to altercation and polemic (at its least edifying, to theft and calumny).

We must be ready to take these forms of pedagogy, *scientia*, and *sapientia* as seriously as Descartes himself did. He made them his constant sounding board partly because he did think neoscholastic Jesuit scholarship, embodied in the Coimbran commentators, in Pedro Fonseca, Francisco Toletó, Antonio Rubio, and above all Francisco Suárez, the most powerful philosophy of his day, and partly because an initial vesting of conceptual authority in the individual cogito was a main novelty of his own thought. (I stress *initial*: it was, as I say, one of his passage techniques.) To this last, Jesuit pedagogy afforded a striking contrast of

method, form, and content. Prælection, repetition, disputation, explanation and defense of opinions, above all the *concertatio*, were the basic pedagogical exercises. The 1599 *Ratio studiorum*'s first explanation of *concertatio* is revealing:

The concertatio, which is usually conducted by the questions of the master or the corrections of rivals, or by the rivals questioning each other in turn, must be held in high esteem and used whenever time permits, so that honorable rivalry, which is a great incentive to studies, be fostered. Some may be sent individually or in groups from each side especially from the officers; or one may attack several; let a private seek a private, an officer seek an officer; or even let a private attack an officer, and, if he conquers, let him secure his honor or some other award or sign of victory, as the dignity of the class and the custom of the place demand.<sup>7</sup>

The military metaphors are particularly interesting. The “officers” and “privates” in question were pupils who had been separated into two sides for purposes of debate. *Concertatio* was used not just in rhetoric, the highest of the five “lower classes,” but from the earliest grammar class.<sup>8</sup> Exchange and fierce debate grounded knowledge of authority and the opinion essential to understanding. That was why and how such contemporaries of Descartes as Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, François Garasse, Marin Mersenne, Gabriel Naudé, François Ogier, and his good friend Jean de Silhon put such exhaustive effort into refuting deists and arguing about stoics, Rosicrucians, skeptics, and others in the 1620s. And with respect to Descartes himself, we may well wonder what it could mean to wish to refute the neoscholastics, if the full meaning of one’s work lay only, as so many have asserted, in the work itself and in the lone questioning mind. The refutation would be unnecessary and confusing.

What, more importantly, could we then make of his determined collecting of “Replies” and “Objections” to the *Meditations*; of his earlier efforts to do the same for the *Discours* and its “Essais”? How could we understand his “Replies” (1640–42) to them? Their very existence belies any notion of self-sufficiency. Their purpose was surely to create the community of thinkers and doers described in the *Discours*. It was also to enable the elaboration of thought itself. How else could we fathom the widely accepted idea that Descartes’s career itself was at least partly the result of an impromptu interjected disquisition at a late 1628 Paris gathering, provoking Pierre de Bérulle to urge him to dedicate himself to philosophical research and make his talents of service “au genre humain” (to humankind)?<sup>9</sup> In the same light we may better grasp Descartes’s bitter dispute (1641–45) with Ghisbert Voet and Martin

Schoock, as well as his attempts to engage the entire Jesuit Society by reacting in print to Pierre Bourdin's criticisms (1640 and 1642) of the "Essais" and of the "Seventh Set of Objections" to the *Meditations*.<sup>10</sup> Even more in this light should we view the making of the *Passions de l'âme* in dialogue with the Princess Elisabeth from 1645 to 1647. Lastly, of course, Descartes elaborated much of his thinking via the vast correspondence pursued with so many important intellectual and political figures in the Low Countries, England, Sweden, and France.

Descartes did not draw these procedures as conclusions from his own work. They composed, I am suggesting, the atmosphere people breathed. In his case, they were made precise by eight years of Jesuit schooling. When Isaac Beeckman first met him in Holland in 1618, he noted in his *Journal* that this Poitevin was deeply versed in the work of many Jesuits and of other learned and scholarly people: "cum multis Jesuitis alijsque studiosis virisque doctis versatus est."<sup>11</sup> But what was in question was not simply a style of thought and its content. The air breathed also lay over action and event. The Jesuits were profoundly alive to their role in these. Indeed, participation in worldly life was an essential goal of all their thinking and teaching.

So it was for Descartes. In the preface to the 1647 French translation of the *Principia*, he was clear that the final goal of any philosophy had to be "the highest and most perfect moral system, which, supposing a complete knowledge of the other sciences, is the ultimate level of wisdom."<sup>12</sup> Adrien Baillet only echoed Descartes himself in suggesting he had been thinking about this in one way or another all his life.<sup>13</sup> This ethics would enable "not just prudence in worldly matters but a perfect knowledge of everything humans can know, as much for the conduct of life as for the conservation of health and discovery of all the arts."<sup>14</sup> Two years earlier, Descartes had expounded to the Princess Elisabeth the human condition such a *morale* addressed: "One is really one of the parts of the universe, and yet more particularly one of the parts of this earth, one of the parts of this State, of this society, of this family, to which one is joined by one's home, one's oath, one's birth. And the interests of the whole of which one is a part must always be preferred to those of one's own particular person."<sup>15</sup> In this light we may better understand the end of philosophy as public "douceur et concorde" (gentleness and harmony).<sup>16</sup>

This posed a nice dilemma. By the sixteenth century's end, the European world was everywhere felt to be in a state of irresolvable disarray.<sup>17</sup> The very inadequacy of the finest of all educations was itself evidence that something had gone wrong; it could no longer provide

analysis of and consequent action in the world and society. The problem was how to achieve a new instauration, as Bacon put it. Descartes's new grounding of thought in the cogito led him directly to the individual "subject." The dilemma, then, was the apparent conflict between that "subject" and the multitude of "subjects" that community necessarily became. To define the "subject" as an isolated self-centered thinking essence seemed to mean that community was inconceivable save as ubiquitous confrontation: Hobbes's state of nature. That is, indeed, how later thinkers took it. Hobbes's covenant became its settled solution.

Some other solution might have been possible, had Descartes's "subject" been taken as the means it was, rather than as the end it became. Then community could still have been considered the origin and end of political thinking. As it was, claim based on community yielded to claim based on the individual. Duties and obligations gave way to freedoms and rights. These are but two of the drastic changes that later thinkers have since taken to characterize the period and have found most clearly embodied in Descartes's thinking, when they do not actually make it the source of such transformations. *That* is wrong simply because debates grounding such changes long predated Descartes. But it is assuredly the case that cogito and Cartesian "subject" could be taken to give them particularly solid foundations. I am suggesting that Descartes himself had something else in mind.

Just as the idea and practice of community were fundamental in assumption, style, and content to Jesuit education, so was the use of pedagogical or philosophical *bridges* to get from one level of thinking and training to another. The first step in education, for example, was that of learning to speak and write Latin. For three years, pupils in grammar worked their way from the simplest parsing to complex verse-making and prose dispute. Gradually, they read ever harder Latin texts. Having started with Cicero's *Familiar Letters*, they were, by the third year, reading his *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, *De senectute*, *De amicitia*, *Somnium Scipionis*, and, in the fourth, that of humanities, his speeches like *Pro lege Manilia* and *Pro Archia*: students eventually would have read most of his works. His writings were deeply embedded in issues of community, society, and politics. One could not possibly escape them – certainly not in the oral expository and debating techniques used by the Jesuits. I would note, too, that grammar itself was presented, not just as a means to language use, but as essential to concordant social community. Emmanuel Alvarez's standard grammar made the point at its outset, and major Jesuit educators like Pedro de Ribadeneyra, Suárez, and Juan de Mariana insisted on it elsewhere.

Grammar did not just ground later learning. It was the bridge to a clearer idea of living in community *concordissime*, as Alvarez had it.<sup>18</sup>

In the second semester of the second year of grammar, pupils studied an immensely popular text, one used everywhere in schools throughout the Renaissance – and indeed into the nineteenth century. Cebes’s *Tabula* offered an allegory of the road to the true and the good, a reply to the very question Descartes would later draw from Ausonius: “Quod vitae sectabor iter?” Stoic in emphasis (although its philosophical ties have provoked much controversy), it described a painting depicting three, or maybe four (it is difficult to interpret the text precisely) enclosures through which humans passed on their way to wisdom. Two things are especially relevant here. The first is a character who stands just outside the first gate – Suadela (Deceit) – serving a goblet of varied amounts of error and ignorance to humans as they enter life (opposed here to Genius, who simultaneously offers right guidance). Suadela was a figure of mischief whose malign influence the successful sage would at last bypass and transcend. The second thing is the text’s commentary on *doctrina*, the divers disciplines that composed familiar knowledge. These were actually *falsa disciplina* that, even so, provided a *lingua*, a language the sage could use to reach true wisdom and the good.

My first example, from grammar, was of a standard pedagogical device. The second two seem to have given Descartes and others actual models for thinking from the false to the true. Suadela had several dramatic counterparts, among them the *deus maleficus* of Book Two of Plato’s *Republic*, on which Jean de Serres embroidered at length in the margins of the great 1578 Stephanus edition of Plato. De Serres asserted that before the city’s magistrate could achieve any rectitude, justice, and wisdom of thought, the mere idea of such a *deus maleficus* had to be expelled.<sup>19</sup> A similar idea could be found in the work of Duvergier de Hauranne, a friend of Descartes’s family, whose 1609 *Question royalle* asked whether in peacetime, any conditions obliged a subject to save a sovereign’s life, knowing it would mean loss of one’s own. Duvergier wrote of the need of a “sens clair & net,” without impediment from a change of medium or “Devil’s illusion.”<sup>20</sup> I mention these, not as having anything to do with irrelevant issues of “originality” or such, but as being familiar markers on a road to knowledge, an *iter* or *hodos* (as in “method”), from uncertainty to certainty: passages to wisdom. Not for nothing, no doubt, did Leibniz later call the moral allegory offered by Cebes’s *Tabula* not itself conclusive, but as serving “to waken the mind”: a comment recalling Descartes’s own *morale par provision*.<sup>21</sup>

The notion of drawing a rational *lingua* even from false doctrine is still more striking. Cebes's allegory may almost be thought here to have named a stable device of Jesuit education, one that Descartes specifically adopted as early as the *Regulae*. Each stage of education was carefully presented as a way to use what had preceded even while going beyond it. Each provided, as it were, a "language" needed to pave a way to its own supersession (I almost said *Aufhebung*). The clearest rapid example may be taken from a student's fifth year, that of rhetoric. For many this was their last year. Those like Descartes, it prepared for three subsequent years of philosophy, divided into logic, natural philosophy, and ethics and metaphysics. The rhetoric year was built around Cyprian Soarez's *De arte rhetorica*, which pupils actually began studying in the second semester of humanities: another bridge. In the second semester of rhetoric, similarly, some distinctly new questions were broached. Along with rhetoric proper, students were to explore such matter as "hieroglyphics, Pythagorean symbols, apothegms, adages, emblems and enigmas."<sup>22</sup>

The questions indicated by this phrase were popular among many Jesuits and others. The *Ratio studiorum*'s rule referred teachers and students to at least two areas of study of very broad significance, the one rooted in the humanist past, the other with shoots pushing toward a different kind of future. The first was the study of chronology, which thought to find there an ark holding the one unified knowledge of humanity. Among its techniques were computation of astronomical and astrological data, examination and comparison of calendars and temporal cycles from all known cultures and theologies, exegesis of historical and chronological works of equally wide range, and interpretation to this end of such things, precisely, as "hieroglyphics . . . emblems and enigmas." History, then, was not simply to be found in written documents. Its elements were held to be subject to precise calculations, dependent on the physical world.

This connected to the second area of study I mentioned: that of the "magical" and "scientific" aspects of symbols and enigmas. Some aspects of their treatment tended to query the weight placed on the very rhetoric being studied, to raise questions about the relation between the true and the probable, fact and mere opinion. Modern scholars have begun to show that much of what was written about "natural" magic adumbrated what we now think of as science. Natural magic "aimed . . . at producing changes in the physical environment desired by the operator," by mechanical or illusionary device; and tested such effects "experimentally" against expectations.<sup>23</sup> No less importantly, its practitioners

questioned claims made for the occult effects of words, tokens, symbols, incantations, spells, charms, and such.

If an effect had neither natural nor rhetorical explanation, it should be considered a superstitious figment. Such was the aim of the Jesuit Martin Antonio Delrio in the first book of his famous and hugely influential *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex* of 1600: to apply rational analysis to worldly effect. The study of symbols and the like took the student from the humanities to problems of rational logic. It also made a passage from rhetorical analysis to mathematical studies and scientific questions, which were introduced in the second semester of the logic year, even though natural philosophy did not formally begin until the next year. Similarly, questions of free will and necessity were raised in the final year, but not fully debated until the theology years, open only to those who were to enter the Society itself. Descartes would, of course, raise them constantly in later writings.

What we see here is something not at all unlike the *lingua* of the false doctrine confronted in Cebes's *Tabula*. Each stage of education did not actually treat preceding ones as false, but it certainly showed that they had to be superseded. So when Descartes urged the insufficiency of poetry, history, rhetoric, and familiar mathematics, he was repeating what he had learned. False doctrine, the *Tabula* had said, lay in the letters and mathematical studies of the trivium and quadrivium, to say nothing of medicine, law, and the rest. Yet these were needed to bridle the young. They did not themselves improve one. They provided the *lingua* to guide toward the true. Descartes would write in the second "Regula" (late 1619):

Yet I certainly do not condemn the way of philosophizing that others have hitherto devised, nor those war machines that are scholastic probable syllogisms, excellent for [oratorical] battles. For they exercise the minds of the young, pushing them to rivalry. It is far better their minds be formed by opinions of this sort – even if they are evidently uncertain since they are disputed among the learned – than they be left free and to their own devices. Without guidance they might run upon precipices, but so long as they stay in their master's footsteps, they may occasionally stray from the truth, but will take a path safer at least in that it has already been tested out by more expert heads.<sup>24</sup>

Echoing the Jesuit handbooks, Descartes drew from his education the idea of a *raison par provision*. It would let one think even as one worked toward a permanent, more accurate rational method. It would avoid but learn from the errors of those "exceptional minds" who had "almost all copied those travelers who, having left the high road to take a short cut,

remain lost among thorns and precipices.”<sup>25</sup> Passage techniques responded to the tensions and dramatic shocks of an age obscurely aware of being in transition. They allowed familiar tools to be forged into new ones. In the Jesuit rhetoric class, symbols, hieroglyphs, and enigmas were brought in to let a reformed Aristotelian logic reply to them, just as, in a next step on a student’s path, masters used mathematics to reply to the logic. Each step was a provisional reason on a way to full wisdom and that *summum bonum* with which Descartes and his correspondents were still to be preoccupied at mid century.

Method itself was just such a passage to right reason, full knowledge, and always revisable praxis. That is why its presentation gave way to three “Essais” – not applications but trials providing patterns for exploration. They moved toward a goal whose shape was not wholly foreseeable. So Daniel Garber is quite right to argue that the “Method” presented in 1637 differed from what Descartes would apply later: a method adequate to cope with all problems seen as separate and individual but interconnected became insufficient to treat the interconnections themselves.<sup>26</sup> In his “Replies” to the “Second Set of Objections” (by Mersenne) to the *Meditations*, we can trace how Descartes actually got from neo-Aristotelian analysis and synthesis to “Method” – itself, too, always a *raison par provision*, always a becoming.<sup>27</sup>

It has taken some time to get from showing how fundamental were the assumptions about idea and practice of community to demonstrating the ubiquity of passage techniques and, especially, the importance of *raison par provision*. But we are already well launched into dilemmas of cogito and “subject”; for rational “Method” assumed security of the thinking self. The leaning, stumbling, windblown, sinister subject of Decartes’s November 1619 dreams sought provisional security in reliance on the rational *iter* of neoscholastic masters: the text cited from the second “Regula” seems to date from the same time. But the *Regulae* as a whole proposed a more precise *mathesis*, based on breaking down the elements of a physical dilemma to find a first intuition (or more than one) from which a mathematical analysis could then reconstruct the complex dilemma. What such a *mathesis* could not explain was how one could trust the first intuition. The *Discours* likewise simply took for granted the power of the historical “I” with which the first parts began, and drew from it the “we” of the scientific community with which the last two parts ended. Such a passage from “subject” to community needed a far more substantial grounding. The *Meditations* gave it.

As we know, the “First Meditation” elaborated a retreat from the



outside world and from the senses in a new search for the right road to security of reason, culminating in the now-familiar “genium . . . malignum.” The “Second Meditation” concluded that even were there such a “malign deceiver,” yet the very ability to suppose so proved “ego sum, ego existo; certum est.” I must at least be “res cogitans.”<sup>28</sup> This “something thinking” could as yet rely on nothing at all but its awareness of itself as thinking process. We remain pretty much in the realm of an illustrious predecessor of Descartes, Montaigne, for whom the thinking “subject” had to remain strictly private, taking no part in the public arena of the citizen subject fixed in public hierarchies precisely because of thought’s instability, its characteristic “branloire perenne” (perennial seesaw).<sup>29</sup> But, in this regard, we need to look much more closely at “res cogitans,” a concept that I think no modern vernacular can really echo.

Descartes reached it by means of a process remarkable (to modern Western exegetes) in the way it objectified the expression of anything like personal being. For we must remember that Latin could, and did, express the site of thinking and saying by a first-person verb that did not involve any separate expression of “selfness.” Having dismissed possible attributes of personal being as unreliably knowable, he asked whether, nonetheless, these things could in fact differ “ab eo me quem novi” (from this “me” that [I] know). For the moment, he noted, he could say nothing about that; he could simply assert that something (the present thinking process) existed: “Novi me existere” ([I] know the “me” exists). But he had to ask “what may be that ‘I’ that I know” (quaero quis sim ego ille quem novi).<sup>30</sup> This led to “res cogitans,” an expression much misunderstood because largely untranslatable. In medieval and Renaissance Latin, *res* could mean “thing” in pretty much all its modern senses. Equally typically, it could mean the referent of any word or concept, without regard to ontological status. Descartes used the latter sense when he asked about the object or referent of thought that this “I” is: “Sed qualis res? Dixi, cogitans” (But what sort of thing/referent? I have said a thinking).<sup>31</sup> To translate the phrase combining the two terms as “thinking thing” or “chose pensante” is inevitable. It is also entirely misleading, as Descartes’s separation of them in the just cited passage suggests:

Sed quid igitur sum? Res cogitans. Quid est hoc? Nempe dubitans, intelligans, affirmans, negans, volens, nolens, imaginans quoque, & sentiens.

(But what am [I] therefore? [This “thinking” thinks of it as] a thinking something. What is this? Certainly [a process of] doubting, conceiving, affirming, denying, willing, not willing, imagining, as well, and feeling.)<sup>32</sup>

What, he asked, if all these acts could be separated from this present act of thinking – of being conscious: “*Quid est quod a mea cogitatione distinguatur?*” Could any of these activities be separated from what must be referred to as “*me ipso*,” the source of these thoughts? That from this “source” came the activities of doubting, conceiving, and willing was clear, Descartes claimed. Yet the clarity is undermined by the dubitative subjunctives he employed to affirm it:

*Nam quod ego sim qui dubitem, qui intelligam, qui velim, tam manifestum est, ut nihil occurrat per quod evidentius explicetur.*

(For what “I” may be who doubts, conceives, wills, is so evident that nothing may be found to explain it more clearly.)<sup>33</sup>

An obvious problem existed here: how to establish something like the place from which thinking happened. This was just the question to which Descartes sought to respond in the “Third Meditation.” There he began by making clear that the process of thinking was not agent, but “passible subject,” reactive to “something”: “*ut, cum volo, cum timeo, cum affirmo, cum nego, semper quidem aliquam rem ut subjectum meae cogitationis apprehendo*” (as, when [I] wish, fear, assert, deny, [I] always understand something like the subject [the lying-under] of my thinking).<sup>34</sup> “Ego” and its cognates were not, at this stage – it bears repeating – any sort of agent, any more than was “*res cogitans*.” These were names given to the place where thinking (as any form of mental activity) occurred; or, better still, as Descartes expressed it, they were simply the referents *subjected* to that thinking process. This was why the “Third Meditation” proceeded to seek a sure God, and the “Fourth Meditation” to distinguish the true and the false: they had to provide grounding. But we must be aware that in this exercise, something had already changed in this thinking process: it had become an internal agency.

Before we get to know how Descartes worked this out, we need to glance briefly at how the process of thinking could itself be offered as necessitating a thought of a perfect thinking process – or, as Descartes put it, of “God.” The “Third Meditation” addresses this question as Descartes teases out of this “present process of thinking” some process (and reliability) that would transcend it. We need to be clear that, at this point, Descartes is trying to draw the potentially greater certainties of such a “higher” process from the very act of thinking. Evidently, he wrote, if this present thinking could conceive (have an idea of) a thinking process more perfect than the one it was using, then this idea must

come from somewhere “prior” to this present thinking, since a lesser cannot precede a greater, just as “non potest calor in subiectum quod prius non calebat induci” (heat cannot be produced in a subject[ed] that was not previously heated).<sup>35</sup> Here again, Descartes emphasized the *subjected* nature of the thinking process. The continuing arguments of the “Third Meditation” depended on this assertion: one had to find an “ideam . . . primam” (first idea) that was like an “archetype” making lesser ideas.<sup>36</sup>

This idea was one of a thinking that was “more perfect” than this thinking that was happening right now in “me,” an idea that was in itself “clear and distinct.” Indeed, as the idea of absolute clarity and distinctness, it was of necessity the clearest and most distinct idea that “my” present thinking could have.<sup>37</sup> “God” was first of all the idea of a thinking process whose perfection could not derive from this here-and-now process whose imperfection was evident. For this “I” that was “cogitans” had to be aware of its “own” ability (and concern/interest/desire) gradually to increase in knowledge.<sup>38</sup> By definition, perfect thinking would not be subject to such increase: it would already have full knowledge. Behind this argument hovers the ghost of the “impassible” universal soul of Aristotle’s *De Anima* set against the “passible” soul incorporated in the human body. For Descartes, when this “I”-process-of-thinking thought perfection, it could only think a perfect “rem cogitantem.”<sup>39</sup> “God” was thus, first of all, the “idea” produced from “my” thinking of this perfect thinking process.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Descartes was always to hold this view of the soul as “a thinking” subjected to passions coming to it through the senses, or innately, or “by prior dispositions in the soul,” or by “movements of the will.” As he wrote to the Jesuit priest Denis Mesland in 1644:

I make no difference between the soul and its ideas, other than that between a piece of wax and the various shapes it can take. And just as it is not an action, properly speaking, but a passion in the wax to receive various shapes, it seems to me that it is also a passion in the soul to receive such and such an idea, and that only its volitions are actions; and that its ideas are put in [the soul] partly by objects that touch upon the senses, partly by impressions that are in the brain, partly, too, by the dispositions which preceded [a given idea] in the soul, and by the movements of its will.<sup>41</sup>

To transform, however momentarily, this ever-moving passible process of thinking into an agent – cogito or ego cogito – exemplified a trope with which Descartes’s studies in rhetoric certainly familiarized him: “personification, the preeminent rhetorical figure of agency,” as

Victoria Kahn has put it.<sup>42</sup> For Descartes, as for his teachers, rhetoric was *always* a road to something else, a passage. Here, it enabled a particular sort of passage. As the thinking process became an agent, not only reasoning (which included doubting, imagining, denying, affirming) but also willing had to characterize it. As an agent, the cogito's own contents were converted and became its ground. As an agent it also conceived the idea of agency more complete than its own, capable, indeed, of everything. This idea of something perfect and greater than itself cannot have been created by the cogito, argued Descartes, for a lesser cannot make a greater, and my current dilemmas of thinking show "me" to be not perfect and so not self-created. Perfection by definition includes existence: that perfection we call God.

Agency's willfulness became abstract absolute will. But cogito was, perhaps, above all grounded in an idea of *recta ratio*, a right reason whose foundations could not be deceptive. It could, of course, reach wrong conclusions if based on wrong information, but that was wholly distinct from the rectitude of the rightly organized process itself. It is then not surprising that after the personification of supreme agency, as he returned in the "Fourth Meditation" to further exploring its foundations (in issues of reason, freedom, matters indifferent, truth, and falsehood), Descartes made this a definition of the human's secure relation with God: "I recognize it to be impossible that he should ever deceive me; for in every fraud or deception is to be found some imperfection."<sup>43</sup> The same held true for the faculty of judgment that such a God placed in one, since a perfect being could not *set out* to falsify.

Truth was the identified ground and end not only of Method but also of the "subject," as well as of reason, morality, and a communal ethics – what we more usually choose to call politics. And truth was being approached here by means of arguments whose familiarity is now largely lost to us, but which were then altogether familiar both in theology and in rhetoric. These were arguments about "things indifferent." In Christian debate these were matters of worldly knowledge or action having nothing to do with salvation. The concept came primarily from Stoic argument, where *adiaphora* referred to a class of *indifferentia*, morally neutral things to be preferred or rejected according to one's purpose and situation.<sup>44</sup> For the Stoics, the material world itself was wholly composed of such *adiaphora*. There is no question as to Descartes's familiarity with the work of neo-Stoic thinkers like Justus Lipsius (himself trained by Jesuits, who used his writings in their schools), Pierre Charron, Guillaume du Vair, Errycius Puteanus, and

others. Furthermore, students of the Jesuits were introduced to *indifferentia* through Cicero's *Paradoxica*.

Things concerning God were evidently not such – hence the need to try and ground truth there. For about everything else not only was there room for debate but perhaps, too, no way to determine a decision. To personify the cogito as willful agency and find its epitome in God explains why Descartes then insisted that it was “only the will, or freedom of choice, that I experience within me to be so great that I can grasp the idea of none greater; so much so that it is above all through the will that I understand myself to bear some image and likeness of God.”<sup>45</sup> It also explains why God, will, and the ground of truth were virtually equated. Otherwise truth itself would fall into the realm of the indifferent and of mere rhetorical advantage: as Kahn puts it, some absolute truth was needed “as a check on the weakness of individual judgment and the indeterminacy of the rhetorical ‘wars of Truth’.”<sup>46</sup> But how could the mere assertion of such a truth serve to distinguish it from falsehood? There had to be a certainty and security of truth able to ground the willful self for right action *in the world*. We need not be surprised, therefore, that Descartes explored *indifferentia* in just this context:

For [the will, or *free will*] consists simply in our being able to do or not to do (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or flee), or rather, simply in that we are brought to affirm or deny, to pursue or flee what is proposed to us by the intellect in such a way that we sense we have been determined to it by no external force. For me to be free, I do not need to be able to be moved two ways: on the contrary, the more I lean in one direction, whether because I understand that truth and goodness lie in it, or because God so disposes my inmost thoughts, so do I choose the more freely. Neither divine grace nor natural knowledge ever diminishes freedom, but rather increases and confirms it.<sup>47</sup>

To hesitate between possibilities, Descartes added, to hold a choice “indifferent,” was “the lowest level of freedom.” To lack constraint was but license of anarchy: “not at all perfection of will, but defect of knowledge, or some negation: for if I always saw clearly what is true and good, I should never deliberate over what is to be chosen or judged; and so although I would evidently be free, I could never be indifferent.” The will can only be indifferent, Descartes went on, in areas where its knowledge is insufficient. And there it should make no choice at all: there, “if I abstain from making a judgment, it is clear I am acting rightly and not erring.”<sup>48</sup> Such are the conditions of *passages par provision* – a withholding of decision until certainty was possible: that is as much the reason for his not publishing *Le Monde* in 1633, as for the *morale par provision* in 1637. And

we begin to see, I think, just how the “subject” itself needs to be seen as the provisional instrument it was: a rhetorical tool to ground new formations of truth and society. Not accidentally, in this light, did Descartes try to forge a rational community from the *Meditations* themselves: I mean of course through the “Objections” and “Replies.”

Even more, to apply once theological argument to a citizen’s life in community, or at least to know what was necessary for it, would not be overly hard. A moral yardstick was needed to direct a clear-sighted grasp of the true and good, that “highest and most perfect moral system” which Descartes would propose in the “Lettre-Préface” to the *Principia*. This yardstick would proffer the same bounds of control and sureties of truth in the realm of ethics and politics as God did in those of ontology and theology. Once found, it could rule that fine concord of public and private life which he also named there. So when Descartes took up the argument of the “Fourth Meditation” in the *Passions de l’âme* to apply it to relations between desire and truth, passion and goodness, freedom and order, he phrased it so as to combine theological, psychological, and political connotations: “I see in us only one thing able to give us legitimate reason to value ourselves, namely the use of our free will and the sovereignty we have over our volitions.” This, he wrote, as he had nine years before, “renders us in some way like God, by making us masters of ourselves.”<sup>49</sup> The *Passions de l’âme* began to present the requisite moral measure to the public. The two paragraphs after the one just cited defined “generosity” as knowledge and sharing of sameness among subjects.

In this way the cogito and the “subject” – whatever its initial individuality and self-possessiveness – was to be reinserted in community. The *Passions* here sought to generalize notions Descartes had started to advance in his September 1646 letter to the Princess Elisabeth about Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. There, his context had been that of trying to understand how one could get from individual action, benefiting private interest in an imperfect society, by means of mask and morality provisional, to a new society where all acted to everyone’s benefit. He put forward the good prince as guide: if only there were a leader who possessed all the qualities of one who had acquired the means of true knowledge, good judgment, and the use of methodical reason, and was thus able to direct the will to the common interest, then such change and a new establishment would be possible.

It is worth remembering that the letter began with the architectural metaphor of the second and third parts of the *Discours*. There it was used

of mind and method. Now it was used of the State to be founded on method, knowledge of truth, and that habit of virtue which meant one supported others' interests because one was attentive to one's own. The good prince knew the wicked nature of man, but he also did everything that right reason dictates. This good prince would be generalized to everyone in the paragraphs of the *Passions* to which I referred, but in fact Descartes already started to do that in the 1644 *Principia*: "The power men have over each other was given so that they might employ it in discouraging others from evil."<sup>50</sup> The will of the sovereign, we readily see, was but the counterpart of the methodically rational individual made particular. The word "prince" not seldom referred to sovereign authority, which could, of course, be embodied in more than one person.

"Conscience" and "inclination," Descartes wrote to Elisabeth on 6 October 1645, would necessarily make such people act to protect others' interests with their own.<sup>51</sup> That, too, is the sense in which he constantly wrote about friendship. Amity marked the obligation one owed as an individual to others. The word "obligation" signaled an enlightened play of everyone's interests allowing the proper working of the new society based on method, will, and reason. To fail such friendship was to cause the failure of all effort to build this new society. For the individual's interest, protected by this amity, was to be equated with the very thinking "subject" whose will permitted the institution of "Method." To fail friendship was thus to fail knowledge of truth, prudence, good judgment, and the thinking "subject" itself. It was to go against the cogito and the essence of being human. Care was needed: "You must not attempt to draw people abruptly to reason, when they are not accustomed to understand it; but you must try little by little, whether by public writings, through the speech of preachers, or any other means, to make them comprehend it."<sup>52</sup> So wrote Descartes in the letter on Machiavelli.

Clearly, here, the particular good prince was already becoming the good, rational being of the *Passions*. Reason of State, properly considered, was reason. Community could now consist of individual selves, each embodying a reason common to all, shared by all, and worked by all. Each also embodied the play of will and necessity, reason and passion, consent and coercion, intention and effect, freedom and necessity, that became the terms of civil association. The self/"subject" embodying these terms was, to use a metaphor we can now readily understand and expand, the personification of a particular locus of turmoil, conjuncture of dismay. By this very personification, an agency was formulated that made it possible to resolve those conflicts: in a way,

it eventually absorbed them. Gathering these elements of conflict into a solution, to change the metaphor, produced a new precipitate, a new compounded formation.

Metaphors are one thing, of course – decorative or banal. Facts on the historical ground are quite another. For theory, however, there was something new: the human, not as exemplary figure or divine instrument, but as typical and universal actor and knower in a rational universe, whose agency could intervene in and resolve the very sources of conflict.<sup>53</sup> Such views were at the root of the idea of progress and essential optimism of Enlightenment. In the realm of the political, not for nothing did Descartes's disciple, Pierre-Sylvain Régis, combine Hobbes's with his master's voice in his *Cours de philosophie*, treating formation of societies, cession of individual rights, duties of sovereigns and subject, mixing Cardin Le Bret, Descartes, Malebranche, and Hobbes, and explaining the need for a Cartesian society because, "in the state of nature, passions rule, war is perpetual, poverty inescapable, fear never leaves, etc."<sup>54</sup> Here, the personified Cartesian cogito united in civil community because in nature, the subject's life was, to quote Hobbes, "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short."<sup>55</sup>

Rejected into a state of nature before civil society as mere animals or even monsters, remembered in times of new constitutions and internal peace (more or less) as suffering victims of violent civil or religious wars, these unnecessary "zeds" had been replaced by the rational consenting subjects of a new establishment. This notion of consent, grounded in the legalism of contractual debate, further strengthened the personification of rational thinking: it gave the subject a title of judgment, a justification of will, a claim to decision. For Hobbes, writing in exile (1640–42), the moment of consent was hardly separate either from ongoing conflict or the civil association it was held to permit. Things would be a bit clearer ten years on, but never so clear as for Locke, who managed to make reason precede conflict and consent thus be its foreseeable rational resolution; or for Montesquieu and Rousseau, who invented increasing numbers of stages to separate an original rational "subject" from the eventual necessities of association.

Locke, too, added the idea of "concept" as the rational tool in the mind to mark a moment of passage from individual perception, *Vorstellung*, to communal meaning, *Sinn*. For a concept was not a "concept" unless it put my (and one can now even emphasize that *my*) perception in a context of sense that was publicly comprehensible. Late seventeenth-century debate in the realm of aesthetics did with the idea



of “taste” what “concept” did in that of epistemology and “contract” did in that of politics: taste – “good taste” – signaled how my perceptions of the beautiful, the fine, and the good were adjusted to the norms agreed by the community. Taste might even play the same role in the domain of behavior, of ethics – as the reference to the “good” was meant to suggest.

All these terms – responses to and enabled by Cartesian passages and becomings – marked resolutions of conflicts in distinct areas of action and thought. Freedom and coercion, consent and control, reason and passion could now be understood as modes of the relations between the individual and society, the one and the many, the self and others. Descartes himself, I proposed, thought of something more tenuous, less resolved or resolute: a kind of constant give and take within a community whose priority still made duty and obligation primary for a willfully rational “subject.” Maybe that was never practicable. Indeed, he would not go to the Palatinate in 1649, just because things there were still shifting and would only become “agreeable” after “two or three years of peace.”<sup>56</sup> That was no doubt a different kind of shifting, and the decision to go to stable Stockholm was not wise either. The later sureties of possessive individualism and what I call authoritarian liberalism have proven hardly less drastic in their outcomes, as the primacy of community in political theorizing has yielded to that of the individual. Perhaps we may see that, too, as a historically necessary but perilous passage technique.

## NOTES

1. I thank Patrick Coleman for his early editorial work on this essay, but above all Ellen Wilson for her exemplary care and generosity of attention to editorial (and intellectual) detail. Both have shown unusual patience and restraint.
2. On Descartes’s struggle with questions of history and memory see my “Denying the Body? Memory and the Dilemmas of History in Descartes,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57.4 (October 1996): 587–607.
3. The first has been discussed through Descartes’s complex use of “I” and “we” in Sylvie Romanowski, *L’Illusion chez Descartes: La Structure du discours cartésien* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1974), the second in Timothy J. Reiss, “Descartes, the Palatinate, and the Thirty Years’ War: Political Theory and Political Practice,” in *Baroque Topographies: Literature/History/Philosophy*, ed. Timothy Hampton, Yale French Studies, 80 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 108–45.
4. Jean-Robert Armogathe, Vincent Carraud, and Robert Feenstra, eds., “La

- Licence en droit de Descartes: un placard inédit de 1616,” *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* (1988:2): 123–45, here 126–27; “Discours de la méthode,” in Descartes, (*Œuvres*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, new presentation, 11 vols. (Paris: Vrin, 1964–75), vi: 4–10; this edition cited hereafter as AT. Translations are my own, but I have referred to *The Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (with Anthony Kenny for vol. III), 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985–91). This is directly keyed to AT, so I do not give a reference. Where possible, I give references to Descartes, (*Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. Ferdinand Alquié, 3 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1963–73) (hereafter FA), on the assumption that most people may have more immediate access to this edition: here FA, I: 571–77.
5. AT, II:378; FA, II:89–90.
  6. Larry Arnhart, *Aristotle on Political Reasoning: A Commentary on the Rhetoric* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981), 3. Richard Bodéüs convincingly analyzes his ethical thought in this light: *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle’s “Ethics,”* trans. Jan Edward Garrett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
  7. “Rules Common to the Professors of the Lower Classes,” Rule 31, in *The Ratio Studiorum of 1599*, trans. A. R. Ball, in *Saint Ignatius and the Ratio Studiorum*, ed. Edward A. Fitzpatrick (New York and London: McGraw-Hill 1933), 203, hereafter *Ratio studiorum*. I also refer to G. M. Pachtler, SJ, ed., *Ratio studiorum et institutiones scholasticae Societatis Jesu per Germaniam olim vigentes collectae concinnatae dilucidatae . . .*, 4 vols., in *Monumenta Germaniae Pedagogica . . .*, gen. ed. Karl Kehrbach (Berlin, 1887), II: 234–481, and Ladislaus Lukács, SJ, ed., *Monumenta Paedagogica Societatis Jesu*, new edn., 7 vols. (Rome, 1965–92), v: 355–454.
  8. “Rules of the Professor of Lower Grammar Classes,” Rule 9, in *Ratio studiorum*, 234.
  9. Adrien Baillet, *La Vie de Monsieur DesCartes*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hortemel, 1691; facsimile reprint, Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1972), I: 160–66 (here: 165), cited hereafter as Baillet, *Vie*. The event occurred at the house of the Papal Nuncio Cardinal Francesco Bagnò, gathering many scholars (including Mersenne) to hear the sieur de Chandoux present a new philosophy rejecting the scholastic. All approved except Descartes, who convincingly took it apart and gave examples of his own new method’s power.
  10. The first dispute is now available in French translation: René Descartes and Martin Schoock, *La Querelle d’Utrecht*, ed. and trans. Theo Verbeek (Paris: Impressions Nouvelles, 1988); for the second, see Baillet, *Vie*, II: 70–85, 162–65.
  11. Isaac Beeckman, *Journal . . . de 1604 à 1634*, ed. Cornélis de Waard, 4 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1939–53), I: 244 (also excerpted in AT, x:52).
  12. AT, IXb:14; FA, III:780.
  13. Baillet, *Vie*, I: 115.
  14. AT, IXb:2; FA, III:769.