

DO IDEAS HAVE BODIES?
PHILOSOPHICAL 'CONTENT' AND
LITERARY 'FORM' IN DESCARTES

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As long as philosophy is part of a living and binding tradition, the figure of the great philosopher tends to acquire in common consciousness the significance of an *exemplum*. His name stands for that of the sage, the embodiment of wisdom as the perfect unity of life and insight, being and knowing. When, on the other hand, philosophy becomes one of the constituents of so-called 'high culture', the great philosopher tends to become an *exemplar*, even if a most excellent one. He is regarded as the paradigmatic embodiment of an abstract point of view, one competing with others in the great marketplace of ideas. His name stands above all for a particular kind of world view, most completely and consistently expressed in his writings. His *oeuvre* becomes, for those who shop around for a systematic articulation or confirmation of their attitudes to life, the model case for appraising the 'utility' of such a point of view, its relative advantages and disadvantages, its enlightening power and internal difficulties. In this way, Spinoza exemplifies monism, Leibniz pluralism, Locke empiricism, Hume scepticism and Hegel the strange thing called the 'dialectic'. And, of course, Descartes' name stands for dualism.

Such a characterisation of Cartesian philosophy is no doubt completely correct. Descartes certainly maintained that the mind and the body constitute two distinct substances which do not possess any property in common, though an interaction does take place between correlated mental and corporeal states in that quasi-substantial composite which we call a human being. But whether his dualism can be regarded as a paradigmatic one is rather questionable.

For in fact Descartes, in opposition to more standard forms of dualism, severely restricted the relevant correspondence between psychic occurrences (and their inseparable mental contents, the ideas) and corporeal states. According to him, only those of our ideas with a strictly conceived 'imagistic' or 'pictorial' character—our sensations, perceptions, memory images and ideas of imagination—have some corporeal or physiological correlate. In his philosophy, being imagistic or pictorial and being related to the body strongly presuppose each other. The ideas of pure understanding—our mathematical and metaphysical concepts—are without any bodily correspondent. And it is precisely with regard to our metaphysical ideas that this has the most far-reaching consequences. For as far as our basic mathematical concepts are concerned, it is at least possible for them to be associated with suitable ideas of the imagination. It is this fact that makes the axioms of geometry so easily comprehensible by everyone, even though it ultimately impedes the development and acquisition of truly scientific mathematical knowledge. As far as our metaphysical ideas are concerned, however, any attempt at their imagistic or pictorial presentation is solely a source of radical error. Descartes frequently levels against his critics, as his gravest charge, their incapacity to comprehend ideas like the 'mind' or 'God' except with the help of imagination, as a result of which they fundamentally misconceive their very meaning.

These views of Descartes are, however, not easily reconcilable with the actual practice of his philosophy. For in this latter, the presentation of abstract philosophical ideas and trains of thought through striking images plays not only a significant, but also quite special, role. And this concerns not merely the whole series of his grand and eloquent metaphors, but above all those magnificent *fictions* of imagination ('fables'), which in his writings fulfil a fundamental and indispensable argumentative function—fictions in comparison with which the beloved conceptual experiments of recent analytic philosophies seem rather anaemic and pedestrian. Thus one finds at the centre of the short exposition of the Cartesian physics in the Fifth Part of the *Discourse* the whole history of the evolution of a world that God could have created "somewhere in imaginary spaces". It is also in such a vein that the *First Meditation* summons its reader not only to imagine that his life and entire experience is merely a matter of dreams, but in addition evokes (as the weightiest sceptical argument) the image of a *genius malignus*: the idea of an omnipotent

and no less malevolent demon, which seems to be more at home in the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights* than a work of philosophy. The same Descartes, who so emphasises the irreconcilability of clear and distinct metaphysical ideas with the confused fictions of the imagination, steadily prompts his readers in these contexts to imprint firmly these fictions on their minds and to cling to them with the full force of their will, "to deceive themselves deliberately". And what makes these fictions truly unsettling is not their mere presence or rhetorical weight, but the fact that these fictions (as I shall try to argue later) are indispensable. They cannot be replaced by 'straightforward' arguments: their argumentative force and function in the discourse is inseparable from their pictorial, imaginative character.

In view of this, we have to pose the question: do not Descartes' metaphysical ideas also demand a particular sort of embodiment? This question does not of course concern the existence of their cerebral correlates (a discussion of Cartesian physiology is hardly of pressing interest today), but relates to the problem of their *literary* or *textual* materialisation. Is this materialisation merely an external garment useful for making visible (and perhaps alluring) the contours of disembodied ideas—clear in themselves, but easily misperceived by those whose mental sight is still bedazzled by their corporeal one? Or is philosophy itself a composite in which the illusive, fictive materiality of literary form and the ideality of philosophical thought form a quasi-substantial unity?

This may well seem to be a question of marginal import. In fact, however, it is not without relevance today. Contemporary philosophy is in danger of being polarised in such a way and to such a degree as could undermine the fragile unity of the discipline itself—a unity which in modern times has always been realised only through the confrontation and polemical dialogue of its opposing 'schools' and tendencies. Today we find, on the one side of the frontline, philosophies which refuse to recognise any form of discourse that does not satisfy the demands of a rationality narrowly equated with strict logical argumentation based upon clear conceptual analysis, and which simultaneously frequently restrict themselves to the discussion of such theoretical niceties of detail that are understandable and of interest only to similarly inclined professionals. On the other side, there are the more 'literary' philosophies of broader appeal, which we may find suspending with aestheticising irony the very truth claim of philosophy, and are at times inclined to treat logical argumentation

itself as a form of impersonal and concealed coercion. The simultaneous presence of a multiplicity of divergent styles of thought and forms of discursivity has been a characteristic feature of the whole history of modern philosophy. What gives cause for apprehension today is the increasing disinclination to engage with each other in meaningful dialogue, sometimes expressed in rather scandalous forms. I would regard as such the public protest of a number of renowned analytic philosophers against Derrida's invitation to Oxford—and equally the polemical strategy that Derrida himself has at times employed against some of his critics (for example, Gadamer).

In retrospect, we can see in Descartes, the 'father' of modern philosophy, the progenitor of either and both of these tendencies. He was, of course, the initiator of the scientisation of a philosophy which would claim absolute certainty. For him, as Heidegger rightly underlined, the mathematical (in its original sense) constituted the paradigm of valid knowledge. On the other hand, however, he was one of the most 'literary' philosophers of modern times. This refers not only to the enormous role he played in forming the abiding stylistic ideal of French culture. Even more important from our viewpoint is the rich variety of the literary forms and genres that he used for the presentation of his philosophy. Autobiographical essay; meditations; a series of replies to objections in their abstract form, resembling the *Summae* of the Middle Ages; a fragmentary axiomatic exposition; a textbook with pedagogic intentions; an unfinished dialogue—to mention here only those mature writings that aimed at the exposition of his system in its totality. These forms were always chosen with a clear awareness of their communicative functionality. At the same time, Descartes also demonstrated a rare literary sensitivity in the way he, while paying attention to the particular conventions of a given genre, creatively and sometimes quite radically adapted them to the cognitive requirements of his philosophy. (This is reflected in the pieces of advice or prescriptions which he liked to insert into his works as to their 'proper reading'. There are not many writers of textbooks who would suggest to the reader "first of all to go quickly through the whole book like a novel, without straining his attention too much".) One should add to all this that Descartes (as is clear from his early correspondence with Guez de Balzac) had a quite elaborate programme aiming at the synthesis of the two great contending rhetorical tendencies of his age—Ciceronian and Senecan—an end perfectly realised in the more narrowly conceived style of the *Discourse*.

Nevertheless, if we now directly pose the question of how Descartes himself regarded the relation between literary form and theoretical content in his writings, then the answer is unambiguous. He treated the first as an external wrapping whose choice was dictated solely by practical or pragmatic considerations, primarily concerning the ideal intended public of the work in question. To confuse the first with the second would be analogous to identifying the substantive presence of a human being with the sighting of a hat and a cloak. As he repeatedly stressed, these writings of so many different genres, with differing degrees of circumstantiality and complexity of elaboration, *say the same thing*: they formulate and articulate one and the same philosophy. He explicitly states this (in his letter to Mersenne from January 28, 1641) with regard to the relation between the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*, and he later repeats it to Chanut with regard to the relation between the *Meditations* and the first part of the *Principia*.²

This innocuous assertion deserves some attention. For, on the one hand, what is maintained here by Descartes is evidently and strictly true. In fact, one can only wonder at, and admire, the patience and missionary enthusiasm which allowed and drove him to present the same philosophical theses in ever new literary forms, with the help of only partially modified arguments and within the framework of an essentially constant general train of thought.

On the other hand, this assertion, which seems quite natural to us (for what would represent the writings of a philosopher, if in the meantime he has not changed his views, but one and the same philosophy?), implies a genuinely novel understanding of the nature of philosophy. Neither Montaigne, nor Bacon, nor even Seneca—the classical model of the philosopher most frequently evoked by Descartes—could have maintained that their various writings contained strictly speaking the same doctrines. Descartes' assertion is closely linked to one of his greatest and most important innovations: the conception of philosophy as a single *system*. The theoretical premises of this idea, concerning the objective order of all possible true human cognitions—the *ordo idearum*—are quite familiar. I would like here, however, to draw attention to its less evident cultural-historical context. As long as philosophy is addressed to a plurality of pre-given, culturally and socially circumscribed, concretely defined circles of recipients (be they potential patrons, members of particular academic corporations or some smaller group of humanist erudites), the constancy of a fundamental philosophical view and position does

not imply the strict identity of the particular *philosophemes* presented in the different works of the same author. If one were attempting to convince a grief-stricken young widow of the ultimate principle of right conduct in life, one would not employ the same arguments or refer to the same considerations that would seem appropriate if the addressee were an elderly Roman bureaucrat. If someone, like Bacon, presents the idea of a new science with the aim of persuading his lofty patrons of its utility, he will not characterise it in the same way as when he turns to those who may want to participate actively in the pursuit of its ideal. Descartes creates a new cultural form for philosophy—that of the system—by targeting his writings not at select audiences of *savants* or erudites (and certainly not at those named in their eventual dedications, which served solely the tactical purpose of self-defence), but at an anonymous ideal public, the *honnestes gens* (personified by Polyander in the *Recherche*). For everyone, in principle, who is ready to lay aside their prejudices, and with an open mind put to its proper use the most universal human capacity: the power to distinguish the true from the false, *le bon sens*. It is within this indeterminate circle of ideal readers that Descartes then makes quite subtle but again idealising distinctions concerning their presumed aptitudes, and above all the character of their interests regarding philosophy, in order to adapt the concrete form of exposition of his system to the assumed potentialities and expectations of the recipients.

On the basis of such pragmatic considerations, one and the same philosophy takes on differing external-literary forms of presentation. This authorial characterisation of Descartes' *oeuvre* is not only evidently correct, it simultaneously expresses an important and novel facet of Cartesian philosophy. Nevertheless, this self-interpretation is not completely satisfactory: it does not adequately answer some of the questions raised by the writings themselves. The fact that Descartes did not regard these texts as of equal theoretical value—the *Meditations* alone constituting, in his reckoning, an adequate exposition of his philosophy—may well still be reconcilable with such an understanding. More problems arise, however, from a detailed comparison of the *Meditations* with his other work of comparable historical significance—the *Discourse*. Perplexingly, the *Discourse* seems to derive, from weaker premises (since it lacks the most weighty sceptical argument), stronger ultimate conclusions than those justified by the text of the *Meditations*. And this cannot simply be explained by the more 'popular' and sketchy character of

the exposition in the former work, since the variance in question is clearly related to corresponding differences in the precise logical structure of arguments that at first sight may seem to be identical. This is true above all of the *cogito* argument itself, which appears in such different forms in these two works as to make questionable the legitimacy of regarding them as variants of a single argument. And lastly, there is the question of those grand fictions which set in motion the metaphysical train of thought in the *Meditations*, as also partly in the *Discourse*. As I have already indicated, these cannot be replaced by strictly discursive arguments lacking the evocative power of literary or imagistic representation. They cannot be substituted in such a manner for the simple reason that they are faulty, invalid arguments. Descartes already demonstrates in the Fourth Meditation that the idea of the *genius malignus* is self-contradictory in an elementary way, and the Sixth Meditation goes on to prove in addition the inconclusive character of the dream-argument. It is Eudoxus, Descartes' spokesman in the *Recherche*, who clearly discloses the aim and character of these 'arguments'—their chief effect is to "touch the imagination" for the sake of bringing about an attitude, the cognitive emotion of anxiety of radical error shattering the spontaneous evidences of everyday thinking.³

One and the same philosophy, which nevertheless cannot be strictly separated from its diverse literary presentations, since these are not simply external wrappings but form the respective organic bodies of identical abstract contents of thought, endowing the particular writings with distinct individuality—I would like to resolve this paradox by distinguishing (and evidently not only in the case of Descartes) what is *stated* in a paradigmatic philosophical work from what is *expressed* by it. Or, to formulate this distinction in more familiar terminology (proposed essentially at the same time, though in quite differing contexts, by Wittgenstein and Walter Benjamin): to distinguish between what it *says* and what it *shows*. For no great philosophy can be simply reduced to its propositional content, to a set or system of discursively articulated and argumentatively justified *philosophemes*. Were this the case, we should prefer, instead of studying the classical works themselves, to read their analytic 'translations' and modern commentaries, since a Gueroult or an Alquié undoubtedly know more (and often know 'better') about Cartesian philosophy than Descartes did any time in his life. The paradigmatic works of philosophy, in their literary form and

through their textual practice—owing to its seeming immediacy and emphatic, pragmatic power—express a simultaneously cognitive and practical attitude to the world that they present (though do not represent) to the reader with a normative force constitutive of their meaning and significance. It is this thesis that I would like now to illustrate and perhaps somewhat better illuminate through a schematic discussion of the relation between the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*. For Descartes is right: these works *say* essentially the same thing, but what they *show*, in the aforesaid sense, is far from being identical.

In his correspondence, Descartes quite unambiguously characterises the intention that motivated his choice of the form of exposition adopted in the *Discourse*. It is only a “discourse” on the method—and not, for example, a treatise—because his aim here is not to *teach* it, only to “talk about” it (“*d'en parler*”⁴). Perhaps even—since at one point he calls the whole work a “fable”—to tell a tale about it, and that for the widest possible range of readers. It thus employs a manner—sometimes even at the cost of strict argumentative consequentiality—which everyone, even “weaker minds”, can easily grasp.⁵ This was the reason (as he explains it to Father Vatier⁶) why he wrote it in French: to be intelligible even to women. (It is perhaps worthwhile to recall here a remark made by his first biographer: Descartes preferred to talk with women about philosophy, because he found them “*plus douces, plus patientes, plus dociles*” —kinder, more patient and more pliable—and in any case they read fewer books and were therefore less infected by prejudices than men.)

There can be no question of either the sincerity or the relevance of these authorial explanations. Nevertheless, there is something amiss here. Let us put aside the fact that it renders somewhat mysterious Descartes' zealous push from 1637 onwards for the translation (or, as Derrida puts it, the “restitutive retroduction”⁷) of the *Discourse* into Latin. More importantly, these characterisations are not easily reconcilable with another one, which appears no less frequently and in an equally emphatic manner: that whereby the *Discourse* is to serve as an introduction to the three scientific treatises following it. Are the *Géométrie* or the *Dioptrique* equally destined for the “kinder” spirit and “weaker” intellect of the ladies? Our confusion will only increase if we pay attention to the Sixth Part—the segment of the text most directly addressed to the readers. For here Descartes seems to appeal to these readers with such requests as ladies, at least in the seventeenth century, were hardly in a position to fulfil.

To help dissipate this confusion, let us for a while treat the *Discourse* strictly as a work of literature and examine its composition in this sense—what is suggested, shown or directly expressed by the literary structure itself.

According to its general framework, the *Discourse* belongs to the genre of the autobiographical essay. Already its first sentence refers to, and simultaneously distances itself from, the most relevant tradition of this genre. For the famous opening lines about the equal distribution of good sense, since no one complains of its lack, are an easily recognisable paraphrase of Montaigne. Except that Descartes immediately puts a twist on it by adding: "In this it is unlikely that everyone is mistaken." Montaigne's ironically intended statement is thus itself evoked with an ironic reflexivity. Through one and the same gesture, Descartes both accepts and criticises a tradition.

As concerns the literary form and structure of this essay, it is—one could say—of musical complexity. There are two quite distinct principles of construction in play, interfering with each other and inflecting each other. One of these structuring principles is that of *continuous progression*: from the personal and particular to the impersonally valid and universal; from the *narration* of the course of an individual life to discursive *argumentation*. It is thus realised in the gradual, progressive transformation of the authorial voice and (in connection with it) the manner of exposition. This construction is figuratively represented by the recurring metaphor of the arduous path that nonetheless becomes, as we advance, ever wider and more secure.

The *Discourse* begins as a typical autobiographical narrative, even if it is highly stylised and primarily aims—within the framework of a picture of intellectual development—at the systematic critique of the state of the established sciences. But already in the Second and Third Parts, the spirit of narration is replaced by that of discussion. Here it is the formulation of philosophically relevant theses—the rules of the method and the maxims of the provisional moral code—which occupies the central place. These ideas are, however, still presented as individual inventions, as the results of decisions based upon personal life experiences ("it occurred to me", "I observed", "I resolved", and so on). The Third Part actually adduces quite thorough arguments for its maxims, however these are prudential considerations related in the tone of personal insights. Then, in the Fourth Part, the voice of the author becomes the direct organ of universal reason. Formally, it is still the authorial 'I' who speaks, in

the first personal singular, only this 'I' can no longer be identical with René in his empirical particularity, because the sceptical arguments ("I could pretend that I had no body", and so on) suspend all that could individuate him in this sense. In the Fourth and Fifth Parts, it is the universal philosophical subject who elucidates argumentatively—though often with the help of telescoped arguments—the main principles of the Cartesian metaphysics, physics and physiology. Lastly, at the end, in the Sixth Part, the personal voice reappears again. With the acquired authority of the creator of the new science Descartes now directly addresses his readers.

As already indicated, the character of the philosophical argumentation is adapted to its place and function within this particular construction. In comparison with the *Meditations*, the most conspicuous difference is the omission of the argument of the *genius malignus*, the deceiving omnipotence, in consequence of which the validity of the axioms of mathematics and, more generally, of eternal truths remains beyond doubt. The very formulation of the *cogito* argument directly reflects this fact. It is presented here in the form of a meta-linguistic epistemic statement: "this truth '*I am thinking, therefore I exist*' was so firm and sure that ...".¹⁰ What I here directly perceive, in my own case—and this is in complete accord with the explications provided in the *Principia* and in the *Conversation* with Burman—is an eternal truth, the necessary and self-evident connection of two "simple notions": thinking and existence. A few lines further down Descartes then states it so explicitly: *pour penser, il faut être*—all that to which the predicate "thinking" can be attributed, by necessity can also be attributed the predicate "existence" ("being in existence"). And from the *cogito* so conceived, Descartes here directly—and legitimately—derives two basic conclusions: the thinking 'I' is a substance, and clarity and distinctness constitute the valid criterion of indubitable truth. The subsequent argumentation also therefore remains unaffected here by the Arnauldian counterargument of the "circle". At the same time, the rudimentarily presented proofs of God's existence assume almost through definition the unity of omnipotence and benevolent truthfulness in the nature of the divine, whose intellectual comprehensibility is equally taken for granted, once the principal distinction between the unimaginable and the unintelligible is recognised.¹¹ And from this divine warrant, Descartes seems here to draw—compared to the *Meditations*—a particularly expansive and strong ultimate conclusion. It ensures the metaphysical truth of the

totality of our wakeful experience, in so far as it is free of contradictions and can be reconciled with the clear and distinct perceptions of pure intelligence. For, as Descartes states in the conclusion of Part Four, "all our ideas and notions must have some foundation of truth; for otherwise it would not be possible that God, who is all-perfect and all-truthful, should have placed them in us".¹²

One is better able to judge the significance of these particularities of the argumentative exposition, if they are related to the second literary structure of the *Discourse*, which has only been mentioned up to this point. If the construction of this work realises, on the one hand, from the viewpoint of the transformation of the authorial voice and its corresponding discursive type, the principle of continuous progression, from the viewpoint of the presented *contents* this structure is, on the other hand, that of an accentuating *repetition*. Morphologically, one and the same story is told twice, the first time in individual or personal terms, and then in universal terms: the story of a success, of a *triumph*. In this sense, the *Discourse* embodies a narrative archetype: the story of the naive innocent who almost loses himself in the tumult of the wide world, but who ultimately by his own might alone conquers (here, of course, intellectually) the whole world. The Third Part of the *Discourse* ends with the revocation of those years of solitary, but comfortable, retirement, whose self-validating results are here delivered to the reader in the form of the three scientific treatises, the first promising fruits of the method, the greatest of all his discoveries. And this elevating feeling of success, a "most sweet and pure contentment" evoked solely by the independent use of his own reason,¹¹ is then repeated in the second half of the *Discourse*, in the form of the triumph of universal human reason which, through reflection upon its own nature, is capable of overcoming all doubts and lays the indubitable foundations of that unified and comprehensive science of nature that ensures our mastery over it.

What the *Discourse* brings to expression with its rhetorical/literary form is the propagandistically oriented self-understanding of the Enlightenment, its public ethos and general programme aimed at a wider public. It suggests to its reader a firm conviction beyond all doubt of the power of reason, of the rational comprehensibility and practical transformability of environing reality. It manifests that 'optimism' which is a signatory feature of our usual and current understanding (and critique) of Enlightenment. The Descartes whose voice addresses us in the *Discourse* is the hero of Enlightenment, the philosopher whom Condorcet will canonise as its patron saint.

At the same time, however, the *Discourse* is also the unintentionally revealing document of the contradictions of Enlightenment. Its author appears, on the one hand, in the guise of 'everyman', representing himself as a person whose intellectual abilities are in no way better than average and whose great discovery—the method—consists of the simplest precepts, easy to understand and follow. But this same voice is simultaneously that of the solitary hero of cognition, the only person capable not only of laying the foundations, but also of actually elaborating the whole system of the new science—at least, if some external assistance is forthcoming. For the Sixth Part of the *Discourse*, in spite of all its artful rhetoric striving to combine a tone of dignified authority with a suitable (pseudo-)modesty, does not really conceal the fact that it addresses the reader primarily as a potential sponsor and financial backer of Descartes' great scientific endeavour. The anonymous, ideal readership is subtly called upon "to contribute towards the expenses of the observations that he would need"¹⁴—for this public is hardly good for anything else. Already in the Second Part, Descartes clearly points out that "the world is largely composed of two types of minds", both of which are "quite unsuitable"—owing primarily to their moral disposition and character—for making use of the method.¹⁵ There is thus in the text of the *Discourse* a constant alternation of the basic metaphors illuminating the very character of its task and enterprise. The motive of the daring explorer/traveller, who alone in the deep darkness of the forest clears a way, but does so to make the path safe for all others, keeps being replaced by the metaphor of the architect. Descartes compares his method to that of the architect not only in so far as he, too, has to dig down from the sandy surface of shifting opinions into the bedrock of undoubtable certainty,¹⁶ but also on the grounds that a well-ordered and beautifully proportioned building can only be created if it is planned and completed by a single architect.¹⁷

One cannot regard this tension as merely an expression of Descartes' unshakeable faith in his own calling, or—if you want—of his exaggerated sense of self-importance and immodesty. It signals a general antinomy of cultural modernity. Modern science, emancipated from the control of binding traditions, claims not only universal validity for its truths, but at the same time declares them, as an integral constituent of their rationality, to be comprehensible and ascertainable by everyone—in principle. This idea of an epistemic democratism, organically pertaining to the culture of modernity,

stands however in striking contradiction to the incontestable fact that, from the very time of its origin, this science could only be cultivated and even understood by the few: first by members of a social-cultural elite and more lately by a professional one. The paradigmatic thinkers of early modernity could only solve this contradiction by comprehending and representing the scientist as the *virtuoso of morality*. It is not the exceptional excellence of his intellectual capacities which distinguishes him from the average, but a particular ethos that only a few can acquire and exercise, an ethos expressed, among other ways, in the new conventions and forms of intrascientific communication and conduct. Descartes' philosophy provides a perfect legitimation for this transposition of cognitive achievements onto an extraordinary moral habitus: according to his voluntaristic theory of judgement, the discovery of truth first of all demands the *right* use of our free will.

This 'ethicising' understanding of science has become for us quite alien. In the meantime science has been institutionalised as the vast plurality of ever more narrowly determined specialities, and if someone chooses his or her profession from among them, there are—we tend to think—no unsurmountable practical, social or cultural obstacles to the acquisition of the appropriate competence. And in this process all that pertains to the ethical aspects of the everyday practice of science has somehow evaporated, become unspecifiable and unlocalisable within the field of the real institutional organisation of science, that network of interactions between the expert-professionals directly contributing to science, the managers directing its institutions and the representatives of the political and economic powers which ultimately decide upon its support.

One cannot understand, however, the goal and character of the Cartesian *Meditations* without recalling this 'ethicising' comprehension of the practice of science. For the *Meditations* are addressed to those select few who precisely are capable of forming such a moral habitus: to those "who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions".¹⁸ This authorial choice defines the genre of the work: *meditation*. Both in its (Stoic) philosophical and in its religious variants (for Descartes the most relevant being Augustinian and Ignatian), this genre always aimed at leading the reader onto, and steering him on, the path of full spiritual reform or rebirth through radical self-examination. The text of the meditations is merely a guideline

providing the general direction to those spiritual exercises which the reader himself must undertake, thereby actively enacting his own transformation. And this is the way Descartes himself conceives his *Meditations*. This work aims not only at the radical purification of intellect from all sorts of prejudices, but also at changing the very direction of the will, thereby uprooting possible sources of error. In this way it ought to assist in the birth of that rational Ego who can become the co-creator of, or at least contributor to, the new science.

The meditation genre is anything but an external covering for Descartes. He certainly takes its requirements seriously and literally: thus, he repeatedly asks the reader to spend at least a day in deep absorption with each of the six meditations, but better still a whole week or weeks. In a similar vein he asks the reader at the end of the Third Meditation to now pause and spend some time in adoring intellectual contemplation of the idea of God that just has been clarified. But perhaps what is most telling in this respect is the "prescription"—certainly strange in a work of philosophy—which demands the reader forget, or at least put temporarily aside, all questions and objections which may arise in the course of his unfinished reading. The reader should not "quibble", Descartes says simply, for such interruptions (as he writes to Mersenne) would only "destroy the force of my arguments".¹⁹

What is regarded today as the constitutive requirement for the adequate understanding of fiction as fiction—the temporary suspension of disbelief—appears with Descartes as the necessary condition for comprehending the discourse of ultimate truth. And while in a purely logical respect his remark seems to be absurd, in fact it makes good sense within the framework of the chosen genre. As a work which integrally presupposes the directed performance and the self-transformative activity of its readers, problems can be treated and adequately resolved in the *Meditations* only at the appropriate level of already achieved spiritual-intellectual maturation. To raise them "too early" would in fact obstruct the carefully staged process of illumination and thus "undermine the force of the arguments". The objective order of ideas in the system of humanly available truths also determines the regimen of their subjective comprehension. This is not an *ad hoc* excuse in order to evade possible counterarguments, for this insight is organically present and effective in the very practice of meditations. Descartes repeatedly—for example in the Third Meditation, both in the case of the truth criterion and that of the causal classification of

ideas—demonstrates in practice for the reader that some true ideas cannot yet be adequately comprehended and justified at the given level of illumination.

This meditative-performative 'logic' of the exposition explains and vindicates not only the role of 'invalid arguments' presented through irreplaceable fictions, but also provides an answer to the well-known problem of the "Cartesian circle". If one treats the text of the *Meditations* as a strictly discursive, logical exposition, then it is not only in the case of the proofs of God's existence analysed by Arnauld that one comes across seemingly vicious circles in argumentation. In a number of other cases, too, Descartes seems to presuppose what he sets out to prove, or at least what he should have proven. To refer to only a single example: already the opening paragraphs of the First Meditation, which introduce the *dubito* arguments, simply assume that our everyday cognitions constitute a single *system* based upon a few fundamental premises taken as self-evident. A 'performative' reading of the text, however, seem to remove, at least in most of such cases, the appearance of the circle—a point that unfortunately I have no space to argue here.

This non-discursive but performative 'logic' basically affects both what is 'said' in the *Meditations*, and what they 'show' or express. I can illustrate this here only in a very schematic way. The most conspicuous difference from the *Discourse*, the appearance of the argument of the "malevolent demon", problematises the connection between the ideas of omnipotence and divine benevolence, and thus extends the scope of the sceptical *epoche* to encompass the validity of eternal truths as well. This radically changes the very character of the *cogito* argument. Here it serves to lead the co-meditator to turn his whole attention to what he does when he performs an act of thinking, more precisely when he is thinking *I am, I exist*. It is the indissoluble unity of a performance and the reflection on this performance which endows the existence of the meditating Ego with indubitable certainty. But when?—"whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind"²⁰: so long and only so long as I am actually performing this reflection. This most minimal certainty (*minimum quid*, writes Descartes), relativised to the instantaneous act of reflection, does not provide, however, sufficient ground for the comprehension of the thinking Ego as substance. According to the only conclusion that follows from it, when and as long as I am thinking, I exist as *res cogitans*, but "res" is the most general term in Descartes' theoretical vocabulary,

and does not specify an ontological status. Only around the end of the Third Meditation, after he has demonstrated—with the help of the *a posteriori* proofs of God's existence—the truth of our clear and distinct ideas, does Descartes first raise the question concerning the substantiality of the thinking 'I', and this is ultimately proven only in the Sixth Meditation. The arguments for God's existence, which re-establish the necessary connection between goodness and omnipotence, not only present in a logically stricter and more elaborate way what has already been anticipated in the *Discourse*, they join it up with the ideas of the actual infinity of the creative ultimate cause and the unbridgeable distance dividing the finite from the infinite. Accordingly, the final conclusion concerning ourselves also becomes modified. The *Meditations* sharply distinguishes mathematical certainty, based on the "natural light" of the intellect, but not involving any actual existence, from the spontaneous "natural impulse" or "instinct" upon which our confidence in sensuous experience is founded, and which can be justified not only in a merely global sense, on the whole, but also on purely *pragmatic* terms. This experience provides information only concerning what is good for, or harmful to, the preservation of the mortal composite of a human being.

These ideas raise some disturbing ambiguities. For, if all our knowledge concerning the empirical existents of the material world has its source in such an experience, what then is the epistemic validity and value of the physics which Descartes intends to smuggle in as a precious contraband under the protective cover of metaphysics? And even more radically: what then is the ultimate metaphysical coverage and return of the divine guarantee of knowledge? God cannot be a deceiver, since the *intention* to deceive implies the presence of some defect and is thus irreconcilable with the idea of infinite perfection. But since our finite intellect cannot comprehend the purposes and intentions of an infinite being at all, and any attempt at explanation by such final causes is not merely fruitless but ultimately also heretical, what does it mean that He cannot be a deceiver? If even those eternal truths that are self-evident for us depend upon the unfathomable decisions of the divine will—which could have created our minds in such a way that two plus two be for us, with an equal clarity allowing no doubt, exactly *eight* (even if *we* cannot even comprehend what this would mean)—what then have our certainties and truths to do with ultimate, metaphysical reality?

This is, of course, a question which every co-mediator must

answer for himself—as it has been and is by every interpreter of Cartesianism, each coming up with his own answer. The tension of this ambiguity, however, makes the tenor of the *Meditations* unlike the self-confident optimism of the *Discourse*. Even if its conceptual and argumentative apparatus is in some respects more closely related to the past, to Scholasticism, what the whole of this work suggests and expresses is the genuine spirit and practice of Enlightenment. For the Enlightenment is much more complex, rich and contradictory than its own propagandistic self-image. Every representative thinker of the Enlightenment in some way faced the paradoxes to which the relation of the finite and contingent human intellect to its object, the infinite (conceived in one way or another) gives rise. And when they, like Descartes, nevertheless voted for the power of autonomous reason to solve the doubts and problems besetting us, they were aware of the fact that they themselves thereby created new questions and problems which now concerned the character, scope and limit of this power. If we, as latecomers, and sure of our superiority, now instruct Descartes, pointing out to him the self-contradictory and senseless character of any attempt which aims at the rational self-legitimation of reason, we are not necessarily saying something surprising to him. For he himself indicated that in this very enterprise we inevitably push understanding beyond the limit of what is comprehensible for us: to make it touch the mountain of Being that we cannot embrace. Only we should not forget what he added to it: “it would be irrational for us to doubt what we understand correctly just because there is something which we do not understand and which, so far as we can see, there is no reason why we should understand”.²¹ This is surprisingly modest, and may well be ambiguous and insufficient, but this *is* the Enlightenment.

There are two distinct voices, two different ‘Descartes’ who address us in the *Discourse* and in the *Meditations* respectively. Which is the ‘true’ one? Before hastily choosing the second, which may well seem to us at least the more attractive, we should take into account the fact that the meditating ‘I’ of the *Meditations* is not really Descartes, but the representative of the ideal reader. Descartes himself is the great stage manager who arranges these meditations behind the scenes and on some occasions even comments on them (again rather misleadingly using the first person singular). And this voice of the commentator-director is so self-assured, his arranging hand is so unerring in guiding a seamless flow of thought that we

cannot but accept: he knows all the answers, for him there are no ambiguities, and if they beset us then this is only because we are incapable of following his guidance, unable to “meditate seriously” together with him. This Descartes, however—the ‘real’ one—conceals himself.

Bene vixit qui bene latuit: he lives well who conceals himself well. This sentence from Ovid was Descartes’ chosen motto. At first glance, all may seem completely clear. After the condemnation of Galileo, Descartes decides to last out the time until the break between the Church and the new science—a break based on a fatal misunderstanding—is healed. He could not have foreseen how long it would last. This explanation of the motive of concealment is, no doubt, correct—only, again, it leaves too much unexplained. For in the first place, Descartes did ultimately publish his physics, albeit under a hollow and rather transparent disguise (for to take seriously what is said on the Third Part of the *Principia* regarding the immobility of the Earth requires a great deal of credulity). And in the second place, the motive of *larvatus prodeo*—“I proceed in disguise”—first appears in his work almost one and half decades prior to the condemnation of Galileo, when he had no reason to conceal a physics which in any case he did not yet possess. And this first and in fact most elaborate formulation of the motive of concealment, in the *Praeambula*, is truly enigmatic. Now, having decided to mount the stage of the broader public world, he comes forward masked, like the actors on the stage, “not to let any embarrassment show on their faces”.²² Actors play roles, what they must say may be shameful—but what can embarrass Descartes, who intends to say only the universally valid truth? Unless this is precisely what motivates the disguise, for in another remark we read that the sciences themselves are at present masked, their true beauty only being revealed when their masks are taken off.²³ Descartes comes forward masked, conceals himself, so that nothing personal stains or veils the beauty of the naked truth. But then we can equally read this as saying that science is like a woman: as long as she exhibits herself to her husband alone, she is respected; but when she becomes common property, she grows despised.²⁴

Descartes, so resolutely condemning all efforts to render science an *arcanum*,²⁵ conceals not only himself, but also the meaning of this concealment. We are not only unable to find him, we have no idea where and how to look for him. The ‘real’ Descartes is a phantom created by the texts: for us, there is no other Descartes but those

'inauthentic' voices we claim to hear in the texts, and which to some extent mutually disown each other. If we need to choose, we must do so between them.

If I were forced to make such a choice, then, between the two 'Descartes' I have inadequately tried to invoke here, I would rather elect a third: the voice resounding from the *Replies* to the *Objections*. For this finicky persona, often engaged in word-splitting and intentionally misunderstanding his objectors, sometimes prevaricating and deceiving, and in no way lovable, is nevertheless exemplary. Exemplary in what he does for philosophy, as I understand it. Initiating and realising a dispute in which he does not represent the views of his objectors, in order to make a lightning retort (on the usual model of the *Summas: sed respondeo*), but in which he gives genuine publicity to his critics, Descartes transformed the *respublica litterarum* of humanist erudites—mostly actualised through private correspondence and based on a commonly accepted classical tradition—into the *république des lettres*, creating the prototype of the scientific and intellectual public sphere of modernity. But the dispute of the *Meditations* is not merely a historically significant cultural initiative; this collective text is at the same time the paradigmatic embodiment of the living practice of philosophy—at least what it is and can be under the conditions of modernity.

I would not like to be misunderstood on this point. My intention here is not to repeat the currently fashionable idea according to which philosophy is 'conversation'. As far as I am personally concerned, I tend to 'converse', in the true sense of this word, only with a rather limited number of persons: those with whom I think I can reach, in the essentials, an ultimate concord, perhaps only because of the fact that what we share in broad ends, attitudes and values is more important than the particular opinions which divide us. Philosophy, I think, precisely and irrevocably ceases to be a *symposion* when one can no longer hope to achieve the ultimate consensus of all those who share nothing else but this 'love of wisdom'. This, however, is a dream that we have truly dreamt through. This case, however, is of two people who are talking not with the intention of convincing each other, but of persuading a third—the anonymous reader excluded from the intercourse, merely listening to or perhaps only taping it. As it happens, I am not completely unfamiliar with such a practice in its most direct sense either, but I must say that in such cases neither I, nor my partners, had the illusion that we were engaged in conversation.

However, if even this intention to convince the silent third of the continuing dispute of philosophies—the reader—were to disappear, then I fear the ideal community of philosophers would be transformed into a world-wide virtual coffee-house where everyone, no doubt hugely enjoying his voice, talks beside the other.

Descartes is not engaged in conversation. He argues, disputes, sometimes mocks, sometimes prevaricates; on occasion he may appropriate a counterargument to build it into his own philosophy, elsewhere he clarifies or silently modifies his own theses. He takes his critics deadly seriously—he does not for example answer genuinely philosophical arguments with easily available theological excuses, because he wants by all means to convince his opponents of the falsity of their position. He stubbornly defends his truth as *the* truth, sometimes getting enmeshed into seeming absurdities. And this—this ‘dogmatism’ if you like—is exemplary for philosophy.

In modernity, every significant philosophy has ultimately tried to answer the Kantian question: what is man? Today we may and we ought to know that there is no answer to this question which could be demonstrated, or even made sufficiently plausible, by facts that could be firmly established. And this is so, not because facts are irrelevant to the question, but because ultimately we are not asking about facts, but about their *meaning*. Every significant philosophy has attempted to provide a definite and consistent answer to this question, which at the same time seems to be relevant to our actual, contingent historical situation. In this way it also *expresses*: it evokes an attitude to the Other and to ourselves, to what happens to us and to what we ourselves can and ought to do.

Within the Western cultural tradition, philosophy originated as the breathtakingly audacious enterprise which aimed at the consistent rationalisation of the human way of life, of the whole of our life. We cannot but recognise today that this enterprise—philosophy in its most original and radical sense—ends and has ended in failure. We can assume and simultaneously overcome its tradition in a meaningful way only if, from a plurality of standpoints that are relevant to us and from a variety of cognitive and practical commitments, we still endeavour to carry through this attempt at a consistent rationalisation in thought—every time bumping into its concrete, and from a given standpoint untranscendable, limits; into its ultimate breakdown under the contingency of life and history. And that one, *single* philosophy, which only exists in the dispute of philosophies, can only legitimately

reckon on the interests of others, of outsiders, if it can disclose these limits in such a way, or perhaps—if we are unduly optimistic—contribute intellectually to their extension. For, to repeat my introductory statement, philosophy cannot be reduced to its propositional content alone. Significant philosophies are more than the sum of all that they 'say', for they also simultaneously 'show': they express a never completely explicable attitude, a cognitive and practical way of relating to ourselves, to others and to the world in general. But let me now add to this and be more accurate: philosophy can only 'show' this if it consistently and exclusively 'says' *in its own way*, which is to say according to its own intellectual tradition of arguments, speculative constructions and conceptual narratives. Otherwise, philosophy can easily become an exercise in intellectual self-indulgence, or be transformed into a token of assumed personal or social distinction: truly a mere 'conversation' piece.

Notes

- 1 *Oeuvres de Descartes*, revised Adam-Tannery edition (Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1996), Vol. IXB, pp. 11-12 (henceforth: *AT*); *Descartes. Philosophical Writings*, J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, eds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Vol. I, p. 185 (henceforth: *PbW*).
- 2 Cf. *AT*, Vol. III, p. 297 and vol. V, p. 291; *PbW*, Vol. III, p. 369.
- 3 Cf. *AT*, Vol. X, p. 513; *PbW*, Vol. II, p. 408.
- 4 Letter to Mersenne, 27th February 1637 (*AT*, Vol. I, p. 349; *PbW*, Vol. III, p. 53). See also his letter to Huygens, 25th February 1637: "d'en dire quelque chose" (*AT*, Vol. I, p. 347).
- 5 Letter to Silhon, May 1637 (*AT*, Vol. I, pp. 353-354; *PbW*, Vol. III, pp. 55-56).
- 6 *AT*, Vol. I, p. 560; *PbW*, Vol. III, p. 86.
- 7 Baillet, quoted in Marc Fumaroli, *La Diplomatie de l'esprit. de Montaigne à La Fontaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 380.
- 8 Cf. J. Derrida, *Du droit à la philosophie* (Paris: Gallilée, 1990), pp. 314ff.
- 9 *AT*, Vol. VI, p. 2; *PbW*, Vol. I, p. 111.
- 10 *AT*, Vol. VI, p. 32; *PbW*, Vol. I, p. 127.
- 11 Cf. *AT*, Vol. VI, p. 37; *PbW*, Vol. I, p. 129.
- 12 *AT*, Vol. VI, p. 40; *PbW*, Vol. I, p. 131.
- 13 Cf. *AT*, Vol. VI, p. 27; *PbW*, Vol. I, p. 124.
- 14 *AT*, Vol. VI, p. 73; *PbW*, Vol. I, p. 148.
- 15 *AT*, Vol. VI, p. 15; *PbW*, Vol. I, p. 118.
- 16 Cf. Seventh Set of Replies (to Bourdin), *AT*, Vol. VII, pp. 536-537; *PbW*, Vol. II, p. 366.

- 17 Cf. *AT*, Vol. VI, pp. 11-12; *PbW*, Vol. I, p. 116.
- 18 *AT*, Vol. VII, p. 9; *PbW*, Vol. II, p. 8. Already in 1637 letter to Silhon, Descartes opposed those "weaker minds" that are only able to passively receive ("to read") a philosophy to those "intelligent people" who are themselves able to meditate on the same topic as the author (Cf. *AT*, Vol. I, p. 354; *PbW*, Vol. III, p.56).
- 19 Letter to Mersenne, 24th December 1640, *AT*, Vol. III, p. 267; *PbW*, Vol. III, p. 164.
- 20 *AT*, Vol. VII, p. 25; *PbW*, Vol. II, p. 17.
- 21 *AT*, Vol. VII, p. 436; *PbW*, Vol. II, p. 294.
- 22 *AT*, Vol. X, p. 213; *PbW*, Vol. I, p. 2.
- 23 *AT*, Vol. X, p. 215; *PbW*, Vol. I, p. 3.
- 24 *AT*, Vol. X, p. 214; *PbW*, Vol. I, p. 2.
- 25 "As soon as I see the word *arcanum* in any proposition I begin to suspect it"—letter to Mersenne, 20th November 1629, *AT*, Vol. I, p. 78; *PbW*, Vol. III, p. 11.