

The Methodology of the *Meditations*: Tradition and Innovation

[Christia Mercer, *Cambridge Companion to Descartes' Meditations*, ed. David Cunning, CUP, forthcoming.]

Descartes intended to revolutionize seventeenth-century philosophy and science. But first he had to persuade his contemporaries of the truth of his ideas. Of all his publications, *Meditations on First Philosophy* is methodologically the most ingenuous. Its goal is to provoke readers, even recalcitrant ones, to discover the principles of “first philosophy.” The means to its goal is a reconfiguration of traditional methodological strategies. The aim of this chapter is to display the methodological stratagem of the *Meditations*. The text’s method is more subtle and more philosophically significant than has generally been appreciated.

Descartes’ most famous work is best understood as a response to four somewhat separate philosophical concerns extant in the seventeenth century. Section 1 describes these. Section 2 discusses how Descartes uses and transforms them. A clearer sense of the *Meditations*’ methodological strategy provides a better understanding of exactly how Descartes intended to revolutionize seventeenth-century thought.¹

1. Early Modern Methodology: Tradition and Innovation

In order to understand the methodological brilliance of the *Meditations*, we need to recognize both its continuity and discontinuity with earlier philosophical traditions and its clear-headed response to difficulties of the period. Scholars have long noted Descartes’ Augustinianism, skepticism, anti-Aristotelianism, Platonism, and interest in the tradition of religious meditations. For each of these traditions, a strong argument has been made that it was a main inspiration for his thought.² In fact, Descartes borrowed heavily from all of them. This should not come as a surprise. The early seventeenth century is teeming with philosophical options from which philosophers causally borrowed and whose boundaries were porous. Like so many of his contemporaries, Descartes picked and chose ideas that suited his purpose at the moment, blending them together to solve the problem at hand.

In this section, I survey the traditions that formed Descartes’ intellectual milieu and from which he drew. They help us see the *Meditations* as traditional and innovative. They are as follows.

a. The Search for Stability

The Europe of Descartes’ youth was a period of religious, political, and philosophical instability. It contained a startling array of philosophical options and eager

¹ On the relation between Descartes’ first philosophy and concern to argue for his natural philosophy or physics, see especially Hatfield 2003 and Garber 1992.

² For example, Menn 1998, chapters three and four; Broughton 2002; Curley 1978; Garber 1986; and Schmaltz 1991, Popkin 1979, chapters nine and ten; Hatfield 1985 and 1986.

zealots passionately arguing against one another. The Protestant reformers had splintered into warring factions and the counterreformation was in full swing. The period is packed with people bemoaning the falsities and misunderstandings around them while claiming the power of truth.³ The English philosopher and statesman, Francis Bacon, exemplifies this attitude. In an essay published in 1597, entitled “Of Truth,” he discusses “the Difficultie, and Labour, which Men take in finding out of *Truth*.” He warns that falsities and lies corrupt the mind when they “sinketh” and “setleth in it.” But he avers that despite the human capacity for “depraved Judgments, and Affections, yet *Truth* which onely doth judge it self, teacheth, that the Inquirie of *Truth*, which is the Love-making, or Wooing of it” and the understanding “of *Truth*, which is the Presence of it, ... is the Sovereign Good of human Nature.” Indeed, “no pleasure is comparable, to the standing, upon the vantage ground of Truth.”⁴

b. Platonism

Descartes was willing to use any material at hand to create, in Bacon’s words, a “vantage ground” for truth. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century humanists had often woven together quotations and ideas explicitly drawn from ancient philosophical schools and many believed that, whatever their apparent differences, these traditions could be made to cohere.⁵ It is no wonder that, by the early seventeenth century, the boundaries of philosophical schools had become porous and sectarian categories unclear.

Descartes insists that he does not intend to build his system explicitly out of the ideas of Plato or Aristotle. As he makes the point in *The Search for Truth*, “I hope too that the truths I set forth will not be less well received for their not being derived from Aristotle or Plato” (AT 10:498). But this attitude toward the explicit use of ancient ideas is consistent with drawing heavily from the rich philosophical traditions available to him. Descartes suggests as much when he explains,

everything in my philosophy is old. For as far as principles are concerned, I only accept those which in the past have always been common ground among all philosophers without exception, and which are therefore the most ancient of all. Moreover, the conclusions I go on to deduce are already contained and implicit in these principles, and I show this so clearly as to make it apparent that they too are very ancient, in so far as they are naturally implanted in the human mind.⁶

The main point I want to make here in relation to Descartes is that Platonism was ubiquitous in the early modern period. Because Platonist doctrines were interpreted in radically different ways in the fifteenth, sixteen, and seventeenth centuries and because early modern thinkers were happy to combine ideas from diverse sources, the task of

³ For some of these, see Cunning 2010, Chapter 10.

⁴ Bacon 2000, 7-8.

⁵ Mercer, 1999; Mercer 2002; Kraye and Stone 2000.

⁶ *Letter to Father Dinet*, AT 7:580. In this letter, Descartes describes his reaction to the Seventh Set of Objections, written by Pierre Bourdin. The letter is to Bourdin’s superior, Father Dinet, who had taught Descartes at the La Flèche. (See CSM 2:64-65.) Descartes is clear that he was very concerned that this one man’s views did not represent “the balanced and careful assessment that your entire Society had formed of my views” (AT 7:564).

identifying and then tracing the divergent paths of Platonism through the period is virtually impossible. The designation ‘Platonism’ is frustratingly vague although various strands and loosely connected doctrines can be associated with the term.⁷ With this vagueness in mind, we can turn to the “Platonisms” of Descartes’ intellectual milieu. They derive from three main sources.

First, when the Aristotelian Latin texts and ideas were imported to Europe from the Arab world in the thirteenth century, they were steeped in Platonism. Scholasticism resulted from the blending of Platonized Aristotelianism and medieval Christianity, which itself had Platonist roots. Thus, despite the philosophical subtlety of scholastic thinkers and despite their commitment to the Philosopher, they unknowingly promulgated a wide range of Platonist ideas, about the soul, the intellect, and the relation between the divinity and the world.⁸

A second major source of early modern Platonism is Augustinianism. The philosophy of Augustine laid the groundwork for medieval Christianity in the fifth century and set the stage for the reformations of Christianity that occurred a thousand years later.⁹ Luther himself emphasized the importance and profundity of Augustine’s thought, as did counter-reformation theologians. For example, the important French Catholic, Antoine Arnaud, wrote to Descartes that “the divine Augustine” is a “man of the most acute intellect, and entirely admirable not only in theology but also in philosophical matters.”¹⁰ When early modern reformers and Catholic counter-reformers turned to Augustine for inspiration, they were absorbing Platonist ideas.

Italian Renaissance thinkers who translated and interpreted Plato’s works constitute the third source for early modern Platonism. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, few thinkers in the Latin west had access to more than a couple of Plato’s dialogues;¹¹ by the end of the century, thanks to Marsilio Ficino’s translations and editions, all of “the divine Plato’s” works were in print.¹² Not only did Ficino produce the first Latin edition of Plato, his commentaries and interpretations form the materials for all of early modern Platonism. And the awkward truth about his Ficino’s Platonism is that it

⁷ It is an awkward truth about prominent Platonists that they put forward elaborate theories that are sometimes only remotely connected to the texts of the Athenian philosopher himself. On the heterogeneity of early modern Platonism, see Kristeller (1979) and Mercer (2002). On the question of what Platonism is, see Gerson 2005.

⁸ As the Renaissance historians Copenhaver and Schmitt 1992 have written: “Given the quantity of Platonic material transmitted” through Arabic authorities “or generally in the air in medieval universities, it is not surprising that parts of Thomist metaphysics owe more to Augustine, Proclus, or Plotinus than to Aristotle” (133).

⁹ Augustine himself acknowledges his Platonist sources, noting the special importance of the thought of Plotinus. See, e.g., Augustine’s *Confessions*, VII. 10 (16).

¹⁰ For the importance of Augustinianism in seventeenth-century France and for other examples of major figures proclaiming the importance of the “divine Augustine,” see Menn 1998, esp. 21-25.

¹¹ Twenty-first century scholars are often surprised to discover that, despite the importance of Platonism in medieval Europe, very few of Plato’s texts were available. Only the *Timaeus* was widely available. Dialogues as important as the *Republic* and *Symposium* had been lost and had to be “rediscovered” in the Renaissance. On Descartes’ relation to the *Timaeus*, see Wilson 2008.

¹² For more on this history, see Copenhaver and Schmitt 1992, esp. chapters 1 and 3.

owes as much to the thought of Plotinus, whose works he also translated, as to Plato himself.¹³

c. Search for a New Philosophy

In the decades leading up to Descartes' *Meditations*, Europe was full of philosophers trying to replace Aristotelianism. Whether the ideas were based on the ancient philosophies of thinkers like Democritus, Lucretius, and Epicurus or were newly formed, the goal was to forge a new account of the world. Each of these competing philosophies had to find a way to convince readers of its truth. The rhetoric was often flamboyant. To cite one such prominent example, Galileo provokes his readers to accept his proposals as follows:

Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.¹⁴

This passage from *The Assayer* is so often quoted that it is easy to overlook Galileo's threat: either the reader will follow him and learn to read the language of "the book of nature" or be forever lost in a dark labyrinth.¹⁵

d. Medieval Meditations

When Descartes chose to present his first philosophy in the form of a meditation, he was doing something provocative: he was placing himself and his proposals in a tradition going back to Augustine's *Confessions* of 397-98 ACE and announcing as much to his early modern readers. In order to recognize the fascinating ways in which Descartes uses and transforms the meditative discourse, we need to know more about it. In this subsection, I summarize the meditative tradition that began with Augustine and developed in important ways in the late medieval and early modern period, and that formed a crucial part of Descartes' education.¹⁶

In Cotgrave's French-English dictionary published in 1611, the English given for the French *meditation* is: "a deep consideration, careful examination, studious casting, or devising of things in the mind."¹⁷ The history of Christianity contains an evolving set of spiritual exercises where the point is to acknowledge the divinity deep within oneself and

¹³ Much has been written about Ficino, his thought and influence. A fine place to begin an exploration of these topics is Allen 2002 and Garfagnini 1986.

¹⁴ *The Assayer* from Drake (1957), 237-38.

¹⁵ There has been important recent work done on the "emergence" of science. For an overview and reference to other works, see Gaukroger 2006. It is noteworthy that few of these studies discuss the role of Platonism in the period.

¹⁶ The standard treatment of the relation between Descartes and Augustine is Rodis-Lewis 1954. Also see Janowski 2000, and esp. Menn 1998.

¹⁷ Cotgrave 1611.

devise a mental process to find it.¹⁸ For many Christians, the underlying assumption is that we must learn how to turn our attention away from ourselves and on to God. In a striking passage, the Gospel of Mark has Jesus claim: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”¹⁹ For Paul and many other early Christians, our sinful nature makes this turning to God impossible without the direct help of Jesus Christ. Paul summarizes the point succinctly: “just as sin came into the world through one man,” so “through the one man, Jesus Christ,” we “receive the abundance of grace” so that we might be “set free” from sin (Romans 5:12-17; 6:7)

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) is the single most influential meditator in the history of philosophy. Deeply moved by the epistemological pessimism of Paul, the *Confessions* contains the remarkable story of his decades-long effort to find ultimate truth and attain enlightenment. After years of struggle, Augustine realized that his corrupt nature could not find enlightenment on its own: “But from the disappointment I suffered I perceived that the darkneses of my soul would not allow me to contemplate these sublimities.”²⁰ Rather, “wretched humanity” will remain in darkness without the direct help of Jesus Christ. As this radical epistemological claim is put in the Gospel of Matthew: “no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew, 11:27). For hundreds of years after Augustine, the direct help of Jesus was considered a requisite for knowledge of the most significant truths about God and the human soul. Only when such divine help was conferred on the believer could there be the right “turning around” or conversion. Spiritual exercises developed to encourage self-improvement and increase the chances of attaining divine help. Their point was to teach meditators how to “take up the cross” and ready themselves for illumination. For the vast majority of medieval Christians, the final step in self-improvement required the intervention of Jesus Christ.

After generations of meditative practices based loosely on Augustinian ideas, the twelfth century witnessed a flourishing of systematic meditative treatises. Written from the first-person perspective, these spiritual exercises contain detailed steps about how to prepare to receive divine help.²¹ The author of such a meditation counsels the creation of a receptive state of mind through prayer and/or attention to one’s unworthy soul and then makes precise recommendations on how, when, and where to meditate. The main point is usually to learn to identify with Christ, especially with his sufferings, and to avoid temptations, demonic and otherwise. The striking thing about these “affective meditations” is that, as a recent study shows, they “ask their readers to imagine themselves present at scenes of Christ’s suffering and to perform compassion for that suffering victim in a private drama of the heart.” These writings “had serious, practical work to do: to teach their readers, through iterative affective performance, how to feel.”²²

¹⁸ For an interesting comparison between ancient and early Christian notions of self, see Barnes 2009. For an important study of religious meditations, see Stock 2011.

¹⁹ All Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. Mark 8:34.

²⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.20.26-27. Also see XIV.15. 21.

²¹ Bennett 1982, 32.

²² McNamer 2010, 1-9. Since Bynum 1987, scholars have increasingly discussed the gendered aspect of such meditations. For a summary, see McNamer 2010, 3-9.

This tradition of spiritual meditation developed in close proximity with the rise of scholasticism. Meditative exercises absorbed philosophical terms and nuance. Authors came to explicate meditative steps in terms of the faculties of memory, imagination, intellect, and will. The faculty of imagination became particularly important in affective meditations, where the goal was to imagine the emotional reality of Christ's sufferings as vividly as possible so as to elicit the right affect. Some meditations contain instructions for how to meditate over a short period of time; others would be used throughout a year.

e. Early Modern Meditations

The Reformation changed the course of meditative practices. After the reformers rejected the sanctity of saints and demanded a reconsideration of their role in spiritual life, there was a general reconsideration of meditative practices. The Catholic theologians at the Council of Trent (1545-1564), in the words of one scholar, "shaped new models of spiritual accomplishment."²³ Before the Reformation, saints were considered to be direct interveners in the lives of believers. Believers prayed to saints for help. After Trent, saints became paragons of spirituality, offering lessons on how to live a proper life. Against the Protestant reformers who took Biblical study to be a sufficient means to salvation, Catholic meditations used saints as inspirational.²⁴

In this context, it is not surprising that sixteenth-century spiritual leaders offered imaginative reformulations of spiritual exercises. The Catholic church moved quickly to canonize post-reformation spiritual advisers like Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) and Teresa of Ávila (also called 'Teresa of Jesus' (1515-1582)). Ignatius himself grounded the proper religious life in an education that included a rigorous pedagogy mixed with meditative exercises. The Jesuits founded schools and universities around the world including the one Descartes attended in La Flèche. During Descartes' youth, Teresa of Ávila was enormously popular for her humble and poignant reflections on the proper Christian life and the means to illumination.²⁵

As this brief history of post-Augustinian meditations suggests, it has dramatic phases and moving parts. The popularity of new spiritual exercises and the Catholic commitment to the role of saints in spiritual development inspired hundreds of early modern meditative manuals. To be sure, the traditional spiritual exercise persisted, but there quickly developed variations on that tradition and many new meditative modes, including many written by Protestants. In order to discern the rhetorical subtlety in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, it is important to see it as a clever negotiation of this diverse literary landscape.²⁶

²³ Leone 2010, 1.

²⁴ Alonso de Villegas published his *The Lives of Saints* in 1583. On Alonso De Villegas and the role of saints in the counter-reformation, see Leone 2010, 4 and *passim*.

²⁵ Teresa of Ávila's fame has hardly decreased. For the importance of her writings to modern Spanish literature, see DuPont 2012.

²⁶ I agree with Rubidge that "Descartes's *Meditations* do not resemble Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* more than other devotional manuals" (28), though I think the similarities between Descartes' work and other early meditations are more philosophically significant than Rubidge suggests. For a helpful account of those manuals, the role in them of memory, intellect, and will, and references to earlier studies, see Rubidge 1990.

I would like to offer a few brief examples of that diversity. The meditations summarized here represent the heterogeneity of early seventeenth-century meditative options. For our purposes, the most important differences among early modern meditations are in the goal of the exercise, the faculties and other elements that contribute to that goal, the power of demons to distract from it, and the role of the author in relation to the reader and to God.

I begin with an early seventeenth-century commentary on a canonical medieval meditation on the passions of Christ. The English title of the work expresses a good deal about its goal: *Saint Bernard, his Meditations: or Sighes, Sobbes, and Teares, upon our Saviours [sic] Passion*. The text contains a translation of major parts of Bernard of Clairveux's (1090-1153) twelfth-century meditation, but it does more than that. "To the Reader" explains: "these divine and comfortable Meditations on the Lords Passion, and Motives to Mortification . . . [are] selected out of the workes of S. Bernard, and other ancient Writers, not verbally turned into English, but augmented with such other Meditations, as it pleased God to infuse into my minde."²⁷ As a divinely inspired commentary on Biblical passages about the passions, relying on earlier Christian canonical writings, the work is full of direct proclamations to God and to the soul: "Learn therefore (oh my soule) to imitate the blessed Savior."²⁸ The book's goal is to engage the reader to meditate on the sacrifice and sufferings of Christ in order that the reader's soul might learn to imitate him.

In 1607, Antonius Dulcken published a book entitled *A Golden Book, On Meditation and Prayer*, which is an edition and translation (into Latin) of an important Spanish work by Pedro de Alcántara (1515-82). The latter had become famous in the late sixteenth century partly because he had been the spiritual adviser to Teresa of Ávila and partly because he was frequently seen to levitate in his cell. He was canonized in 1669. Pedro de Alcántara's *Meditations* nicely captures the point of many affective meditations: "Meditation is nothing other than the means to use our imagination to make ourselves present . . . in the life and passion of Christ."²⁹ But Pedro de Alcántara also emphasizes the role of the intellect, acknowledging that some "Meditations require the intellect more."³⁰ The Dedicatory Letter that Dulcken wrote for his edition exemplifies the Tridentine emphasis on saintly lives and an underlying epistemological optimism based on them. He explains that all people contain "the seeds of virtue in our souls," which only need to be properly nourished. Because saints have "supernatural affections," they encourage human hearts "to grow" in the right way.³¹

Carlo Scribani, a Jesuit, published a book in 1616, entitled *Divine Love*. Although it has the structure and focus of a traditional meditation, this very long and very odd work asks the reader to focus on the passions of Christ with the goal of immortality. Scribani concedes in his nearly 600-page work that one of the main difficulties in igniting "the flame of divine love" is that humans are weak and that demons provoke that weakness.³² He asks: "Where are you my love? . . . You are not in the bread, or in the virgin milk, . . .

²⁷ Bernard of Clairveux 1614, A 3r.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2v.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 136-37.

³¹ De Alcántara 1624, 2v-3r.

³² Scribani 1616, 582.

or in the cross or the sword.”³³ He insists that by focusing on the nature of divine love, we can overcome all difficulties. He speaks erotically of the love between Mary and Christ and between Christ and his followers. According to Scribani, this love “inebriates us,” causes “a stream of tears,” and “creates torrents of love.”³⁴

A huge two-volume *Meditations on the Mysteries of our Holy Faith*, published in 1636, marks a shift in the power of the intellect and the role of education in meditative exercise. This work, by the Spanish Jesuit, Luis de la Puente (1554-1624), is a grand and thoroughly scholastic treatment of topics common to meditations. For example, the second treats the “mysteries of the passions” and the resurrection, before moving to the trinity and then to “the most perfect attributes” of God. The text cites Aquinas and other “Scholastic Doctors” in an attempt to give “a rational account” of conflicting views about the mysteries. The hope here is to create a “fount of spiritual science [scientia].”³⁵ The frontispiece of the book summarizes its approach: the author sits in his priestly robes with a crucifix on one side and a pile of books on the other.

Early modern spiritual meditations differed significantly in terms of points of emphasis and modes of presentation. Consider, for example, Philipp Camerarius’ *Historical Meditations* of 1603. The point of this huge, two-volume work in French, is to show that the history of philosophy is full of diverse ways to purify “the heart” and approach God. Camerarius’ work does not fit any of the models usually offered of early modern meditations. It is not itself a meditation, in the sense that it does not ask the reader to meditate, and it appears to suppose that we do not require God’s direct assistance in accessing fundamental truths. Rather, it begins with the assumption that there are different ways of coming to God and different ways of purifying one’s heart;³⁶ it then sets about discussing those historical figures who presented “vain and useless efforts” and those who offered help in attaining a “true heart.”³⁷ Although Camerarius is critical of many philosophers, he compliments many others, including non-Christians. From “Greek sages” to Cicero and beyond, he acknowledges that “pagan” thinkers were able to understand the right approach to virtue. Within a few pages, he quotes Homer, Augustine, and the Emperor Justinian in evaluating their views.³⁸ There is a chapter on the “virtues and vices of the ancient Romans.”³⁹ For our purposes, it is important that he offers a thorough analysis of Plato’s cave allegory. Camerarius is particularly concerned to note that this famous story from Book VII of the *Republic* proves how easily people remain in “false opinion and vain ignorance.”⁴⁰

The books described here represent only a small sample of the range of meditations published between 1603 and 1639.⁴¹ My intention is to show that, although

³³ Ibid., 565.

³⁴ Ibid., 2v-4r. Scribani also published a more standard meditations. See Scribani, 1616.

³⁵ De la Puente 1636, 3-5.

³⁶ Camerarius, 1603; 2-3.

³⁷ Ibid., 334.

³⁸ Ibid., 3-5.

³⁹ Ibid., 183

⁴⁰ Ibid., 167.

⁴¹ Catholics wrote the majority of early modern meditations. But Protestants also took up the meditative banner. For example, a famous Lutheran theologian, Johann Gerhard (1582-1637),

the tradition of spiritual mediation persisted well into the seventeenth century, there was a great variation among them and that post-reformation Europe developed new meditative modes.

When Descartes entered the Jesuit school La Flèche in 1606, at the age of ten, his Jesuit teachers (and the professors who had trained those teachers) were thoroughly educated in this diverse meditative culture. As part of his education, Descartes would have studied Jesuit classics like Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* and very likely the works of Teresa of Ávila, which were extremely popular in the period. When Descartes was composing his *Meditations* in the final years of the 1630's, he was fully aware of this complicated context. It is noteworthy that the French translation of the *Meditations* that appeared in 1647 had the title *Les méditations métaphysiques de René Descartes*. Subsequent French editions also gave it the title *Metaphysical Meditations*.⁴²

2. Descartes

Descartes' *Meditations* was written to revolutionize seventeenth-century philosophy and science. Section 1 described four methodological traditions extant in the early seventeenth century. In order to forge his revolution, Descartes needed to respond to each of these. Some he used; others he transformed. It is time to consider how.

a. The Search for Stability: Meditation and Reorientation

We have noted the religious, political, and philosophical instability of the early seventeenth century. Philosophers were eager to cast aside the lies that "corrupt" the mind in order to find, in Bacon's words, "the vantage ground of Truth." But as Bacon also admits such "finding out of the Truth" requires "Difficultie, and Labour." In his *Meditations*, Descartes encourages his readers to do this labor. The traditional spiritual meditation demanded that readers shift attention from themselves to a greater and greater identification with Christ. To return to the Gospel of Mark, the mediators learn to "deny themselves and take up their cross" so that they shed "the world" and gain "their soul" (Mark 8:34, 36). This reorientation of the self requires practice and a willingness to reconsider one's world.

As we have seen, beginning with Augustine's *Confessions* and persisting through the early seventeenth century, the main goal of the spiritual meditation is a reorientation of the self so that the exercitant is prepared for illumination. The means to this goal is a series of intensive meditative exercises. The assumption is that, if the meditator becomes properly reoriented, then the chances of divine illumination are greatly increased. As we have also seen, there are differences in the roles and significance assigned to the meditator's memory, intellect, will, and imagination, but the assumption remains that only by identifying with Christ and experiencing his love will illumination occur.

published a Latin work that went through several editions and was translated into English and German. For the English version, see Winterton 1627.

⁴² The first French translation is: *Les méditations métaphysiques de René Descartes. Traduites du Latin par M. le D.D.L.N.S. [i.e. Louis Charles D'Albert de Luynes. Et les objections faites contre ces Meditations ..., avec les réponses de l'Auteur. Traduites par Mr. C.L.R. [i.e. Claude Clerselier] (Paris: Camusat), 1647. Subsequent French versions*

One of the most rhetorically stunning features of *Meditations on First Philosophy* is that it frames the search for metaphysical truths in meditative terms. For his seventeenth-century readers, Descartes' title itself would imply three things about their task: they would have to struggle to reorient their relation to themselves as experiencers of the world; they should expect such reorientation to be difficult and require rest along the way; and they could hope for illumination if they properly applied themselves. The meditative framework for the "first philosophy" prepares readers to be thoroughly changed. It is a brilliant way to prepare them for a revolution.

b. The Meditations as a Meditation: Steps in Reorientation

Descartes' *Meditations* both uses the meditative tradition and transforms it in important ways. It is now time to explain how. In her most important work, *Interior Castle*, Teresa of Ávila describes one of the main elements in spiritual illumination in terms roughly similar to those of the *Meditations*. She explains that although we begin with "a distracted idea of our own nature," the goal is "a notably intellectual vision, in which it is revealed to the soul how all things are seen in God."⁴³ Descartes' Meditation One creates "a distracted idea" of one's self, which the meditator confronts in Meditation Two. In Meditations Three through Five, the meditator is led to more and more notable instances of "intellectual vision."

It will be helpful to list the standard elements of meditative exercises and note how Descartes used, rejected, and transformed them. Here are the main steps in reorientation.

Step 1: Desire to Change

The authors of spiritual meditations begin with the assumption that readers want to find the way to truth and enlightenment. There is no reason to read a spiritual meditation unless one is seeking help. Descartes can assume no such thing. Unlike his spiritual cohorts, he has to convince his readers of the need to meditate on "first principles" and to reorient themselves metaphysically. In the first paragraph of Meditation One, he famously attempts to engage his readers in the need, once in a life, "to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations" (AT 7:17). Given the familiarity of his readers with the meditative tradition, Descartes' rhetorical strategy here is clever. His meditator takes a step that virtually all meditations ask their readers to make, namely, to admit their past mistakes and in that sense reject the foundations of their past lives.⁴⁴ Like the authors of spiritual manuals, Descartes believes that all his readers need complete reorientation. And like them, he assumes that, although

⁴³ Teresa, 1921, 6th mansion, chapter 10. For a major Latin edition of her works, which were originally in Spanish, see Teresa de Jesús, *Septem meditationes in Orationem Dominicam septem diebus hebdomadae accommodatae*, in *Opera s. matris Teresae*, ed. and Latin translation by Matthias Martinez, Coloniae Agrippinae, 1626,

⁴⁴ On the similarity between some of the steps in spiritual exercises and those in the *Meditations* and on their goal of illumination, see Hatfield 1986, especially 47-54. But the historical context is more complicated than he suggests. Also see Rorty 1983.

his readers might be confused in different ways and to different degrees, they all need to “start again.”⁴⁵

Step 2: Doubt and Demons

As we have seen, many meditations discuss the dangers of demons. In his two-part *Lives of the Saints* of 1583, Alonso de Villegas writes about the ease with which demons lead people astray. For many authors, the only way to avoid the power of demons is to learn to meditate properly. It is clear that Descartes intended the skeptical arguments of Meditation One to force his readers to doubt all of their beliefs. Scholars have long debated the argumentative strategy of the arguments and debated their cogency. But the rhetorical subtlety of the Meditation has not been sufficiently noticed. Given the religious and philosophical turmoil of the period and given the common warnings about demons, his early modern readers must have found the deceiver argument particularly poignant. Whether they were Catholic or Protestant, they wanted to avoid demonic power and find a secure foundation for true beliefs. When Descartes framed the presentation of his philosophy as a meditation and then introduced a deceiving demon, he was both forcing his reader into the philosophical equivalent of sinfulness and signaling to them that he was doing so. Whatever the soundness of the demon-deceiver argument, its rhetorical force must have added to its power, especially given recent warnings of thought-controlling demons.⁴⁶ Echoing the language of Alonso de Villegas and others in the tradition, he writes: “I will suppose therefore that... some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me” (AT 7:22). For some readers, this possibility must have sent chills up their spine. Similar to current religious meditations, the warning is: struggle against demons or be doomed.

Step 3: The Meditating Subject and the Authorial Voice

In his *Confessions*, Augustine describes the step that must be taken to find God:

These books [of the Platonists] served to remind me to return to my own self. Under Your guidance I entered into the depths of my soul. . . . I entered, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw the Light that never changes casting its rays over the same eye of my soul, over my mind. . . . What I saw was something quite, quite different from any light we know on earth. . . . It was above me because it was itself the Light that made me, and I was below because I was made by it.⁴⁷

Following Augustine, meditators assumed that the “changeable” mind could only reach the “unchangeable” truths “by turning towards the Lord, as to the light which in some fashion had reached it even while it had been turned away from him.” Thanks to God’s

⁴⁵ Scholars have interpreted the rhetoric and skepticism of Meditation One in different ways. See for example Wilson 2003 and Broughton 2002. Cunning is very helpful in introducing the notion of the “unemended intellect” and emphasizing the fact that Descartes’ strategy here is to offer a means for any sort of reader (whether Aristotelian, mechanist, atheist, or theist) to follow the method and discover the truths. See Cunning 2010, especially 7, 28-33, 103.

⁴⁶ See Cunning 2010 and reference to other sources, 62-63, esp. note 40.

⁴⁷ *Confessions* VIII. 10.

intimate presence in the human mind, humans can attain knowledge, though only “through the help of God.”⁴⁸ But even with divine help, as he explains in *Confessions*, “the power of my soul . . . belongs to my nature” and “I cannot grasp all that I am. The mind is not large enough to contain itself.”⁴⁹ Because the mind is mutable and finite, it can never grasp the whole of its contents; with the help of God, however, it can grasp some part of it.

As these passages from *Confessions* suggest, the author of spiritual exercises often speaks directly to God to praise the divinity and to ask for help. The spiritual adviser has attained illumination and so can speak with authority. In the *Confessions* Augustine speaks only to God, and so the advice he offers the reader is indirect. Instead of telling his readers what to do, he shows them his life. But it is clear that the authorial voice is that of someone who has experienced illumination.

Most late medieval and early modern spiritual meditations offer explicit advice to their readers about how to reorient themselves. In her *Interior Castle*, Teresa of Ávila constantly addresses “her sisters,” offering them directions based on her own experience. She frets about the obscurity of these “interior matters,” admitting to her readers that “to explain to you what I should like is very difficult unless you have had personal experience.”⁵⁰ She asks God for help and beseeches those who are struggling along with her: “But you must be patient, for there is no other way in which I can explain to you some ideas I have about certain interior matters.”⁵¹ In the end, if her readers follow her advice, they might attain illumination.⁵² But there is also a constant instability in the process of spiritual development. Teresa is clear about the precariousness of the journey to enlightenment because its success depends entirely on God’s support. She writes: “whenever I say that the soul seems in security, I must be understood to imply for as long as his Majesty thus holds it in His care and it does not offend him.” Even after years of practice, one must “avoid committing the least offence against God.”⁵³ Teresa insists in *My Life* that the soul can never trust in itself because as soon as it is not “afraid for itself” it exposes “itself to dangers.” It must always be fearful.⁵⁴ For Teresa and for many other meditators, there is never real spiritual security and so there must be constant meditation.

Like Teresa, Descartes’ meditator has to have an intellectual vision. Like Augustine and the spiritual exercises inspired by his *Confessions*, Descartes’ truth-seeker must begin his journey to illumination by learning “to return to my own self.” As he writes in Meditation Two: “But I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this ‘I’ is” (AT 7:25). But the authorial voice of the *Meditations* differs significantly from that of spiritual meditators. Descartes’ meditator has no idea of where the journey will lead or how the demon deceiver will be overcome. In an Augustinian mode, Descartes shows his reader a process of struggling toward illumination. But unlike the speaker of the *Confessions*, the speaker of the *Meditations* is not yet enlightened. While Descartes himself has clearly devised his first philosophy, the meditator does not let on that there is

⁴⁸ Ibid., XIV. 15 (21).

⁴⁹ Ibid., X. 8 (15).

⁵⁰ Teresa, 1921, Mansion 1, Chapter 2.

⁵¹ Ibid., Mansion 1, Chapter 1.

⁵² Ibid., Mansion 6, Chapter 10.

⁵³ Ibid., Mansion 7, Chapter 2, section 13.

⁵⁴ Teresa, 1904, Chapter XIX, Section 22

a clear path to illumination. At the beginning of Meditation Two, he writes: “It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles be around so that I can neither stand on the bottom now swim to the top. . . .I will proceed in this way [continuing to doubt my beliefs] until I recognize something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize that there is no certainty” (AT 7:24). To the reader, the authorial voice seems much more humble: it begins in confusion, turns to despair, and then moves only slowly to clarity.⁵⁵ And, in the end, it is much more optimistic: the meditative journey implies that any human being who takes the steps described will attain illumination. Unlike Augustine and his followers who restrict human knowledge to a mere part of the truth, and unlike Teresa and others who suggest that illumination does not effect stability, Descartes’ meditator is able to grasp the entirety of “first philosophy” once and for all. Compared to the instability of religious illumination, Descartes’ promise of certainty must have seemed appealing. And because his meditator moves from confusion to certainty, Descartes’s readers might have felt more optimistic about their own struggle.

Step 4: The Arduous Journey

The reorientation of the self in spiritual exercises takes time and effort. It is no wonder that the meditative journey is slow and arduous. Many early modern spiritual advisers preach the development of discipline, which they often explicate in terms of the faculties of memory, intellect, and will. The acquisition of such discipline requires brief periods of intense attention and must be punctuated with periods of rest. Given the fickleness of human attention, one has to develop the capacity to concentrate and then practice what was learned.

Descartes’ *Meditations* has all these features. Concerning discipline and rest, each of the first three Meditations constitutes a breakthrough that leaves the meditator discombobulated and in need of rest.⁵⁶ The end of Meditation One displays an attitude common in the discourse of spiritual exercise, namely, the fear of backsliding and inescapable darkness: “I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised” (AT 7:23).

Like his early modern predecessors, Descartes’ meditation also involves the redirection of the intellect, the proper application of memory, and the strengthening of the will. For example, Meditation Two concludes with a standard insistence: “But since the habit of holding on to old opinions cannot be set aside so quickly, I should like to stop here and meditate for some time on this new knowledge I have gained, so as to fix it more deeply in my memory.”⁵⁷ In Meditation Four, the meditator realizes that in order “to avoid error,” he must remember “to withhold judgement on any occasion when the truth of the matter is not clear” (AT 7:62). Then, echoing a common sentiment about the weakness of will and the human propensity to error, he acknowledges:

⁵⁵ See also Curley 1986, 153-57; Hatfield 1986, 69-72; and Cunning 2010, 37-43, 217-30.

⁵⁶ In a famous letter to Elisabeth of June 28, 1643, Descartes writes that one should spend “very few hours per year at those [activities] that occupy the intellect alone.”

⁵⁷ AT 7:34. In Meditation Four, he also emphasizes the importance of imprinting his insights in his memory through frequent meditating (AT 7:62).

Admittedly, I am aware of a certain weakness in me, in that I am unable to keep my attention fixed on one and the same item of knowledge at all times; but by attentive and repeated meditation I am nevertheless able to make myself remember it as often as the need arises, and thus get into the habit of avoiding error. (Ibid.)

I have noted that early modern meditations began to highlight the role of the intellect. In the next section, I argue that the “pure” intellectualism of the *Meditations* owes more to Platonism than do standard spiritual meditations. But it is worth noting here that, by the end of Meditation Five, Descartes is willing to state: “if there is anything which is evident to my intellect, then it is wholly true” (AT 7:71).

Step 5: Illumination

The main point of spiritual exercises is to be illumined. The authors who talk about illumination differ in their accounts, but a common assumption is that the experience involves a full recognition of the beauty and love of God. One is taken by that love and changed accordingly. As we have seen, Francis Bacon avers: “no pleasure is comparable, to the standing, upon the vantage ground of Truth.” For many early modern philosophers, whether Protestant or Catholic, there is a close relation between truth, love and pleasure. Teresa describes her experience of God as “absolutely irresistible.... It comes, in general, as a shock, quick and sharp, ...and you see and feel it as a cloud, or a strong eagle rising upwards, and carrying you away on its wings.”⁵⁸ We will discuss the illumination that occurs in the *Meditations* in the next section. For now, the relevant point is that although Descartes appropriates much of the language and imagery of Christian spirituality, he has dropped all talk of divine love. He mentions the beauty of God at the end of Meditation Three, but it does not function as a motivating force or even an attraction. Descartes’ account of illumination differs significantly from the tradition in that it is virtually devoid of affect.

But it is also easier to attain than the tradition could allow. Although Descartes recognizes that the path to illumination will not always be easy, he is committed to the view that proper meditation will lead to insight. In *Second Replies*, he acknowledges that for those who have “opinions which are obscure and false, albeit fixed in the mind by long habit,” it may be hard to become accustomed “to believing in the primary notions.” But he insists:

Those who give the matter their careful attention and spend time meditating with me will clearly see that there is within us an idea of a supremely powerful and perfect being.... I cannot force this truth on my readers if they are lazy, since it depends solely their exercising their powers of thought. (AT 7:135-36)

In the end, however, those who are not lazy and who practice will be properly illumined.

c. Transforming Platonism

Section 1 listed the three main sources of Platonism in early modern thought: scholasticism, Augustinianism, and the Plotinian Platonism promulgated by Ficino. Although there is no reason to believe that Descartes ever made any thing like a thorough study of Plato’s philosophy, his education would have given him a familiarity with

⁵⁸ Teresa, 1904, Chapter X, Section. 3.

Platonist ideas from these three sources. A Jesuit secondary school education in the seventeenth century retained a pedagogy structured around scholastic textbooks, with special attention paid to the thought of Aquinas. Scholars have long noted the Platonist ideas in the writings of Aquinas, whose popularity had increased in the counter-reformation. He became a pillar of the new Jesuit order after its formation in 1540 and was declared a “Doctor of the Universal Church” by Pope Pius V in 1567.⁵⁹ Descartes’ Jesuit education also contained huge amounts of Augustinianism. As we have seen, the medieval tradition of spiritual meditations grew out of Augustine whose ideas inspired early modern Reformers and Catholics alike.⁶⁰ Concerning the Platonism promulgated by Ficino and other humanists, it is unlikely that Descartes’ secondary education required a study of Plato’s works, but his teachers were familiar with Platonism and their textbooks would have included Platonist ideas.⁶¹

Given the ubiquity of Platonism in early modern Europe, it is not surprising that Descartes appropriates Platonist ideas. Some of those bear a close resemblance to Augustinian sources; others suggest non-Augustinian Platonist roots. For example, elements in the epistemological journey described in *Meditations* Two, Three, and Five bear a striking similarity to Plato’s cave allegory. In Book VII of the *Republic*, when the truth-seeker escapes his chains and turns from the shadows, he looks with difficulty at the fire in the cave. Once he accustoms himself to the fire’s illumination, he moves with difficulty to the entrance of the cave, where he is nearly blinded by the sun’s brightness. He slowly becomes accustomed to that light until he is able to gaze upon the sun and see the realities it so beautifully illuminates. In Plato’s words, once the truth-seeker “is able to see ... the sun itself,” he can “infer and conclude that the sun ... governs everything in the visible world, and is ... the cause of all the things that he sees” (516b). In *The Republic*, the epistemological moral is that the truth-seeker is able to grasp the Good itself and see how it is “the cause” of everything else.⁶²

What makes the *Meditations* so clever is that it uses all of these traditions to suit Descartes’ particular needs. On the one hand, as we have seen, he explicitly models his

⁵⁹ For a summary of the range of Aristotelianisms in the early modern period, the place of Aquinas in the counter-reformation, and citations to other studies, see Stone 2002.

⁶⁰ Scholars have often noted the striking similarities between Descartes’ ideas and those of Augustine. E.g., The latter is also concerned with proving that the self exists in the face of skeptical arguments. His response is summed up in the statement “Si fallor, sum,” which is recognized to be the distant antecedent of Descartes’ defense of the same idea, “Cogito, existo” AT 7: 25). 4-5. For more on Descartes’ relation to Augustine, see Menn 1998. But despite striking similarities between some of Augustine’s views and those of Descartes, it is doubtful that Descartes knew Augustine’s texts very well. He denies direct knowledge of those works and I see no reason not to take him at his word. The similarities between his ideas and Augustine’s are easily explained by the ubiquity of Augustinian ideas in the period. For a recent scholar who does not take Descartes at his word, see Brachtendorf, 2012

⁶¹ Robert Black has shown that in late medieval and Renaissance secondary schools, students learned about Plato’s cave allegory. Students also learned, in Black’s words, the “basic doctrines of the ancient philosophical schools,” including Plato, who was called “semi-divine and preferred by the gods themselves.” Black 2001, 305-07..

⁶² For a brief discussion of the similarities between Descartes’ *Meditations* and Plato’s cave allegory, see Mercer (2002), pp. 37-39. Buckle (2007) argues for a similar point, but seems unaware of the variety of Platonisms available to Descartes.

work on Christian spiritual meditations. On the other, he replaces an essential feature of those exercises with exercises that are devoted to “the pure deliverances of the intellect.”⁶³ As we have noted, Augustinian notions of sin make divine intervention a requisite for illumination. Descartes ignores the standard Christian need for intervention and relies instead on a purer form of Platonist intellectualism, according to which the intellect needs no such help. Similar to Augustine and the Augustinian spiritual tradition, Descartes’ journey begins with a turning “inward.” But unlike that tradition, his meditator is able to escape the shadow-world without the aid of any divine or human source.

The narrative arc that begins with the first paragraphs of Meditation Two and ends with the conclusion of Meditation Three roughly parallels the steps that Plato’s cave-dweller takes: it begins with disorientation and confusion, moves to a first glimpse into the nature of things (the nature of mind and body), followed by the dramatic moment when the ultimate reality is apprehended. Plato’s truth-seeker sees the light of the sun at the edge of the cave; Descartes’ has his first glimpse of God. Neither needs divine help.

At the end of Meditation Three, Descartes neatly combines elements drawn from religious meditations with those of the Platonist tradition to create a dramatic epistemological shift. Although the argument for the existence of God occupies much of Meditation Three, its conclusion strongly suggests that one of the main points of this part of the meditative exercise is to reorient the intellect so as to recognize its cognitive range and its relation to God: “I perceive ... the idea of God, by the same faculty which enables me to perceive myself” (AT 7:51). Although Descartes emphasizes the importance of having turned his “mind’s eye” upon itself, the result is illumination. The meditator perceives God. As a conclusion to Meditation Three, he writes that, before “examining” this idea of God “more carefully and investigating other truths which may be derived from it, I would like to pause here and spend sometime in contemplation of God; ... and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it” (AT 7:52).

The first paragraph of Meditation Four summarizes the lessons drawn from the meditative enterprise: “During these past few days I have accustomed myself to leading my mind away from the senses” and recognized that “very little about corporeal things ... is truly perceived, whereas much more is known about the human mind, and still more about God” (AT 7:52-53). As a consequence of this meditative exercise, “I now have no difficulty in turning my mind ... towards things which are the objects of the intellect alone.” Descartes is perfectly clear that it is “the human intellect” by itself that knows these things. Looking forward toward the next phase of meditation, he writes: “And now, from this contemplation of the true God, in who all treasures of wisdom and the sciences lie hidden, I think I can see a way forward to the knowledge of other things” (AT 7:52-53).

For seventeenth-century readers of the *Meditations*, this was surely a dramatic moment. Descartes’ meditator had reached the point of reorientation: he has escaped the shadows of doubt to attain illumination, accomplished by his own intellectual endeavors. The lesson is clear: the human intellect is able to make the arduous trek to illumination entirely on its own. Descartes’ readers would have been fully aware of the difference

⁶³ This is language from Hatfield 1986, 47. I agree with Hatfield’s basic point that the *Meditations* attempts to “evoke the appropriate cognitive experiences in the meditator.”

between this journey to illumination and the Augustinian one. And many readers would be familiar with the story of the cave, if not the details of Plato's *Republic*.⁶⁴ It seems likely that Descartes is here cleverly engaging with these Platonist traditions to suit his needs. By elegantly interweaving different Platonist strands he creates something both old and revolutionary.

d. Reorientation and New Philosophy

The revolution that Descartes hoped to effect was primarily a scientific one. Scholars have persuasively argued that his main concern was to furnish the world with a science that would replace Aristotelianism and explain “the whole of corporeal nature.”⁶⁵ Descartes believes that the “establishment” of his new philosophy would render the Aristotelian system “so absolutely and so clearly destroyed ... that no other refutation is needed” (AT III 470). As I have noted, when he claimed his system would replace Aristotle, he joined a chorus of early modern voices announcing that a philosophical revolution was at hand. But unlike most others, by the mid-seventeenth century, Descartes' proposals had become one of the “new philosophies” that had to be taken seriously.

The similarities between the “pure intellectualism” of Galileo in *The Assayer* and that of Descartes' are obvious. For both natural philosophers, the mind turns itself upon its concepts, reflects on them, and discovers the truths there contained. Also, like Galileo, Descartes believes that if the mind does not attend to its concepts in the right way, it will remain in a world of its own prejudices. But Descartes goes well beyond Galileo in offering a first philosophy that will ground his physics and doing so in a way that gradually prepares his readers for a revolution. After the illuminations of Meditation Five, Descartes concludes that meditative exercise by summarizing what he has learned and preparing his readers for the science of nature that will come:

Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him. And now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge of countless matters, both concerning God himself and other things whose nature is intellectual, and also concerning the whole of that corporeal nature which is the subject-matter of pure mathematics (AT 7:71).

The success of Descartes' proposals in natural philosophy is surely due to their innovation and explanatory power. But we should not let their success hide the power of the *Meditations'* rhetorical arc. While it is impossible to gauge the exact contribution that its meditative rhetoric made to its philosophical success, the methodology of reorientation must have cushioned the blow of its proposals. In grounding his account of nature in first principles discoverable through a reorientation of the mind, Descartes was preparing his readers to accept radical change.

⁶⁴ See Black 2001, 305-07.

⁶⁵ AT 7:71.. See also Garber 1986, 83-91.

3. Conclusion

The goal of this chapter is to contextualize the methodology of Descartes' *Meditations* in order to reveal the subtlety of its rhetorical strategy. Historians have long noted the work's brilliance and originality. The same has not been true of the richness and finesse of its method. I have tried to show some of the complicated ways in which Descartes uses, ignores, and transforms traditional philosophical and religious elements to create a work of astonishing subtlety. He negotiated a complex philosophical landscape to set a path that would surprise, illumine, and *change* his contemporaries. The *Meditations* is much more than a series of arguments. It is an attempt to reorient the minds of its readers and ultimately to forge a revolution.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ I would very much like to thank David Cuning for asking me to write up my ideas about methodological matters as they apply to the *Meditations* and then advising me along the way. A conversation with Gideon Manning was also very helpful. I would like to thank the Herzog August Bibliothek for offering me a Senior Fellowship so that I could use their wonderful library while researching early modern meditations.