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The Structure of Descartes' *Meditations*

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"I . . . treat the whole of First Philosophy. . . . I would never advise anyone to read it excepting those who desire to meditate seriously with me, and who can detach their minds from affairs of sense and deliver themselves entirely from every sort of prejudice, I know too well that such men exist only in small number. But for those who, without caring to comprehend the order and connections of my reasonings, form their criticisms on detached portions arbitrarily selected, as is the custom with many, these I say, will not obtain much profit from reading this Treatise." (AT VII, 9–10)

"I rightly demand special attention on the part of my readers and have purposely chosen a special style of writing which I considered most suitable for this aim. . . . I think it quite fair to ignore altogether and despise as of no weight the criticisms of people who are unwilling to meditate with me and instead persist in holding their preconceived views. I know how difficult it is for anyone—even someone who gives it his full attention and who is really seriously trying to discover the truth—to keep before his mind the whole compass of my *Meditations* and at the same time grasp each part, both of which must, in my opinion, be achieved if the full point of my work is to be comprehended." (AT VII, 158–159)

The details of Descartes' directions and warnings to the reader indicate his sensitivity to issues of style and genre. His preoccupation with methodological issues, his attempts to formulate the rules governing stages of inquiry and demonstration, extend to a concern for issues of philosophical rhetoric. He is sensitive to the difficulties of addressing readers who are not yet convinced of the propriety of his methods of inquiry and demonstration. It is no accident that Descartes wrote

in a remarkable variety of genres. We have *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* (1628), *Le Monde* (written in 1634, published in 1664), *Discours de la Méthode* (1637), *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (1641; the authorized French translation was published in 1647); a posthumously published dialogue entitled *La recherche de la Vérité par la lumière naturelle*, *Les Principles de la Philosophie* (1644), *Traité des Passions de l'Âme* (written in 1645–1646; published in 1649). This variety attests to his experimentation with modes of philosophical exposition, with a series of distinctive voices and positions. Sometimes—as in the *Discours*—he writes in French for a more popular audience; sometimes—as in the *Regulae*—in Latin for learned scholars. Sometimes he writes in the first person to present an intellectual autobiography; sometimes—as in the *Traité des Passions*—he presents an impersonal analytic treatise. Sometimes he straightforwardly formulates rules for scientific thought. Sometimes he carries the reader through a meditation designed to clear the mind of superstition and prejudice in order to bring it to a realization of its scientific powers. In such works, he is preparing the reader to follow the rules for scientific investigation, in the conviction that doing so ensures truth.

The *Meditations* is an artfully constructed work, following the structure of the traditional meditational genre. That tradition is both ancient and varied. Descartes might well have had several quite different reasons for borrowing, conjoining, and transforming its diverse strands. The full title of his book intimates his intention to synthesize: *Meditations on First Philosophy*, not "Meditations on God's Creation" or "A Treatise on First Philosophy." Following Descartes' suggestion, I propose to read the *Meditations* as a work within the traditional meditational form, rather than as a treatise composed of a series of arguments. While some of the familiar objections to the "arguments" of the *Meditations*—particularly the various charges of circularity—lose their sting under such a reading of the *Meditations*, other, analogous problems arise, problems that are more central to Descartes' concerns and directions.

Although various species of meditations all bear the mark of their Stoic origins, Marcus Aurelius's book was originally called *Ton Eis Heauton Biblion*, "his book to himself." The tradition is reflexive as well as reflective: the author transforms himself by following a staged reflection, a self-reform through self-examination.[1] Though he writes for himself, the author intends to be read as a guide, if not also as a director. His reforming and reformed self are not uniquely his: they represent any and every mind capable of reflexive transformation. Along with set forms, meditational manuals feature set topics: the

ego's relation to sense, imagination, its own body, and the physical world; the search for what is trustworthy, stable, and structured; the relation between the meditator's ideas of divinity and divinity itself, as well as the relation between divinity and cosmic order; the proper place of the essential self in that order. When these topics are treated attentively in a proper sequence with an appropriate regimen, true understanding has existential consequences: the self comes into its proper inheritance, its proper mode of existence.

The traditional meditational mode offers Descartes a number of distinct attractions. Because the reader must enact his own transformation, the meditational mode serves Descartes' antiauthoritarian purposes. Since that transformation involves a series of catharses of sensation, common opinion, and superstitious prejudice, it supports Descartes' provisional use of skepticism as a scourge of falsity. The introspective and reflective aspects of meditational exercises suit Descartes' program of examining confused ideas to discover the mind's clear and distinct innate ideas. And because such exercises are intended to strengthen the will and purify the understanding, they serve Descartes' constructive program of laying the foundations of proper science, the true understanding of the world.

But there are distinctive varieties of the meditational mode, differing in outcome, structure, and in the author's relation to the reader. A philosopher's choice among the varieties of meditations signals his conception of the nature of his philosophic enterprise. Some meditations are intended to effect a radical transformation in the meditator and his world. Everything in his world is meant to be affected by his transformation: his embodiment, his friendships, his practical and political life, his relation to divinity. In contrast to such revolutionary meditations, interpretive meditations bring the meditator to a new understanding of himself, the significance of his practices and convictions, but they leave everything—particularly practical and political matters—essentially unchanged. If seeing the world in a different light transforms a person, the meditator is changed; but the change is a change in his understanding of the significance of what he does rather than a change in what he does.

The Stoics were divided among themselves, and most were also divided in mind about whether meditational reflection could transform sensations and passions, practical and political life, or whether everything would—and should—be left unchanged save that it is understood anew. The inheritors of the Stoic tradition retain this ambivalence. Spinoza's *Emendation of the Human Understanding* is evasive on this issue, as is Freud's presentation of psychoanalysis as a form of

the classical meditational exercise. Wittgenstein is singularly ambiguous on the issue of whether philosophical understanding transforms everything or leaves it exactly as it was. And Descartes, too, inherits this Stoic uncertainty: Does he leave his starting pont behind, or is it reinterpreted, transformed but not transcended? Or does he attempt to effect a compromise by transforming scientific understanding while leaving practical life intact? Scholastic science is demolished, replaced by an entirely new edifice constructed with new materials, on a new foundation. But practical matters, and moral and political life are to remain within the domain of common sense and common understanding. Yet this alternative also has its ambiguities. Descartes does not provide the theoretical structure for a distinction between scientific and practical understanding. His position is thoroughly evasive. On the one hand, practical matters are not to be disturbed by the method of doubt; on the other hand, common opinion represents confused ideas, just the sorts of ideas to which a scientific mind should give no credence.

There are other varieties of meditational writing: Both revolutionary and interpretive meditations can be ascensional, and both can be penitential. Ascensional meditations move the reader relatively smoothly, without reversals or turmoil, to a new mode of existence or to a new mode of understanding. Both revolutionary and interpretive ascensional meditations can be—as Stoic meditations tend to be—primarily intellectual. Others—those of neo-Platonic Christians like Saint Bonaventure and Cardinal Bellarmine—border on the celebratory and ecstatic.[2] The author of an ascensional meditation moves to self-realization through exhortation and admonition, celebration and prayer, but he does not suffer the dark night of the soul. Metaphors of light and illumination, clarity and precision of vision, are used with strongly heuristic intent. An intellectual ascensional meditation stresses the primacy of cognitive understanding in the gradual clarification of ideas, the individual mind's movement to innate truths reflecting the cosmic mind. Because the emphasis is on a step-by-step movement from confused to clear ideas, the will's rejection of falsity is relatively muted. Since falsity is regarded as stemming from confusion rather than from illicit assertion, the author-guide can illuminate the reader-meditator without demolishing his previous beliefs. Standardly, an ascensional meditation moves upward through a series of reflections: the meditator follows a practice or develops a train of thought that embeds a series of presuppositions. Reflection on his meditation—for instance, that the stages in the regimen of doubt presuppose that sensory and mathematical knowledge are distinguishable or that the

capacity for reflection presupposes that remembering and perceiving are distinguishable—reveals a set of presuppositions that are (so to say) dramatically, or phenomenologically, demonstrated.

Though speaking to himself, the author of an ascensional meditation speaks to be overheard; his soliloquy and his conversation have the same voice and language. He is Everyman, marking the signposts of his journey for others to follow. Guide rather than director, he does not manipulate the stages of the reader's self-realization. The reflective reader will find the light of nature within himself; it is in him already, awaiting the turn of his attention. Parables, masks and unmaskings, indirections, ambiguities are unnecessary—all minds are implicitly united in *nous*, the cosmic mind. As we are all of one mind, the distinctions between reader and author, between the order of self-discovery and that of guidance, need not be rigidly enforced.

The intellectual ascensional mode has enormous attractions for Descartes. Its neo-Platonic echoes underwrite his conviction that mind contains the formulae of Extension. Since individual minds have these formulae among their innate ideas, they can turn to their real selves and return to their proper immortality in *nous* by scientific inquiry, following the light of nature. The lure of this mode is that it supports Descartes' claim that a meditator reflecting on the logical order of clear and distinct ideas must rationally believe that those ideas truthfully represent the ontological order that causes them. Reflective introspection and scientific investigation are one and the same enterprise. It is no incidental benefit of the ascensional mode that it is meant to assure the meditator of the immortality of his soul, even if it does not assure him of the immortality of his individuality. Nor is it an incidental benefit of the ascensional mode that it gives an account of an order of degrees of reality in a hierarchy that culminates in perfection.

In contrast to the ascensional meditational mode, the penitential mode places the author in a much more complex relation to his reader.[3] Because the penitent reader's condition is not merely confused but fallen, not merely mistaken but perverse, self-transformation requires more than the detached stance of an ascensional guide. It requires a director to manipulate a penitent's catharsis. When the reader-penitent is unaware of his fallen condition, he must first be brought to a state of despair. Saint Ignatius of Loyola instructs spiritual directors in the techniques of evoking penitential self-lacerating guilt and anguish.[4] The author of such a meditation is not just slightly further along the same path as the reader: he stands in a different place altogether, staging and directing as well as guiding. Because the director-author's understanding of what he says is radically different from

that of the penitent, he must speak in parables, images, darkly with double meaning. The penitent undergoes ritual exercises, sensory deprivations, trials. Often there are three distinct positions and voices in such works: the author's training advice to the spiritual directors, speaking as a teacher; the spiritual director's commands to the penitent, speaking as a guarded authority; and the penitent's inner dialogue, speaking to himself with reproach and encouragement.

Like the ascensional mode, the penitential mode can be either revolutionary or interpretive; it can change the meditator's life or his understanding of his life. In the revolutionary mode, all the stages leading to the true self are transcended, the ladder is kicked away at the end. The new person bears no continuous relation to the old, not even to the self who undertook the penitential quest: everything about the past self, even his motives for seeking the Way, is suspect and must be abandoned. Even when such a penitential meditation is intellectual rather than passionate or spiritual, skeptical cleansing is only provisional. In the ascensional mode, skepticism can be abandoned once it has revealed itself to be self-destructive. But in the interpretive penitential mode, all stages of the penitential quest are preserved, perpetually reenacted. The mediating skeptical asepsis, the cleansing of error, is continuously required, even after the self is transformed, fully realized. Both ascensional and penitential meditations require complexity, if not actual division of mind. But there is an important difference between the two modes. An ascensional meditation requires only that the capacity for reflection includes the ability to discover the presuppositions implicit within the meditational movement, whereas a penitentional meditation also requires the capacity to disassociate from, and even to deny, beliefs that may persist even after the mediator realizes their falsity. (Someone who understands the laws of optics still experiences perceptual illusions, and so, too, someone who understands the epistemological status of confused ideas still finds herself inclined to assert them.)

Descartes is attracted to the penitential mode because it streses the activity of the will in rejecting error: the penitent detaches himself from his false beliefs by a series of exercises that reveal and strengthen the will. Ironically enough, this view is used to support the Enlightenment rationalism that emphasizes the autonomy of the individual inquiring mind. Descartes' critique of authoritarian and dogmatic establishments attracts him to those aspects of Augustinian theory which centralize the autonomy of the will as the condition for self-improvement and transformation. The mind's ability to free itself from error depends on the will's capacity to suspend judgments it had once

affirmed. The movement from error to truth is discontinuous. The distance separating the author-guide from the reader-meditator, which is so distinctive of penitential meditations, reflects this discontinuity: the movement to truth requires a clearing of old rubbish to prepare the ground for a new foundation.

In addition to the ascensional and penitential meditational modes, Descartes also adopts a mode of analytic reconstruction, a logical analysis that begins by testing complex beliefs and dissolving them into their basic constitutive elements.[5] "I have used only analysis in my Meditations, which is the best and truest method of teaching. . . . Analysis shows the true way by which a thing is methodically discovered and deduced. . . . If the reader cares to follow . . . and pays attention to every point, he understands the matter no less perfectly and makes it his own as if he had discovered it himself" (AT VII, 155–156). The sequence of stages moves analytically to locate structural elements rather than to effect an ascension or a catharsis. The probing, testing movement from sensation to perception and perceptual memory, to commonsense beliefs, to physics, then to mathematics and on to theology ends in a self-certifying reflection. When the analysis reaches this indubitable and unanalyzable Archimedean pivotal point, the method becomes reconstructive and architectonic: the world is reconstructed from that point.

In an analytic meditation, skeptical arguments are probative and probationary rather than penitentially destructive. They do not lead to a cathartic expulsion of fallible beliefs. They are used to locate those irreducible and self-certifying beliefs that serve as the foundational basis for the reconstruction of scientific knowledge. Reflections on the ways that such truths are self-certifying—methodological analyses of the presuppositions and the logical structure of self-certifying arguments—do not add further premises to such arguments. Rather they explicate and articulate the implicit criteria that validate them. The presuppositions uncovered by analytic reflection on self-certifying truths reveal the criterion by which such truths are validated. Analysis discovers a self-evident truth; reflection on that truth uncovers the measure of its truthfulness. It is as if the analytic method could—by riding on the skepticism of a penitential meditation and the reflective unfolding of an ascensional meditation—find the standard meter, which then certifies itself as the appropriate unit of measure. Descartes' hope is that introspective analysis reveals the foundations of a deductive mathematics, which turns out to provide the foundations for an ontologically significant science that reveals the structure of the world.

Like the traditional meditation, the analytic-architectonic mode is meant to turn the soul and reconstitute the mind, freeing it from falsity and confusion. This turn of thought, that the analytic-architectonic mode is not only scientifically productive but also metaphysically validated, may well have struck Descartes with something of the force of divine revelation. It seemed natural to suppose that the analytic method could be combined—and indeed fused—with a traditional meditation, whose stages appear loosely isomorphic with those of an analytic inquiry. The analytic search for the elements of thought requires just the sort of probing, skeptical cleansing that traditional religious meditations require. Once the analytic elements of thought are discovered, more radical skeptical doubts appear: doubts that reproduce the moments of nihilistic despair in religious meditations. Analysis can discover the elements of thought; but, once they are discovered, there is a question about whether the elements of psychological thought are the elements of proper science, and whether the elements of a properly rigorous science are the elements of ontology. An analytic discovery of self-validating truths is parallel to the meditator's discovery that his despair is itself a sign of God's truth within him. Analytic reflection on the method that validates self-certifying truths reproduces the meditator's reflection that the stages of his meditation reveal both his finitude and his creator's benevolence. And, finally, in both the traditional meditation and in its analytic counterpart, the assurance of divine veracity is followed by a return of the world, a recovery of the reliability of knowledge. Of course the divinity that Descartes' analytic mode discovers is the God of the rationalists—to some no divinity at all—and the knowledge that is reaffirmed is scientific knowledge of the mathematical properties of Extension rather than the claims of faith. But still, Descartes speaks in his boldest and most confident tone in the analytic-architectonic mode. Yet that mode could not have stood on its own, validating itself: it rests on the practices of ascensional and penitential meditations and on the presuppositions embedded in the actual exercise of such meditations.

One of the attractions of combining the analytic-architectonic mode with traditional meditations is that it could provide Descartes with a way of transposing and using the sequence of a traditional meditation as a method for discovering the elements of thought. Once the foundational elements are identified, the traditional meditational mode provides an ontological ground that validates the use of an analytic method in mathematical physics. Descartes might well have hoped that grafting the analytic with the traditional meditations would enable

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him to use the advantages of each to provide needed support for the other. Descartes already knew he had a working deductive mathematical physics. He wanted a metaphysics and a theory of cognition that would support his physics: he wanted to legitimize introspective analysis as a method for discovering the epistemological elements—basic analytic self-certifying truths—that express and define ontologically basic elements. The reflective self-reformer engaged in intellectual catharsis is the ancestor of the author of *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt*, itself the first volume of a complete new science of the world, a science that is in principle available to Everyman.

The enlightenment resulting from an analytic-architectonic meditation offers further hidden practical and political benefits. Because its metaphysical elements and the rules for their combination are quite simple, the analytic-architectonic meditation is openly accessible. Only care, clarity, and reflection are required from the reader-meditator in order to reach truth. Despite Descartes' suspicion that very few will be able to read the *Meditations* with the care it requires, the confluence of the ascensional, the penitential, and the analytic modes of meditation promises equality of minds and the freedom of individual minds from mystification, established authority, and worldly power. Descartes wants the road to truth to be straightforward: because the directions are simple, they can in principle be followed even by the simple.

But wishing, even bold confident wishing, doesn't make it so. Descartes' stance to us, his readers, is most devious and controlling when he appears to speak with artless candor. His attempts to fuse the varieties of meditational modes, his use of a traditional religious form to transform his reader into a rational inquirer are hidden under the surface of what appears to be a straightforward expository argument. This indirection—his use of the associations and impetus of meditational writing—undermines his enlightenment enterprise. Descartes speaks with forked tongue. On the one hand, he assures us that there is no danger in following the method of doubt: it is a purely intellectual exercise that need not endanger practical, moral, or political life. On the other hand, in the preface of the French edition of the *Principles*, written six years after the *Meditations*, Descartes speaks of philosophy as a tree whose branches are medicine, morality, and mechanics: the fruits of his philosophy are, it seems, in action and in practical life. Does Descartes speak with forked tongue merely to assure his safety from the authority of the Church, while urging the reader to follow no authority but reason itself? Or does he really intend his enlightenment to remain purely intellectual, leaving authority and practice untouched?

If so, what would be the point of having a new mind in an old self? Descartes' new analytic mathematical physics can of course remain purely intellectual. But can the psychology and ontology that support it remain within the bounds of a purely intellectual enlightenment? How can his new metaphysics fail to challenge Scholastic doctrines, and consequently the power of Scholastic institutions? The crucial question is: What is to be taught in the Schools, the old authority or the new science? Because the old and the new are not compatible, Cartesian enlightenment cannot possibly remain purely intellectual: it must move to a reforming practice, if only of the curriculum of the Schools. It is not surprising that Descartes, writing in the shadow of Bruno and Galileo, could not write frankly. He may not himself have been fully aware of the extended ramifications of his intellectual revolution. Perhaps he had been so devious with his readers that he became devious with himself. Or perhaps his thoughts were not, after all, as transparent to his investigations as he believed.

I

The six staged days of the *Meditations* can be read as moments in an ascensional meditation, or as moments in a penitential meditation, or as stages in an analytic investigation. Each of these suggests a distinctive interpretation of the import of the stage, its function in the work of transforming the mind.

First, there is Descartes' embarrassing, presumptuous echo of the six days of Creation in the six stages of the *Meditations*. The new creation is the new science of the world: Meditation I begins by Descartes' separating the light of certainty from the darkness of confusion, and Meditation VI ends with an account of the composition of a man, a being composed of mind and body, a fallible but rational being. Although the stages of classical meditations vary depending on the significance of the writer's favorite mystical number (6, 7, 9, 10, or 12) they generally follow a standard form:

Stage 1: *Catharsis*, detachment, or analysis: a movement from sensation to imagination and memory, to science and mathematics, to theology.
Stage 2: *Skepsis*, despair, or nihilism.
Stage 3: Reflection (*peripeteia*), a reflection that performs a revolutionary change.
Stage 4: Recognition (*anagnorisis*) of the reflexive, corrective power of the will; the discovery of the law of noncontradiction as a methodological principle validating *reductio* arguments.

Stage 5: Ascension from the psychological to the ontological order; proofs for the existence of God.
Stage 6: Reconstruction of the world and the self.

The sequence of Descartes' *Meditations* clearly conforms to this traditional structure.[6] But since all the varieties of meditational modes follow the same stages, the structure of the *Meditations* does not by itself reveal Descartes' rationale for attempting to use, fuse, and transform the three varieties of meditational modes. While each stage can be read ascensionally, penitentially, and analytically, some stages are more hospitable to one mode of interpretation than to the others. Sometimes the modes pull in different directions, resisting Descartes' attempts to yoke them together.

Stage 1 most happily combines the three meditational modes in a mutually supportive reading. In an ascensional reading, the movement from sensations and perceptions to common beliefs about the physical world, to physics, to mathematics, then to logic and, finally, to theology is a movement from confusion to greater precision and clarity. Here Descartes is, of course, following a familiar Platonic movement of abstraction from the confusions of sensation to increasingly more powerful and more stable levels of explanation. Since the movement also presents skeptical arguments designed to perform a series of catharses of confused, dubitable ideas, it is crucial for Descartes to combine his adaptation of the Platonic movement with a penitential reading. He wants to set the stage for the realization that an ascension through a skeptical catharsis has been effected by the power of a free will, whose operations are independent of those of the understanding. The carefully staged sequence of skeptical doubts that moves from sensations through ordinary belief to mathematics also introduces distinctions central to an analytic reading of Stage 1. On the principle that whatever is distinguishable is distinct, the sequence of catharses shows that intellectual memory is independent of perceptual memory, that theoretical physics and mathematics are independent of common sense, that the law of noncontradiction is a formal principle independent of the particular contexts of its application, and that it is possible to affirm, deny, or refrain from judging the truth of the same idea. These basic distinctions and principles of analysis are introduced and embedded in the ordered sequence of an ascensional reflection and a penitential cleansing. Once such distinctions and principles are used in the meditational movement, the presuppositions implicit in their application can be uncovered by further ascensional reflection.

While this confluence of influence works very well for Stage 1, the varieties of meditational modes pull in different directions in Stage 2. In an ascensional reading, the moment of nihilistic despair can—for

good reasons—only be a rhetorical trope. If skepticism really ends in nihilism, then even the reflection that skepticism and nihilism are self-destructive cannot be trusted. A fully despairing self cannot trust its Augustinian reflections that guilt and anguish presuppose and reveal a sound conscience and that the realization of error evinces an implicit criterion of truth. A fallen self that recognizes its condition may speak comfortingly to itself: but can it believe its own words of comfort? If the moment of reflection really does overcome the anguish of nihilism, then the moment of despair must have been superficial. If the idea of righteousness (and thus the possibility of righteousness) is implicit in the sense of guilt, and a criterion of truth is implicit in the recognition of error, then the stage of despair is only notional. Descartes must be evasive: he needs ascensional trust to support the reflections that move the soul out of despair. But if that ascensional trust is in working order, the tears of anguish were histrionic. Descartes trusts the force of ascensional reflection to reveal the presuppositions of the meditational exercises in order to overcome the complete despair of a strict penitential nihilism.

Stage 3, the stage of reflection, again nicely combines the three meditational modes. On an ascensional reading, reflection reveals the presuppositions of the lower levels, presuppositions which, when made explicit, bring the mind to a clearer and more powerful understanding. On a penitential reading, reflection is the moment of turning: the point at which the erring soul recognizes that its capacity to be aware of its errors reveals that it is using a criterion of truth, even if that criterion is not self-certifying. On an analytic reading, the stage of reflection articulates the criterion with which the meditator identifies self-certifying elements from which complex experience is constructed. The conclusion of this stage is, on all of the meditational modes, a modest one: there is no presumption that the criterion which reflection discovers is itself self-validating.

The fusion of the three meditational modes again becomes problematic in Stage 4. Combining the penitential and the ascensional modes introduces an assumption that would be illicit within an analytic-architectonic framework. Reflection on the structure of self-certifying truths and of the presuppositions embedded in the cathartic movements of Stages 1 and 2 reveals two working principles. One is a criterion of error: self-contradictory judgments are false. The other legitimizes constructive *reductio* arguments: a proposition can be proven true by showing that its negation leads to a contradiction. The penitential reading of this stage emphasizes the will's capacity to free itself from error, whereas the ascensional reading emphasizes the discovery of premises presupposed by the meditational exercises. (For instance,

if it is possible to doubt the validity of sensory knowledge while not yet doubting that of mathematical truths, then the truths of mathematics are independent of those of sensation.) Fusing the ascensional and the penitential modes allows Descartes to think that he has legitimized *reductio* proofs by reflecting on the presuppositions embedded in his applying a criterion of error. Within a strictly penitential meditation, such a reflection at best reveals the structure and the psychology of a finite and untrustworthy mind. No validation of ontologically informative epistemological principles can follow solely from such phenomenologically bracketed reflections.

From the point of view of an analytic-architectonic, Stage 4 illicitly introduces a set of question begging assumptions. The will's capacity to suspend dubitable judgments is identified with its capacity to construct valid arguments. But in principle, at any rate, it might be possible for the will to recognize dubitable judgments and refrain from affirming them, without necessarily also having the capacity to preserve truth through valid arguments. It is one thing to recognize that the will has, and uses, the principle of noncontradiction as a criterion of error to identify dubitable judgments, and another to enlarge on the principle of noncontradiction to support constructive *reductio* arguments. The principle of noncontradiction does not by itself permit the detachment of a valid conclusion, affirming the truth of a proposition whose denial has proved contradictory. That the will can avoid error assures us that we need not be deceived by a malignant demon. But defeating the hypothesis of a malignant demon only establishes that we need not live in error. It does not yet establish that we can live in truth: what ensures freedom from error does not necessarily also ensure the validity of constructive proofs in science.

Superficially, the sequence of Meditation III and Meditation IV violates the stages of a classical meditation. On an analytic reading of Meditation III, Descartes seems to present proofs for the existence of God before he has validated the modes of demonstration used in the proofs. He seems to move from the psychological order of ideas arranged in a hierarchy according to degrees of perfection (measured by an ascensional criterion of explanatory independence and perfection) to ontological conclusions about the existence of the causes of those ideas. On such an analytic reading, the proofs for the existence of God illicitly introduce new, ungrounded principles and premises required to warrant detaching existential conclusions from psychological premises. The principles that would, if anything does, legitimize such inferences are not introduced or established until Meditations IV and V.

The charitable reading of Meditation III is ascensional and peniten-

tial. On this reading, Meditation III does not offer any ontologically significant proofs that detach existential conclusions from the psychological or even the logical order of ideas. On such a reading Meditation III presents a phenomenological explication of the presuppositions and the structures of the meditator's system of ideas. Ontological conclusions are bracketed: they are conclusions about what the meditator must *posit* as existing.

At the beginning of Meditation III, Descartes has three tasks before him. First, he must show that the hypothesis of a deceptive demon is incoherent. Second, he must show that a meditator who has followed the argument to this stage does in fact implicitly have the idea of a being more perfect than himself; if he can rank ideas by their degrees of perfection, he also has an idea of a most perfect being. Third, he must show that such a meditator cannot conceive himself to be the cause of his idea of a perfect being. Without having established the propriety of *reductio* arguments, Descartes cannot, and does not, attempt to provide any ontological proofs for the existence of this most perfect being.

In order to move to the ratification of *reductio* proofs, two further steps are required. Descartes must overcome the penitential hypothesis of a malignant deceiver, and he must discover the principle that expresses the causal order implicit in the hierarchical ordering of ideas according to their degree of explanatory independence and perfection. Any meditator who supposes that there might be a malignant deceiver has a criterion by which he identifies dubitable ideas. Since he is also manifestly capable of refusing to affirm such dubitable ideas, he is not a plaything of a deceptive demon . . . or, at any rate, he need not be. Such a meditator may have been deceived into thinking that he *had*, as he supposes, followed the meditational regimen. But if he is *really* capable of considering that doubt, then he is indeed capable of identifying dubitable ideas. So the hypothesis of a malignant deceiver is self-defeating as a *hypothesis:* it is incoherent. Might there nevertheless *be* such a malignant demon, even though no meditator can coherently conceive his existence? Perhaps; but even that hypothesis—that what is inconceivable may nevertheless exist—is incoherent. On an ascensional reading of Meditation III and IV, the idea of *truth* operates *within* the system of ideas. The refutation of a malignant demon is—in the terminology of phenomenological interpreters of Descartes—ontologically bracketed.

By Meditation III, then, the meditator has been shown to be fallible, finite, and imperfect. He could not therefore himself have produced a principle by which the rationality of inferences is tested. A fallible

being could not have invented or created a criterion for identifying confused or dubitable ideas. But since the meditational exercises dramatically show that the meditator does in fact have, and can appropriately apply, such a principle—the principle that self-contradictory ideas are, at the very least, dubitable—the meditator manifestly has and uses a principle of which he could not have been the adequate cause. He may be fallible, but if he is able to recognize his fallibility, he is also rational. The penitential reading of Meditation III is negative: it shows the fallibility of the meditator. An ascensional reading unfolds a constructive premise: reflection on the success of the meditational exercise reveals that a meditator who successfully applies a criterion of error is rational, at least in the minimal and negative sense that he need not be deceived and make false judgments.

Still, since the meditator is fallible, he cannot have been the cause—the adequate explanation—of his rational powers to identify dubitable ideas. Reflecting on capacities that he could not have granted to himself, he must at least have the idea of a being more perfect than himself, upon whom his rational capacity to identify error depends.

With this argument, Descartes has fulfilled the task set by Stage 3. The argument that overcomes the hypothesis of a malignant demon also establishes that the fallible but rational meditator must have an idea of a perfect being; furthermore, he must also know that he cannot be the cause of his idea of a perfect being. Such a penitential and ascensional reading of Meditation III frees it from the charge of drawing illicit conclusions, conclusions affirming the necessary existence of entities beyond the system of ideas. Even the principle of adequate causation only establishes a hierarchical ordering of ideas. On such a reading then, Meditation III is not an interpolation of Stage 5 before Stage 4: rather it is a preparation for Stage 4, which articulates the conditions that legitimate constructive, as well as *reductio* arguments.

The three modes of meditation again support each other in Stage 4, Meditation IV. On an ascensional reading, the reflective meditator articulates the presuppositions of his rationality, his ability to avoid error. His ability to suspend his judgment, to detach assent from dubitable ideas that he continues to entertain, reveals that he has at least two independent intellectual faculties, neither fallible in itself. The understanding is not fallacious: it merely entertains ideas without affirming their truth; and the will need not assent to unclear, confused, or incoherent ideas. It can refrain from affirming what is dubitable. On a penitential reading, Stage 4 establishes that the will can suspend judgment from error and falsity. On an analytic reading, this stage establishes the independence of propositional contents from proposi-

tional attitudes: it assures the identity of propositional content through changes in propositional attitudes. On all three readings, the rationality of the meditator is shown to be secure. Not only is he capable of successfully applying the criterion of error, but, more significantly, there is nothing within his psychological structure that makes him prone to error. He is indeed fallible, and thus imperfect; but he is not necessarily prone to fallacious reasoning, and thus doomed to imperfectibility. Stage 4 implicitly establishes another principle. It is not ideas as such, but only affirmative or negative judgments that are true or false. Truth and falsity are attributed to judgments rather than to ideas or to the referents of ideas.

Stage 5 again presents difficulties in determining the order of dominance among the various meditational modes. In Stage 5, Descartes attempts to move from the psychological to the ontological order, from the idea of perfection to a demonstration that such a perfect being exists. Having moved from a purely psychological order to a logical and rational order, the meditator is now meant to move outside the order of ideas. Phenomenology is meant to establish the propriety of a realistic ontology. As it stands, the principle of adequate causation only establishes that a meditator must have an idea of a perfect being. From Meditation IV, he also knows that, imperfect as he may be, he is not so constructed that he must be mistaken. In principle, then, he ought to be able to trust his use of the criterion of error. Stage 4 was meant to prepare the way for the transition from a purely negative use of *reductio* arguments in identifying dubitable ideas to their constructive use in establishing valid conclusions. But it is one thing to doubt the truth of a self-contradictory proposition, and another to affirm the truth of a proposition whose denial is self-contradictory.

Even though the three meditational modes coincide in Meditation IV, Meditation III does not support an analytic reading. The premises it provides for Meditation V remain within the system of the meditator's ideas. Nothing in an ascensional or a penitential reading establishes the propriety of moving from a negative to a positive use of *reductio* arguments using the principle of adequate causation ontologically (to demonstrate the existence of a perfect being) rather than psychologically (to show that a finite meditator cannot consistently deny the existence of a perfect being). As many commentators have argued, using constructive *reductio* arguments to detach the conclusion of an ontological proof presupposes the existence of just the perfect being that it is meant to establish.

These criticisms only affect Descartes' attempt to fuse the analytic with ascensional and penitential meditational modes. They do not,

by themselves, invalidate reading the analytic mode as contained within ascensional and penitential meditations. On such a reading, the ontological proof is itself bracketed. It does not move the meditator from the system of his ideas to a wholly independent realm. Rather it explicates the consequences of the meditational exercise. Not only does the meditator necessarily have an idea of a perfect being, but his idea of that being is necessarily an idea of a being whose existence must be conceived by him as necessary. Nor can the meditator conceive the possibility that the world might be otherwise. He cannot suppose that a perfect being may not exist.

If the fusing of analytic with ascensional and penitential modes was meant to establish the validity of a realistic ontology that starts entirely within a psychological and a logical order, the meditations have failed. This would be a reading that places ascensional and penitential meditations within the structure of an analytic-architectonic. If the Meditations are read as a sequence of logical arguments, they do not establish a detachable conclusion. On another interpretation—an interpretation that places the analytic modes within the framework of ascensional and penitential meditations—the Meditations do not form a sequence of arguments validating a detachable ontological conclusion. On such an interpretation, the meditations have succeeded in bringing the meditator to a new place. Starting from a set of dogmatic confusions, he has gradually been brought, step by step, to realize the power and structure of his mind. In a way, Descartes has after all fulfilled his promise to the Doctors of Divinity at the University of Paris. He has shown that someone who has followed his meditation must acknowledge that there are rational arguments for the separability of the soul from the body. Such a meditator must also acknowledge that he exists as a rational being, and that such a rational being must, in accordance with his rationality, think that God necessarily exists. On this interpretation, the task of the meditational exercises has succeeded.

It would be pretty to think that the *Meditations* is itself a structured transformation of the meditational mode, starting with the dominance of intellectual ascensional mode, moving through the penitential form, and ending with the analytic mode. Unfortunately, the text does not sustain such an easy resolution to our problems. Instead we see that different modes seem dominant at different stages: their subterranean connections and relations remain unclear.

We could try a nesting of mask, face, and skeleton in Descartes' use of these traditions. He may have unself-consciously inherited an ascensional skeletal structure, fleshed it with the musculature of an analytic meditation, and masked it with a penitential meditation for

the sake of safety in orthodoxy. But the penitential mode cannot be unmasked: it provides essential skeletal support. And, as we have seen, the analytic flesh does not always conform to the articulation of an ascensional skeletal structure.

The problem is that the various readings subtly undermine one another. There are solid clues for reading the composition of the work: there are in fact too many. The work we see when we use some of these clues is quite different from the work we see when we follow others. Did Descartes do this deliberately? An extremely charitable reading would turn him into a new sort of Socrates, constructing puzzles to force us to examine the truth of his dialectical arguments. But whatever else Descartes may be, he is not Socrates. He is defensive as well as devious, proud as well as prickly. And he is not funny.

II

But the six days of the *Meditations* does not really end Descartes' work. We might ask: What is the beginning, middle, and end of the book? Is *Meditations on First Philosophy* really just the core six days? Or does it include the prefatory dedication and the synopsis as essential parts? And, crucially, what about the objections gathered and presented to Descartes by his friend Mersenne? At Descartes' suggestion, six of these objections were printed, together with Descartes' replies, in the first edition of the work. Does the *Meditations* properly contain the Objections and Replies?[7]

I think it does. The core six days of the *Meditations* can profitably be read as providing a transition from Descartes' arrogant, courtly obeisance to the Doctors of Theology at the University of Paris, to whom the work is addressed, to Descartes' real audience, his correspondents—opponents and friends alike—engaged in argument and debate. To be sure, Descartes grants himself the last word, at least in his published work.

Like the core days of the meditation, the preface, and the postscript Objections and Replies, are themselves transformations of traditional genres. The preface combines a religious with a secular dedication. It acknowledges authority but promises, with breathtaking presumption, to provide the rational proofs that had eluded the theologians, proofs for the existence of God and for the immortality of the soul (or, at any rate, its separability from the body), to be given without assumptions borrowed from faith, authority, or tradition, and without any metaphysical devices. But, as we have seen, Descartes did, after all,

rely on tradition, and not only on a literary tradition but on the presuppositions embedded in that tradition. However self-conscious he may have been about manipulating those traditions, he was not prepared to admit what he had done. How could the confident Enlightenment architect consider himself a manipulative spiritual director?

The Objections and Replies are themselves transformations of a tradition. His interlocutors are not invented to present roles in a fixed intellectual drama. Unlike Plato, he does not put words in the mouths of well-known historical figures. Descartes invites his opponents to speak for themselves, in their own words, for as long as they like: not a constructed dialogue but a genuine correspondence. Nor does he edit his interlocutors—not a Thommistic snippet *Sed Contra* followed quickly by a *Responsio*. Nor does he present a showy dialectical *Disputatio*, with a *defendens* and *impugnans*. Rather he asks respected fellow scholars to present him with their criticisms. Their objections and his replies are published together; readers can weigh and consider the merits of the arguments in privacy and at their leisure rather than immediately, at a public event. That Descartes is sometimes testy, often evasive, and certainly defensive shows the voice of the individual person, not of the mind. It may be a defect of character, but it is not a defect of the genre.

Read in this way, the *Meditations* has a surprise ending. Descartes intended to construct science from the refined, tested, proved truths that survived skeptical dissolution. But examining the Objections and Replies gives us quite a different picture of that science. It is not an isolated meditator's reflective analytic and foundational architectonic but the published correspondence of a group of debaters animated by mutual respect. In truth, then, the *Meditations* in its final printed form moves us from a world of prefaces addressed to doctors of divinity to a world defined as a community of philosophers and scholars. The meditator's reflective self-transformation from a confused believer to a rational scientific inquirer provides the transition between those two worlds.[8]

NOTES

1. See Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature* (New Haven, Conn., 1969) and Pierre Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality*, trans. W. H. Mitchell and S. P. Jacques (London, 1928–1936); Lewis Beck, *The Metaphysics of Descartes* (Oxford, 1965).

2. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, trans. P. Boehner (New York, 1956) and Robert Bellarmine, *The Ascent of the Mind to God by a Ladder of Things Created*, trans. TB (London, 1928).

3. See Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Saint Bernard, His Meditations; or: Sighes, Sobbes and Teares . . . Also His Motives to Mortification*, trans. W. P.; and *The Twelve Degrees of Humility and Pride*, trans. Barton R. V. Mills (London, 1929).

4. See St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Loyola*, trans. W. H. Longridge (London and Oxford, 1950).

5. Cf. E. M. Curley, "Analysis in the *Meditations*," this volume.

6. These six stages do not exactly correspond to the six meditations. For instance, Stage 2 begins towards the end of Meditation I, roughly at AT IX, 17, and stops a few paragraphs after the beginning of Meditation II, roughly at AT IX, 19. Although Stages 4, 5, and 6 correspond roughly to Meditations IV, V, and VI, Stage 3 begins in Meditation II, at roughly AT IX, 19, and extends to the end of Meditation III, AT, IX, 42. I know of no explanation of the rationale for the breaks in the meditational days, no explanation of why they do not always correspond to what might seem to be the natural standard psychological stages. Descartes certainly meant his reader to pause between each meditational day. Understanding the rationale of the form of each day would require an extended comparative study of the variations among the traditional meditations. I suspect that spreading Stage 2 between Meditations I and II is a way of diminishing its importance, indicating that there cannot be a moment, or stage, of "pure" skeptical despair. The large scope of Stage 3 indicates the far-reaching character of the reflective revolution: besides locating the pivotal point in the demonstration of the existence of the thinking substance, Stage 3 requires an investigation into the real character and significance of the meditator's ideas of himself, his body, his world.

7. The author of the First Objections is Caterus, a theologian from Alkmaar; the Second Objections were probably written by Mersenne and by Gibieuf, the Third by Hobbes, the Fourth by Arnauld, the Fifth by Gassendi, the Sixth by de la Barde and some mathematician friends of Mersenne, the Seventh, called the *Sixth* after Gassendi's objections were withdrawn, were by the Jesuit Bourdin. Because Gassendi had complained at the publication of a private communication, Descartes omitted the Fifth Objection from the first French edition of the *Meditations*. He was careful to make public his reasons for doing so. He remarks that Gassendi had expanded his objections "into a book of great size" containing further objections responding to his replies.

8. An earlier draft of some sections of this essay appeared as "Experiments in Philosophic Genre: Descartes' *Meditations*" in *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn, 1983. I am grateful to Rüdiger Bittner, John Etchemendy, Victor Gourevitch, and Robert Wengert for discussions and comments. Reading Gary Hatfield's essay (in this volume) further clarified some ideas.

2

The Naive Narrator: Meditation in Descartes' *Meditations*

L. Aryeh Kosman

We sometimes remember, though perhaps not often enough, that Descartes' *Meditations* is not merely a treatise or a discourse but a set of meditations or, as I shall here suggest, the narrative account of a set of meditations. But what are we to make of this formal and stylistic fact about the *Meditations*? In this essay, I will begin by outlining very briefly some thematic respects in which the fact that the *Meditations* consists of meditations may be of interest. Then I will consider what might seem a more purely stylistic feature of the work, and what, if anything, we might learn from it.

THE *MEDITATIONS* AS MEDITATIONS

To begin, then, let us consider some obvious respects in which the fact that a work is entitled *Meditations* should affect the ways in which we think about it. In the first place, a meditation is a spiritual or mental exercise that must be gone through by anyone who wishes to benefit from it; there is no detachable product in which a meditation results that could be acquired by someone who has not been through the meditation's actual praxis. For a meditation just is a praxis, and not the making of some alienable product.

The *Meditations*, then, if it consists of meditations, consists of a series of philosophical exercises to be gone through, and not merely

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