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THE STONE

Descartes Is Not Our Father

By Christia Mercer
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René Descartes has long been credited with the near-single-handed creation of modern philosophy. Generations of students have read, and continue to read, his famous "Meditations" as the rejection of medieval ways of thinking and the invention of the modern self. They learned that he doubted all traditional ways of knowing before pivoting to the modern subjective individual. Tumbling into a "deep whirlpool," the doubter of the "Meditations" has no secure footing until he hits upon a single firm and indubitable truth: He is most essentially "a thinking thing." The modern individual is born, with the rejection of the past as its midwife.

It's a dramatic story. But it's false.

Descartes's contemporaries in the 17th century would have been stunned to hear these accomplishments credited to him. Although he was rightly famous in his time for some of his scientific and mathematical ideas, many considered his philosophical proposals about the radical difference between mind and body implausible and unoriginal. Even his scientific ideas were often ranked on par with others. For example, the English philosopher Anne Conway considered Hobbes's and Spinoza's account of corporeal nature to be equally influential, and similarly mistaken.

Another contemporary, the German Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, agreed, sometimes comparing Descartes's proposals to those of long-forgotten thinkers like Kenelm Digby. Others noted his debt to past thinkers. In his "Dictionary," Pierre Bayle writes of complaints about Descartes's "pirating" of ideas from earlier sources. Fast forward a century or so to Kant, who does not consider the author of the "Meditations" to be worth much attention.

So if Descartes did not invent modern philosophy, how was this false narrative created and sustained?

The longstanding story about Descartes's creation of a "new philosophy" that broke radically with medieval "ways of thinking" and that marked "the dawn of modern times" was promoted by philosophers who came after Kant and who, oddly enough, turned Descartes into the originator of "Germanic" thought. In his 1820s lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel asserts that "Germanic, i.e., modern philosophy begins with Descartes." By 1847, Schopenhauer insists "our excellent Descartes" is "the instigator of subjective investigation and in this the father of modern philosophy."

A prominent German professor, Kuno Fischer (1824 -1907), published a gripping (and multivolume) story in the 1870s about Descartes's groundbreaking ideas and their impact on subsequent thought. In a revealing passage from his extended discussion of Descartes's life and innovations, Fischer writes: "In the whole range of philosophical literature, there is no work in which the struggle for truth is portrayed in a more animated, personal, captivating manner and, at the same time, more simply and clearly, than in Descartes's essay on method and his first 'Meditation.' "

This 19th-century invention of the "modern era" excised 17th- and 18th-century philosophy of its theological and religious underpinnings — and its women, whether they were overtly theological or not. Even influential Enlightenment figures like the natural philosopher, Émilie Du Châtelet, were ignored, not to mention the contributions of significant 17th-century radical thinkers like Margaret Cavendish and Anne Conway, a favorite of Leibniz.

The adulation continued into the early 20th century, when Descartes's heroism was codified by prominent thinkers like the German Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) and the French Étienne Gilson (1884-1978). In Cassirer's dramatic telling, Descartes single-handedly created the "spiritual essence" of a new epoch, which would "permeate all fields of knowledge," to which 18th-century philosophers responded, and out of which Kant and other German thinkers would arise as liberating angels.

Based on his interpretation of the 17th century as a period of "great metaphysical systems" developed in response to Descartes, Cassirer advised historians to "string its various intellectual formulations along the thread of time and study them chronologically." That is, in order to understand "the sum total" of the period's "philosophical content," it was sufficient to track its systems "lengthwise."

And so people did. One of the most influential treatments of the history of philosophy in the English speaking world is the hugely ambitious and admirably clear study by Frederick Copleston, an Oxford trained classicist who converted to Catholicism, became a Jesuit priest, and famously debated his friend A. J. Ayer as well as Bertrand Russell on philosophical and theological matters. In elegant concise prose, Copleston kept to the lengthwise approach, displaying the whole history of philosophy in nine volumes, published between 1946–75 and widely read in the English-speaking world. Although Copleston includes mystics like Master Eckhart (1260-1328) and prominent Jesuit scholastics like Francisco Suárez (1548–1617), he entirely ignores the richly philosophical spiritual writings of even the most prominent late medieval women, reducing the entirety of philosophy to a series of great men, each responding to the ones who went before.

Analytically trained historians working in the mid-20th century were satisfied to rummage through the "great systems" of the canonical great men to find their philosophical gems. And who can blame them? From Bertrand Russell's book on Leibniz (1900) to Peter Strawson's study of Kant (1966), prominent philosophers could grind their own philosophical axes using historical texts. They

felt justified in restricting themselves to the standard story about modern philosophy and its limited range of problems, to which they could apply their philosophical tools with the hope of producing innovative ideas and arguments for themselves and their colleagues. One did not need to worry one's head with the social and political complications of early modern Europe, much less dirty one's hands with the messiness of its theology. One could focus on what *mattered* to properly educated philosophers.

This approach was doomed to fail. The richness and diversity of early modern philosophy were bound to become evident, engendering a growing awareness of the inadequacy of the standard story.

The engendering of that inadequacy was itself gendered. When feminist scholars in the 1980s began to explore early modern women writers, they discovered both the richness of the period's philosophy and the inadequacy of the lengthwise approach. Scholars like Eileen O'Neill dared historians to widen their scope and include long-forgotten figures, foreseeing how women's philosophies would offer significant insights into the period's central debates. This strategy has produced significant results and begun to influence the way historians of philosophy think about the period.

Most relevant to the reconsideration of Descartes and the subjective individual that he was supposed to have invented is the recent recognition that late medieval spiritual meditations — especially those written by women like Julian of Norwich, Hadewijch of Brabant, Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Ávila — involved the need to focus on the meditator's subjectivity as a means to rethink everything the meditator has previously learned about the world. The point was to learn not to *care* about the external matters so as to develop new habits and beliefs. For most meditators, the only proper means to do this was through subjective exploration.

Longstanding prejudice against women, their capacities to reason, and their right to teach had left women out of philosophy for centuries. But the 12th century witnessed the beginning of a shift to meditative practices emphasizing introspection and feelings. Although created by men, the new forms of spiritual practice gave women the right, for the first time in centuries to write and be read.

Because women were considered naturally predisposed to emotive introspection, their spiritual writings began to be taken seriously. In constant fear of overstepping their bounds, these authors had to find imaginative ways to share their insights while seeming suitably humble. For example, Julian of Norwich writes in late 14th-century England, "Just because I am a woman, must I … not tell you about the goodness of God, when I saw … his wish that it should be known?" Women like Julian had to admit their "natural" inferiority and practice their philosophy within the confines of this emotive spiritual genre.

And so they did, brilliantly, writing carefully in their meditations about the subjective individual who doubts everything she was previously taught before progressing to self-knowledge and eventually to truth. It is here in the spiritual writings of late medieval women that we find many of the features that Hegel and Schopenhauer considered new and "Germanic." To be sure, the steps in Descartes's "Meditations" are rendered in more explicitly epistemological terms than those of his predecessors, but his strategy and pivot to self-knowledge were already at the time centuries old. It is no wonder his contemporaries were not very impressed.

Our understanding of history evolves. We can now see Descartes as the benefactor of a long tradition, to which women significantly contributed. The time seems right to rethink the role of women and other noncanonical figures in the history of philosophy and begin to create a more accurate story about philosophy's rich and diverse past.

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