Descartes as sage: 
spiritual askesis in Cartesian philosophy

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE CARTESIAN MASK

In one of his earliest surviving writings Descartes says that just as actors put on masks 
(personam induunt), so he himself will enter the theatre of the world masked: larvatus 
prodeo.  ¹ ‘Mask’ was, of course, the original meaning of the Latin term persona— in 
Greek pròspton (prosopon): the false face of clay or bark that actors in the ancient 
world donned in order to come on to the stage. It is an odd figure of speech for a 
philosopher to adopt: both in Classical philosophical thought (from Plato’s famous 
strictures against acting and role-playing),² and also in the Christian gospels (from 
Jesus’ denunciation of those whose outward display did not match their inner 
thoughts),³ the connotations of the term ‘actor’ (hypocrites) were far from favourable.

What persona did Descartes himself have in mind? We are apt, in the light of 
popular contemporary psychology, to think of a persona as some kind of false self-
presentation;⁴ but the ancient theatrical persona was a formal, stylised device, whose

¹ Praeambula [1619], from Descartes’s early notebooks (later dubbed the Cogitationes 
Privatae): AT X 213: CSM I 2. In this paper, ‘AT’ refers to the standard Franco-Latin edition 
of Descartes by C. Adam & P. Tannery, Œuvres de Descartes, 12 vols (revised edn, Paris: 
Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76); ‘CSM’ refers to the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff 
and D. Murdoch, The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vols I and II (Cambridge: 
Cambridge University Press, 1985); and ‘CSMK’ to Vol. III, The Correspondence, by the 

² Plato, Republic [c. 385 BCE], 392c-398b.

³ Gospel according to Matthew [c. 60 BCE], 6: 2-5.

⁴ One thinks of Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous account of how people willfully imprison 
themselves in their official roles as a kind of escape from true self-realization: ‘the waiter who 
tries to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying 
his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope walker . . . playing at being a waiter in a café . . . 
There is the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavour to 
persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor.’ Being and 
oberves (writing a few years before Sartre), ‘the danger is that [people] become identical 
with their personas— the professor with his textbook, the tenor with his voice. Then the 
damage is done; henceforth he lives exclusively against the background of his own biography 
. . . One could say, with a little exaggeration, that the persona is that which in reality one is
purpose was not so much simulation as dissimulation. Going on stage is a daunting business, and the mask conceals awkwardness and embarrassment (a point that Descartes himself makes quite explicitly).\(^5\) By hiding his nervousness, or simply the unprepossessing ordinary features that might be familiar to the audience, the actor could pronounce his lines with more confidence.

So it may be that the young Descartes is simply recording his shyness—his reluctance to make a stir. We know that his favourite motto was the Ovidian tag *bene vixit qui bene latuit*, a variation on the Epicurean maxim *lay\(^6\) bevsaw (lathe biosas)*: ‘get through life without drawing attention to yourself.’\(^6\) And when he finally presented the public with an account of his ‘method of seeking the truth in the sciences’, together with some sample essays illustrating its results, he would not allow his name to appear on the title page.\(^7\)

But there is more to it than this. Descartes may have been cautious and reticent, but he had a mission.\(^8\) If the mask was there, it was one he wanted ultimately to shed, like the sciences themselves, of which he remarked that in his own epoch they were still masked (*larvatae*)—veiled or constricted, as it were, in the formal stylised apparatus of scholasticism—but if the masks could only be shed, their true nature would appear in its full beauty (*larvis sublatis, pulcherrimae apparerent*).\(^9\)

And similarly for Descartes himself, the inaugurator of the early modern age, we need to understand what he saw himself as setting out to do as he entered the world’s stage:

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\(^5\) ‘Comoedi, moniti ne in fronte appareat pudor, personam induunt’ (AT X 212: CSM I 2).

\(^6\) Letter to Mersenne of April 1634: AT I 285: CSMK 43.

\(^7\) *Discours de la méthode pour . . . chercher la vérité dans les science. Plus . . . des essais de ce méthode*. Leiden, 8 June, 1637.

\(^8\) The zeal and commitment is clearly apparent in, for example, the *Discourse on the Method* (especially throughout part six), and seems to have dated right back to Descartes’s night of vivid dreams in November 1619, from which he awoke with the vision of inaugurating a comprehensive new scientific system, and made a vow of thanksgiving to visit the shrine of the Virgin at Loretto. Adrien Baillet, *La Vie de M. Des-Cartes*, vol. I, p. 85-6 (cf. AT X 180ff and CSM I 4-5).

what he took his distinctive contribution to be, or what was his true self-conception as a philosopher.

In asking about of the true self-conception of Descartes, or of any philosopher, we are moving to a richer and more positive sense of the term *persona*, one that takes us away from masks and acting towards something more ‘personal’, something connected not just with a ‘career’, but with the full moral and psychological dimensions of someone’s chosen form of life. For alongside its ancient theatrical connotations, the Latin concept *persona* also has deeper and more serious resonances, deriving in part from early-Christian theology. *Tres personae in una substantia* (‘three persons in one substance’) was Tertullian’s formula in the third century for defining the unity and triplicity of God, *persona* being (in Hugh Pyper’s apt phrase) ‘a label for whatever accounts for the distinctive identity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit’. Without going into the intricate theological controversies surrounding the mystery of the Trinity, one way in which the individual *personae* have long been understood is by analogy with the way in which a human being forms a true self-conception of him or herself. For our present purposes, the *persona* of the philosopher may thus be said to involve the development and expression of a particular distinctive identity or sense of self— that which gives intellectual shape and moral significance to that individual’s life and work.

2 PHILOSOPHICAL SELF-CONCEPTIONS AND THEIR EVOLUTION
The self-conception of the philosopher in something like the above sense was, until our own time, a serious and important matter— something we tend to forget in our philosophically somewhat degenerate age. A culture manifests its degeneration in part by bad faith, a telling instance of which is the undertaking of some philosophical pursuit not for itself, but merely instrumentally, for the sake of the practitioner’s vanity or some other advantage. The sophists of ancient Greece, who claimed to teach virtue for money, were criticized by Socrates as a paradigm case. Contrasted with


11 For this suggestion, deriving from St Thomas Aquinas, with earlier roots in Augustine, see B. Davies, *Aquinas* (London: Continuum, 2002), Ch. 16, §2 (‘Three Persons and one God’), p. 167f.
this instrumental approach is the Platonic ideal of *philosophia*— love of wisdom for its own sake.\(^{13}\) Familiarity with the label has perhaps dulled us to the passionate seriousness it originally conveyed— the seriousness that led Socrates, threatened with the death penalty, to insist that ‘for a human being, the unexamined life (*bios*) is not worth living’\(^{14}\) It is often assumed nowadays that the critical inquiry that is the hallmark of the so-called Socratic method is of a purely logical character, having to do merely with the examination of concepts and definitions. But the oft-quoted slogan cited here should remind us that philosophical ‘examination’, for Socrates, involves the entire character of someone’s life (*bios*). As Socrates goes on to explain in the *Apology*, his philosophical vocation was linked with unwavering allegiance to conscience, the ‘god’, as he put it, whose inner voice demanded his obedience.\(^{15}\)

Contrast this moral seriousness with the climate inhabited by many of today’s practitioners of philosophy— a climate whose character is aptly indicated by the kinds of questions that seem to claim most attention. How do you know that you are really not sitting in this lecture room, but instead are just a brain floating in a vat of nutrients somewhere in the Andromeda galaxy? May it not be, for all you know, that the planet Earth and all its inhabitants are not real, but mere fantasies produced in your mind by a group of mad scientists in Andromeda, who have stimulated the nerve inputs of your floating brain in such a way as to give you the all the appropriate sensations so as to create the convincing illusion that you are sitting here in Brisbane, on the planet Earth, when in reality you are light years away, and don’t have a body at all, and therefore no posterior to sit on in the first place.

Asking this sort of fantastic question might seem as silly a waste of time for grown people as one could imagine. Yet the present writer could testify (as no doubt

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\(^{12}\) The criticism is implicit in the heavy irony used by Socrates in his description of the sophists (in the course of his own defence against the accusation of corrupting the young): *Apology* [c. 390 BCE], 19d-e. For a more favourable interpretation of Plato’s attitude to the sophists, see T. H. Irwin, ‘Plato: the intellectual background’, in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 64ff.

\(^{13}\) ‘Although we say many things are loved (*phila*) for the sake of something that is loved, we are evidently using an inappropriate word in saying that. It seems that the thing that is really loved is that in which all these things called loves come to an end . . . Then what is really loved is not loved for the sake of anything.’ Plato, *Lysis* [c. 390 BCE], 220a7-b5. Cf. T. Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 67ff.

\(^{14}\) i dê énej’*tastow bÈow oÈ bivtû’ ényr=pf (Plato, *Apology*, 38 a 5).

\(^{15}\) Plato, *Apology*, 40 a2-c2.
could many other editors of mainstream anglophone philosophy journals) to receiving scores of submissions each year, highly intricate pieces of work, laboriously examining just one more variation on this brain-in-vat scenario. Our philosophical culture, to be sure, perceives these inquiries as contributions to an important subject called ‘epistemology’. But on reflection one may wonder whether this kind of work can be pursued only at the cost of a certain fragmentation, a split between one’s job as a ‘philosopher’, and the more intimate concerns that structure the rest of one’s life. The instrumental value of the work is clear, for on it depend promotions and grants and research ratings and all manner of other appurtenances of modern academic life. And no doubt the intellectual puzzles involved may have a certain engaging intricacy which can be stimulating in itself, as well as provoking wider reflection on the nature and justification of knowledge claims. Yet for all that, are we not left with a certain sense of disquiet at seeing so much philosophical energy expended on examining the epistemic credentials of a science-fiction hypothesis that no human being, once they get outside the study or the seminar, could even begin to take seriously? One could of course pretend to care about it— pretend that one was passionately involved in making sure we know we are not on Alpha Centauri— but that would be hard to reconcile with the spirit of commitment and integrity which, since Socrates and Plato, has been thought of as fundamental to genuine philosophical inquiry.

In Harold Pinter’s play, The Homecoming, a character called Teddy, who has escaped his East End background to become a philosophy professor in the USA, returns home to London on a visit. On his arrival, Lennie, his clever younger brother, who has stayed at home to become an accomplished pimp and thug, insolently asks him: ‘What is a table, Teddy— philosophically speaking, I mean?’, and he proceeds to taunt his embarrassed elder brother with a barrage of questions about whether we should doubt the nature and existence of external objects. The moral is clear: these are the kinds of vacuous question that get philosophy a bad name.

Many people might suppose that if this lamentable image of philosophy is to be laid at anyone’s door, it must be that of René Descartes. For the last fifty years or so, at least in the anglophone academic world, the persona of the ‘epistemologist’ has been retrospectively fitted on to Descartes so tightly as to condition, for a large

16 Harold Pinter, The Homecoming [1965], Act 2.
number of people, how his philosophy is examined and interpreted. The outlines of
the story are very familiar. At the start of Descartes’s most famous work, perhaps the
most commonly used text in Introduction to Philosophy courses all over the world,
the question of knowledge and its justification becomes the philosophical question
par excellence; so the first steps in philosophy involve raising doubts about
everything — even the existence of an ‘external’ reality. Asserting that he ‘cannot
possibly go too far in his distrustful attitude’, the meditator supposes that ‘the sky, the
earth, and all external things’ are merely ‘delusions’, which a ‘malicious demon of the
utmost power and cunning’ has implanted in his mind in order to deceive him.17 This
last scenario is of course the precursor of today’s brain-in-vat obsessions — the only
difference being that Descartes couched it in immaterialist terms, with the demon
directly inducing the deceptive sensations into the consciousness of a supposedly
bodiless meditator, while today’s more physicalist scenario prefers to talk of
stimulating the nerve fibres of a severed brain, the bodily organ of consciousness.

So entrenched has our vision become of Descartes as the purveyor of elaborate
sceptical scenarios that the phrase ‘Cartesian doubt’ has passed into contemporary
philosophical jargon as a shorthand for a whole mode of epistemological inquiry.
There is someone called ‘the sceptic’, who has to be defeated; and although it has
become unfashionable to accept Descartes’s weapons for the victory (weapons which
invoke divine power and goodness), he is at least credited with taking doubt to its
limits, and showing us just what the anti-sceptic has to overcome. Nor is this
epistemological image of Descartes merely the creation of those contemporary
analyticians who have scant regard for historical context: Richard Popkin, very much
a historian’s historian of philosophy, takes a very similar line, defining the Cartesian
revolution in terms of the centrality it accorded to the question ‘Where does our
knowledge come from, and what can we know and how certain is our knowledge?’18

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17 Meditations on First Philosophy [Meditations de prima philosophia, 1641], First
Meditation, AT VII 18, 19, 22: CSM II 17-15.

18 ‘In questioning all of the theories in philosophy, science and theology of the time, the
sceptics made it crucial for thinkers to find a satisfactory justification for their knowledge
claims. Hence, the question Where does our knowledge come from, and what can we know
and how certain is our knowledge? became central. New theories of knowledge had to be
offered to deal with the epistemological crisis brought on by the growth and spread of
Schmitt and Quentin Skinner (eds), The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy
With the introduction of Descartes’s malicious demon, argues Popkin, ‘the crise pyrrhonienne [the crisis of extreme scepticism]’ was ‘pressed to its farthest limit.’

But a careful look at how Descartes himself presents the sceptical issues in the Meditations is enough to cast serious doubt on this image of him as preoccupied with abstract epistemology. He himself described the sceptical doubts of the First Meditation as ‘exaggerated’ or ‘hyperbolical’, and ‘deserving to be dismissed as laughable — explodendae (literally, to be hissed or booed off the stage). What is more, in the Synopsis published as an introduction to the first edition of the Meditations in 1641 Descartes explicitly disavows the role of a champion epistemologist holding the line against some supposed ‘sceptical crisis’:

The great benefit of these arguments is not, in my view, that they prove what they establish— namely that there really is a world, and that human beings have bodies and so on— since no sane person has ever seriously doubted these things. The point is that in considering these arguments we come to realize that they are not as solid or as transparent as the arguments which lead us to knowledge of our own minds and of God.

Descartes certainly wanted ‘solid’ and ‘transparent’ arguments; and certainly, like many of his immediate predecessors in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, he wanted to expose the vanity of what had passed for knowledge in the culture in which he had grown up. But he was emphatically not playing the modern

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20 ‘. . . hyperbolicae superiorum dierum dubitationes ut risu dignae sunt explodendae’ (AT VII 89: CSM II 61).

21 I have elsewhere expressed serious reservations about Popkin’s account of a supposed crise pyrrhonienne in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; see J. Cottingham, ‘Doubtful uses of doubt: Cartesian philosophy and the historiography of scepticism’ in L. Catana (ed.), Historiographies in early modern philosophy and science (Dordrecht: Kluwer, in preparation).

22 AT VII 15-16: CSM II 11 (emphasis supplied).

23 Compare, for example, Francisco Sanches in Quod nihil scitur [1581], which provides a remarkably frank description of the rambling mixture of anecdote and pseudo-explanation that passed for knowledge in the renaissance world: Sufficiat nunc nosse nos nil plane nosse
‘epistemological’ game— inventing artificial positions (those of the ‘the sceptic’, the ‘antisceptic’, the ‘realist’, the ‘antirealist’, and so on) to see whether one is ingenious enough to refute the latest ploy in an introverted academic debate. His philosophical concerns had a far greater integrity, a far closer link to the goals of his life.

3. FROM EPISTEMOLOGY TO SCIENCE?
In recent Cartesian scholarship, the long dominant image of Descartes the epistemologist has gradually given way to that of Descartes the scientist. In part, this is a reversion to an earlier view, held for example by the great Cartesian scholar and editor Charles Adam, that Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology are essentially subordinate to Cartesian science. According to an interesting study by Desmond Clarke published last year, the key motivation behind Descartes’s research programme is the desire to provide a new style of explanation that would replace the scholastic approach that prevailed in the world in which he grew up. Much of this is uncontroversial: Descartes frequently complains of the explanatory vacuity of the ‘substantial forms and real qualities which many philosophers suppose to inhere in things’, objecting that they are ‘harder to understand than the things they are supposed to explain’. His own mechanistic accounts, by contrast, were supposed to have an immediate intelligibility, since they simply ascribed to the micro world exactly the same kinds of interactions with which we are familiar from ordinary middle-sized phenomena around us. If we understand the latter, then we already have a grasp of how the posited micro events operate (‘imperceptible simply because of their small size’); and Descartes’s key idea is that these give rise to the relevant

24 ‘Descartes ne demande à la métaphysique qu’une chose, de fournir un appui solide à la vérité scientifique’ (AT XII 143).


26 Principles of Philosophy [Principia philosophiae, 1644], Part IV, art.198.

27 Principles, Part IV, art. 201.
explananda in a way that is (as he put it) ‘just as natural’ as explaining how a clock tells the time by reference to the little cogs and wheels inside it.²⁸

There is no denying that a very large proportion of Descartes’s writings (vastly larger than is suggested by those passages typically selected for study in today’s standard philosophy courses) is taken up with working out this mechanistic programme with respect to the animal and human nervous system. In Le Monde and the Traité de L’Homme[1633] and the Dioptrique [1637], what we would nowadays call ‘cognitive functions’, such as visual perception, are investigated by Descartes in terms of brain events of a certain kind (‘ideas as brain patterns’ as Clarke puts it). And the same corporeal strategy is used by Descartes in his accounts of imagination and memory, and of the passions— an approach that receives its fullest treatment in his last published work, Les Passions de l’âme [1649]. But is it right, in the light of these extensive writings, spread over many years, to construe Descartes’s primary role as that of the explanatory scientist?

One qualm about this interpretation is that it leads to a curiously awkward view of Descartes’s notion of the res cogitans— the immaterial ‘thinking substance’ that he identifies in the central sections of his masterworks, the Discours and the Meditationes, as the indubitable subject of his metaphysical reflections. Construed as offering an explanatory theory of the mind, this notion of a ‘thinking thing’ tells us remarkably little; and indeed Clarke’s interpretative framework, giving primacy to the persona of the scientist, leads him to mount a complaint against Descartes on precisely these grounds— that the notion of the res cogitans has no explanatory force. For given that the Cartesian quest, on Clarke’s account, was for ‘genuine’ (i.e. mechanistic) explanations of seeing, hearing, remembering, imagining and so on, the programme ‘ran into apparently insurmountable obstacles’²⁹ when it came to dealing with the perspective of the thinking subject; and the result, for Clarke, was a dead end. Descartes did not really have a ‘theory’ of an immaterial thinking substance; instead, his talk of a ‘thinking thing’ was ‘true [but] uninformative’, a ‘provisional

²⁸ Principles, Part IV, art. 203.

²⁹ Clarke, Descartes’s Theory of the Mind, p. 241.
acknowledgement of failure, an index of the work that remains to be done before a
viable theory of the human mind becomes available.'

The talk of ‘failure’ is appropriate, Clarke suggests, because the Cartesian
claims about thinking substances ‘add nothing new to our knowledge’ of them.
Descartes is ‘claiming no more than . . . that, if thinking is occurring, there must be a
thinking thing of which the act of thinking is predicated.’ So the attribute of thinking
can no more be of explanatory value that the Schoolmen’s attribute of gravitas or
‘heaviness’ was any use in explaining why heavy things fall.

The charge of explanatory vacuity seems right in one way, but in my view it is
nevertheless misleading in so far as it tacitly assumes that Descartes must have
approached the phenomenon of consciousness with a view to seeing if it could be
explained after the manner of his mechanistic programme for physics. This is indeed
what his contemporary Pierre Gassendi thought he should be doing: it is no more use
telling us you are a ‘thinking thing’, he objected, than it would be to tell us that wine
is ‘a red thing’; what we are looking for is the micro-structure that explains the
manifest properties. Descartes’s reply is instructive: he was utterly scathing about
the very idea that one might produce some ‘quasi-chemical’ micro-explanation of
thinking.

In the context of the argument of the Meditations, which is the focus of this
sharp exchange, we should recall that Descartes’s meditator has arrived at a self-
conception of the mind which leads him directly forward to contemplate the
‘immense light’ of the Godhead, the infinite incorporeal being whose image is
reflected, albeit dimly, in the finite created intellect of the meditator. So whatever
else the notion of res cogitans was or was not intended to do, it clearly played a
central role in meditator’s journey towards awareness of God. Like Bonaventure
before him, whose own Itinerarium mentis in Deum (the ‘Journey of the Mind
towards God’) was profoundly conditioned by the contemplative and immaterialist

30 Clarke, Descartes’s Theory of the Mind, pp. 257, 258.
31 Clarke, Descartes’s Theory of the Mind, p. 221.
32 Objectiones et Responiones [1641], Fifth Objections, AT VII 276: CSM II 193.
33 Fifth Replies, AT VII 359: CSM II 248.
34 Third Meditation, AT VII 51: CSM II 35.
tradition of Plato and Augustine, Descartes has a conception of ultimate truth that required an *aversio*—a turning of the mind away from the world of the senses—in order to prepare it for glimpsing the reality that lies beyond the phenomenal world. Both Bonaventure and Descartes, following Augustine’s famous slogan *In interiore homine habitat veritas* (‘The truth dwells within the inner man’), undertake an interior journey. ‘Go back into yourself’, says Augustine; ‘let us return to ourselves, into our mind’, says Bonaventure, that we may search for the ‘*lux veritatis in facie nostrae mentis*’—the light of truth shining in our minds, as through a glass, in which the image of the Blessed Trinity shines forth. ‘I turn my mind’s eye upon myself’, says Descartes, and find the idea of God stamped there like the ‘mark the craftsman has set on his work’.37

Can this immaterialist metaphysics be merely a means to an end—a kind of propaedeutic to science in the way suggested by the thesis of Adam? Such a view is not, perhaps, beyond the bounds of possibility, though it would, I believe, be very difficult convincingly to explain the theistic reflections we find in the Third Meditation as simply part of an instrumental strategy; for it is striking that the style and flavour of the writing is often much closer to the language of devotion and worship that it is to the detached critical terminology of the analyst.38 But there is another and more fundamental reason for being wary of the image of Descartes the scientist as the key to understanding the Cartesian system, and that is that the very notion of ‘the scientist’ is fundamentally anachronistic when we transpose it back from our own time to the world of the seventeenth century. Descartes was deeply

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35 ‘Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas’ (‘Go not outside, but return within thyself; in the inward man dwelleth the truth’). Augustine, *De vera religione* [391] XXXIX 72.

36 ‘Ad nos reintraremus, in mentem scilicet nostram, in qua divina relucet imago; hinc . . . conari debemus per speculum videre Deum, ubi ad modum candelabri relucet lux veritatis in facie nostrae mentis, in qua scilicet resplendet imago beatissimae Trinitatis.’ Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* [1259], III 1.

37 Third Meditation, AT VII 51: CSM II 35.

38 Compare the following: *Placet hic aliquamdiu in ipsius Dei contemplatione immorari . . . et immensi hujus luminis pulchritudinem . . . intueri, admirari, adorare* (‘Let me here rest for a while in the contemplation of God himself and gaze upon, wonder at, and adore the beauty of this immense light’). Third Meditation, AT VII 52: CSM II 36. For more on this theme, see J. Cottingham, ‘Plato’s sun and Descartes’s stove: contemplation and control in Cartesian philosophy’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, forthcoming.
interested in physis and mechanics, of that there can be no doubt. But his interests were the interests not of a scientist in the modern sense, but those of the natural philosopher. And unpacking the persona of the natural philosopher discloses a role that is far more structured and systematic, and far more wide-reaching in its scope, than is readily graspable from the perspective of the fragmented and compartmentalised contemporary culture within which modern ‘science’ and ‘scientists’ find their place.

4. PHILOSOPHY, KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

The very term ‘natural philosophy’ immediately gives a strong clue to what the subject was in pre-modern times— not a separated discipline, in the manner of our contemporary academic and scientific specialisms, but rather a species of the genus philosophy. And philosophy, in the climate in which Descartes grew up, was by its very nature a synoptic or comprehensive enterprise.\(^3\)\(^9\) When he was a schoolboy of thirteen, there appeared a textbook that was rapidly to become a best seller, the *Summa philosophiae quadripartita*, a ‘Compendium of Philosophy in Four Parts’, which Descartes was later to describe as ‘the best its type ever produced’.\(^4\)\(^0\) Written by Eustachius, a Cistercian and professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne, it covered dialectic, morals, physics and metaphysics. And in case we should think that the aim of this comprehensive summary was simply to impart to its readers an intellectual grasp of the essentials of each of the separate branches of philosophy, the object of the enterprise is stated very clearly: *universae philosophiae finis est humana felicitas* (‘the goal of a complete philosophy is human happiness’).\(^4\)\(^1\)

The two principal features of philosophy that are prominent here, its all-encompassing character, and the link with how we can best live (‘philosophy as a way


\(^4\)\(^0\) Letter to Mersenne of 11 November 1640, AT III 232: CSMK 156.

\(^4\)\(^1\) Eustachius a Sancto Paulo, *Summa philosophiae quadripartita* [1609], Preface to Part II. Translated extracts may be found in R. Ariew, J. Cottingham and T. Sorell (eds), *Descartes’ Meditations: Background Source Materials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
of life’, as Pierre Hadot has called it, are in both cases explicitly recognised and adopted by Descartes for his own system. The celebrated metaphor of philosophy as a tree, which he uses in the French preface to his own comprehensive textbook, the *Principia philosophiae*, captures both the integrated or organic nature of the subject (metaphysics the roots, physics the trunk, the more specific disciplines—medicine, mechanics and morals—the branches), and also its aspirations to yield fruit in our lives. This last aspect is sometimes presented by Descartes in terms of the practical benefits or payoffs of his philosophy, in contrast to the ‘speculative’ philosophy of the schoolmen; in the *Discourse* and elsewhere, for example, he mentions the conquest of illness and the maladies of old age, and even the artificial prolongation of life. Here Descartes is adopting what is, to our ears, his most ‘modernistic’ persona—what we might almost now see as that of Descartes the ‘proto-Californian’. But if we bracket off these sometimes rather brash-sounding boasts about what the new mechanistic understanding of nature might achieve, Descartes’s general philosophical orientation, one directed not only towards increased knowledge but also to the goal of a better way of life, was in fact part of a much older tradition which linked him, rather

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43 *Principles of Philosophy, Lettre Preface à l’édition Française* [1647], AT IXB 14: CSM I 186).

44 ‘au lieu de cette philosophie spéculative, qu’on enseigne dans les écoles, on en peut trouver une pratique, par laquelle, connaissant la force et les actions du feu, de l’eau, des astres, des cieux et de tous les autres corps qui nos environnent, aussi distinctement que nous connaissons les divers métiers de nos artisans, nous les pourrions employer en même façon à tous les usages auxquels ils sont propres, et ainsi nous rendre comme maîtres et possesseurs de la nature’ *Discours de la méthode*, part vi (AT VI 61: CSM I 142).

45 In the continuation of the passage cited in the previous note, Descartes observes that the new knowledge he envisages is ‘desirable not only for the invention of innumerable devices which would facilitate our enjoyment of the fruits of the earth and all the goods we find there, but also and most importantly for the maintenance of health . . . For whatever we now know in medicine is almost nothing in comparison with what remains to be known, and we might free ourselves from innumerable diseases, both of the body and of the mind, and perhaps even from the infirmity of old age, if we had sufficient knowledge of their causes and of all the remedies which nature has provided.’ *Discours de la méthode*, part vi (AT VI 62: CSM I 142-3). See also Descartes, *Conversation with Burman* [1648], AT V 178: CSMK 353.

than separating him, from the scholastic predecessors he hoped in many respects to supersede.

Before exploring this further, we need first to be aware that even the contrast just made between knowledge on the one hand and one’s way of living on the other can be radically misleading. The Thomist tradition, which was an important element in the philosophical culture Descartes’s teachers at La Flèche handed on to him, embodied a conception of knowledge that was much richer and less narrowly intellectualistic than our modern conception of this term might suggest. Thomas Aquinas had divided the rational faculty into two categories, practical reason and speculative reason. The former involves the virtues of prudence and art (concerned respectively with doing and making what conduces to human good); the latter involves the three virtues of intellectus or ‘understanding’ (the grasp of first principles), scientia or ‘knowledge’ (comprehension of things and their causes), and sapientia or ‘wisdom’ (awareness of how everything is related to the highest or ultimate causes). But it is striking how far Aquinas departs from the original Aristotelian framework on which this classification is based; for although formally speaking these three virtues are excellences of speculative reason (which might suggest to us a certain neutrality and abstraction from the conduct of life), Aquinas’s account places them within a richly structured religious and moral framework. Excellence of intellect, for example, is, as Eleanore Stump acutely observes, ‘linked [by Aquinas] together with certain actions and dispositions in the will and also with certain states of emotion.’ And it follows that on Aquinas’ view ‘all true excellence of intellect—wisdom, understanding and scientia—is possible only in connection with moral excellence as well.’

The idea of a complex interrelation between moral and intellectual excellence is reinforced once we begin to delve into the theological context of Aquinas’s account of the virtues. There is explicit reference to the ‘seven gifts (septem dona) of the

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47 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266-73] Ia IIae, 57,2

48 *Summa theologiae*, Ia IIae, 66,5.


Spirit’, a doctrine based on the prophecy in Isaiah: ‘And the spirit of God shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and godliness, the spirit of the fear of God.’\textsuperscript{51} Aquinas observes that four of the gifts pertain to reason, namely wisdom (\textit{sapientia}), knowledge (\textit{scientia}), understanding (\textit{intellectus}) and counsel (\textit{consilium}); and three to the appetitive faculty, namely strength or courage (\textit{fortitudo}), godliness or piety (\textit{pietas}) and fear (\textit{timor}).\textsuperscript{52} The result is that, despite Aquinas’s stress on their different origins (natural and supernatural respectively), his discussion involves a considerable overlap, or ‘twinning’\textsuperscript{53} between the list of intellectual excellences and the list of gifts of the Holy Spirit. And indeed Aquinas’s account constantly interweaves items from these lists, and also from other standard theological lists, including the famous enumeration in Paul’s letter to the Galatians of the twelve \textit{fruits} of the Spirit, namely ‘love, joy peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance’.\textsuperscript{54} Aquinas also cross-refers us to the three great ‘theological’ virtues of faith, hope and charity: two of the three intellectual virtues, \textit{scientia} and \textit{intellectus} are linked with the faith, while \textit{sapientia} is linked with charity.

This interweaving is particularly striking in the case of \textit{sapientia} or wisdom: although if construed in purely secular or natural terms, it might be thought to be a ‘morally neutral’ virtue, and hence able to be present irrespective of the moral character of the agent, this ceases to be so if it is construed as a spiritual gift.\textsuperscript{55} What had in Aristotle been understood in terms of the mastery of the first principles of metaphysics becomes in Aquinas associated with knowledge of the ultimate first principle, God, knowledge of whom is linked in many biblical texts to charity or love.

\textsuperscript{51} Isaiah 11: 2, following the Greek text of the Septuagint version (LXX). The original Hebrew lists six gifts, and this is followed in the Vulgate: ‘et requiescet super eum spiritus Domini spiritus sapientiae et intellectus, spiritus consilii et fortitudinis, spiritus scientiae et piétatis.’ But the LXX version adds a gloss ‘the fear of God’, which some commentaries construed as a seventh gift; hence the standard doctrine of the ‘sevenfold gifts’ of the Holy Spirit, reflected in Thomas’s inclusion of \textit{timor}.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Summa theologiae}, Ia IIae 68, 1.

\textsuperscript{53} Cf. Stump, Aquinas, pp. 350ff.

\textsuperscript{54} Galatians 5: 22-3: ‘fructus autem Spiritus est caritas, gaudium, pax, longanimitas, bonitas, benignitas, fides, modestia, continentia’ (Vulgate).

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Summa theologiae}, IIa IIae 45, 4.
(which of course is far from being a purely intellectual matter). Some of the ramifications of this are again brought out by Stump:

On Aquinas’s account of wisdom . . . a person’s moral wrongdoing will produce deficiencies in both her speculative and her practical intellect. In its effects on her speculative intellect, it will make her less capable of understanding God and goodness, theology and ethics. It will also undermine her practical intellect, leaving her prone not only to wrong moral judgment in general, but also to wrong moral judgment about herself and particular actions of hers, and so will lead to self deception.

The upshot of this is that although a certain image of Aquinas that is prevalent today sees him as a proto-analytic philosopher, concerned purely with abstract conceptual inquiries (together perhaps with certain quaint and abstruse theological puzzles, for example about the identity of angels), in reality his philosophy offers an integrated vision in which the pursuit of virtue and the cultivation of knowledge are closely interlinked, and in which even an abstract sounding virtue like sapientia (the successor to Aristotle’s sophia) emerges as central to a harmonious and integrated life. To quote from the Summa theologiae:

It belongs to wisdom, as a gift, not only to contemplate Divine things, but also to regulate human acts. Now the first thing to be effected in this direction of human acts is the removal of evils opposed to wisdom: wherefore fear is said to be ‘the beginning of wisdom,’ because it makes us shun evil, while the last thing is like an end, whereby all things are reduced to their right order; and it is this that constitutes peace. Hence James said with reason that ‘the wisdom that is from above’ (and this is the gift of the Holy Ghost) ‘first indeed is chaste,’ because it avoids the corruption of sin, and ‘then peaceable,’ wherein lies the ultimate effect of wisdom, for which reason peace is numbered among the beatitudes.

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56 See for example 1 John 4: 16.

57 Stump, Aquinas, pp. 353-4.

58 Summa theologiae, IIa IIae 45, 6 (English Dominican translation, 1947).
5. DESCARTES AS SAGE?

Given that this traditional model exemplified by Aquinas and others—the model of philosophy as contributing centrally to how we should live—would have been absorbed at some fairly deep level by Descartes as part of his educational and cultural background, how far can we say that Descartes himself aspired to make his philosophy conform to it? And if, as has recently been suggested, the traditional persona of the philosopher (that of the ‘philosopher as sage’, as we might call it for convenience) had begun to come under serious attack in the early-modern period with the emergence of the new experimental science,\(^5^9\) should Descartes be seen as joining that attack, or as holding fast to the older conception?

There is a certain amount in Descartes that may seem to point us towards the erosion (or indeed eradication) of the persona of the philosopher as sage, and its replacement by the harsher more modernistic persona of the technocrat—the controlling manipulator of nature, aiming to ‘deliver the goods’ as a result of the expertise provided by the new science. We have already mentioned the manifesto of the Discours, which offers the hope that the new philosophie pratique will deliver mankind from the obstacles of disease and infirmity and make us ‘masters and possessors of nature’.\(^6^0\) And the way this programme is worked out in the writings of Descartes’s later years seems at first to reduce morals to physiology and medicine: to use the new mechanistic knowledge to develop techniques to reprogram the human affective system and thus, as it were, bypass the need for the traditional goals of spiritual discipline in the pursuit of the good.

The key to this radical activism is Descartes’s vision of how the results of physiological science could be harnessed to the service of ethics. He wrote to a correspondent in 1646 that his results in physics had been ‘a great help in establishing sure foundations in moral philosophy’;\(^6^1\) and when he published his treatise on the

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\(^{5^9}\) See for example Stephen Gaukroger’s account of Francis Bacon in ‘The persona of the natural philosopher in the early to mid seventeenth century’, typescript.

\(^{6^0}\) Discours de la méthode, part vi (AT VI 61: CSM I 142), quoted above, note 44.

\(^{6^1}\) ‘. . . la notion telle quelle de la Physique, que j’ai tâché d’acquérir, m’a grandement servi pour établir des fondements certains en la Morale’ (letter to Chanut of 15 June 1646, AT IV 441: CSMK 289).
Passions in 1649 he distinguished his approach from that of many of his predecessors by stressing his goal of explaining the passions en physicien — from a physiological point of view, as we might say. What Descartes has in mind here is a systematic programme for the re-training of our psycho-physical responses. The details of this programme (which I have examined at length elsewhere) are based partly on Descartes’s observations of how the behaviour of animals can be modified by appropriate conditioning; partly on observations in his own case of how various patterns of emotional response can be triggered by an arbitrary physical stimulus previously associated with a certain outcome (a striking example is his description of how he freed himself from a tendency to be attracted to cross-eyed women, caused by a forgotten childhood infatuation with a girl with a squint, which set up a conditioned erotic response); and partly by his general investigations of the psycho-physiology of the affective system.

Descartes’s activist dream that human beings should become masters and possessors of nature thus now encompasses human nature as well. Technological mastery will extend not only to the natural environment, but also to the mechanisms of our own bodies (indeed, the material structure, and the laws of operation are no different inside the body from what they are outside). And since the bodily events are inextricably linked to affective events (the ‘passions of the soul’), and since virtue is about the management of the passions, science opens the door to a practical recipe for virtue. Habituation, as Aristotle foresaw, will be the key; but it will no longer rely on the good or bad luck of having a certain kind of childhood training, since it is now in our power to re-program ourselves, armed with scientific knowledge of how our psycho-physical responses operate. ‘Even those whose souls are most feeble would be able to gain an absolute mastery over all the passions, if enough effort were devoted to training and guiding them (à les dresser et à les conduire).’ The ‘dressage’

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62 AT XI 326: CSM I 327.


65 ‘Ceux mêmes qui ont les plus faibles âmes pouraient acquérir un empire très absolu sur toutes les passions, si on employait assez d’industrie à les dresser et à les conduire’. *Passions of the Soul* [Les passions de l’âme, [1649], art. 50.
envisaged here, at the end of Part One of the *Passions of the Soul*, is aimed at nothing less than adjusting the pattern of brain movements (*les mouvements du cerveau*) and their associated feelings— a systematic reprogramming of our inherited and acquired psycho-cerebral responses.

All this might indeed seem to take us very far away from search for wisdom and righteousness associated with the traditional *persona* of the philosopher as sage. But it is now time to notice that all these envisaged technical developments in the management of the passions have for Descartes an essentially subordinate role. For the passions are related to the good only, as it were, accidentally and contingently. Sometimes the objects which they incline us to pursue are indeed worthy of pursuit, but often they can mislead us into supposing that something’s value is vastly greater than it is:

> Often passion makes us believe certain things to be much better and more desirable than they are; then, when we have taken much trouble to acquire them, and in the process lost the chance of possessing other more genuine goods, possession of them brings home to us their defects; and thence arise dissatisfaction, regret and remorse.⁶⁷

This leads Descartes straight into an insistence on the ‘true function of reason in the conduct of life’, namely ‘to examine and consider without passion the value of all the perfections, both of the body and of the soul, which can be acquired by our conduct.’⁶⁸

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⁶⁶ This applies in particular to the legitimate pleasures which the soul has in common with the body: ‘L’âme peut avoir ses plaisirs à part. Mais pour ceux qui lui sont communs avec le corps, ils dépendent entièrement des passions: en sorte que les hommes qu’elles peuvent le plus émouvoir sont capables de goûter le plus de douceur en cette vie’ (*Passions of the Soul*, art. 212).

⁶⁷ Letter to Elizabeth of 1 September 1645. Descartes goes on to say that the passions often ‘represent the good to which they tend with greater splendour than they deserve’ and they make us imagine pleasure to be much greater before we possess them than our subsequent experiences show them to be.’ (AT IV 284: CSMK 264-5).

⁶⁸ Letter to Elizabeth of 1 September 1645, AT IV 287: CSMK 265.
Is what is here envisaged a kind of utilitarian calculus—the kind of rational instrumentalism that we have seen in more modern times, namely one that cuts free from any substantive vision of the good, and simply aims to maximize the ‘preferences’ of the agent, or of the community at large? Emphatically not. For Descartes never abandoned his allegiance to a strongly theistic metaphysics of value, one that construes goodness as an objective supra-personal reality, constraining the rational assent of human beings just as powerfully as do the clearly perceived truths of logical and mathematics.

At the centre of Descartes’s metaphysics, resonantly expressed at the climax of his philosophical masterpiece, the Meditations, lies a vision of the eternal and infinite divine source of truth and goodness: *Placet hic aliquamdiu in ipsius Dei contemplatione immorari . . . et immensi hujus luminis pulchritudinem . . . intueri, admirari, adorare* (‘Let me here rest for a while in the contemplation of God himself and gaze upon, wonder at, and adore the beauty of this immense light’).69 This vision, it needs to be emphasised, involves contemplation of the good as well as the true: Descartes insists, in a strongly Platonic moment, on the closest possible match between how the mind responds to the *ratio veri* and to the *ratio boni*.70 The metaphysical journey from darkness and confusion to divine illumination, whether in the pursuit of truth or of goodness, involves a co-operation between intellect and will: the will must be exercised first in rejecting what is doubtful and unreliable, and then in focusing attention on the innate indubitable deliverances of the natural light that remain. Once the eye of the soul, the *acies mentis*, is turned on the relevant objects, they reveal themselves with irresistible clarity to the perceiving intellect as good or as true, and the assent of the will (to affirm, or to pursue) follows automatically: *ex magna luce in intellectu sequitur magna propensio in voluntate*.71

Once the importance of this powerful underlying metaphysics has been appreciated, we can see that Cartesian ethics, with its proposed techniques for the

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69 AT VII 52: CSM II 36.

70 My spontaneous inclination to assent to the truth, or to pursue the good, is a function of my ‘clearly understanding that reasons of truth and goodness point that way’ (*quia rationem veri et boni in ea evidenter intelligo*); Descartes suggests that this may also be thought of as resulting from a ‘divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts’ (AT VII 58: CSM II 40).

71 AT VII 59: CSM II 41.
management of the mind-body complex, could not even get off the ground without the fundamental supporting role of reason. Philosophy can show us how to live because the divine light of reason, implanted in each of our minds, can, when used carefully and properly, make us aware of those genuine and lasting goods in the pursuit of which our true fulfilment lies. Because of the weakness of our nature (a recurring theme in Descartes)\textsuperscript{72} we can easily be led astray, failing to focus on the light of truth and goodness, and allowing the false allure of lesser or specious ‘goods’ to attract our attention. But as long as we are determined to hold the image of the good before our eyes ‘in so far as the eye of the darkened intellect can bear it’,\textsuperscript{73} then we can know the right way forward. And virtue follows in the wake of this, since its fundamental basis is a ‘firm and constant resolution to use our freedom well, that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out what we judge to be best’.\textsuperscript{74} This is the discipline, or askesis, that Descartes’s philosophical method requires, in morals as in metaphysics. And it is a discipline which, because of its theistically-oriented character, and its fundamental integration of the moral and epistemic domains in the quest for truth and goodness, it seems not inappropriate to call a genuinely spiritual one.\textsuperscript{75}

Descartes’s ambition for his own philosophy was for it to match the goals set by his scholastic predecessor Eustachius: ‘the aim of a complete system of philosophy is human happiness.’ And in so far as his theistic metaphysics is the key to securing this goal, he follows in the tradition of Aquinas, for whom sapientia, the highest of the intellectual virtues, operates properly when it is directed towards knowledge of the highest and most exalted cause, that is, God.\textsuperscript{76} The key to discerning the persona of

\textsuperscript{72} Compare the last sentence of the Meditations: Naturae nostrae infirmitas est agnoscedanda- ‘We must acknowledge the weakness of our nature’ (AT VII 90: CSM II 62).

\textsuperscript{73} AT VII 52: CSM II 36 (end of Third Meditation).

\textsuperscript{74} Passions of the Soul, art. 153 (speaking of the master virtue of ‘generosity’).

\textsuperscript{75} There are many aspects of the Meditations, for example, that call to mind the model of a set of spiritual exercises; for more on thesis claim, see J. Cottingham, ‘Doubtful uses of doubt’.

\textsuperscript{76} A recent most interesting study by Lilli Alanen has plausibly argued that ‘from the time of the correspondence with Elizabeth onwards, Descartes became increasingly interested in the ‘practical, moral and therapeutic’ uses of reason: Descartes’s Concept of Mind (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 166). Earlier in her book, Alanen acutely observes that Descartes’s philosophical interests in scientia were closely connected to the traditional
Descartes the philosopher has very often been understood in terms of his new vision of *scientia*. And that, of course, is an very important part of the story. But the full story discloses his even more important commitment to the ancient ideal of *sapientia*, with all the religious connotations that notion would have had for one brought up as he had been.

We began by calling attention to Descartes’s earliest notebook, the *Praeambula*, where Descartes sees himself as entering the world stage masked, and goes on to describe the sciences themselves as masked. Peeling off the masks is no easy task when one is dealing with of the most wary and private of the great philosophers. But if the argument of this paper has been anywhere near the mark, Descartes’s true philosophical *persona* is already strongly prefigured in the verse from the book of Psalms that he chose to inscribe as his motto at the very front of that first notebook: *Initium sapientiae timor Domini*— ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’. 77

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77 Psalm 110 (Vulgate); this corresponds to Psalm 111 in the numbering of the Hebrew bible, which is followed the ‘Authorised’ Version (1611) and the Book of Common Prayer (1550, rev. 1662).