

REGARDING DESCARTES' *MEDITATIONS* AS MEDITATIONAL

by

Matthew Hettche

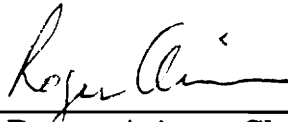
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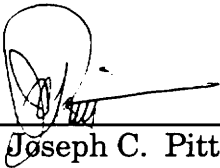
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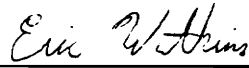
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(Abstract)

Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy is often hailed as one of the great classics of western philosophy. First-time readers of the Meditations are often struck by Descartes' clear and accessible writing style. Within recent scholarship (e.g., most notably, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty's collection of Essays on Descartes' Meditations [1986]), much attention has been focused toward examining the philosophical import of Descartes' literary techniques. In particular, discussions have centered upon whether there is a significant relationship between the literary format of Descartes' "Metaphysical Meditations" with that of religious devotional exercises, also known as meditations, that were prevalent during the early part of the seventeenth century. Although commentators are fairly equally divided on whether the stylistic devices employed by Descartes are philosophically important, there is general agreement that Descartes' text, at the very least, exemplifies the features of religious meditation.

Building upon the efforts of previous scholarship, the focus of this present study is to provide a philosophically plausible and historically accurate account of how Descartes' Meditations are meditational. Much of our attention will be directed toward examining the different styles and techniques of religious meditation. In particular, we will examine the relevance of Marin Mersenne's recently rediscovered treatise L'usage de la raison (1623). This work exhibits features of an Augustinian style of religious meditation and it is a text which can be easily connected to Descartes.

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There are many people who have contributed to my efforts on this project. I extend my most sincere thanks and gratitude to my advisor Roger Ariew. His knowledge of Descartes and passion for the history of philosophy has influenced my work in countless ways. The clarity and depth of his own writing has provided me with a model of scholarship which I can only hope to someday replicate. I also wish to thank Peter Dear from Cornell University for loaning me the microfilm of Mersenne's L'usage de la raison. Not only was this text my angle for discussing Descartes' Meditations in a new light, but it also provided me with the opportunity to learn the painstaking art of translating seventeenth century French. I am indebted to Joe Pitt and Eric Watkins for their help and suggestions during the different stages of my research and writing. In particular, Joe's advice on research methods and Eric's ability to untangle my (sometimes) confused questions are just two of the benefits I enjoyed. The conversation and support of Lori Watson, Eric Lewis, and the rest of the graduate students cannot go unnoticed. But lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Patricia and Leroy, to whom I dedicate this thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iii	
Table of Contents	iv	
Author's Note on Translations	v	
 <u>Chapter One:</u>		
The Problems of Connecting the <i>Meditations</i> with Religious Devotional Exercises		
1. Introduction and Focus of Present Study	1	
2. Literature Review.	4	
3. Problems Outlined	24	
 <u>Chapter Two:</u>		
The Historical and Intellectual Context of Devotional Exercises.		27
1. Historical Background	28	
2. Divisions within the Genre.	34	
 <u>Chapter Three:</u>		
Descartes and Two Traditions of Religious Meditation		44
1. A Jesuit Connection	45	
2. A Minim Connection	49	
 <u>Chapter Four:</u>		
Rereading Descartes		56
1. The <i>Meditations</i> as an Augustinian Meditation	57	
2. Philosophical Meditation.	62	
 Bibliography	 68	

Author's Note on Translations

Most of the translations of this thesis are taken from the standard anglo-editions of the various authors discussed. References to these editions are first cited within the footnotes by original author, first publication date, and year of translation, and then within the end bibliography by original author. For the handful of texts where no English translations are available, these translations are my own. The translated passages appear in the body of the text and the original language is quoted in the footnotes along with a reference to the end bibliography. I have striven to capture the literal meaning of the author's ideas rather than a polished English version, and consequently, many of these passages are perhaps not as clear as my own prose.

M. R. H.

The Problems of Connecting the *Meditations* with Religious Devotional Exercises

1. Introduction and Focus of Present Study

For its time, the literary format that Descartes employed to present his metaphysics was as novel and unorthodox as the philosophical method he wished to advance. During the seventeenth century, the standard convention for a written work of philosophy was a treatise or disputation. Descartes' conversational tone, writing in first person present tense, and unique organization of chapters into "meditations" was clearly a departure from the norm. His intentions were not simply to rebel against the status quo, however. On the contrary, as architect for the "new science" Descartes' agenda depended quite heavily on gaining approval from the proper authorities (e.g., the Doctors of the Sorbonne and the Jesuits, his former teachers).¹ Prima facie, the reasons for such an unconventional writing style seem merely rhetorical. Descartes' request of the reader to "meditate seriously" and give the subject matter "attentive consideration" is unquestionably related to the motif of his book. At the end of the replies to

1 Evidence of Descartes' concern for the acceptance of his Meditations on First Philosophy can be seen in the "Dedicatory letter to the Sorbonne" (AT, VII, 1. CSM, II, 3) and in the following correspondence: To Mersenne, 30 July 1640 (AT, III, 126. CSMK, 150); To Huygens, 31 July 1640 (AT, III, 751. CSMK, 150); To Mersenne, 30 September 1640 (AT, III, 183. CSMK, 153); To Mersenne, 11 November 1640 (AT, III, 233. CSMK, 157); To Gibieuf, 11 November 1640 (AT, III, 237. CSMK, 158); and To Mersenne, 31 March 1641 (AT, III, 350. CSMK, 177). All references to the works of Descartes are given to the Adam and Tannery editions, Oeuvres de Descartes (Paris, 1964-76) quoted as AT by volume and page, as translated in The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, vols. 1-2, edited by Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, quoted as CSM by volume and page, (vol. 3, idem with Kenny quoted as CSMK by page).

the Second Objections, he writes: "I am therefore right to require particularly careful attention from my readers; and the style of writing that I selected was one which I thought would be most capable of generating such attention."² However, for the historian of philosophy the literary style of Descartes' Meditations, upon closer examination, poses many other questions. The two main issues that dominate discussions on this topic are: (1) how do Descartes' "Metaphysical Meditations" relate to religious devotional exercises, also known as meditations, that were prevalent during the early part of the seventeenth century; and (2) do the stylistic devices employed by Descartes bear on the philosophical content of his work--that is, should the mode of presentation not only affect the way we read and study the Meditations but also how we understand and interpret its philosophical arguments?

The focus of this present study is to provide answers to these questions. At the broadest level of inquiry, our objective will be to determine the extent to which Descartes' Meditations are meditational. What we conclude will largely depend on how we construe and develop the notion "meditation." If we can provide a philosophically plausible and historically accurate account of this notion, then it is perhaps possible to gain new insight on Descartes' text. Building upon the efforts of previous scholarship, our primary concern will be to examine the religious meaning of the word "meditation." To be sure, there is much to be gained by comparing Descartes' text with the diverse and abounding genre of devotional exercises. Beyond structural parallels, the basic strategy and psychological character of these religious writings closely resemble the approach and methodology of the Meditations. However, to assess accurately the meditational quality of Descartes' text it is not sufficient to merely point out the ways in which his text generally resembles the genre of devotional

2 AT, VII, 158. CSM, II, 112.

exercises. As our analysis unfolds, we will find that there are sharp theoretical differences between the various types of “spiritual exercises” that were prevalent during the seventeenth century. To make the general claim that Descartes’ text is modeled after religious meditation would perhaps explain a certain rhetorical aspect of his writing style but it would not lead us to a very deep understanding of how his writing style (as meditational) is philosophically important.

Our overall strategy within this study, therefore, will be first to determine exactly how Descartes’ Meditations relate to the genre of devotional exercises, and depending on what we conclude, we will then consider how his writing style bears on the philosophical content of his work. We will begin this venture within the remaining sections of this chapter by giving a rather detailed and extended survey of the secondary literature. The opinions of commentators within the past century serve as a formative starting point from which to begin our own analysis. Their efforts point to a number of ways in which Descartes can be connected with religious meditation. At the very least, they draw our attention to many structural and thematic parallels which prompt us to take a closer look of how Descartes may have borrowed the conventions and techniques of religious meditation. As we shall see, however, there are a number of problems with how commentators have attempted to establish Descartes’ relationship with the devotional genre. After taking into account what these problems are, we will then begin Chapter Two with our own assessment.

In Chapter Two we will provide the historical and intellectual background of devotional exercises. By first understanding how devotional writings developed in the seventeenth century, and then discussing the different types of writing that exist within the genre as a whole, we will be in the informed position to see how these writings relate to Descartes. In particular, this chapter will expose exactly what is meant by religious

meditation (proper) and will give a detailed account of the different styles or traditions of meditation that existed during the seventeenth century. In Chapter Three we will examine two different works of religious meditation: first, St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises and second, Marin Mersenne's L'usage de la raison. Each of these works represent a different tradition of meditation, and there is strong historical evidence to link both of these texts to Descartes. The latter of these two works was recently rediscovered and, until now, has not been discussed in context of Descartes' Meditations. As we shall see, this text plays a very important role in our assessment and understanding of the meditational quality of Descartes' text. In the last chapter of our study, we will consider how Descartes' text is in fact meditational. First we will review the literary and meditational devices of his work, and second, we will consider the ways in which these devices are philosophically important. With this overall strategy in mind, let us now turn to our survey of the secondary literature.

2. Literature Review

Not surprisingly, one of the first commentators to remark on the conspicuous style of Descartes' Meditations was Étienne Gilson. Contemporary approaches to the history of Cartesian philosophy are indebted to his work in many ways. Although not specifically addressing the issues that surround discussions of Descartes' writing style, the general focus of Gilson's work serves as a prologue for much of the scholarship dedicated to such issues. Gilson was among the first to view Descartes' thinking as set within the context of Scholastic-Aristotelianism--that is, he recognized that while Descartes' project was a reaction against the dominant tradition of scholasticism, it was at the same time deeply embedded within that tradition. His seminal work Études sur le Rôle de la Pensée Médiévale dans la Formation du Système Cartésien (1930)

investigates the role of medieval thought, primarily that of Thomism, on the formation of Descartes' philosophy.³ An important observation by Gilson is noting the similarities and possible influence of Jesuit thought (e.g., the Coimbrans and Suárez)⁴ on Descartes. This historiographical approach sets the stage, so to speak, for others who attempt to connect the literary format of the Meditations with the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. Such attempts, at first glance, do not seem very far from Gilson's attitude on the methodology of the Meditations; for example, he writes: "[T]he first Meditation is not as much a theory to understand as it is an exercise to practice."⁵ However, Gilson's comments are much too brief and cursory for us to consider him as holding any definitive position.

The first substantive discussion comparing the Meditations with Loyola's Spiritual Exercises occurred during the International Colloquium on Descartes held at Royaumont Abbey in 1955. At this conference Pierre Mesnard gave a lecture, entitled "L'Arbre de la sagesse." His lecture focused on how the Ignatian practice of reflecting on religious symbols can be considered as a central theme within all of Descartes' works.⁶ His thesis extends beyond specific connections with the Meditations, suggesting an Ignatian influence that underlies the whole of the Descartes' philosophy.⁷ Mesnard's paper is important for our purposes because it introduces the relevance of religious meditation as well as the role of the

3 Gilson, 1930.

4 The Coimbrans were a group of commentators on Aristotle who first published in 1592, and who were connected with the Colégio das Artes in Coimbra (Portugal). Descartes refers to this group as the "Conimbricenses" in a letter to Mersenne, dated 30 September 1640 (AT, III, 185. CSMK, 154). Francis Suárez (1548-1617) is a Spanish Jesuit who published his main philosophical work Metaphysical Disputations in 1597.

5 "[L]a première Méditation n'est plus une théorie à comprendre, c'est un exercice à pratiquer." Gilson 1930, p. 186.

6 Mesnard, et al, [1957] 1985.

7 For more recent studies that attempt to establish an over-arching Ignatian influence throughout all of Descartes' works, see: Thomson, 1972; and Stohrer, 1979. For the purposes of this chapter, I will primarily concentrate on the literature that deals specifically with the Meditations.

imagination in ascetical reflection when regarding Descartes' metaphysics. His lecture provoked a discussion between Martial Gueroult and Evert Willem Beth that focused more narrowly on whether Descartes' Meditations were influenced by Loyola's Exercises. Within the discussion, Gueroult and Beth take opposing positions with respect to the significance that image and imagination serve in Loyola's text.⁸

Gueroult maintains that Descartes' Meditations do not resemble the Exercises because of the dissimilarity between how each text employs the use of image and imagination. He explains that the goal of the Exercises is to persuade the will of the meditator through a meditational technique that requires the representation of certain images. For Loyola, these images are ascertained from the sensible imagination which, in Gueroult's opinion, is opposite from the methodology that Descartes employs.⁹ Gueroult argues that Descartes' method of leading the mind away from the senses is closer to the style of meditation found in the Soliloquies of St. Augustine. He comments:

With Descartes there is without a doubt an influence of an Augustinian-type meditation, transformed by the use of the discipline of mathematics as means of segregation from the sensible with what it is not. For example, in the first three meditations we really feel that Descartes responds to Augustinian meditation. Moreover, there is a pause in his meditations to exert oneself and dwell on contemplation. But as soon as we arrive at the fourth, and above all at the sixth meditation, the meditation ceases at bottom to be a meditation, it becomes a treatise.¹⁰

⁸ For the discussion following Mesnard's lecture see: Mesnard, et al, [1957] 1985, pp. 350-359.

⁹ This point by Gueroult, noting the dissimilarity between Loyola's and Descartes' attitude toward the sensible imagination, can also be seen in his work: Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons: The Soul and the Body [1952]. See: Gueroult, 1985, p. 294, n 27.

¹⁰ "Il y a sans doute chez Descartes une influence de la méditation du type augustinien, transformée par l'emploi de la discipline mathématique comme moyen de ségrégation du sensible avec ce qui ne l'est pas. Par exemple dans les trois premières méditations, on a bien le sentiment que Descartes répond à la méditation augustinienne. D'ailleurs il y a des arrêts dans ses méditations pour faire effort sur soi-même, et s'attarder sur une contemplation. Mais à partir du moment où l'on arrive

The interesting claim by Gueroult here is that although Descartes' metaphysics are influenced by an Augustinian style of meditation, it is an influence that can only be attributed to the first three meditations. What Gueroult has in mind with respect to the philosophical importance of such a meditational style is unclear. Given that his comments appear only in the discussion after Mesnard's lecture (what amounts to 2 printed pages), the issue of whether the meditational elements of Descartes' work bear on its philosophical content was most likely not a concern for Gueroult.

In contrast to Gueroult, Beth de-emphasizes the role of image and imagination within the Ignatian Exercises. He suggests that the use of images are only important during the third and fourth "weeks,"¹¹ and that the overall spirit of the Exercises are found in the "abstract suggestions," what he considers the dominating theme during the first "week."¹² He believes, furthermore, that the imagination is only invoked by Loyola to establish "the composition of place"--a meditational device which serves to occupy the body or sensible faculty in order to free the intellect. By downplaying the importance of image and imagination within Loyola's Exercises, Beth circumvents Gueroult's position and leads one to more plausibly connect Descartes' literary style in the Meditations with an Ignatian influence. On the whole the discussion at Royaumont Abbey is quite short, consisting in very general points of comparison and contrast. At the very least, however, it is a helpful episode in illustrating two distinct hypotheses as to how to connect Descartes' Meditations with specific texts of

à la quatrième, et surtout à la sixième méditation, la méditation cesse au fond d'être méditation: elle tend au traité." Mesnard, et al, [1957] 1985, p. 351.

11 The structure of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises is divided into six chapters or parts: (1) Introductory Explanations; (2) The First Week; (3) The Second Week; (4) The Election; (5) The Third Week; (6) The Fourth Week; and (7) Supplementary Matter. See: Ignatius, [c.1541-56] 1992; and pages 45-49, below.

12 Beth comments to Gueroult: "Votre exemple est pris dans la troisième semaine de l'exercice spirituel, et il serait encore vrai dans la dernière semaine, mais si vous prenez la première semaine, et surtout le commencement des exercices spirituels, cela n'est plus vrai, car l'exercice spirituel repose . . . sur des propositions abstraites." See: Mesnard, et al, [1957] 1985, p. 352.

devotional exercises (e.g., an Augustinian style of meditation and Loyola's Exercises).

In his book The Metaphysics of Descartes (1965), Leslie J. Beck follows the precedent set by Mesnard and Beth and presents a more developed thesis for why an Ignatian influence can be attributed to Descartes' text.¹³ Beck maintains that Descartes intentionally borrows from the "technical structure" of the Exercises in order to inculcate a method of study for the reader.¹⁴ He recalls Descartes' comments at the end of the replies to the Second Objections where Descartes gives his reasons for choosing the title "Meditations" over the more traditional title of "Disputations."¹⁵ Beck portrays Descartes as wanting to transform philosophy from the stilted Scholastic practice of disputations or "actus syllogisticus" to a "special kind of activity" or exercise.¹⁶ This exercise encourages the reader to engage a subject, to think through various problems with the help of an experienced thinker, and in the end to arrive at a particular understanding for oneself. The technical structure borrowed from Loyola's Exercises is simply the "art of meditation," which in-itself is empty of content, existing as an approach of techniques or rather as a kind of attitude. According to Beck, Descartes' request of the reader to give the subject matter attentive consideration and to withdraw from preconceived opinions is ultimately tied up with this meditative attitude.

Beck finds four "echoes" of the Exercises' technical structure in the

13 Beck 1965, pp. 28-38.

14 Beck 1965, p. 32.

15 AT, VII, 157. CSM, II, 112.

16 Beck 1965, p. 30. The disputation or "actus syllogisticus" is a Scholastic method of teaching philosophical arguments through the exercise of oral debate. At La Flèche there was known to be two main variations of this practice as revealed in either the "weekly disputation" and the more formal "monthly disputation." In general, this practice involves the master or teacher to present a problematic thesis to the student, whereby the student would assume a position and state his argument in the form of a syllogism. A contrary argument was also presented, either by another student or the master, and then finally a resolution was drawn. For more on the scholastic practice of disputation, especially at La Flèche, see: Rochemonteix 1889.

Meditations. He considers these echoes as evidence for Descartes employing the techniques or tactics of Loyola's devotional exercise. The first echo is that the Meditations are divided into six days, each day treating a separate topic, and each topic serving as step in a progression cumulating in a final resolution or understanding.¹⁷ The second echo is a meditative technique where the narrator calls for a period of rest after examining a particular topic; and the third echo is a confession of the narrator's humility.¹⁸ The last echo pointed to by Beck is Descartes' allusion to the mystic contemplation of the Beatific Vision at the end of the "Third Meditation."¹⁹ This last tactic adopted by Descartes is important for Beck's thesis in showing that Descartes intended his philosophical exercises to be taken in analogy with a well-known devotional practice. There are obvious differences between Loyola's spiritual exercise and Descartes' philosophical reflections; however, Beck believes these differences merely lie in the content and aim of each exercise rather than in the structure. He notes that during the seventeenth century the title of "Meditation" was exclusively reserved for religious writings. It is precisely from such a context that Beck believes that Descartes borrows the notion and title "meditation"; however, he also believes it is a term that Descartes transforms for his own purposes. He considers the title of Descartes' work, Meditationes de prima philosophia, as revealing an intentional analogy between the well-known religious style of meditation and an innovative brand of philosophical meditation.

Beck's reasons for claiming that Descartes' Meditations are specifically influenced by Loyola's Exercises are curious. He considers that

17 Evidence of this diurnal division can be found in AT, VII, 17-23-34-52-62-63. CSM, II, 12-16-23-37-43-44. See: Beck 1965, p. 32.

18 The second echo can be found at AT, VII, 34. CSM, II 23.; and the third can be found at AT, VII, 90. CSM, II, 62. See: Beck 1965, p.32.

19 Beck 1965, p. 33. See: AT, VII, 52. CSM, II, 36. The Beatific Vision is the direct knowledge of God enjoyed by the blessed in heaven. St. Paul alludes to this in 2 Corinthians 12.

since Descartes was a student at the Jesuit college of La Flèche, where it was customary for the students to attend an annual spiritual retreat during holy week, Descartes would have been familiar with Loyola's meditation manual.²⁰ Beck writes: "We may fairly assume that the pattern of those six-day retreats must have colored his [Descartes'] association of the word 'meditation'."²¹ Beck assumes that since Descartes had exposure to the Ignatian style of meditation as a student, it was necessarily the style that Descartes modeled his text after. If Loyola's Exercises was the only text of its kind during Descartes' life, then Beck's thesis would be unequivocal. However, as we have already seen from Gueroult's comments, there were other traditions and styles of devotional writings present during seventeenth century (e.g., an Augustinian style of meditation)--not to mention there were also secularized versions of meditations being published during this time.²² Moreover, the four echoes that Beck attributes to Descartes' text are not features exclusive to the Ignatian Exercises. These features are common to many styles and if Beck is going to maintain such a precise connection he needs to provide more internal evidence. In particular, he needs to establish two things: (1) a defining set of characteristics that separates the Ignatian Exercises from the entire genre of devotional writings; and (2) the ways in which Descartes employs these characteristics when presenting his metaphysics. Beck's position does not address the issue of how such a meditational structure affects the philosophical content of Descartes' work. His thesis is simply that Descartes refers to the Exercises in order to recommend a method of reflection. This is to say that Descartes borrows from the structure of the spiritual exercise in hopes to prepare the reader for a new way of thinking.

20 For details on the annual spiritual retreats of the Jesuits, see: Camille de Rochemonteix 1889, p. 141.

21 Beck 1965, p. 31.

22 See: page 33-34, below.

For the most part, the issue of whether the literary devices of Descartes' Meditations are philosophically important has only recently become a concern within the secondary literature. Our objective for the remainder of this section will be to survey the opinions of commentators writing within the past ten years who have focused on this issue. In particular, we will consider how each commentator connects Meditations with religious devotional exercises and examine what each believes this connection means for an understanding of Descartes' ideas.

We begin this survey with Zeno Vendler. In his essay "Descartes' Exercises," Vendler maintains that Descartes was influenced by Loyola's Exercises, and moreover, that it is an influence that has important consequences for a philosophical understanding of Descartes' work.²³ The basic strategy of his essay follows the line taken by Thomson and Stohrer.²⁴ But in contrast to Thomson, who considers the Discourse as the text which exemplifies the greatest number of Ignatian ideas, Vendler considers the most striking parallels to be found in the Meditations. He writes: "Loyola's deepest influence is to be found in the Meditations, where it is not just a matter of some similarities, but of basic concept, aim, strategy, and literary form."²⁵ A central theme throughout Vendler's article is the idea that Descartes was greatly inspired by Jesuit spirituality from his school days at La Flèche. According to Vendler, this spirituality influenced Descartes' intellectual development, not only affecting his later philosophical ideas but also the way Descartes chose to lead his life. Part one of his essay outlines the Ignatian features of the Meditations; and the second part traces the parallels between the life of the philosopher and the life of the Saint. In part two of his article, Vendler presents the view that in composing the Meditations Descartes realized his "mission" in life: first envisioned in a

²³ See: Vendler 1989.

²⁴ See: footnote # 7.

²⁵ Vendler 1989, p. 195.

mystical experience in his youth, followed by a dream, a pilgrimage to a shrine of the Virgin, and finally a term of solitude--thus mirroring the experiences of Loyola's own life.²⁶ Whether such a view is correct or not depends in part on whether Vendler can firmly establish that the Meditations are modeled after the Ignatian Exercises in "basic concept, aim, strategy, and literary form."

Vendler begins part one of his essay by presenting historical evidence for Descartes' exposure to the writings of St. Ignatius. Similar to Beck, Vendler considers that since Descartes was a student at La Flèche he would have attended, or at least been aware of, the annual spiritual retreats during Holy Week. Vendler also notes that Father François Véron, a professor of philosophy at La Flèche during Descartes' term, published his own book of devotions, Manuale Sodalitatis (1608), designed especially for students and young laymen, and which was based on Loyola's Exercises.²⁷ Vendler claims that even if Descartes did not read the Exercises personally, the basic elements and spirit of Ignatian meditation would have been familiar to all students of La Flèche.

Next, Vendler describes four parallels that exist between the Meditations and the Exercises.²⁸ The first similarity is that each text assumes an identical structure. He delineates six steps or stages that constitute an Ignatian meditation, and maintains that Descartes' philosophical narrative, at least within each of the first four meditations, follows a similar format. The second parallel is that both works have a comparable aim or purpose. Just as it is the goal of the Ignatian exercises to affect a change within the spiritual life of the meditator, the Cartesian meditations have a similar type of goal. He writes: "The aim of the

²⁶ Vendler 1989, p. 196.

²⁷ Vendler 1989, p. 194. For a discussion and excerpts of this publication see: Thomson 1972, pp. 61-69. For what it's worth, Thomson points out that Véron's Manuale divides the exercises into six days, the same diurnal division of Descartes' Meditations.

²⁸ Vendler 1989, pp. 195-196.

Meditations is not merely to convince the reader of the truth of certain propositions, but to change the will of the meditator concerning the conduct of his intellectual life.”²⁹ The third similarity is how each work builds to a “climax” of personal choice. Vendler explains that the entire enterprise of meditation culminates in a moment where the meditator is faced with a choice of what is true or false. In Loyola’s text, it is a choice between salvation and inordinate attachments (i.e., wealth or glory); and in Descartes’ case, it a choice between confused ideas and certain knowledge. The last parallel Vendler points out is how each text employs the same types of psychological devices. He considers the malicious demon of the “First Meditation” and the wax-passage in “Meditation Two” as therapeutic exercises which help the meditator reach a state of mental equilibrium. These exercises, in Vendler’s opinion, follow along the same lines of the Ignatian practice of “age contra”-- a technical phrase that literally means “go against”.³⁰ In order prepare the soul for a state of indifference, Loyola advises the meditator to go against the inordinate attachments of his/her corrupt nature. For example, if a person is inclined to the grandeur of wealth he/she is advised to turn away from this attachment and desire its opposite: poverty. Vendler believes the demon and wax-passage are similarly invoked in spirit of “age contra”--acting as “counterweights” to the inordinate inclinations of trusting the senses and imagination, respectively.

As imaginative as these textual correlations may be, they fall subject to the same criticism of Beck’s four “echoes.” It is unclear, at least when considering Vendler’s first three parallels, how and why such meditational techniques are exclusively Ignatian. Even before determining whether Descartes actually employs such techniques, Vendler needs to provide a defining set of characteristics that single out the Exercises from other

29 Vendler 1989, p. 195.

30 Vendler 1989, p. 203.

forms of devotional writings. As far as regarding Vendler's fourth parallel, it is true that both texts employ what might be called "psychological devices"; however, such devices are implemented for different reasons and serve different purposes in each text. On one hand, Descartes uses the demon and wax-passage, respectively, as a type of thought experiment. They are intended to promote free-speculation on the part of the reader, exposing an existing range of possibilities. These experiments serve to raise certain epistemological problems associated with knowledge gained from the senses. Loyola's device of "age contra," on the other hand, is not intended to promote free-speculation on the part of the meditator--on the contrary, it is a directive or imperative on how to think. Instead of being the type of device that raises certain problems, Loyola's device provides the solution to an already existing problem (i.e., the inordinate attachments of the soul). From the evidence that Vendler presents, it seems highly unlikely that the Meditations are modeled after Loyola's Exercises. His overall argument depends too much on the idea that Descartes was influenced, and even inspired, by Jesuit spirituality from his school days at La Flèche. Unfortunately for Vendler, this idea cannot be confirmed beyond Vendler's own opinions nor from any of Descartes' published or unpublished writings.

The important insight we gain from Beck and Vendler is that Descartes' text does seem to exhibit features of a spiritual exercise. Although we can deny these features as being distinctively Ignatian, we cannot dismiss the idea that these features might allude more generally to the genre of devotional exercises. Bradley Rubidge, in his article "Descartes's Meditations and Devotional Meditations," advances an interpretation of Descartes' text precisely along these lines.³¹ Rubidge maintains that there are aspects of the Meditations that refer to the genre of

31 Rubidge 1990.

devotional meditations; however these aspects do not significantly alter the content or structure of Descartes' text. He claims that Descartes alludes to the genre in such a general and superficial manner as to not to distract from the more intentional philosophical substance of his work. Rubidge suggests two reasons why Descartes may have wanted to invoke the tradition of devotional exercises. The first reason is to reinforce his recommendations on how the work should be read and studied. The second reason is to indicate to the reader that his ideas are not iconoclastic or out of line with the views of the Catholic Church. Rubidge writes: "By linking his text to such a tradition, Descartes signals his adherence to orthodox positions and advertises his desire to conform to, even to support, some of the Church's fundamental doctrines."³²

Rubidge outlines a short history of Christian meditation and isolates three traditions that contribute to the specification of the genre.³³ According to Rubidge, devotional exercises involving meditation were practiced from the beginnings of monasticism; however, written examples or systematic treatises did not appear until the twelfth century. These early styles of meditation focused mainly on the proper subjects for reflection (e.g., passages from Scripture and events from sacred history) and relied on the imagination for provocation. Rubidge describes the overall structure of these manuals as "open-ended"--that is, functioning more as examples rather than a set of instructions. The first distinct tradition he recognizes is the "Neoplatonist" tradition. Taking form around the thirteenth century, this tradition stressed the role of the intellect as opposed to the imagination for the avenue of meditative thought. The most prominent author within this tradition is St. Bonaventure.³⁴ Rubidge credits Bonaventure as the

³² Rubidge 1990, p. 48.

³³ Rubidge 1990, p. 30.

³⁴ Most commentators consider Bonaventure's greatest work on meditation to be the Itinerarium Mentis in Deum or The Mind's Road to God [1259]. See: Bonaventure [1259] 1953; as well as Martz 1954, p. 36; and Gilson 1938, p. 224.

being the originator of the doctrine of the “three ways”-- a method of meditation which guides the meditator through three distinct stages, culminating with a knowledge of and union with the Divine.³⁵ With the exception of this meditational technique, Rubidge claims that Neoplatonist ideas did not play a significant role in the types of spiritual exercises that were familiar to Descartes and his contemporaries during the seventeenth century.

The second tradition mentioned by Rubidge is the “*Devotio Moderna*” tradition which took form around the fourteenth and fifteenth century.³⁶ According to Rubidge, this tradition was later centered in the Netherlands around a reformist spiritual movement which placed particular emphasis on the personal and private aspects of devotions. This tradition is considered to be more methodical and more formal than the Neoplatonist style.³⁷ Rubidge explains: “The exercises described by the later writers of the *Devotio Moderna* are distinguished by their division of meditations into carefully specified stages of thought and emotion, laid out in a prescribed sequence.”³⁸ He considers the methods of the *Devotio Moderna* to be traceable in most all of the devotional works prevalent during the seventeenth century.

The third and last style of meditation discussed by Rubidge in

35 For more on the doctrine of the “three ways,” see: pages 38-39, below.

36 Rubidge labeling this tradition the “*Devotio Moderna*” is perhaps somewhat misleading. Properly speaking, the “*Devotio Moderna*” was a spiritual movement founded in the twelfth century upon the writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. St. Bernard’s writings were important to the development of speculative mysticism, a very different form of meditation (if we can even call it meditation) from the reflective and intellectual exercises in which to compare Descartes. In brief, his treatises are mostly anti-intellectual, focusing on divine love and religious ecstasy as pathways to heaven. See: Gilson 1955, pp. 164-171; as well as Murray 1967, pp. 17-34.

37 Rubidge is reluctant to mention specific authors of this tradition, however, there are two possible candidates: Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen (1367-98) and John Mombaer (d. 1502). These authors belonged to “The Brothers of Common Life” or “The *Devoti*”--a society dedicated to reforming the clergy and who published a number of methodical treatises under the title “*Spiritual Exercises*”. See: Debuchy 1912, p. 226; and pages 30-31, below.

38 Rubidge 1990, p. 31.

specifying the genre is the Ignatian tradition and, unsurprisingly, Loyola's Exercises serves as the model text. Rubidge considers the Exercises as overall the most influential text of any devotional exercise. He maintains there are two distinguishing characteristics that separate this text from other traditions. The first is that Loyola's text is designed as a "handbook" for a spiritual director to lead a meditator through a series of exercises. The Exercises are not intended to be read by the person performing the exercise; rather they are intended to be read by the director or guide of a spiritual retreat. The second defining characteristic is that the Exercises borrow from the conventions of other traditions. Instead of developing meditational techniques that are unique to its own tradition, the Ignatian style combines features from other traditions (e.g., the Neoplatonist doctrine of the "three ways" and the formalized structure of the *Devotio Moderna*). He writes: "Far from recommending a radically new and distinctive form of devotion, Loyola's Spiritual Exercises may be considered exemplary of the entire meditation genre."³⁹

Although Rubidge's description of the genre proves to be very helpful in understanding the diverse history of Christian meditation, his assessment of the types of devotional exercises that were prevalent during the seventeenth century is inadequate. Rubidge is very careful in constructing a historically cogent description of the genre; however, he neglects to apply the same historical sensitivity when considering the types of texts that would have been available to Descartes. In particular, he maintains that devotionals of the Neoplatonic bent did not play major role during Descartes' life and he only mentions two texts from this time period: (1) Loyola's Exercises; and (2) St. François de Sales' Introduction à la vie dévote

39 Rubidge 1990, p. 33.

(1608).⁴⁰ If Rubidge is going to maintain such a precise view on the nature and spirit of meditation during the seventeenth century, he needs to provide evidence for why this is so. As it turns out, there were many minor figures publishing devotional exercises throughout Descartes' life, producing a variety of devotional styles--not to mention that all of St. Augustine's works were reprinted.⁴¹ To claim that the devotional corpus during the seventeenth century consisted of a few texts in a particular tradition is really an oversimplification of matters. Rubidge seems to conflate the issue of what traditions Descartes would have most likely been aware of with the issue of what types of devotional texts actually existed. *Prima facie*, the Ignatian and Salesian texts do seem to be the most likely candidates for Descartes' knowledge of the meditational genre; however, as we shall see within Chapter Two, this is also an oversimplification.

Another commentator who attempts to connect Descartes' Meditations with the genre of meditations is Amélie Oksenberg Rorty. In her essay, "The Structure of Descartes' *Meditations*," Rorty maintains that Descartes not only employs a meditational structure when presenting his metaphysics, but she also claims that this structure has important philosophical implications when interpreting Descartes' text.⁴² In contrast to Rubidge, Rorty regards the Meditations as "belonging" to the genre of meditations, rather than simply alluding or referring to the tradition. She proposes to read Descartes' text as fitting into a "traditional meditational form" and not as a series of philosophical arguments.⁴³ Rorty delineates three distinct varieties of meditation (e.g., ascensional, penitential, and

40 See: François de Sales [1608] 1923. Perhaps second to St. Ignatius, François de Sales was the most popular figure contributing to the literature of devotional exercises during the seventeenth century. For a discussion on the life and works of St. François de Sales, see: Plassmann, 1954, pp. 392-405; and also Martz 1954, pp. 144-150.

41 Augustine's works were reprinted in many editions throughout the early part of the seventeenth century, both in latin as well as the vernacular, and most notably an *opera omnia* in 1614.

42 Rorty 1986.

43 Rorty 1986, p. 2.

analytic), each having two separate modes (e.g., revolutionary and interpretive). Even before delving into the specifics of each variety, and the different ways in which Rorty believes Descartes “borrows,” “conjoins,” and “transforms” each of these styles within his text, we are confronted with one major flaw in Rorty’s overall argument.⁴⁴

Rorty begins her essay with the observation that Descartes wrote in a variety of different genres when presenting his philosophy. She considers the diverse writing styles of the Rules, Discourse, and Principles as evidence of Descartes’ willingness to experiment with different forms of exposition and philosophical positions. Her basic assumption is that the presentation, style, and genre of a philosopher’s work reveals, to some extent, his/her underlying intention. Rorty’s approach to studying the Meditations is, at bottom, an interpretative one. She considers the meaning of Descartes’ work to be ultimately tied up with how his work is presented, and consequently with how it was intended at the time it was composed. The flaw in her overall argument is how she presents the Meditations as “belonging” to the meditational genre. Rorty conceives of the genre from a very modern perspective and not how it would have been understood by Descartes or a contemporary of the seventeenth century. Rorty “whiggishly” imposes her own modern conception of the “traditional meditational form” onto Descartes without taking into account Descartes’ own intellectual context.⁴⁵ If we are to consider an author’s intent as expressed through the genre in which he/she writes, then we must reconstruct to the best of our ability how that author would have understood that particular genre. Rorty’s account of the meditational genre does refer

⁴⁴ Rorty 1986, p. 2.

⁴⁵ This same criticism can be applied to view held by Aryeh Kosman in his essay “The Naive Narrator: Meditation in Descartes’ *Meditations*.” Kosman advances the thesis that Descartes presents a narrative account of meditation, adopted from the meditational genre. Similarly to Rorty, however, he conceives of the genre in a very ahistorical fashion.

to certain historical texts (e.g., the texts of St. Bonaventure, St. Bernard, and St. Ignatius); however, she does not present any historical evidence for why Descartes would have been familiar with these texts. If Rorty is to maintain successfully the claim that Descartes intentionally “borrows,” “conjoins,” and “transforms” distinct styles of meditation, she at least needs to provide reasons for why Descartes would have been aware of such styles.

The positions of Rubidge and Rorty are helpful in illustrating the various pitfalls of connecting Descartes’ literary style in Meditations with the genre of devotional meditations. If nothing more, they help demonstrate the complexity that is involved in establishing a precise relationship between Descartes’ text and the wide variety of meditational works available to him. There remains, however, one more position, that of Gary Hatfield, to consider before completing our literature review. In his essay “The Senses and the Fleshless Eye: The *Meditations* as Cognitive Exercises,” Hatfield advances the view that Descartes primarily adopts the conventions of an Augustinian style of meditation.⁴⁶ Although this position was first suggested by Gueroult in his discussion with Beth at Royaumont Abbey, Hatfield presents a much more developed thesis.⁴⁷ He proposes that while Descartes employs a variety of features attributable to the entire genre, there is an important sense in which Descartes’ “Metaphysical Meditations” are distinctively Augustinian.

Hatfield begins his essay by proposing to read the Meditations as a series of “cognitive exercises,” as opposed to a collection of philosophical arguments. Although he admits that the Meditations are not exactly void of arguments, he maintains that the primary emphasis within Descartes’ text is focused toward guiding the reader through a sequence of mental exercises. These exercises are prescriptive in design, serving to assist the

⁴⁶ Hatfield 1986.

⁴⁷ See: pages 6-7, above. It should be noted that, in his article, Hatfield does not refer to Gueroult.

reader in uncovering certain metaphysical truths, not through the force of logic but through a prescribed pathway of discovery. According to Hatfield, the distinctive Augustinian feature of Descartes' text is evidenced in the manner in which these exercises aim at leading the mind away from the senses--laying the groundwork, so to speak, for a theory of knowledge that specifies the independent operation of the intellect. Just as Augustine in his Confessions is only able to know God through the "fleshless eye"--turning away from the senses toward reason and will--so Hatfield claims that Descartes employs a similar method in establishing the clear and distinct ideas of his metaphysics.⁴⁸ The Augustinian style of meditation is unique to the genre of devotional meditations by its distrusting attitude toward the senses.

Although Hatfield presents a very convincing case for the way in which Descartes' Meditations resembles the Augustinian tradition, there still remains the crucial issue of whether Descartes would have been aware of such a tradition. Just because Hatfield is able to point out various similarities and parallels between Descartes' text and a very distinct tradition of meditation, it might be the case that these similarities are due to Hatfield's rather privileged historical perspective. In other words, if Hatfield is unable to provide evidence for Descartes' exposure to such a meditational style, then his overall thesis is subjected to the same criticism levied against Rorty. In contrast to Rorty however, Hatfield does at least make an attempt to connect Descartes with a specific text within the Augustinian tradition. The work he thus considers is Eustachius a Sancto Paulo's Exercises Spirituels (1630).

Apart from the question of whether Eustachius' text actually exhibits

48 See: Hatfield 1986, p. 48. For a more thorough discussion of St. Augustine's theory of knowledge as manifest in his doctrine of "divine illumination", see: Bubacz 1981; Nash 1969; and pages 41-42, below.

features of the Augustinian tradition,⁴⁹ the historical evidence to support such a connection is rather weak. In a footnote to his essay, Hatfield explains that because Eustachius was an acquaintance and correspondent of Cardinal Bérulle he was consequently connected with the circle of Descartes.⁵⁰ The first part of Hatfield's claim is fairly un-controversial; Eustachius and Bérulle were both students at the Sorbonne (c. 1603). However, the second part of Hatfield's statement is at best tenuous. The most reliable source for establishing the details of Descartes' life is his published writings and correspondence. What we gain from consulting these texts is that Descartes' relations with Bérulle were quite brief. Descartes mentions the Cardinal only once in his correspondence, in a letter dated "Summer 1631," in which he gives an account to Monsieur Villebressieu of his experience three years earlier at the lecture of Chandoux.⁵¹ Moreover, in 1630 when Eustachius publishes his Exercises, Descartes is in Holland and Bérulle is already dead. Therefore, it is not very likely that Descartes' knowledge of Eustachius came from Bérulle.

A direct knowledge of Eustachius's Exercises by Descartes is also unlikely. In a letter to Mersenne, dated "30 September 1640," Descartes expresses an interest in obtaining scholastic textbooks. He tells Mersenne that while waiting for the Jesuit's objections to his Meditations, he intends

49 Rubidge makes the case that Hatfield fails in his attempt to show Eustachius' text as falling within the Augustinian tradition. See: Rubidge 1990, pp. 42-43.

50 Hatfield 1986, p. 73, n 5. Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629) was the founder of the French Oratory in 1611. Much has been written on Descartes' relationship with Bérulle, however the most extensive discussion on this issue is by Henri Gouhier in his book, La pensée religieuse de Descartes (1924). Gouhier trivializes the relationship, maintaining that the influence of Bérulle consisted in little more than approving of the young Descartes' scientific projects. See: Gouhier 1924 pp. 57-61.

51 AT, I, 213. CSMK, III, 32. This lecture was held at the home of Papal Nuncio, Cardinal Bagni, sometime towards the end of 1628. Monsieur de Chandoux was a French Chemist, who, within his lecture, apparently presented a view of scientific probalism, a view contrary to the Scholastics. We are told that all those attending praised his talk with the exception of Descartes. Descartes evidently spoke against Chandoux's position giving an account of his own "Methode naturelle." For speculative account of this episode see: Popkin 1964, pp. 177-179.

to reread some of their philosophy. After claiming not to have looked at their treatises for twenty years, he writes: "I want to see if I like it better now than I did before."⁵² He inquires whether there is an abstract on the whole of scholastic philosophy, an abridged version that would save him from having to pore over "huge tomes."⁵³ Referring indirectly to Eustachius's Summa Philosophica Quadripartita (1609), he writes: "[t]here was, I think, a Carthusian or Feuillant who made such an abstract, but I do not remember his name."⁵⁴ In his article, Hatfield admits that his overall argument depends on establishing, "with some exactness," Descartes' acquaintance with a meditational text in the Augustinian tradition.⁵⁵ However, it seems odd to identify Eustachius' Exercises as being this text when Descartes is unable to recall the author's name, literally months before his Meditations are published. Hatfield might reasonably argue that this comment merely suggests a mental lapse on Descartes' part when recalling the name and author of a specific text that he once read. However,

52 AT, III, 185. CSMK, III, 153-4.

53 Descartes mentions having remembered several textbooks, authored by the Conimbricenses (see footnote # 4), the Jesuit Cardinal Franciscus Toletus (1532-96), and the Jesuit Antonio Ruvijs (1548-1615). See: AT, III, 185. CSMK, III, 154. All scholastic textbooks during this period were essentially commentaries on Aristotle. Perhaps the most erudite and scholarly of such commentaries were those of the Conimbricenses. Their disquisition was comprised in a number of volumes, each volume covering a separate work of Aristotle (e.g., the Physics, de Anima, de Caelo, Ethics, etc.). The format of each volume first presented the Greek text and Latin translation, followed by a Latin paraphrase of the text or "explanationes," then a handling of the standard problems in Aristotle's text, known as "quaestiones," and finally a further subdivision of various articles, discussing the philosophical implications of such questions. See: Ariew 1995, pp. 8-9.

54 AT, III, 185. CSMK, III, 154. Although we do not have Mersenne's reply to Descartes, he undoubtedly identified this abstract as Eustachius's Summa. In a letter, dated "11 November 1640, Descartes tells Mersenne that he purchased a copy of the Summa, noting it to be "the best book of its kind ever made" and inquiring if "the author is still alive. . ." See: AT, III, 233. CSMK, III, 156. Moreover, the Summa was clearly the kind of abstract Descartes was looking for. Its format omits both the Aristotelian text and the explanationes, comprised of only the quaestiones, and treats the whole of Aristotle's philosophy in a single volume. For more on the structure of the Summa and Descartes' rather late reintroduction to Eustachius, see: Ariew 1995, p. 8; and Ariew 1992, pp. 74-75.

55 Hatfield 1986, p. 48.

this would only be speculation and not the “exactness” that Hatfield’s argument aims for and depends on. On the whole, there are no good reasons to believe that Descartes was cognizant of Eustachius’ work before 1640--that is, other than remembering that Eustachius wrote the Summa. If Descartes were to model his Meditations after Eustachius’ Exercises, a work in which was published in 1630, after Descartes was in Holland, one would at least expect more evidence to establish their acquaintance. Although Hatfield’s overall approach in establishing the relationship between the Meditations and devotional exercises is largely correct, going beyond theoretical and stylistic parallels to consider the historical context, it is his historiography that is a bit clumsy and, to some extent, misleading.

3. Problems Outlined

Up to now, our focus has been to review the different ways in which commentators have attempted to connect Descartes’ text with religious devotional exercises and to point out why their attempts fail. What we have learned is that there are three problematic positions taken within the literature: (1) Descartes’ text is modeled after St. Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises; (2) Descartes’ writing style either alludes or belongs to the meditational genre; and (3) Descartes borrows the conventions of an Augustinian style of meditation within his text. The most unsatisfactory of these appears to be the first. Proponents of this position conceive of Descartes’ relationship with the meditational genre too narrowly. They restrict their attention solely to one text and do not consider the broader array of devotional writings during the seventeenth century. Descartes might naturally be connected with the Jesuits and thus with Loyola’s Exercises. However, as Gueroult suggests, the Ignatian model seems to be the wrong style of meditation to consider as influencing Descartes because of its strong emphasis on imagination and sensible faculties.

The second position is correct in what it asserts but, as we have seen, it does not say quite enough. It is true that when understanding the meditational elements of Descartes' text we need to take into account the entire genre of devotional exercises and not just specific works. If nothing else, this position introduces a convenient way to discuss the different techniques of meditation (i.e., through its description of the various "traditions"); however, it tends to neglect the way in which Descartes would have been aware of the meditational genre. In particular, the analysis advanced by Rubidge is helpful in illustrating the diverse history of Christian meditation, but his study does not go far enough to uncover the different styles of meditations that were present during the seventeenth century.

Of the three positions stated above, the last is the most appealing. Originally suggested by Gueroult and later advanced by Hatfield, this position considers Descartes' metaphysics as modeled after a very distinct style of religious meditation (i.e., the Augustinian style). When we consider the defining feature of this tradition (i.e., turning away from the senses and imagination toward reason and the independent operation of the intellect), this style does seem to closely match the strategy taken within the Meditations. However, as we have seen, there are problems with this view when establishing the ways in which Descartes would have been familiar with such a tradition. Gueroult suggests that Descartes' text resembles the type of meditation found in Augustine's Soliloquies--though we should keep in mind he only invokes Augustine in order to point out stylistic parallels. On the whole, Gueroult's main concern is to disparage the attempts of those who attribute an Ignatian influence to Descartes' Meditations; he is not really interested in providing a detailed account of how Descartes would have been aware of such a tradition. Hatfield's study, however, does strive to establish such a connection. His general approach and notion of "cognitive exercise" are very helpful when regarding Descartes'

metaphysics as meditational; however his study ultimately fails when recommending a specific Augustinian text that would have been familiar to Descartes.

A separate but related issue discussed by commentators is the question of whether the stylistic devices employed by Descartes bear on the philosophical content of his work. The consensus on this issue is fairly equally divided. Some consider Descartes' writing style to be merely rhetorical--that is, consonant with his recommendations to readers on how his text should be read and studied. They regard Descartes' use of certain meditational techniques as simply offering a method of reflection and separate from the more philosophical substance of his work. Other commentators, however, consider Descartes' reference to devotional meditation as having important philosophical implications for understanding his text. Depending on the manner in which his text relates to a specific text, genre, or tradition, different commentators believe this relationship should change the way we interpret and understand Descartes' philosophical ideas. In order to form our own opinion on this issue, let us now investigate, among other things, the intellectual context of meditations during the seventeenth century.

The Historical and Intellectual Context of Devotional Exercises

Before we can determine whether the literary format employed by Descartes affects the philosophical content of his work, we must first consider the intellectual context from which it emerged. Generally speaking, discussions on the Meditations which focus on Descartes' writing style are ultimately concerned with uncovering Descartes' implicit intentions. While it is true that the manner in which something is written reveals, to some extent, an author's intentions; it is not immediately apparent, when regarding Descartes' text, what his exact intentions are. At the very least, we know that his writing style is aimed at inducing the reader to carefully study his ideas--for Descartes tells us this much. But the question remains: how far and to what extent does Descartes' writing style bear on an understanding of his ideas? To answer this question, we must first discern how Descartes' text relates to similar styles of writing that were prevalent during the seventeenth century (i.e., the genre of religious exercises). If we are to consider an author's intent as expressed through the genre in which he/she writes, then we must reconstruct to the best of our ability how that author would have understood that particular genre. The first step in achieving such an outlook is to understand the historical and intellectual context in which this genre is set. In section one we will briefly trace the history of devotional writings up to the seventeenth century, and in section two, we will discuss the different kinds or styles of writing that exist within the genre as a whole.

As we have already seen from Rubidge's historical survey of the

devotional genre, formalized writings on meditation began to appear during the twelfth century--at least six hundred years prior to the 1700's.⁵⁶

Although meditative writings were fairly consistently published throughout this time, there were certain periods or movements in which they flourished. For our purposes, it is perhaps helpful to mention three such periods: (1) Monastic devotionals; (2) devotionals of the Catholic Revival; and (3) devotionals of the Counter-Reformation. Our primary concern is with the last of these; however, we will say a few words about the first two in order to clarify what sets the third apart. In short, each devotional period represents a different spirit or temperament of devotional exercise. Although there may be several traditions or styles of meditation within any given period, the unitary character or defining feature of a particular movement is the specified audience. At bottom, all devotional meditations are aimed at enhancing the religious life of the reader/exercitant; however, who that reader is or what audience he/she belongs to becomes an important consideration when understanding the intellectual context of any one particular text. With this in mind, let us now turn to our historical survey.

1. Historical Background

Christian monasteries have their origin in the Egyptian deserts during the third and fourth centuries. These religious communities were founded on the idea that perfection could be attained through extreme asceticism and thus required all members to take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The earliest monastic orders (e.g., the cenobitic tribes of St. Anthony and the Basilian Monks) demanded their members to conduct

⁵⁶ See: pages 15-17, above.

their lives in strict solitude.⁵⁷ With the exception of eating meals and worshiping together, each member was expected to dedicate himself to contemplative isolation and private devotion in order to prepare his soul for the afterlife. As monasticism matured and diversified during the Middle Ages the stringent demand for solitude was abated. During the tenth and eleventh centuries the role of the monastery in Christian society was transformed. No longer simply functioning as a recluse community of religious men, the monastery became an important institution for learning and the advancement of Christian theology. The spirit of private devotion and contemplative isolation, however, was not lost. During the twelfth century the devotional practices of chants, prayers, and meditational exercises became formalized in written works.⁵⁸ What defines these devotional exercises as belonging to their own movement (i.e., the monastic devotional movement) is the specific audience for which these writings were intended. These manuals were not composed for the general population or laymen of the church; but rather they were internal to the monastery--that is, written by monks for monks.

Another prominent movement of devotional exercises was that of the Catholic Revival of the fifteenth century. Long before Luther hung his grievances on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg in 1517, there were many attempts to reform the Catholic Church from within. In fact, the entire history of Roman Catholicism is replete with internal efforts to make the holy church more holy. One persistent source of trouble and corruption for the Church permeates from its highly centralized and hierarchical structure. The general organization of the Church is by

57 St. Anthony of Egypt (c. 356) is often described as the "father of monasticism." A fictional account of his life and experiences are given in the French novel The Temptation of St. Anthony (1874) by Gustave Flaubert. The Basilian monks follow the Rule of St. Basil the Great (c. 643) and are considered to be one of the first formal monastic orders. See: Plassmann 1954, pp. 42-49.

58 Rubidge 1990, p. 28.

Dioceses or “sees,” where each see is a territory of parishes under the control of a single bishop. Each bishop is considered the appointed representative of the bishop of Rome or Pope. According to Catholic belief, the Pope is the spiritual leader of the Church and is considered to be infallible and representative or vicar of Christ. During much of the Middle Ages, the appointment or investiture of bishops and clerics was a combined effort of both kings and the papal court. However, toward the end of the tenth century the temporal authority of the Pope began to decline. His power became severely mitigated by the already existing bishops and by the feudal lords of various territories. The papacy was thrown into chaos and disorder during the Great Schism (1378-1417), where there were three rival popes at one time.⁵⁹ Although the internal politics of the Church existed in utter turmoil, the Catholic Church as a whole continued to gain wealth and land through its assimilation and partnership with feudal governments. During the fifteenth century many bishops and abbots assumed the same responsibilities of lay seigneurs. With this increase in power, much of the clergy became corrupt and overly concerned with acquiring wealth.

Many of the devout clergy, appalled by this desecration of their profession, considered such conduct to reflect a crisis in the spiritual life of the Church as a whole. They believed the avarice of Church leaders to be symptomatic of the Church losing touch with its basic convictions. Since the papacy was distracted with its own problems, spiritual leadership and reform was not to come from the top down. Hence, there were efforts directed from within the Church to revive Catholic spirituality. Perhaps the most notable group within this movement was the “The Brothers of Common Life” or “Devoti”—a society based in the Netherlands around the end of the fourteenth century.⁶⁰ This society was dedicated to reforming the

⁵⁹ See: Salembier 1912, pp. 143-151.

⁶⁰ For more on the “Brothers of the Common Life,” founded by Gerard de Groote and Florence Radewyn, see: Debuchy 1912, p. 226.

clergy through the publication of various devotional texts. What better way to amend the errors of a corrupt cleric than to prescribe a meditative exercise aimed at strengthening his relationship with God--or so was strategy of the Devoti. Two prominent works accredited to this society are De spiritualibus ascensionibus, by Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen (1367-98), and Rosetum exercitiorum spiritualium, by John Mombaer (d. 1502).⁶¹ Similar to the exercises of the Monastic movement, the devotionals of the Catholic Revival were not intended for the lay congregation or general public. Given the widespread illiteracy of the masses during the fifteenth century and the fact that these texts were written in Latin, the language of clerics and schoolmen, we can safely infer that devotionals of this period were directed to a rather narrow audience.

Let us now turn to the devotionals of the Counter-Reformation--our primary concern-- for it is the texts of this period that bear on our understanding of Descartes. Before describing the spirit or temperament in which these devotionals were written, it is perhaps necessary to say a few words about the Counter-Reformation as a whole. To be sure, the Catholic Church's response to the rising tide of Protestantism during the sixteenth century can not be reduced to a single historic episode. The battles that were waged took place on many fronts, both figuratively and literally, and in some sense still continue today. On a very basic level, the break within the Church symbolizes a dramatic transformation in western society. The medieval mind-set of western Europe, so indicative of Catholicism, began to wither. By the seventeenth century, society's ideas on science, politics, economics, art, mathematics, and philosophy were set on a radically new course. It would be incorrect to claim that the break within the Church

61 Debuchy 1912, p. 226. These two treatises, along with the Ejercitatorio de la vida espiritual of Dom Garcia de Cisneros, published at Montserrat in 1500, are credited as the influences of St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. For more on the connection see: Fr. Watrigant, La genèse des exercices de saint Ignace (Amiens, 1897), as cited in Debuchy 1912, p. 229.

actually caused society's transformation--for there were many factors converging all at once. Speaking in the broadest of terms, what historians have labeled the "Renaissance" and "Scientific Revolution" can be considered as equal and overlapping influences. However, at the very least one thing is certain: the decentralization of Roman Catholicism during the sixteenth century is a contributing factor to the reshaping of western civilization.

During the mid-1500's, the propagation and spread of Protestantism in such countries as Germany, England, and France forced Catholics to realize that they were quickly losing their foothold--they were no longer, so to speak, the only Church on the block. If the Catholics were to remain a viable contender in the reorganization of christendom, they were going to have to make some changes. Thus, during an eighteen year period (1545-63) Church leaders converged at the Council of Trent to discuss measures of reform. It is essentially from this meeting that the Counter-Reformation was born. There were two main objectives of this council: (1) to reassess the Church's doctrinal principles; and (2) to revive the Catholic faith among the people. The conciliar program was clear: modernize and accommodate to the changing needs of the congregation. A religion steeped in conservatism and orthodoxy, the Catholics were not prepared to go as far as the Protestants, however. The concessions made were relatively moderate, falling in line with the established yet diverse traditions of the Church.

A controversial issue debated among Catholics and Protestants during this time was the manner in which the Holy Scripture was to be interpreted. On one hand, Catholics maintained the authority of the Church as supreme--that is, on all questions of interpretation the layperson should rely on the tradition and scholarship of the Church. The Protestants, on the other hand, regarded Scripture in a much more literal sense. They considered the Bible to be the "word of God" which speaks directly to the reader. Whereas Protestantism encouraged an active

participation from anyone reading the Bible, Catholicism tended to alienate the non-clergy within this respect. It is essentially against this backdrop that the genre of devotional writings became popular. Catholics revived the practice of devotional exercises from the Monastic and Revival periods, directing them to a popular audience, in an effort to make Catholicism more attractive, and in a sense more competitive, in light of Protestant practices.⁶²

By the seventeenth century devotional writings assumed a new character. No longer simply intended for clergymen, devotionals of the Counter-Reformation were composed in a very different spirit. The intellectual life of society as a whole matured with the advent of the Renaissance and printing press--spawning, among the masses, a unbridled enthusiasm for learning and personal discovery. Writing in the vernacular, authors of this movement exposed their writings to a greater readership, eventually securing a recognizable genre. The two most prominent authors within this movement are St. Ignatius of Loyola, writing his Spiritual Exercises (c.1546), and St. François de Sales, writing his Introduction of the Devote Life (1608).⁶³ Their texts gained an international appeal and were translated into many different languages (e.g., English, German, Spanish, and French). The conventions and literary devices of their work were even adopted by many of the poets of the time (e.g., Robert Southwell, John Donne, and George Herbert).⁶⁴ Even if Descartes did not expressly employ the conventions of the devotional genre, there were certainly those who did. Beyond the various poetical works, there were legal

62 For a general discussion on the role of devotional exercises during the Counter-Reformation, see: Martz 1954, pp. 4-12; and McNally 1970, pp. 3-15.

63 See: Ignatius Loyola, St. [c.1541--56] 1992; and François de Sales, St. [1608] 1923.

64 A study on the influence of religious meditation in English poetry is essentially the theme of Louis Martz's The Poetry of Meditation. His book is an invaluable reference for anyone seeking a comprehensive understanding of meditation during the seventeenth century and, consequently, I am gratefully indebted to his efforts. See: Martz 1954.

and political treatises adopting the conventions of the genre, some even employing the word “meditation” within their title.⁶⁵

2. Divisions within the Devotional Genre

Our brief historical survey on the devotional genre has been primarily focused on the social and intellectual context. Although understanding the way in which devotional writings were developed in the seventeenth century is helpful in our analysis of Descartes, our discussion of the genre as a whole has been very general. Up to now, we have rather loosely applied the terms “devotional,” “spiritual exercise,” and “meditation” as if they all roughly mean the same thing. At the most basic level of discussion, they are indeed the same. Within the critical literature, as well as in the devotional texts themselves, these notions blend together and are often used interchangeably. However, if we are to understand Descartes’ relationship with the meditational genre at any thing more than the basic level, then it is necessary to delve a bit deeper and point out with greater specificity the exact divisions that lie within the genre. Within this present section we will restrict our discussion solely to religious texts. As mentioned in the above section, there were secular writings that employed the conventions of the devotional genre. Needless to say, the secularization of the meditation is extremely important when regarding Descartes’ Meditations as meditational, however, we will postpone that discussion until Chapter Four.⁶⁶ In short, the different divisions we will highlight will provide a

65 For such examples, see: François de La Rochefoucauld’s Letter de Monsieur enuoyee a Monseigneur de Luyne: pour la reformation de l’Estat. Ensemble la Meditation de Monsieur de Luyne ou response a la Remonstrance au Roy. (1620); Sir Gervase Helwys’ The lieutenant of the Tower his speech and repentance, at the time of his death who was excuted upon Tower Hill, on the 20th day of November, 1615: together with a meditation and vow of his that he made not long before he dyed. (1615); and [unknown author] Meditation D’un advocat de Montavban: Sur les mouvemens de ce Temps (1622).

66 See: page 62, below.

basis or foundation to which to compare Descartes' Meditations. Learning from the mistakes of previous scholars, we will not simply lump all devotional exercises into the same group or tradition. Understanding the differences that exist between the various traditions will help clarify the ways in which Descartes' text is (and is not) meditational.

Let us, therefore, begin with the broadest division within the genre which is a determinative distinction. There are essentially two types of devotionals: paradigmatic and performative. Both kinds were present during seventeenth century and each was a kind of practice intended to cultivate the spiritual life of the reader. Paradigmatic devotionals, (e.g., tracts written on the lives of the saints and treatises on perfection), were less instructive than they were exemplary of christian spirituality.⁶⁷ These writings focused on the kinds of pious actions that would make the reader more holy and more worthy of God's grace. In one sense, these texts are the most "catholic" of all devotionals. In contrast to Luther's rather famous catchphrase, "God's favor is not a prize to be won, but a gift to be accepted," paradigmatic devotionals stressed the importance of "good actions" as the pathway to heaven.⁶⁸

The label of "performative devotional" is applied to those texts within the genre that require the reader to perform a prescribed task or exercise. Instead of describing or giving examples of pious actions, performative devotionals demand the reader to do something--that is, they require a person to consciously engage in a certain process or activity that will hopefully enhance his/her spirituality. Generally speaking, the practices of "prayer," "chant/song," and "spiritual exercise" all fall into this category. All spiritual exercises are a method of prayer, but not all prayers are

67 Stellar examples of these texts are The Lives of Saints (Eng. tr., 1623) by Jesuit Peter Ribadeneyra; and Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues (1632) by Jesuit Alphonsus Rodriguez. For a general discussion on these types of devotionals, see: Whitmore 1964, pp. 59-99; and Martz 1954, pp. 4-24.

68 See: Luther's Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (1531).

spiritual exercises; for there are prayers of thanksgiving, repentance, and blessing and, in a strict sense, the label “prayer” cuts across our rather clumsy division.

For the purposes of studying Descartes, however, the most important type of performative devotional is the spiritual exercise. Before discussing the different styles and traditions within this division, consider two aspects that are common to spiritual exercises as a whole. First, these writings are designed to be a set of mental exercises for a believer to follow in order to achieve a predetermined goal (e.g., a renewed relationship with God, a lesson learned from sacred history, or the preparation of one’s soul for heaven). The exercises function to help one attain a certain type of experience that facilitates spiritual development. Although different traditions may prescribe different techniques, the basic idea is the same--that is, they prescribe a reflective and internal procedure for the meditator to work through in order to achieve his/her desired goal. The second common aspect within this division is that each exercise ends with a resolution whereby the will of the reader/exercitant is influenced. This is perhaps the most important aspect of spiritual exercises. The guidance of the will through an internal experience is essentially what separates these religious writings from philosophical treatises on morality and religion. The purpose is not to persuade the reader’s will through the force of logic, but rather to cause a change within the reader by means of illumination or a moment of intuitive insight.

Within a given exercise, the type of internal experience prescribed (i.e., the way in which the will of the reader is intended to be influenced), determines the kind of exercise it is. For our purposes, there are two kinds of spiritual exercises to distinguish between: (1) the intellectual, more formally known as “meditation”; and (2) the mystical, referred to in the

seventeenth century as “contemplation.”⁶⁹ An intellectual spiritual exercise relies on what we might call “ordinary grace”—that is, what is endowed to everyone, evidenced through a person’s own mental faculties or “natural powers.”⁷⁰ The internal experience achieved by this kind of exercise manifests from the reader’s ability to reason and think rationally. As the meditator progresses through the various stages of the exercise, his/her efforts ultimately yield or produce a moment of intuitive insight whereby his/her will is influenced.

The mystical form of exercise, in contrast, relies less on a meditator’s concerted effort than it does on “special grace”—that is, what is given directly by God in a moment of religious ecstasy or rapture. For example, the reader proceeds through the beginning stages of the exercise just as if it were a meditation, (i.e., relying on his/her own natural powers), but in the final stage he/she is bestowed or infused with God’s divine love to influence his/her will. It is thus within this final stage, in a moment of mystical revelation, that the division between contemplation and meditation is most clearly drawn. Perhaps the best way illustrate this division is to consider, first, a description of the “three degrees of truth,” a method of contemplation employed by St. Bernard of Clairvaux; and, second, François de Sale’s seventeenth century rendering of this method. St. Bernard explains his method:

We rise to the first by humble effort, to the second by the loving sympathy, to the third by *enraptured vision*. In the first truth is revealed in severity, in the second in pity, in the third in purity. Reason, by which we analyze ourselves, guides us to the first, feeling which enables us to pity others conducts us to the second; purity by

⁶⁹ The rather strict division between “meditation” and “contemplation” was observed by most all devotional authors during the seventeenth century, see: Martz 1954, pp. 13-20.

⁷⁰ I borrow the notions “ordinary grace” and “special grace” from Martz’s discussion on meditation and contemplation, see: Martz 1954, p. 16. The notion of “natural powers” is taken from St. Bonaventure’s Itinerarium Mentis in Deum or The Mind’s Road to God. See: Bonaventure [1259] 1953.

which we are raised to the level of the unseen, carries us up to the third.⁷¹

Addressing his reader Theotimus, François de Sale helps clarify the difference between meditation and contemplation; he writes:

Look at St. Bernard, Theotimus: he had *meditated* all the passion [of Christ] point by point; then of all the principal points put together he made a nosegay of loving grief, and putting it upon his breast to change his *meditation into contemplation*, he cried out: A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me.⁷²

The first two of St. Bernard's "three degrees of truth" are steps of a exercise that involve a person's own natural powers and thus fall into the category of meditation. However, the last step, described as an "enraptured vision," is the decisive step that qualifies this exercise to be a contemplation.

Both these kinds of exercises were employed during the seventeenth century and often within the same devotional text (e.g., they both appear in the works François de Sales and Loyola).⁷³ Loyola describes meditation to be especially fitting for "beginners" (incipientes) and he essentially uses it as a warm-up exercise for his more important exercises of contemplation.⁷⁴ By far, the mystical form of spiritual exercise is much older than the intellectual form; and consequently we find traces of these older forms in many of the meditational texts of the seventeenth century. In particular, two techniques of contemplation common to many but not all traditions of meditation are the doctrines of the "three ways" and the "three powers."⁷⁵ These techniques find their origin in the theological doctrine of the Trinity

71 Bernard [c. 1125] 1929, p. 40. [my emphasis] Strictly speaking, the division between meditation and contemplation was not an operative distinction during the twelfth century when St. Bernard lived. He adopts the title "meditation" for some of his works, but they are not meditational by the standards set in the seventeenth century.

72 François de Sales [1630] 1971, p. 246. [my emphasis]

73 In fact, François de Sale's An Introduction to the Devout Life can be described as both a paradigmatic and performative devotional, including both contemplations and meditations. See, for example: François de Sale [1608] 1923.

74 See: Ignatius [c. 1541--56] 1992, p. 154.

75 Both Rubidge and Hatfield mention these techniques within their discussion of Descartes, see: Rubidge 1990, p. 29; and Hatfield 1986, p. 48.

and are set forth in great detail in the third chapter of Bonaventure's Itinerarium Mentis in Deum (1259).⁷⁶ The method of the three ways (via purgativa, via illuminativa, and via unitiva) refers to the different stages by which the meditator proceeds through an exercise. The Purgative Way is when the exercitant confronts his/her own sinful nature and seeks the means to rid himself/herself of fault and weakness. The Illuminative Way is when the meditator reflects upon a certain topic and gains particular insight or knowledge. The Unitive Way is the last stage and serves to unite the exercitant spiritually with God. As we have seen, this stage within a meditation relies on ordinary grace and on a person to successfully employ his/her natural powers to the topic of reflection.

The doctrine of the "three powers" refers to the three faculties of the soul--memory/imagination, understanding, and will.⁷⁷ These faculties, collectively, are a prime example of natural powers and are often applied during the illuminative and unitive stages of an exercise.⁷⁸ To illustrate briefly: first, the topic of meditation is examined by what the meditator remembers or can imagine about the subject matter; second, what it means, through the reflection of the intellect; and third what he/she is going to do about it, through the movement of the will. For the purpose of discussing the different traditions of meditation that pertain to Descartes, focusing on the faculty of memory/imagination is very useful. This faculty conceptualizes or intuitively grasps the subject matter of meditation, introducing it to the intellect. This is what is referred to in the literature as

76 See: Bonaventure [1259] 1959, pp. 22-28. Both Dom Garcia Cisneros's Ejercitatorio de la vida epiritual (c. 1500) and Loyola's Spiritual Exercises employ these techniques. In fact, the stylistic similarities of these two texts sparked a debate during the 1640's among Catholic theologians as to whether Loyola was guilty of plagiarism. See: Debuchy 1912, p. 226.

77 In addition to Bonaventure, Augustine also gives an account of these three faculties of the soul in his De trinitate, X, 12, 19. See: Augustine [c. 416] 1948 p. 805.

78 See for example: Ignatius, [c. 1541-56] 1992, p. 41. Within the Second Point of the First Exercise of the First Week, Ignatius instructs the mediator to apply the three faculties to the sin of Adam and Eve.

“exemplification.”⁷⁹ The manner in which a specific meditational text instructs the reader to “consider”⁸⁰ the topic of reflection will determine to what tradition the meditation belongs. There are two main traditions of meditation we will distinguish between (i.e., the Ignatian and the Augustinian).

On the whole, our division of “meditation tradition” is partly terminological and partly doctrinal. The label of tradition can obviously be defined in a number of different ways depending on exactly how we want to understand the genre. *Prima facie*, the kind of spiritual exercise we are interested in is undoubtedly meditation—that is, the internal and intellectual exercise that relies on “ordinary grace” and a meditator’s “natural powers.” However, as we shall soon see, the manner in which a specific meditation instructs a reader to “consider” a topic of reflection (i.e., what tradition it is), will ultimately be tied up with how the notion “ordinary grace” is construed.

On one hand, ordinary grace can be thought of in terms of the formal Thomistic idea of “natural reason.”⁸¹ With the exception of knowledge by “revelation,” all human knowledge according to Aquinas is acquired through a two step process involving: (1) the sensible faculties; and (2) “the light of nature.” To illustrate, St. Thomas writes:

The knowledge we have by natural reason requires two things: images derived from the sensible things, and a natural intelligible light enabling us to abstract intelligible conceptions from them.⁸²

The Thomistic rendering of ordinary grace is simply that part of human reason which enables a person to abstract from sensory particulars to form concepts and ideas (i.e., the light of nature). It is an ability or power which

⁷⁹ Hatfield 1986, p. 49.

⁸⁰ This is simply a transitive term for what François de Sales labels “considerations” for a topic of meditation. See: François de Sale [1608] 1923, pp. 55-97.

⁸¹ For a more thorough discussion of St. Thomas’ doctrine of “natural reason,” see: Gilson 1955, pp. 375-379.

⁸² Aquinas [c.1224-74] 1944, Question XII, art. 13.

provides a necessary but not sufficient means for human knowledge. Even abstract ideas, such as geometrical concepts, depend on the intellectual apprehension of certain objects from the sensible imagination. At bottom, the doctrine of “natural reason” is grounded in a sense-based epistemology--perhaps best expressed by the Scholastic slogan: “Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses.”⁸³

The tradition of meditation that adopts the Thomistic conception of ordinary grace is the Ignatian tradition. This style of meditation employs techniques that utilize a sense-based form of cognition during the exemplification stage of the exercise. That is to say, the manner in which an Ignatian meditation instructs a reader to “consider” a topic of reflection involves a two step process employing both the sensible faculties and the “light of nature” or intellect. As we shall see in Chapter Three when we analyze Loyola’s Exercises, the first part of this process is prompted by one of two methods (i.e., either the “composition of place” or the “application of the senses”).⁸⁴

The second version of ordinary grace that is important in our analysis of Descartes is what we might call Illuminationism--a theory of grace derived from St. Augustine’s theory of knowledge. This version is similar to the Thomistic account in how it regards the intellect or “intelligence” as a type of inner light endowed to each and every member of humanity. However, it is different in what it considers the role and function of the intellect to be. For example, Aquinas, on one hand, deems the intellect as the means in which a person acquires knowledge--that is, through the intellectual abstraction of sensory particulars a person is able to employ his/her “natural reason” to discover universal concepts and ideas. The Augustinian, on the other hand, regards the intellect more formally as “intelligence” and as a much more direct means to such knowledge. For

83 See: Hatfield 1986, p. 46.

84 See: pages 46-48, below.

Augustine, universal ideas exist in the mind of God and are revealed or impressed upon humans through “divine illumination”-- described by Augustine as “a sort of incorporeal light of a unique kind.”⁸⁵ Similar to the Platonic contemplation of the forms, these ideas are the eternal truths which serve as the norms and standards for a person to judge experience. For Augustine it is not the senses which determine knowledge, but rather it is knowledge (derived from the eternal truths of reason) that determine and judge the senses. To illustrate, Augustine writes in the De magistro:

But when we have to do with things which we behold with the mind, that is, with the intelligence and with reason, we speak of things which we look upon directly in the inner light of truth which illuminates the inner man and is inwardly enjoyed.⁸⁶

Truth, therefore, is interior to the mind and cannot be communicated from without. It is the independent operation of the intellect, man’s inner light of truth, that serves as the foundation for Augustine’s knowledge and as the defining feature of Illuminationism.

The tradition of meditation that adopts the Illuminationist conception of ordinary grace is the Augustinian tradition. This style of meditation employs techniques that rely on the independent operation of the intellect during the exemplification stage of the exercise. That is to say, the manner in which an Augustinian meditation instructs a reader to “consider” a topic of reflection does not involve the sensible faculties, but rather only reason itself. This tradition exemplifies a theory of meditative cognition parallel to the Platonic contemplation of the forms and instructs the meditator to arrive at the resolution of the exercise by relying on his/her own “inner light of truth.”

Keeping in mind the general differences between the Ignatian and Augustinian styles of meditations, let us now consider in greater detail two examples of these respective traditions: Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises and

⁸⁵ De trinitate XII, 15, 24. See: Augustine [c. 416] 1948, p. 824.

⁸⁶ De magistro, II, 12, 39. See: Augustine [c. 389] 1953 p. 96.

Mersenne's L'usage de la raison. Our concern will not only be to highlight the theoretical differences between these two texts, but also we will examine the historical evidence which connects Descartes to these two works.

Descartes and Two Traditions of Religious Meditation

By surveying the historical and intellectual context of devotional exercises, we are now in the position to consider how these religious writings relate to Descartes. The first step in this endeavor is to discern with which meditational texts Descartes would have (most likely) been familiar with. One fairly serious difficulty in this task is that Descartes never explicitly reveals what works he might have read. In one sense, his reluctance to admit the influence of other works on his ideas may have been a tactical measure. By not appealing to the authority and opinions of others, he forces his reader to judge the content of his work on its own merit. However, in another sense, this reluctance may also suggest something about Descartes' attitude toward the personalization of knowledge and learning. In a letter to his mentor, Isaac Beeckman, Descartes explains:

It is ridiculous to take the trouble as you do to distinguish, in the possession of knowledge, what is your own from what is not, as if it was the possession of a piece of land or sum of money. If you know something, it is completely yours, even if you have learnt it from someone else. . .²

Even though Descartes never tells us what works of meditation he might have read, there is historical evidence which links him to two such texts (i.e., Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, and Mersenne's L'usage de la raison). Our task within this present chapter will be review this evidence and to examine the meditational features of each work. In section one, we will focus on Loyola's Exercises, and in section two we will concentrate on Mersenne's L'usage de la raison.

2 AT, I, 159. CSMK, 27.

1. A Jesuit Connection

As we have already seen from our survey of the critical literature, Presumably Descartes would have been aware of Loyola's Exercises, at least in some form, from his school days at La Flèche.⁸⁸ As allegedly was the custom, all students of this Jesuit institution were required to attend a spiritual retreat each year during Holy Week--most likely taking part in an abridged version of the Exercises.⁸⁹ Moreover, it is also known that Father François Véron, a professor of philosophy during Descartes' term, published his own version of the Ignatian meditation, Manuale Sodalitatis (1608), designed especially for students.⁹⁰ Prima facie, these points seem to be strong evidence for leading us to consider Loyola's text as influencing Descartes' writing style in the Meditations. However, in the course of our study we have expressed grave doubts for such an influence because of the kinds of meditational techniques attributed to Loyola's text. As originally suggested by Gueroult, the Ignatian model seems to be the wrong style of meditation to consider as influencing Descartes because of its strong emphasis on imagination and sensible faculties.⁹¹ Moreover, as we have seen from our description of the meditational genre in Chapter Two, the Ignatian meditation relies on a notion of "ordinary grace" that is grounded in a sensed-based epistemology, rendering it antagonistic to Descartes' "Metaphysical Meditations."⁹² However, Gueroult's suspicions and our description of the Ignatian style of meditation are, at bottom, only unfounded assertions. We have not argued for such an interpretation nor

88 For a discussion on the type of education Descartes received at La Flèche, see: Ariew 1992; and Rochemonteix 1889.

89 As we have seen, this historical point plays a very large role within the views of Beck and Vendler, see: pages 10 & 12, above. For the source that confirms this custom at La Flèche see: Rochemonteix 1889, p. 141.

90 See: Thomson 1972, p. 61, n.1; and Vendler 1989, p. 194.

91 See: page 6, above.

92 See: pages 40-41, above.

examined for ourselves the kinds of techniques that are actually employed within Loyola's text. With this self-imposed criticism in mind, let us now attempt to redeem ourselves by giving a brief exegesis of Loyola's text.

To begin, Loyola's Exercises might best be described as a spiritual "handbook." It is not as much a book to be read as it is a manual, or set of instructions, for a spiritual director to lead a person through a series of mental and mystical exercises. The text is organized into seven chapters or parts: (1) Introductory Explanations; (2) The First Week; (3) The Second Week; (4) The Election ; (5) The Third Week; (6) The Fourth Week; and (7) Supplementary Matter. On one level, the text as a whole exemplifies a single and unified exercise. Each "week" represents a different stage within an extended series of individual exercises that culminate within the "Fourth Week" whereby the exercitant is united with the joy of Christ.⁹³ On this level, Loyola's Exercises might best be described as a contemplation (proper)--that is, the final stage of the overall exercise has less to do with the exercitant's "natural powers" as it does with God's divine love or "special grace." Loyola describes the individual exercises of the "First Week" as illustrative of the "purgative way," whereby each exercise is aimed at purifying the soul enabling it to advance toward God and Heaven.⁹⁴ For our purposes, the individual exercises of the "First Week" are the most interesting because they embody the characteristics of the intellectual form of spiritual exercise--what we have been calling meditation (proper).

The general structure of the Ignatian meditation, as an individual exercise, consists of three parts: (1) two "preludes"; (2) followed by a number of "points" (usually three), where the topic of meditation is divided into sub-

93 The last individual exercise of the "Fourth Week" is labeled "Contemplation to Attain Love." See: Ignatius [c.1541-56] 1992, pp. 94-5.

94 Fitting in with the movement of the overall exercise, Loyola describes the individual exercises of the "Second Week" as representing the "illuminative stage," and "Weeks" three and four, collectively, as the "unitive stage." See: Ignatius [c.1541-56] 1992, pp. 5-6.

categories; and (3) ended with a “colloquy.”⁹⁵ The first prelude is the “mental representation of the place” or, as Beth refers to it in his discussion with Gueroult, the “composition of place.”⁹⁶ The purpose behind the first prelude is to employ the imagination to conjure up an image that corresponds to the topic of the meditation.⁹⁷ This meditational device is one of two techniques that help us classify the Ignatian meditation in its own tradition. By relying on the sensible imagination as a means in which to introduce the topic of reflection, Loyola is ultimately committing himself to a Thomistic conception of “ordinary grace.” The “second prelude” is known as a “petition to God” and is performed by the meditator. This step serves to lay out the goal or purpose of the exercise, a feature common to all spiritual exercises.⁹⁸ Within the individual exercises of the “First Week,” the goal of the meditator is to acknowledge the shame and sinfulness of being human.⁹⁹

Within the second part of the meditation, each “point” or sub-category is examined through any one of two techniques (i.e., either the doctrine of the “three powers” or the “application of the senses”). As we have already seen,

95 See for example the first exercise of the first week where there are two “preludes,” three “points,” and one “colloquy.” Ignatius [c.1541-56] 1992, pp. 40-43.

96 See: page 7, above.

97 In the first exercise of the first week Loyola writes: “When a contemplation or meditation is about something that can be gazed on, for example, a contemplation of Christ our Lord, who is visible, the composition will be to see in imagination the physical place where that which I want to contemplate is taking place.” See: Ignatius [c.1541-56] 1992, p. 40. It should be noted that Loyola does differentiate between meditation and contemplation (proper) within his chapter “Introductory Explanations,” however, he often uses these two notions interchangeably within the other chapters of his text.

98 Within the second prelude of the first exercise of the first week, Loyola writes: “What I ask for should be in accordance with the subject matter. For example, in a contemplation on the Resurrection, I will ask for joy with Christ in joy; in a contemplation on the Passion, I will ask for pain, tears, and suffering with Christ suffering.” See: Ignatius [c.1541-56] 1992, p. 40-41.

99 In the second prelude of the first exercise of the first week, Loyola writes: “In the present meditation it [the petition to God] will be to ask for shame and confusion about myself, when I see how many people have been damned for committing a single mortal sin, and how many times I have deserved eternal damnation for my many sins.” See: Ignatius [c.1541-56] 1992, p. 41.

the “three powers” refer to three faculties of the soul: memory, understanding and will.¹⁰⁰ Within a meditation that employs this technique, the image derived from the “first prelude” serves as the object for the memory to focus upon. During the exemplification stage of this exercise (often taking place during the “second point”) the topic of reflection is introduced to the intellect by means of the memory. Another technique employed during the “points” section of the exercise is the “application of the senses.” This technique directs the meditator to apply all senses (i.e., sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch), to a prescribed topic. The best example of this technique is found in the fifth exercise of the first week, where the meditator is directed to apply all of his/her five senses to imagine the torments of hell.¹⁰¹ First, the meditator is instructed to see the fires of hell; second, to hear the screams and cries of the burning souls; third, to smell the filth and smoke; fourth, to taste the bitter tears of the damned; and fifth, to feel the burning flames.

The last part of the Ignatian meditation is the “colloquy” which serves as a type of prayer. In this part of the meditation the exercitant initiates an intimate conversation with God to review the benefits of the intense reflection. Although different individual exercises prescribe different techniques during the “points” section, all exercises within Loyola’s text end with a colloquy. In its most basic sense, this part of the meditation serves as the conclusion or ending.

It is now hopefully clear from our brief exegesis of Loyola’s Exercises that the kinds of meditational techniques employed within this text rely on a sense-based method of exemplification. Although there is alluring historical evidence which leads us to consider Loyola’s text as influencing Descartes, we find that the type of intellectual exercise used by Loyola depends too heavily on knowledge gained from the senses. Even if

100 See: page 39, above.

101 Ignatius, [c.1541-56] 1992, p. 46.

Descartes did borrow certain conventions from the Exercises, it is unclear how these conventions would change the way we read and understand the philosophical content of his work. On the whole, the Ignatian tradition of meditation is simply the wrong style of mental exercise with which to compare Descartes. Keeping this in mind, let us now examine the second meditational text that Descartes would have been aware of, Mersenne's L'usage de la raison.

2. A Minim Connection

The Minim monk, Marin Mersenne (1588-1648), is perhaps best known through his vast correspondence with Descartes. When Descartes was in Holland writing the majority of his philosophical work, Mersenne was his principal correspondent. Their friendship can be dated from about 1625 and perhaps earlier. Mersenne played an important role in the publication of both the Discourse and Meditations. With regards to the latter work, Mersenne was responsible for distributing manuscripts to the learned circles of Europe in the hopes of obtaining objections and feedback to Descartes' work. The result of his efforts are the six sets of "Objections" that were published in the same volume of the first Latin edition of the Meditations (1641). Moreover, two years prior to the publication of this work in 1639, Descartes had elicited Mersenne for thoughts and opinions.¹⁰² If there was anyone to influence Descartes' efforts in the Meditations, Mersenne would surely be at the top of the list. Mersenne's relationship with Descartes was more than just consultant and publishing editor, however. The two men consistently wrote and met with each other for a period of more than two decades, discussing, in this time, many issues on a

¹⁰² This is evidenced by Descartes letter, dated 25 December 1639, where he writes to Mersenne: "I turn to your letter of 4 December and thank you for the advise you gave me about my essay on metaphysics." See: AT, II, 629. CSMK, 142.

variety of topics. Perhaps the best way to describe their relationship is to consider what Descartes says in a letter to Monsieur Carcavi, shortly after Mersenne's death in 1648. Descartes writes:

During the life of the good Father Mersenne, I enjoyed the advantage of always being informed, in painstaking detail, about everything that was going on in the learned world, even though I never made any inquiries about such matters. In this way, if I ever raised any question, he freely gave me the answers, and advised me about all the observations that he and others had made, all the curious devices that people had discovered or were seeking, all the new books which enjoyed any favour and all the controversies which the learned were engaged upon.¹⁰³

Descartes' self-imposed exile from France during much of his adult life rendered him dependent on his circle of correspondents to keep him informed about events of the learned world. Gauging from Descartes' comments and the sheer number of letters written between the two men, Mersenne was undoubtedly Descartes' most esteemed correspondent.

In 1623, four years after establishing residence at the Minim convent in Paris, Mersenne began his literary career by publishing two short religious works: L'usage de la raison and L'analyse de la vie spirituelle.¹⁰⁴ The first of these was recently rediscovered by Klaus Stichweh in 1978, in the Vatican Library; however the latter remains lost.¹⁰⁵ Writing extensively in the areas of biblical scholarship, mathematics, and science, it is perhaps not surprising that Mersenne, a monk of the Minim Order, also made contributions to the literature devotional exercises. The Minims of the seventeenth century, allied in a certain sense with the Jesuits and Oratorians, were considered to be a powerful weapon of the Catholic

¹⁰³ AT, V, 365. CSMK, 379.

¹⁰⁴ For secondary sources on the life and works of Mersenne see: Dear 1988; Hine 1967; Lenoble [1943] 1971; and Whitmore 1967, pp. 140-154.

¹⁰⁵ Both of these works are mentioned in Hilarion de Coste 1649, p. 16, but for details on the rediscovery of L'usage de la raison, see: Beaulieu 1982, pp. 55-56.

Church in combating the Reformation.¹⁰⁶

Mersenne's L'usage de la raison is organized into two books, each having a parallel structure of eleven chapters. Book I is a theoretical treatment of the way in which the two faculties, the understanding (l'entendement) and the will (la volonté), are directed or affected by the use of one's reason. Mersenne refers to this as the "actions" or "movements" of reason upon the will. Book II is the application of ideas discussed in Book I, and it is addressed to the reader in the second person. The publication also includes a letter of dedication, addressed to Madame la Mareschale de Vitry, and a foreword to the reader (avant-propos au lecteur).

Although touching upon many of the scientific and philosophical themes which prevail in his later works, Mersenne's principal concern in L'usage de la raison is fairly obvious. He writes:

My very dear reader, this small publication has no other purpose than to prepare your soul for its entry into the heavenly Jerusalem, so that it may praise eternally its creator with the angels and all the blessed, who fully enjoy the admirable beauty and ineffable goodness of the living God.¹⁰⁷

From the fact that this work was written in French and dedicated to Madame la Mareschale, a women, we gain an idea of the type of audience the work was intended for. Mersenne was not writing a formal treatise on theology directed to the Fathers of the Church; rather he was writing to a less learned (meaning a non-Latin-reading) audience. Moreover, the ideas presented by Mersenne were not viewed as radical or out of the ordinary; it was published with the approval of the Doctors of the Sorbonne.¹⁰⁸

Let us now consider the ways in which L'usage de la raison

106 For a discussion on the history and mission of the Minims during Mersenne's life see: Whitmore 1967.

107 "Mon tres-cher Lecteur, Ce petit ouvrage n'a autre but, que de disposer ton ame pour faire son entrée en la celeste Jerusalem, afin qu'elle loue eternellement son Createur avec les Anges, & tous les bienheureux, qui jouissent à plein de la beauté admirable, & bonté inessable de Dieu vivant. . ." Mersenne 1623, p. 1.

108 Mersenne 1623, p. xiii.

exemplifies the features of a spiritual exercise, and more specifically, the ways in which it resembles the Augustinian tradition. To begin, as we have seen in the above passage, there is a pre-determined purpose or “goal:” to prepare the reader’s soul for heaven. Next, Mersenne is quite exact in prescribing the procedure or path for the reader to attain this desired goal. In the “Foreword to the Reader,” he writes:

Now the path that I wish to trace for you, my dear reader, is not borrowed from the stars and planets, and not even from sublunary things; they will not be far from your mind; it is not necessary to roam and sail to the Indies, nor to the Canary Islands, in order to see the beginning, the middle, the progress, or the end. I do not want either to seek. . . the way of conforming oneself to the divine attributes and emanations which has been taught very excellently by the great Bishop of Geneva inside his “Theotime,” even though this will be an rich way of perfecting oneself. But I will take the path which I trace for Heaven inside you-yourself, so that at any moment that you wish, in the middle of royal greatness, during banquets, dances, pastimes, day and night, in prosperity or adversity, poor or rich, caressed or abandoned, healthy or sick, you will be able to practice that which will be your salvation.¹⁰⁹

This passage is significant for two reasons. First, it is a moment in the text where Mersenne addresses the reader and describes the main idea of the forthcoming exercises. He explains that the procedure is internal--that is, the path to heaven is found within the reader. Furthermore, it is a method in which the reader can practice at any time under any circumstance. The second reason that the above passage is significant is because Mersenne is contrasting the path which he prescribes with other well known methods.

109 “Or les chemins que je te veux tracer, mon cher Lecteur, ne seront pas empruntez des estoiles, ou des planettes, ni mesmes des choses sublunaires; ils ne seront pas éloignez de ton esprit; il ne faudra courir, & naviger aux Indes, ni aux Canaries pour en voir le commencement, le milieu, le progresz, ou la fin. Je ne veux non plus les rechercher. . . bien que ce soit une riche façon de se perfectionner, en se conformant aux attributs, & emanations divines: ce qu’a enseigné fort excellemment ce grand Evesque de Geneve dedans son Theotime; mais je prendrai les chemins, que je trace pour le Ciel, dedans toi-même, afin qu’à tout moment que tu voudras, au milieu des royales grandeurs, des banquets, des danses, & des esbats, le jour & la nuict, en prosperité ou adversité, étant pauvre, ou riche, caresse, ou abandonné, sain, ou malade, tu puisse pratiquer ce qui sera de ton salut.” Mersenne 1623, pp. 8-9.

This is evidenced when he mentions favorably the “Theotime,” by the “great Bishop of Geneva.” Although not immediately apparent to the modern reader, Mersenne is making a reference to the Treatise on the Love of God (1616) by St. François de Sales.¹¹⁰ This contrast is important because although Mersenne is not prescribing the same method as the Salesian tract (i.e., conforming oneself to the divine attributes and emanations, which is essentially an exercise of contemplation), he is linking his own work within the genre of devotional exercises by such a comparison.¹¹¹ The kind of exercise Mersenne offers, instead, is most clearly the intellectual style or meditation (proper)--that is, the internal and intellectual exercise that relies on an Augustinian conception of ordinary grace and a meditator’s natural powers.

The way in which L’usage de la raison resembles the Augustinian tradition of meditation turns on Mersenne’s exclusive use of will and the faculties or powers of the soul. In the second chapter of Book One, he writes:

There are two posts on which the spiritual and rational life turn: the understanding and the will. These are the two Royal powers and faculties, which serve God and adore him in spirit; . . . the understanding is the one that sees and discovers all, . . . it is the torch which shines in the middle of the darkness; the beacon that trains the will and shows it the goal to which it must aim.¹¹²

110 Before canonized as a Saint in 1665, François de Sales’ principal title was the “Bishop of Geneva.” Although François de Sales did not formally publish a work entitled “Theotime,” within the Treatise he addresses the reader throughout the entire work as Theotimus (the title given to the work informally and in some translations). It is in this respect that Mersenne was more than likely referring to the Treatise. For a brief discussion of the life and works of François de Sales see: Plassmann 1954, pp. 392-405.

111 For the influence of the Salesian exercises within the seventeenth century, see: Martz 1954, pp. 144-150.

112 “Ce sont les deux pivots, sur lesquels se tourne toute la vie spirituelle, & raisonnable, que l’entendement, & la volonté; ce sont les deux puissances, & facultés Royales, qui servent Dieu & l’adorent en esprit; . . . [l]’entendement est celui qui voit & descouvre tout, . . . c’est le flambeau qui luit au milieu des ténèbres; le phare, qui dresse la volonté, & qui lui monstre le but, auquel elle doit viser.” Mersenne 1623, pp. 26-27.

Within this passage Mersenne is quite explicit in describing the way in which the understanding and the will interact. The understanding is the faculty of the soul which acquires insight or knowledge. Similar to the illuminationalist conception of ordinary grace, whereby reason is bestowed upon humans “by a sort of incorporeal light of a unique kind,” for Mersenne the understanding is affected by the spiritual “actions’ or “movements’ of reason given directly from God. Once the intellect is “enlightened” by reason, it acts as the “torch” that influences or “trains” the will. Mersenne explains in more detail what he means by this light of the intellect:

This light that the will receives is not similar to the one we receive from the sun, even though we can name the intellect the sun of the soul. This is because the will is not capable of light in the way of a diaphanous body transmitting the brightness of the sun, or of a opaque body, which is reverberating and reflecting. The will is rather capable of light in a more wonderful manner, similar to the way in which imagination illuminates the sensory appetite.¹¹³

For Mersenne, the will of the reader is not influenced by the intellect by means of the senses, but rather from the Augustinian “inner light of truth.” The intellect operates independently from the sensible imagination, and thus it is essentially in this respect that Mersenne’s publication fits within Augustinian tradition.¹¹⁴

Whether or not we can actually prove Descartes read Mersenne’s spiritual exercise is really not a pressing concern. Given Descartes’ extremely close friendship with Mersenne, we would not be going out on a limb to claim that Descartes would have at least been aware of the basic

113 “Cette lumière que reçoit la volonté n’est aussi semblable à celle que nous recevons du Soleil, bien qu’on puisse nommer l’intellect le Soleil de l’ame: car la volonté n’est pas capable de lumière à la façon d’un corps diaphane transmettant l’éclair du Soeil, ou d’un corps opaque, qui la réverbère, & réfléchit; mais d’une façon du tout admirable, pareille à cell, par la quelle l’imagination illuminé l’appetit sensitif. . .” Mersenne 28-29.

114 The influence of St. Augustine on Mersenne’s work in general is not difficult to establish. There are several sources that discuss Mersenne’s use of Augustinian doctrines to advance his own philosophical agenda within the presence of Scholastic-Aristotelianism. For example, see: Dear 1988, pp. 80-116; and Lenoble 1971.

idea of what the Augustinian tradition of meditation is. Furthermore, when Descartes calls Mersenne the “godfather” of his metaphysics, allowing Mersenne to play a role in preparing his text for publication, it would not be very hard for us to imagine or speculate how the two may have exchanged ideas on the selected writing style.¹¹⁵ At the very least, if we were to dispute whether the influence on Descartes’ writing style comes from the Ignatian tradition (i.e., from Descartes’ school days) or whether it descends from Augustinian tradition (i.e., through Descartes’ principal correspondent), the latter is undoubtedly the more attractive choice. The task that remains in our analysis of how Descartes’ “Metaphysical Meditations” relates to the religious style of meditation is to examine for ourself the literary/meditational devices of Descartes’ text.

115 For the letter where Descartes calls Mersenne the “godfather” of his metaphysics, See: AT, III, 340. CSMK, 177.

Rereading Descartes

Before regarding the ways in which Descartes' Meditations are meditational, let us first briefly review our progress up to this point. In chapter one, we surveyed the opinions of past and present scholars who have attempted to compare Descartes' text with either specific meditational texts or more generally with the entire devotional genre. Although their efforts suggest many interesting connections and parallels, their attempts collectively fail for any one of the following reasons: (1) they construe Descartes' relationship with the devotional genre too narrowly by only considering Loyola's Exercises; (2) they conceive of the meditational genre ahistorically; or (3) they misrepresent the kinds of meditational texts that were available to Descartes. After taking into account the various problematic positions of past scholarship, we began in chapter two with our own assessment. First we traced the historical and social background of devotional writings with the hope of establishing the intellectual context in which these writings were set. Next, after gaining a sense of the spirit or temperament in which the devotionals of the seventeenth century were written, we analyzed the different kinds of writings that existed within the genre as a whole. From this, we concluded that the type of devotional that was the most relevant to our analysis of Descartes was meditation (proper)--that is, the internal and intellectual spiritual exercise that relies on "ordinary grace" and a meditator's "natural powers." In chapter three, we examined two examples of meditation, each representing a different tradition. Although there is strong historical evidence to link both works to Descartes, we concluded that the more relevant of the two was Mersenne's

L'usage de la raison. Mersenne's close relationship with Descartes and the fact that his treatise employs the conventions and techniques of an Augustinian style of meditation, seems to render L'usage de la raison as our "smoking gun." Originally proposed by Gueroult, and repeatedly suggested throughout our study, the Augustinian tradition of meditation, with its distrusting attitude toward the senses, turning toward reason and the independent operation of the intellect, seems to be the kind of meditation operative within Descartes' Meditations. Hence, the task that remains in our study is to see for ourselves how Descartes' text exemplifies the conventions of the Augustinian tradition and to determine if such literary devices bear on a philosophical understanding of his ideas.

1. The *Meditations* as an Augustinian Meditation

Before we begin, it is very important to note that Descartes' text is not (properly speaking) a spiritual exercise. Although Descartes does address what we might deem religious topics (e.g., the existence of God and the immortality of the soul), his text is not directly aimed at cultivating one's faith, albeit he certainly thought it could.¹¹⁶ In a parenthetical note to the "Synopsis" of the Meditations Descartes clarifies this point. He writes: "And there is no discussion of matters pertaining to faith or the conduct of life, but simply of speculative truths which are known solely by means of the natural light."¹¹⁷ To be sure, Descartes' focus within the Meditations is

116 This is evidenced by Descartes' comments in a letter to Mersenne, dated 28 January 1641, where he writes: "There will be no difficulty, so far as I can see, in adapting theology to my style of philosophizing . . . If you think that there are other things which call for the writing of a whole new course of theology, and are willing to undertake this yourself, I shall count it a favour and do my best to help you. . ." See: AT, III, 295. CSMK, 172.

117 AT, VII, 15. CSM, II, 11. This comment was added after Descartes received the objections of Arnauld, whereupon Descartes instructed Mersenne to "put the words [i.e., the quoted passage] between brackets so that it can be seen that they have been added." See: AT, III, 335. CSMK, 175.

philosophical. For the time being, however, we will consider how his text exemplifies the features and conventions of religious meditation. First we will focus on the similarities between the “Metaphysical Meditations” and religious meditation in general, and then we will show in particular how Descartes’ text employs the conventions of the Augustinian tradition.

Perhaps the two most striking parallels between Descartes’ text and religious style of meditation is first the title, and second, the division of chapters into individual days of meditation. In and of itself, the title of “Meditations on First Philosophy” does not qualify Descartes’ text to be automatically associated with devotional exercises--as we have already noted, there were secular writings (e.g., on law and politics) that employed such a title.¹¹⁸ However, in building our case, one cannot deny that with the title of “Meditation,” given to a work written during the height of the Counter-Reformation--what we might call the golden-age of spiritual exercises--the religious connotation of this word cannot be ignored. Moreover, when we consider both the title and the division of chapters into individual “meditations,” we are presented with the conventions of a spiritual exercise that seems more than merely accidental. But we must not be fooled or overly taken with these features, for there is more than meets the eye. Unlike those commentators who jumped on these aspects of Descartes’ text and then blindly attributed them to an Ignatian influence, our own understanding of devotional genre prompts us to be a bit more careful.

The next similarity between Descartes’ text and religious meditation is how Descartes begins with a predetermined purpose or “goal” proposed at the very start of “Meditation One”--that is, to eradicate his former beliefs and opinions in order that he may establish absolute certain knowledge for the sciences. He writes:

118 See: pages 33-34, above.

I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. . . . So today I have rid my mind of all worries and arranged for my self a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions.¹¹⁹

Descartes begins this project with a meditative conversation with his own thoughts and continues, as Hatfield claims, with a series of “cognitive exercises.”¹²⁰ On the whole, these exercises are very similar to practice of religious meditation, but more specifically, they are comparable to the “movements” of Mersenne’s spiritual exercise. These exercises rely on a person’s own natural powers and intellect. The exercises aim at evoking a certain type of internal experience that is realized or actualized in a moment of intuitive insight. Similar to the Augustinian tradition of meditation, the cognitive exercises of the Meditations do not elicit the use of one’s imagination, but rather require a person to turn inward to discover the “clear and distinct ideas” that are innate to his/her own mind.

Descartes’ theory of the mind as well as the foundation he sets for human knowledge is based upon the priority of the intellect operating independently of the senses. It is only by the Augustinian practice of turning inward, toward reason and will, that Descartes is able to reach truth and certainty. Thus through a reflective procedure he attempts to establish a method by which his will is guided or influenced to avoid error by the intellect’s capacity to recognize ideas that are clear and distinct.

This procedure begins with Descartes’ “method of doubt,” which predominately takes place during the “First Meditation.” This portion of Descartes’ text is analogous to the “purgative stage” of a religious meditation. Just as the exercitant of a religious meditation confronts his/her sinful nature and seeks the means to rid himself/herself of fault

119 AT, VII, 18. CSM, II, 17.

120 See: Hatfield 1986, p. 47; and pages 20-21, above.

and weakness, Descartes likewise acknowledges his imperfection and seeks a means by which to eliminate his errors. Descartes, however, is not concerned with the imperfect condition of his soul, but rather with the certitude of his knowledge. The thought experiment of the “dreamer” in the “First Meditation” serves as an example in which Descartes confronts the unreliability of his own sensory experience.¹²¹ Although often referred to as the “dream argument,” this part of Descartes’ text is less of an “argument” as it is an example of a mental exercise whereby the narrator is engaged in an examination of his own thoughts. The same holds true for the “deceiving God argument.”¹²² When the logical truths of math and geometry are undermined, Descartes does not present a set of formal theses, but rather is involved within his own meditative conversation.¹²³

The purging skepticism of the “First Meditation” leads us up to what we might call, “Descartes’ illuminative stage,” taking place in “Meditation Two.” In this stage of his cognitive exercise Descartes discovers an indubitable idea--the cogito. The cogito is conferred as a “simple intuition of the mind” or a “spontaneous and self-evident truth.” As Descartes himself tells us, it is not meant to be argued in the form of a syllogism but rather is exemplified to the intellect in a moment of intuitive insight. In the Second Set of Replies, he writes:

And when we become aware that we are thinking things, this is a primary notion which is not derived by means of any syllogism. When someone says “I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist,” he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind.¹²⁴

121 AT, VII, 19. CSM, II, 13.

122 AT, VII, 21. CSM, II, 14.

123 Descartes’ arguments of the first two meditations are often placed into the context of the two intellectual currents in which he was reacting: Scholasticism and skepticism. For a discussion on Descartes’ rather intolerant attitude toward the skeptics of his time, see: Curley 1978; and Popkin 1979.

124 AT, VII, 140. CSM, 100.

The cogito, therefore, is not a proposition to be argued, but rather it is a truth to be discovered. The idea of the thinking-existing-self is arrived at in a moment of meditative intuition. This idea is innate to the mind of the meditator and can only be uncovered after a person proceeds through a series of mental exercises that lead the mind away from the senses--thus exemplifying the defining convention of an Augustinian meditation. When we consider the purgative stage as a necessary procedure in order to realize the "clear and distinct" idea of the existing-self, the cogito is then properly demonstrated or "exemplified" to the intellect. In the same manner in which we might draw the three lines of a triangle on a blackboard to teach a young child what a triangle is, Descartes teaches the cogito in a similar manner of demonstration.¹²⁵ That is to say, he leads the reader through the experience of a series of mental exercises as a process in which the reader can discover a particular metaphysical truth. Just as the child learns the idea of a triangle through experiencing the process in which the triangle is constructed, the reader of the Meditations similarly learns the self-evident truth of the intellect by experiencing the process in which self-existence is exemplified.

From Descartes' own point of view, the cogito is the starting point from which the rest of his metaphysical system to fall into place. The cogito provides the starting point from which he can derive the foundation of certain knowledge for math and science. It is an instance of a clear and distinct idea that he is able to use to grasp other innate ideas that lie

125 The thesis that Descartes "demonstrates" the metaphysical truths in his Meditations in a "geometrical fashion" is advanced by Peter Dear in his article Mersenne's Suggestion: Cartesian Meditation and the Mathematical Model of Knowledge in the Seventeenth Century. In this article, Dear discusses what is meant by "mathematical demonstration" for a mathematician in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He gives a detailed account of how this procedure might bear on Descartes' use of the notion of "meditation." See: Dear 1995; and pages 64-66, below. It should also be noted that Hatfield also advances the thesis that Descartes sets forth certain metaphysical truths or axioms as a means to "geometrically" demonstrate the innate ideas of the meditator. See: Hatfield 1986, pp. 61-65.

immanent in the mind (e.g., the existence of God and extension as the essence of bodies). In fact, the cogito serves as the standard or criterion from which he can judge all of his ideas. Once Descartes proves the existence of God and can trust that he is not systematically deceived ("Meditation Three"), then the standard of clearness and distinctness becomes the basis in which he can determine the truth and falsity of all his ideas ("Meditation Four"). Just as in religious meditation where the will of the exercitant is influenced by an internal experience to achieve a predetermined goal, the experience of the cogito allows Descartes to influence his will to achieve absolute certain knowledge.

2. Philosophical Meditation

The last task that remains in our study is to consider how the literary devices of the Meditations bear on a philosophical understanding of Descartes' ideas. In one sense, our description of how the Meditations resemble the Augustinian tradition has already suggested a number of ways in which Descartes' literary format is philosophically important. For example, our interpretation of both the "dream argument" and the "cogito argument" is founded on the idea that these passages serve as stages of a process that lead the reader to discover metaphysical truths. They are not "arguments" in the strict sense because they aim at demonstrating or exemplifying certain metaphysical ideas rather than trying to convince or persuade the reader through the force of logic. Although Descartes' text is certainly not void of logical arguments, our assessment of his project as a series of cognitive exercises does diverge from the way in which Descartes is generally handled in the Anglo-American analytic tradition.¹²⁶ That is

126 A listing of commentators within this tradition might include G. E. Moore, Gilbert Ryle, Norman Malcolm, and J. L. Austin. For a brief critique of the Anglo-American analytic tradition in Cartesian studies, see: Roger Ariew's "Introduction" to

to say, within this tradition Descartes' ideas are evaluated as separate topics contained in individual arguments (e.g., personal identity in Descartes, Cartesian dualism, God in Descartes, ect.). At the very least, when we regard the Meditations as meditational the familiar objections that render Descartes' "arguments" as circular or question begging become severely mitigated.

But what does it mean to say that Meditations are meditational? As we have seen, there are many common features between Descartes' text and religious meditation, but at the same time there are also many differences. The most direct answer to this question is to say that Descartes' text is a unique kind of meditation--that is, it is a philosophical meditation (or more properly an Augustinian philosophical meditation). Philosophical meditation is similar to religious meditation in how it requires the reader to engage in a certain activity or process. This process is internal and relies on a person's own natural powers to bring about a certain experience or moment of intuitive insight. Philosophical meditation is different from religious meditation, however, in what it establishes its goal or over-riding objective to be. That is to say, instead of meditating on a particular topic that brings about an enhanced spiritual life, philosophical meditation focuses on those topics which bring about newly gained insight into human knowledge in general.

On the whole, our primary focus throughout this entire study has been to examine the notion of meditation as a specific kind of writing or literary form. We have directed our attention toward the different kinds of techniques and devices that enable us to differentiate between the various texts. The kinds of conventions that a particular text employs determines to what genre and style that that particular text belongs. Since Descartes employs the conventions of an Augustinian style of meditation, but transforms such techniques for his own ends, we have consequently

Gueroult's Reasons, Gueroult [1953] 1985, pp. xiii-xv.

classified his text as a philosophical meditation. But why, one may ask, do we give such a label to his text? That is to say, why not simply classify his text as a “Cartesian meditation” since Descartes seems to be original in his use of such techniques within the philosophical venue? The answer to these questions is really quite simple--that is, Descartes was not alone in employing a philosophical notion of meditation. Although Descartes is certainly unique in how he borrows and transforms the features of the Augustinian style of meditation, there were other authors, some even publishing before 1641, who employed a notion of meditation disengaged from a religious context.

Notable research by Peter Dear points to several scholastic textbooks that employ the philosophical sense of the notion “meditation.”¹²⁷ For the authors of these texts, meditation simply meant purposeful thinking or a method for informal or dialectical reasoning. The first of these authors that Dear mentions is the French Jesuit, Honoré Fabri. In 1646, Fabri wrote a philosophy textbook which focused, among other things, on “method” in the various sciences (e.g., logic, physics, and ethics).¹²⁸ According to Dear, an early section of the text entitled, “De methodo meditationis” (On the method of meditation), outlines four techniques on how to study philosophy: “lectio, meditatio, exercitatio, and scriptio” (reading, meditation, practice, writing). Fabri’s use of the term “meditation” is essentially a procedure that a student is recommended to perform when studying a certain subject. For Fabri, “meditation” is the disciplined manner in which a student thinks about or considers a particular topic. Fabri writes: “to philosophize is to meditate rightly: moreover, indeed to have without interruption the

¹²⁷ See: Dear 1995.

¹²⁸ The title of this work is Philosophiae tomus primus: qui complectitur scientiarum methodum sex libris explicatam: Logicam analyticam, duodecim libris demonstratam, & aliquot controversias logicas, breviter disputatas. Auctore Petro Mosnerio Doctore Medico. Cuncta excerpta ex praelectionibus R. P. Hon. Fabry. See: Dear 1995, p.41 n 52.

abstracted and estranged mind of a sleeper.”¹²⁹

The second scholastic author that Dear mentions is the Italian Jesuit, Antonio Casiglio. Casiglio or “Casilius” published an Introduction to Aristotle’s Logic in 1629 and is considered by Dear to be the pedagogical authority for Fabri.¹³⁰ Consequently, just as we saw in Fabri, Casilius also includes a section within his textbook that is intended to instruct the student on how to study. Instead of using the term “meditatio:” however, Casilius designates the expression “speculatio” (speculation) to refer to the way a student should think about a specified subject matter. For both authors these techniques, although instructive, are not meant to be formal rules; rather, they are intended to be hints or tips of how to go about doing something. In Casilius’ textbook, he gives a set of five instructions for the student to follow; however, these instructions are not intended to be followed the same way by every student. Included within the philosophical notion of meditation there is a sort of personal or subjective element. To illustrate, in Fabri’s own list of study hints he writes:

Some people speculate best by day, in the light; others at night, in the dark; others standing; others sitting or walking, or even lying down. Everyone knows his special aptitude; let him employ it.¹³¹

To summarize briefly, there are two things to be said about the philosophical version of “meditation” that we learn from the textbooks of Fabri and Casilius. First, “meditation” is seen as a type of suggestion that requires the student to do something --that is, it requires a person to actively engage in a certain process that will hopefully yield knowledge in a particular subject. Second, “meditation” involves a subjective element--that is, as a process or activity, each person is allowed a certain degree of freedom on how they go about employing or performing this activity. The

¹²⁹ Honoré Fabri, Philosophiae tomus primus . . . , as quoted in Dear 1995, p 20.

¹³⁰ The original title of this work is Introductio in Aristotelis logicam et reliquas disciplinas. See Dear 1995, p. 42 n 59.

¹³¹ Fabri, Philosophiae tomus primus, as quoted in Dear 1995, p. 26.

position maintained by Dear in his article is that the features inherent within this notion of meditation are very similar to the Cartesian recommendation for “attentive consideration.” Just as these scholastic texts require the student go through a process by following a certain set of instructions in order to achieve knowledge on a certain topic; Descartes requires the thinker to philosophize in an orderly way whereby he/she will become convinced of certain metaphysical truths.

The important insight that Dear’s research introduces into our discussion is that Descartes’ use of meditation is neither exceptionally novel nor very far from the ordinary. Although much of our analysis has been focused on religious meditation and the different ways in which Descartes borrows and transforms the conventions of the Augustinian tradition, the philosophical sense of meditation as employed within scholastic textbooks provides another dimension in which to evaluate Descartes’ text. The scholastic notion of meditation is not in itself a collection of literary devices or a formalized procedure, however, it does seem to capture or rather resemble the way in which Descartes uses the term in his “Preface to the Reader,” where he writes: “. . . I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me. . .”¹³²

To conclude our study, perhaps the best way to understand Descartes’ Meditations as meditational is to think of “meditation” as a notion or term that requires a person/reader to do something--that is, to actively engage in a certain process or activity. On one level, his text is meditational in the Augustinian sense in how it requires the reader to go through a series of cognitive exercises that lead the mind away from the senses. And yet on another level, his text is meditational in the philosophical or scholastic sense in how it reveals a process in which the reader can discover certain

132 AT, VII, 9. CSM, II, 8.

metaphysical truths. Both senses or levels of meditation are important to a philosophical understanding of Descartes' ideas and each can be seen operating within his text.

Regarding Descartes' Meditations as meditational not only provides a means in which to interpret and understand the internal ideas of the text, but it also fits in with the way Descartes himself actually practiced philosophy. That is to say, the Meditations, as they were originally published in 1641, did not only contain the six days or chapters of meditation, but they also included six sets of "Objections and Replies" as well as a prefatory letter. For Descartes, the practice of philosophy did not consist as a set of isolated arguments to be accepted or refuted, but rather took place as a dialogue among a community of philosophers, scholars, and doctors of theology. Cartesian philosophy, as it is described in the Meditations, therefore, begins with the requirement that one must bring something to the conversation (e.g., a willingness or an attentiveness). This requirement is not only a suggestion or recommendation for how one should engage in philosophical discourse but it is itself apart of the activity of philosophizing. The metaphysical truths (or philosophical problems) that Descartes discovers during his reflective analysis are what he brings to the discussion; regarding the Meditations as meditational is what we ourselves bring to the discussion.

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