The Question of Style

Le Discours de la méthode has been, together with the Meditations, the most influential of Descartes’s texts. This influence cannot be explained purely in terms of the philosophical content of the work. As I have pointed out, the philosophical exposition is limited to Part 4 of a treatise in six parts. What is unusual about the Discours is the consistent elaboration of its philosophical ideas within a literary context. The Discours presents the reader with a coherent picture of the emergence of a theory of rationality within a fictive autobiographical context. In Descartes’s previous texts from the Praeambula and Olympica to the Regulae and the Monde, questions of fiction and the conscious use of literary and rhetorical effects arise, but only occasionally and without being systematically defined. In the Discours, the systematic elaboration of subjectivity is indelibly tied to the literary—autobiographical style.

In order to address the seminal issue of the relation of philosophy to literature in the Discours, my analysis will focus on the question of style. In the context of this discussion, style is not viewed in the traditional philosophical fashion as something which is either ornamental or in excess of normal philosophical exposition. Insofar as both literature and philosophy use the medium of language and share common rhetorical and generic devices, literary style is intrinsic to philosophy. The shared stylistic concerns of philosophy and literature are cogently summarized by Tom Conley’s observation:

The style of philosophy was not to be understood as a purely literary style, in which the individual beauty of the writer’s Discourse could account for or valorize itself in some miraculous or ineffable way. Style was to be understood as inscription, as marking in a literal sense rather than as a metaphor of decor. With this supplemental view of the craft, the “styles” of philosophy and literature would be of the same stamp.

In Descartes, style makes a difference in so far as it sets up new relations between the author and the reader, that is, different models of communication. The purpose of this study is not to reduce philosophy to literature. They are different: they function according to specific conventions and have their particular aims. The question that concerns us is the difference which style makes in the text of philosophy. The Discours de la méthode is composed of a collection of heterogeneous literary modes: the autobiographical (Parts 1 and 2), moral (Part 3), metaphysical (Part 4), scientific (Part 5) and elegiac (Part 6). Each of these different modes presents a different portrait of the author mirrored through a different set of relations between the writer and reader. These different styles constitute a series of receding frames to a portrait of the author, who as subject will be demonstrated to become nothing more than a frame himself.

In addition to giving the reader a general sense of the literary character of the Discours, its overall concerns and stylistic structure, this analysis also deals with Descartes’s problematization of the relations of philosophy and literature. Descartes incorporates into his own philosophical strategy the conflict or difference between philosophy and poetry in Plato. Plato’s exclusion of poetry in the Republic is echoed by Descartes’s exclusion of all philosophy that does not obey his new criteria. Consequently, all previous philosophy is devalued; it becomes history and loses its truth value, since it does not obey the rules for certitude outlined by Descartes. Echoing Plato, especially the Theaetetus, Descartes considers philosophy above all to be a theory of knowledge. By choosing mathematics as the norm, Descartes reduces the scope of Platonic philosophy to this epistemic perspective. The difference that originally separated philosophy and literature in Plato, and which is essential to his definition of philosophy as a discourse of knowledge, becomes in Descartes’s Discours a difference at the very heart of philosophy, one which separates modern from ancient philosophy. Descartes will thus emerge not only as the founder of a new philosophy, but also as the inventor of the category of the “new,” that heretofore qualifies the character of modern philosophy.

The opening statement of the Discours, “Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée,” (Good sense is of all things in the world the most equally distributed) startles the reader by its conventional character. This statement, whether ironic or straightforward, sets up the conventions that govern Cartesian discourse, as a discourse whose essence is defined less by the order of demonstration than by that of the act of communication itself. The contractual relation between the author and the reader verifies the truth value of the statement.” From its very
imagination. The statement is proven not by argument but by the act of reading, that is, communication. Having just established his common ground with the reader Descartes proceeds to use the first person, and thus frame his general statement by the authority of his own speech. The appearance of the empirical subject, the speaking I, however, does not lead to the affirmation of the superiority of his own reason. Descartes seeks to keep his contact with the reader and at the same time to affirm his particularity and difference.

The difference between him and other men is not that he has a more perfect reason, but that he has found a new method of knowledge. This new method is presented as a discursive phenomenon; the result of “considerations and maxims” (AT VI, 3; HR I, 82). Having tried it out on himself, Descartes declares himself and his own example completely satisfactory. His method is self-verifiable and its private application or performance provides sufficient proof of its truthfulness. Although Descartes needs to maintain a relation of resemblance to the reader, in order to uphold the premises that govern his communication with the reader, he also marks his differences from him. But these differences are not presented as intrinsic to reason, since reason is complete within each individual, but as different ways of applying reason.

Rather than teaching the new method, Descartes proposes to show the manner in which he endeavoured to conduct it himself. He sets forth his life as if in a “picture.” The purpose of this picture is not to teach, but to reveal his conduct. This picture is also a fable, an allegory that must be read correctly, like the maxims which enshrine the method. It is at this point that Descartes begins his proper autobiographical narrative. But this narrative is limited in scope; it does nothing more than describe the departure of the author in search of his method. Descartes tells of his education, his travels, and so forth, but always in terms of estrangement. He concludes: “il n’y avait aucune doctrine dans le monde qui fût telle qu’on m’avait au paravant fait espérer” (that there was no learning in the world such as I was formerly led to believe it) (AT VI, 5; HR I, 84). This sentiment of internal difference on alienation is increased by his readings and travels: “Car c’est quasi le même de converser avec ceux des autres siècles, que de voyager Mais lors qu’on emploie trop de temps a voyager, on devient enfin étranger en son pays ...” (For to converse with those of other centuries is almost the same thing as to travel ... But when one employs too much time traveling one becomes a stranger in one’s own country . . . . .) (AT VI, 6; HR I, 84). This sense of estrangement is exacerbated by literary pursuits, since he claims that fiction is the ultimate form of alienation - imagining things that do not exist. Fiction can also lead to complete delusion: “Outre que les fables font imaginer plusieurs événements comme possibles qui ne le sont point” (Fables make one imagine many events possible which in reality are not so) (AT VI, 7; HR I, 84). Thus Descartes’s contacts with these different domains do not yield any tangible model of learning. Literature, rhetoric, philosophy and theology are in turn opposed to the delight Descartes takes in mathematics because of the “certitude and evidence of its reasoning.” His admiration for mathematics is expressed in terms of the firmness of its foundations: “Je m’étonnais de ce que, leurs fondements étant si férres et si solides, on n’avait rien batis dessus de plus relevé” (I was astonished that seeing how firm and solid was its basis, no loftier edifice had been reared thereupon) (AT VI, 7; HR I, 85). By comparison, the works of antiquity which deal with morals are nothing more than “des palais fort superbes et forts magnifiques, qui n’étaient bâti que sur du sable et sur de la boue” (palaces built on sand and mud) (AT VI, 7—8; HR I, 85). According to Descartes, what all intellectual domains other than mathematics lack is a solid foundation or frame. The solidity of the frame is based on its formal simplicity, i.e., a collection of basic precepts.

The method as a schema provides the right order for examining things. It begins with (1) clear and distinct ideas, continues with (2) division of complex difficulties into simples; it thus imposes (3) its special order and requires (4) that all enumerations be complete. These logical principles are discursive analogues of mathematical principles. Descartes not only claims that by following this method he can not only resolve difficult questions in geometry and algebra, but - more important - suggests that the method is a possible framework for the resolution of philosophical problems:

_“*_chaque vérité que je trouvais étant une règle qui me servait après a en trouver d’autres, non seulement je vins a bout de plusieurs que j’avais jugées autrefois très difficiles, mais il me sembla aussi, vers la fin, que je pouvais déterminer, en celles même que j’ignorais, par quels moyens, et jusques où, il Cétait possible de les resoudre ... Mais ce qui me contentait le plus de cette méthode était que, par elle, j’étais assure d’user en tout de ma raison, sinon parfaitement, au moins le mieux qui fût en mon pouvoir ... *(making each truth that I discovered a rule for helping me to find others — not only did I arrive at the solution of many_
questions which I had hitherto regarded as most difficult, but, towards the end, it seemed to me that I was able to determine in the case of those of which I was still ignorant, by what means, and how far, it was possible to solve them ... But what pleased me most in this method was that I was certain by its means of exercising my reason in all things, if not perfectly as well as was in my power . . .) (AT VI, 21; HR I, 93—94)

Descartes’s assessment of his method is presented in pragmatic terms: its value lies in its efficacy. The method allows him to frame any problem, to schematize it, to establish the correct perspective, as well as an order of procedure. Like pictorial perspective, the method posits the priority of the subject and his always assured mastery over objects. It charts out the space of representation within which objects can be known through the formulaic character of its precepts.

The Impersonal Autobiography

Hugo Friedrich, in his book on Montaigne, distinguishes the Essais from the Discours de la méthode by pointing out that the latter “dissimulates a general case, the discovery of truth by impersonal human reason after an initial crisis.” Friedrich’s comment on the impersonality of human reason, masked in the Discours by an autobiographical allure, touches upon the very contradictions that we have already elaborated with regard to the subject as a philosophical and literary entity. Rather than identifying the subject naively with a person that has an empirical and historical reality, we have shown that the subject is a logical representation governing the conditions of possibility of subjectivity in general. This philosophical subject in Descartes is empty and impersonal, its character is marked by its affinity to mathematics, upon whose project it is based. The question therefore that haunts the reader is: why the insistence on autobiography? Is there a fundamental problem in the articulation of the philosophical subject which only an empirical historical subject can resolve? We may assume that there must be one, since Descartes presents his method in double terms, both philosophical and auto-biographical.

Descartes introduces his method in general terms, both didactic and autobiographical: “Mais je serais bien aise de faire voir dans ce discours, quels sont les chemins que j’ai suivis, et d’y représenter ma vie comme en un tableau, afin que chacun en puisse juger.” (But in this Discourse I shall be happy to show the paths I have followed, and to set forth my life as in a picture, so that everyone may judge of it for himself) (AT VI, 4; HR 1, 83). The narration of the Discours confuses the reader, since its exemplary function wavers between two different projects: the presentation of a philosophical method and autobiography. However, it is a question of two different projects. The method is tied to the mathematical and epistemological project we have outlined in the Regulae. It involves the a priori manipulation of the givens of knowledge, from the perspective of a universal and anonymous subject whose lack of content assures its axiomatic presence within representation. The autobiographical genre, on the contrary, requires the historical integration of facts seeking to define the particular instances and the special conditions for the constitution of the empirical subject. Descartes not only recognized but in fact consciously used the fundamental incompatibility of these two endeavors, the philosophical and the autobiographical.

Descartes’s introduction of the method as a picture is immediately qualified by the rejection of identification. He specifies that this picture is not to be imitated. He urges the reader to establish a deferential as well as a differential relationship to the picture or fable of his life:

Ainsi mon dessein n’est pas d’enseigner ici la méthode que chacun doit suivre pour bien conduire sa raison, mais seulement de faire voir en quelle sorte j’ai tâché de conduire la mienne ... Mais, ne proposant cet écrit que comme une histoire, ou, si vous l’aimez mieux, comme une fable, en laquelle, parmi quelques exemples qu’on petit imiter, on en trouvera peut-être aussi plusieurs autres qui ‘on aura raison de ne pas suivre, j’espère qu’il sera utile à quelques uns, sans être nuisible à personne, et que tous me sauront gré de ma franchise. (Thus my design here is not to teach the Method which everyone should follow in order to promote the good conduct of his Reason, but only to show in what manner I have endeavored to conduct my own ... But regarding this treatise simply as a history, or, if you prefer it, a fable in which, amongst certain things which may be imitated, there are possibly others which it would not be right to follow, I hope that it will be of use to some without being hurtful to any, and that all will think me for my frankness.) (AT VI, 4; HR I, 83)
Descartes admits that he does not want to teach his method; rather he explains in what manner he has endeavored to conduct his own.

The model of instruction proposed here in the guise of a fable is presented in both general and personal terms. Whereas the general example in structs the reader by means of the analogical function of the fable, the personal one, on the contrary, is affirmed as different, imitable. The tension earlier described in the Regulae, involving Descartes’s rejection of resemblance as a model for knowledge, in favor of a model based on difference, is here recapitulated in relation to the reader. The problem is that Descartes, in order to communicate his knowledge, must presume the identification of the reader with the personal “I” at the very moment that he seeks to distinguish himself from the reader. His literary practice necessarily relies on models of both resemblance and difference, even as he philosophically attempts to denounce resemblance as a model fraught with illusion and error. This contradiction becomes one of the basic mechanisms governing the general structure of the Cartesian text.

Descartes’s representation of the method as a fable relies upon and develops the double definition of the fable as historical example and as a discourse of analogy. In so doing, he uses categories going back to Aristotle’s definition of the fable in the Rhetoric. Aristotle distinguishes between fable and historical example by opposing two different models of persuasion. He observes that fables require the perception of analogy with real events, whereas historical examples are more convincing because they rely on the repetitive character of history, the ability of the future to resemble the past. In other words, the fable is a schematic story — it stands in for something that it signifies and its persuasion is based on allegory — whereas the historical example is more convincing since it relies on the evidence of experience, on something that has already taken place. Aristotle’s formulation can be expanded to argue that the very uniqueness of an event can be the basis of its verisimilitude. The historical example can also act as a self-verifying statement, its performance (the fact that it has taken place) documents its truth. In the Discours Descartes plays out these different registers of fabulistic discourse: the autobiographical narration endows the subject with a historical physiognomy whereas its true aim is to present the philosophical subject of truth.

Descartes consciously brackets the analogical function of the fable. His fable is not total; it is presented as offering a choice of examples: amongst certain things which may be imitated, there are possible others which it would not be right to follow (AT VI, 4; HR I, 83). The reader is ostensibly given the choice, like the author of the method, of exercising his own judgment, of choosing only those examples that truly apply to his own condition. However, the reader’s freedom of choice is deceptive. The Discours as a fable is one that adjudicates its own exemplarity: it serves as a universal model while also denying the reader access to those examples pertaining to the author alone. Thus Descartes’s definition of the Discours as a fable presents the curious fact that this fable is not intended purely didactically; rather than offering a moral lesson, this fable displays the author’s frankness. The author rejects the didactic mimetic model to replace it by the affirmation of his sincerity, which is proven on the spot, since he refuses to exercise a relation of power with the reader, thereby appealing to his own frankness as a source of authority.

As a fable, the Discours renounces its primary function — the didactic — by falling back on the authority of sincerity, which is understood to exceed pedagogical relations. Descartes minimizes the pedagogical role of the fable: “Ceux qui se mêlent de donner des préceptes, se doivent estimer plus habiles que ceux auxquels ils les donnent” (Those who set about giving precepts must esteem themselves more skillful than those to whom they advance them) (AT VI, 4; HR I, 83). However, his refusal to give precepts is contradicted by his actual practice in the fifth and sixth Parts of the Discours, where he overtly imposes his lesson on the reader. The tone of the latter parts of the Discours shifts from tentative suggestion to outright explanation and declaration. The instructive and authoritative function of the Discours is here asserted in no uncertain terms: “j’ose bien dire que je n’y ai remarqué aucune chose que je ne pusse assez commodément expliquer par les principes que j’avais trouvés” (I can truly venture to say that I have not there observed anything which I could not easily explain by the principles which I discovered) (AT VI, 65; HR I, 121). Later parts of the Discours present the transition from an optional example to a recommended one, the passage from a fable to an actual explanation.

Thus Descartes’s overt refusal to offer precepts is undermined by his actual practice. His attempt to shy away from pedagogy can be considered as an effort to affirm his authority indirectly. By reformulating the didactic function of the Discours as a “fable,” neither generally applicable nor universally pertinent, Descartes seems to be making use of the fable while also questioning its pertinence as a genre. He is here displaying his authority as an author by affirming and also denying the genre. This reformulation of the didactic function of the fable in terms of a private autobiographical function affects the representation of the method: the method is reinterpreted as a private exercise whose exemplarity applies exclusively to Descartes. The initial definition of the Discours as a fable turns out to be
deceptive. The negation of didactic exemplarity in the *Discours de la méthode* highlights its private and personal dimension. While losing its general analogical function, the fable of the *Discours* emerges as a historical example. But it is as a unique historical example that the *Discours de la méthode* is also defined as autobiography.

In the second Part of the *Discours*, Descartes suggests the fundamental link between fable and autobiography:

*Jamais mon dessein ne s’est étendu plus avant que de tâcher a reformer mes propres pensees, et de bâtir dans un fonds qui est tout a moi. Que si, mon ouvragem ayant assez plu, je vous en fai voir ici le modèlè, ce n’est pas, pour cela, que je veuille conseiller a personne de l’imiter. (My design has never extended beyond trying to reform my own opinion and to build on a foundation which is entirely my own. If my work has given me a certain satisfaction, so that I here present to you a draft of it, I do not do so because I wish to advise anybody to imitate it.)* (AT VI, 15; HRI, 90)

The model of the method is here presented in personal terms. Rather than intending the method for instructional purposes, Descartes now presents it solely as his private education or exercise. His insistence on the restricted function of the method corresponds to the autobiographical thrust of his project. The pedagogical intent of the presentation of the method is here renounced in favor of an affirmation of private satisfaction. Thus his initial gesture of showing the model of his method is problematized by the fact that the public is the spectator of an already private exercise. The exclusion of the public at the very moment the method is offered for its benefit underlines the complex interplay of presentation and self-representation in Descartes. The public has a secondary function — to mirror Descartes’s own acknowledged pleasure derived from his self-reflection. The reader of the *Discours* has a purely specular role: he is a viewer and a part of the mechanism for viewing. The reader is a constitutive element incorporated into Descartes’s mechanism for self-presentation, i.e. into his autobiography.

The reader’s viewing or spectator privileges are further framed by Descartes’s admission that he would like to hide behind his writings and hear what is said about them. He frames his already complicated relationship to the reader by positioning himself as an ultimate spectator. This final authority (embodied in the author’s wish to be actually present in flesh and bone, acting as the direct referent of his discourse) highlights the complicated meaning of representation in Descartes’s works. It also clarifies his otherwise enigmatic fascination with mask and allegory, and in particular, the discursive mask of the *Discours* — its anonymity. Descartes’s precise comment, announcing his treatise on the Météores (Meteors), to be published as an accompaniment to the *Discours*, is:

*Au reste, je vous prie de n’en parler a personne du monde; car j’ai resolu de l’exposer en public, comme un echantillon de ma Philosophe, et’d être cache derriere le tableau pour ecouter ce qu’on en dira. (As for the rest, please do not speak about it to anyone; because I decided to exhibit it to the public, as an example of my philosophy, and hide behind the painting in order to listen to what is said about it.)* (Letter to Mersenne, Oct. 8, 1629)

This comment, which might appear at first sight purely anecdotal, sums up the specular function of Cartesian discourse. It shows a double impetus at work: the desire to exhibit it oneself as well as to hide and mask oneself through the display of that same representation. Descartes’s overt recognition of his privileged role as both author and subject matter of the painting further clarifies his otherwise ambiguous comments in the *Discours*. The status of the examples offered by the *Discours* is here elucidated. When Descartes advises his reader not to imitate him, this advice cannot be considered solely as an indication of his modesty. Rather, he is implicitly warning the reader of the impossibility of the task, since he is at once author and subject matter, i.e. model and spectator. What is being displayed is not a model of conduct, but a model of an act of representation or mise-en scene aim which benefits the author alone.

The discussion of exemplarity in the *Discours* reflects the more fundamental issue of the relation between subjectivity and representation. For the act of representing himself as subject, rather than serving as an example, is recovered as the feat of the author, who is in a position to view himself as subject matter. This specular play in which the author is engaged by means of his own represented image interrupts and subverts the exemplary function of the *Discours*. A paradox is generated when this discourse, which ostensibly passes through the “personal” in the guise of autobiography in order to achieve universality, is interrupted by this self-reflexive play between the author and representation. This self-reflexivity forbids further reflection or identification on the part of the reader, undermining
the exemplary role of Cartesian discourse.

The subject of the Discours thus succeeds in the task of presenting a model of conduct which applies solely to its author. By negating its own exemplariness, the didactic function of the Discours is cancelled and subsumed by autobiography. The assimilation of pedagogy into autobiography is made possible by the performative character of Cartesian discourse, whose role is not to describe but to accomplish. Autobiography provides the best vehicle and medium for the subject’s staging and performance of his own self-creation. Rather than presenting the reader with a historical and personal account of the subject’s development, the Discours as autobiography presents only the conditions of the subject’s self-invention as representation (a self-objectifying picture). Rather than designating a person, this autobiography functions as the vehicle for communicating an impersonal, anonymous subject — the subject of truth. However, this impersonal subject is also inimitable, since it does not have its own proper essence. This subject outlines and guarantees in general the conditions under which subjectivity is possible.

The anonymity of the Discours, this mask which dissimulates the true identity of its author, also serves, paradoxically, to reveal it. Like Descartes’s Discours, fable or picture, his anonymity negatively affirms and uniquely designates Descartes’s proper name. As Nancy observes:

Il proclame donc que le nom dissimulé est le nom le plus propre qui soit: le nom de celui seul s’est donné à lui-même la méthode de la certitude — et par conséquent de celui qui se donne lui-même comme méthode de la certitude et certitude de la méthode. (It proclaims that the dissimulated name is the most proper name there is: the name of the one who uniquely endowed himself with the certitude of the method — and consequently, who gives himself as method of certitude and the certitude of method.)

This autobiography is thus defined less by what it reveals about the subject than by what it actually shows the subject can do as a representation. This passage through autobiography is necessary for the constitution of the epistemological subject of truth. Its mathematical knowledge about itself must pass through ordinary language, for the subject of doubt who reasons with method is necessarily one who speaks. Descartes’s discourse thus requires a personal, historical subject who will found the universal subject of truth. But as a subject of discourse, it is defined less by its subjectivity proper than by its position as the guarantor of certitude and of representation.

The fictitious autobiography of the Discours literally deceives because it sets up the subject of truth as the subject of autobiography. The Discours as an autobiographical genre assimilates the subject of the utterance to the utterance itself, confusing two different discursive positions. Thus Descartes’s use of autobiography cannot be understood simply in terms of self-presentation, it must also be understood as representation. For the subject of truth must use the fiction of autobiography both to present itself and to be “viewed,” that is, communicated to someone else. In this context, autobiography ceases to signify self-presentation alone as a story; it also draws attention to its own discursive character as a representation.

Autobiography as a genre in the Discours thus provides an ideal medium for the communication of the philosophical subject. The empirical subject of autobiography functions as the embodiment of the subject of truth. This autobiography is presented in didactic and exemplary terms, and yet its typology is such that it excludes the reader. This autobiography, painting or fable exhibited for view also hides the presence of the author dissimulated behind it, guaranteeing its veracity. The author, like the transcendental subject, is hidden behind his own representation in order to guarantee its truth. Autobiography in the Discours functions as a mechanism which permits Descartes to posit the subject in both general and particular terms, as a type, in short, as man. But this man is no longer just any man. He is man as defined by Descartes. He is a subject, an entity that legislates and displays its own self-creation, which places him in an entirely new position, one neither human nor quite divine.
The Onset of Subjectivity in the Discourse on Method

The preceding examination of the order of Cartesian philosophy has established that the Discourse is the first member of a series whose object is to set forth wisdom or knowledge of all things derived from "true principles." The Discourse both initiates the acquisition of wisdom and portrays the whole course of its acquisition, especially with respect to its genesis and goal. The portrayal of the whole can also initiate the acquisition because the portrayal reveals one of the true principles, mind as self-consciousness or subjectivity. Accordingly, the Discourse must show how subjectivity functions to unify wisdom.

The most obvious connection between subjectivity and wisdom as certainty is the literary character of the Discourse. The literary "I" of Descartes's first person narration is the datum through which his principle manifests itself. It is therefore appropriate to begin the investigation with an examination of the literary features of the Discourse.

The Discourse as Autobiography

The Discourse is a "history, or if you please, a fable," whose topic is the discovery and fruitful use of a method for the conduct of reason. The appropriateness of this genre to the topic is initially problematic. It would seem that reason, or the power of distinguishing truth from falsehood, as Descartes defines it, is essentially universal, whereas history is of the particular, and fables hardly seem pertinent to the discovery of truth in the sciences. Yet Descartes chooses to present the method in the form of a somewhat fabulous history of the "paths I have followed, [setting forth] my life as in a picture so that everyone may judge of it for himself." His apology for adopting this mode of presentation is directly related to the topic. In the opening statement he notes that the differences of opinion among men are due not so much to inequality of reason as to the circumstances that men conduct their thoughts in "diverse ways" and do not consider the same "objects," the implication being that judgment would be uniform if all considered the same object in the same way. Thanks to "good luck," Descartes has hit upon "ways" of conducting his thoughts so as to arrive at truth in the sciences. These discoveries have provided him "extreme satisfaction." Indeed, the way he has chosen is the most "excellent and important" possible for "man as man," i.e., for the reasonable man insofar as he is not enlightened by faith. But this sweeping claim, which is reminiscent of Aristotle's claim that the pursuit of wisdom is the highest human perfection, is followed at once by a caveat: "Nevertheless, it is possible that I deceive myself, and that what I take to be gold and diamonds is no more than copper and glass." * In order to keep acknowledgment of this possibility in the foreground, Descartes substitutes an autobiographical account of the method for a didactic account. In this way, 0 it would seem, Descartes reconciles a didactic intention with becoming modesty. For, although he offers his own example as a model-those who wish to imitate his "way" will find all that they need to know in the Discourse-he does not presume to prescribe the way each should conduct "his reason." Descartes thus acquiesces in the factual diversity of judgment even as he presents the method for the conduct of reason.

This explanation, however, does not exhaust Descartes's comments upon his chosen genre. The Discourse is intended as a popular writing. It is written in the vernacular, rather than in the Latin of the learned, not merely because he hopes to reach a wide audience, as he does, but because those who have "never studied" are better recipients of his philosophy than the learned; for the judgment of the latter is corrupted by the prejudices of scholasticism. Descartes's repeated deprecation of his talents, his apparent assertion of the equality of reason, his founding of philosophy on "simple and easy" notions, is all part of the popularization of philosophy, but a popularization anchored in his transformation of the subject; he has discovered that the right method, or the labor of the conduct of reason, eliminates the dependency of science or philosophy on surpassing genius. The presentation of the method ought to be appropriate to the addressees, instructing by the use of example. The genre is suitable to captivating the popular imagination since 'the charm of fables enlivens the mind and histories of memorable deeds
exalt." The rhetorical effectiveness of this manner of address was not lost on the philosophers who wrote the Encyclopédie. According to the author of the article on "Cartésianisme," Descartes emancipated his readers from prejudice by showing how he freed himself from that predicament. By this device, Descartes "prepared . . . minds to receive the new opinions that he proposed to establish. It appears that this manner of address is in large measure responsible for the revolution of which this philosopher is the author."

From these considerations it might be concluded that the autobiographical form is selected merely as a means of making the history concrete, and that the history, in turn, is for the sake of popularization. In that case, the autobiographical form would be only accidentally related to the subject matter, the method. If this appraisal is correct, the "reason" for which the method is devised must be essentially independent of the autobiographical first person. The explanation of the use of the first person, however, runs counter to such an interpretation. While Descartes believes that he has discovered the method that leads to truth, nevertheless the skeptical reservation that leads him to use the first person expresses the consciousness that the ways he has followed are his own ways, that the reason in question is his own reason. The particularization of reason by the possessive pronouns "my," "his," or "one's," occurs throughout the Discourse, beginning with the title, which speaks of the conduct of "sa raison." Corresponding to Descartes's relativization of his judgments to himself is the criterion by which he would have the method judged by his readers: he wishes for each to judge it for himself. If the manner of address of the Discourse is largely responsible for the "revolution" Descartes purportedly fathered, perhaps it did so because the first person is a true expression of the nature of Cartesian reason. The whole meaning of enlightenment, Kant said, is the progressus of man from his minority, in which priests and monarchs do his thinking for him, to the maturity in which he thinks and acts for himself. The Discourse portrays such an emancipation, intended, moreover, as a model for imitation not merely by a few, but by all men who combine "good sense with study." The consciousness that reason is "my reason" is the opening shot of the Enlightenment.

The initial statement on the nature of reason, whose basic simplicity is obscured by a multitude of terminological distinctions and by irony, confirms the foregoing analysis. Reason is good sense, or the judgmental power of distinguishing the true from the false. Descartes seems to identify his notion of reason with the scholastic conception that it is a form of a species. In fact, he says that he would "like to believe" that reason is found complete in each individual and that he would like to "follow the common opinion of the philosophers, who say that more and less occurs only among accidents, and not among forms, or natures, of the individuals of the same species." However, later in the Discourse we learn that he "expressly assumed that there was in the world none of those forms or qualities which are so debated in the schools." He would "like to believe" that reason is complete in each because it is the condition upon which men may be differentiated from the brutes, and hence a condition for belief in the immortality of the soul, which in turn is a necessary support for the virtue of "weak minds." Consequently when, immediately after simulating the scholastic view, Descartes writes "but I do not fear to say . . . ," he implies that the simulation was extracted by the constraints of orthodoxy. The implication is confirmed by the fact that his extensive "proof" of the difference between men and animals, given in Discourse V, does not once invoke the notion of reason as a form. The Meditations incorporate the repudiation of the scholastic conception when they expressly reject "rational" (form) "animal" (species) as that which "I am." 1

The episodically simulated deviation from the authentic Cartesian notion of reason serves to bring out its true character by the contrast with the scholastic notion. Reason as the form of a species is a universal concept mediated by discursive reason. Reason as judgment is immediately known. A form cannot in any way be "conducted" or molded, whereas judgment manifestly can. Knowledge of reason as judgment is accessible independently of consideration about whether it constitutes a differentiation between men and animals, whereas the scholastic notion is not. The immediacy of reason is emphasized by the formula used in this context, "raison ou sens," which the Meditations duplicate by the formula "sentienti vel cogitandi": as the faculty of sentience as such, reason is immediately cognizable. Finally, it is pertinent to mention in this connection the awkwardness that afflicts exposition of Descartes's thought. Scholarly convention sanctions the use of the term "the I," or "the self." Like Descartes's expression "one's reason," the convention evidently misrepresents the perspective of Cartesian thinking since it treats as an object the one "thing" in the Cartesian world that is not an object. Complete fidelity to the concept of Cartesian reason would

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1 The primary and secondary texts assembled by Denissoff regarding the opening statement of the Discourse prove conclusively that it is ironical (Denissoff, 1970, 51-52).
oblige the commentator to adopt first person Discourse himself.

Recognition that the autobiographical first person truly expresses reason as "my thinking" essentially unites it both with "history" and the method. The classical tradition reflected in the scholastic definition of reason had refused the identification of reason with my reason. The self-consciousness upon which the Socratic beginning was based distinguishes between the mutability of Socrates and the immutability of reason. In opposition to the pre-Socratic tradition, Plato and Aristotle could conceive the divine reason to be the first cause of the whole. No such objective reason is to be found in the Cartesian cosmology, for his Godhead is characterized above all by omnipotence and incomprehensibility. Having relinquished objective reason, nothing is left to him but particular reason—"my reason." Particular reason inheres in a particular man whose judgments are determined by his antecedents, or as Descartes put it, his inherited prejudices. In order to portray the ways or method he has followed, especially his auto-emancipation from prejudice, Descartes therefore appropriately chooses the historical or genetic treatment of his subject. For Descartes's auto-emancipation is achieved in part through the improbable discovery that his reason, properly understood, is immutable. The historical approach thus uncovers, in the midst of the flux of opinion, an immanent absolute.

In order to explain the paths that he has followed, Descartes thinks he must set forth his "life as in a picture." A "way" or "path" is the literal sense of methodos. Method in the broad sense as it is initially encountered in the Discourse therefore pertains to the whole of life. It can do so because method in the broad sense is the "conduct of reason": the scope of method is as broad as the scope of reason. It is the "way" of the life of reason. The phrase "conduct of reason" is ambiguous, implying both "reason's comportment" and "leading reason." Both senses are intended, and they have their root in reason as self-consciousness. The conduct of reason is Descartes's comportment toward himself. That comportment is one as direction or governance, for he adopts toward himself his judgments—the posture of leading them in the direction of truth "in order to see clearly in [his] actions and to walk with confidence in this life." The conduct of reason is comprehensive self-governance or self-control. It implies an identification of virtue with knowledge, which Descartes embraces when he writes that "it is sufficient to judge well in order to act well." Descartes accordingly follows Socrates in the view that all the virtues are merely manifestations of a single virtue. For Descartes that virtue is not phronesis but genesity, which is the pride, the self-admiration of reason conscious of its mastery. This new philosophic virtue is integral to the transformation of philosophy into wisdom.

The root of the double meaning of the "conduct of reason" is the determination of reason as self-consciousness. In the next segment it will be shown how, according to Descartes's account of the historical genesis of the method, the guidance of reason arises from consciousness of its situation with respect to knowledge and ignorance. Eventually, we shall see that Descartes's new link of virtue with knowledge provides the unity of theory and practice upon which the coherence of the "parts" of philosophy or wisdom depend.

The Comportment of Self-consciousness

Descartes begins the account of the genesis of his philosophy with an appraisal of his education.

I was nourished on letters since infancy, and because I was given to believe that, by their means, it was possible to acquire a clear and assured knowledge of all that is useful to life, I had an extreme desire to understand them. But as soon as I had completed the course of studies . . . I changed my opinion entirely. For I found myself embarrassed by so many doubts and errors that it seemed to me that the effort to instruct myself had no other effect than the increasing discovery of my ignorance.

The result of his education is doubt, the first of three doubts that occur in the Discourse. Unlike the others which are deliberately instituted, this one occurs unintentionally or naturally. It arises from the disproportion between his desire for certain and useful knowledge, and the character of the scholastic heritage.

The criteria by which he judged his education, certainty and utility, do not themselves have a genesis. They are not said to result from reflection, but spring spontaneously from himself. Their specific character becomes clear by attending to the way they are employed as criteria for the critique of his education.

Certainty. Descartes initially encounters certainty as a paradigm rather than as a concept. He records that he was "delighted by mathematics because of the certainty and evidence of its demonstrations." The dependence of certainty on the mathematical paradigm in effect equates the reasonable with the mathematical. This decisive move
nevertheless occurs within the initial determination of reason as my judgmental thinking. This circumstance is revealed by the fact that truth is construed as certitude, as clarity and evidence, which is nothing else than a determination of empirical consciousness; for mathematical certitude is taken up as immediately given and as demanding and requiring no interrogation. That the immediacy of certainty-the expression is actually redundant-should enjoy such precedence is anticipated by the equivalence "raison ou sens."

The subjectivity of certainty is mitigated by its power to effect agreement. Of all the traditional sciences, only mathematics has been able to sustain unanimity. In philosophy, on the other hand, despite its cultivation by the best minds over many centuries, there is "not a single thing that is not subject to dispute." The incapacity of philosophy to achieve unanimity signifies the obscenity of its subject matter as conceived hitherto. As Descartes's appeal to the unanimity of the mathematicians shows, he takes unanimity as no less factually or empirically given than certainty. It is essentially unproblematic. There is, however, a reasoned link between certainty and unanimity:

Whenever two men come to opposite decisions about the same matter, one of them at least must certainly be wrong, and apparently there is not even one of them who knows; for if the reasoning of the second were sound and clear, he would be able so to lay it before the other as finally to succeed in convincing his understanding also.

In this and similar passages, Descartes is at his most sanguine in the expectations he entertains from the diversity of minds. He is by no means always so optimistic. Or rather it should be said that while the optimistic view endures as a conviction, it is complemented by an explanation of deviations from the standard: agreement would be forthcoming, but for the "corruption" of bon sens by prejudice. A perverted reason may refuse to assent to clear and distinct truths. This contingency raises difficulties about the adequacy of either certainty or unanimity as criteria, since perverted reason may equally well claim certainty and unanimity. The problem is especially acute in view of Descartes's claim that his philosophy is capable of producing "concord and amity," not merely among the expert, but among the generality of men as well. He contrasts it favorably with the received learning: "The controversies of the schools, by insensibly making those who practice them more captious and self-sufficient, are possibly the chief causes of the heresies and dissensions that now exercise the world." Granted that Descartes anticipates that science will remain the preserve of a relatively small number, how can he fairly hope to produce unanimity among those who are not experts? The answer lies in the second criterion, utility.

Utility. In his subject-by-subject review of his studies, Descartes is careful to point out in each case its use. Poetry and history help cultivate sound judgment; rhetoric is worthy of esteem for its powers of persuasion; morality is instructive for the conduct of life; theology teaches the way to heaven; and philosophy, he says wittily, but also seriously, "teaches us to speak with an appearance of truth on all things, and causes us to be admired by the less learned." These uses, however, are secondary compared with the utility of mathematics: "In mathematics there are the subtlest discoveries and inventions which may accomplish much, both in satisfying the curious, and in furthering all the arts, and in diminishing man's labor." But he goes on to add that he did not at once "understand its true use, and, believing that it was of service only in the mechanical arts, I was astonished that, seeing how firm and solid was its basis, no loftier edifice had been reared thereon." Here we stand at the watershed where the traditional notion of a "literary" liberal education divides from what has come to be understood as education for service. Descartes's esteem for mathematics and the mechanical arts is determined by his own wish to meliorate the harshness of the human condition, but his conception of their utility goes deeper. Liberal education looks to the cultivation of the mind, leaving the improvement of man's material circumstances to the practical arts. Classical authors did not conceive the possibility of the improvement of the arts on the scale that Bacon and Descartes anticipate. They thought that man's material circumstances were more or less fixed by nature, with all due acknowledgment of the region of latitude between the harshness of barbarism and the refinements of civilization. Descartes's attention to the material conditions of life is not only governed by a reappraisal of the possibilities of melioration, but also by a reappraisal of the worth and status of the spirit vis-a-vis "the body."

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The New Foundation
Having concluded that there was in the world no teaching such as he desired, Descartes recounts the thoughts of his day in the poéle when he laid new foundations by turning to himself. Comparison of the dates supplied by the Discourse with the posthumous papers fixes the date of this reflection as probably November 10, 1619, when Descartes believed that he had discovered a "marvellous science." The founding reflections divide into four parts. The first elaborates its plan. The second is a transitional section which considers the feasibility of the plan and which unleashes a doubt that clears the ground of old foundations. Then comes the method proper, which sets the new foundations in place. Finally the "provisional morality" is introduced. These segments will be considered in their order of occurrence.

The Precedence of Techne

The founding plan is unfolded through an elaborate metaphor whose leading idea is that "there is less perfection in works composed of several parts, and made by the hands of diverse masters, than those upon which one alone has worked." The idea is explicated by brief comments on four arts. The first two mentioned, architecture and city planning, carry the initial reference to "works" and "hands" decidedly in the direction of the practical arts. The reflection thus seems to be an appraisal of the achievement of perfection, for which the practical arts illustrate both the nature of the material to be worked upon and the manner in which it is to be shaped. All commentary reiterates the supreme condition for perfection, which is that the plan of the work must be ordered and unitary, or issue from a single "master." An imperfect work, by contrast, is a planless accumulation: considering old cities it seems that "fortune rather than the will of men using reason has disposed them." Mastery or perfection, then, is achieved by the power of art or techne, which is able to eliminate the operations of chance by imposing a single design.

The third and fourth examples mentioned are legislation and science. Good legislation requires that one "prudent legislator"-the examples are God and Lycurgus-give all the laws at once so that they tend toward the same end. The comment on science contrasts learning accumulated in books (sciences de liures) unfavorably with the simple judgments of bon sens about things immediately experienced. But bon sens is in turn contrasted unfavorably with an imaginary example of a man who escaped the deforming effects of "appetites and teachers" by having the use of reason from birth.

The sense of the third and fourth examples becomes clear only by reference to the subsequent transitional section in which the possibility and legitimacy of the plan is discussed. Descartes appears to reject public reform as both illegitimate and impracticable, whereas the reform of his own thoughts lies within his province. This shows that legislation and science define the initial scope of the founding plan. Since legislation is the moral art of greatest compass, the plan's scope includes the whole domain of theory and practice. Taken altogether, the foundational reflection contemplates the achievement of perfect mastery in theory and practice by reforming both in accordance with art. The initial reflection on utility and certainty has evidently been embodied in the founding plan.

The unity of the foundations can be brought to light only after the parts of the foundations are understood in their own terms. We shall first expound the relation between science and art within a discussion of the provisional morality and Stoicism; and all that in turn to the public reform announced in Discourse VI. At present a brief glimpse ahead will suffice. The reform of science eventuates in a "practical science" to replace the "speculative philosophy" of the schools. That science knows natural effects as distinctly as artisans know their crafts because it has successfully imitated art. But because its object is the "vast and ample" power of nature, it will render us masters and possessors of nature. The subsequent discussion of the impact of science on society shows that the plan for public reform, apparently abandoned in Discourse II, has been renewed.

The Control of Unaided Reason

The first step toward the implementation of the plan is reform of the sciences. The plan calls for beginning from a clean slate, the obstacles to which are the received learning and prejudices developed since infancy. The broom is a new doubt instituted for a set purpose: "But as regards all the opinions which up to that time I had embraced, I thought that I could not do better than to try once for all to sweep them completely away, so that they might later be replaced, either by others which were better, or by the same when I had adjusted them to the level of reason." The method proper makes its appearance at the conclusion of this all-destroying doubt. What he says about it is perhaps the most obscure part of the Discourse for most modern readers. And it must have been equally obscure to those of
Descartes's contemporaries who were unacquainted with the mathematics of the day. In order to identify and comprehend the philosophic dimension of the method, it is necessary to restore the mathematical context.

It is apparent from the introduction of the method that Descartes is thinking in terms of contemporary mathematics: "Among the different branches of philosophy, I had in my younger days to a certain extent studied logic; and in those of mathematics, geometrical analysis and algebra-three arts or sciences which seemed as though they ought to contribute something to the design I had in view." These three "arts or sciences" are then subjected to criticism. Besides the fact that logic is encumbered by many harmful "precepts," it is not an art of discovery. Geometry and algebra are too restricted in scope, and are also embarrassed by an abundance of complicated and obscure rules. In summary he says: "This made me think that some other method must be found, which, comprising the advantages of these three, is yet exempt from their faults." Observe that logic, geometry, and algebra, previously called "arts or sciences," are now said to be "methods." Method in the narrow sense of the term is simply identical with mathematical science. Descartes conceives the nature and task of method in the broad sense in light of this fundamental identity: the rules or precepts for the direction of the mind are inspired by mathematical rules and methods. Furthermore, the science-method identity will prove to be the key to art-science identity. The thoroughgoing assertion of this threefold identity in the "other" method Descartes seeks is the key to the precedence that method acquired in his philosophy.