

THE 'MEDITATIONAL' GENRE OF DESCARTES' *MEDITATIONS*

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Abstract. In this paper, I reflect on Descartes' employment of the meditational genre in the weaving of the text of the *Meditations*. In the first part, the possible influences behind Descartes' choice of the meditational genre are examined. The second part of the paper attempts to spell out the significance of Descartes' use of the meditational form. The claim advanced here is that Descartes adopted this unique genre ultimately to further his radical philosophical project of a subject-centred theory of knowledge and a new metaphysical *Weltbild*, with the self (*res cogitans*) catapulted to the central stage and the physical world (*res extensa*) reduced to an object of the subject's act of representation.

I. Introduction

The *Meditationes de prima philosophia* is commonly recognised as the masterpiece of the Cartesian corpus.¹ (Williams 1978, p. 19, Cottingham 1992) This text can be considered as the fruit of Descartes' mature years of philosophical reflection,² as vouched by the author himself in the opening paragraph of the First Meditation.

¹ Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Marie Beyssade qualify the *Meditations* as the „maître livre qui domine la métaphysique moderne.” Jean-Luc Marion – Jean-Marie Beyssade (eds), *Descartes. Objecter et répondre. Actes du colloque «Objecter et répondre» organisé par le Centre d'études Cartésiennes à la Sorbonne et l'Ecole normale supérieure du 3 au 6 octobre 1992, à l'occasion du 350^e anniversaire de la seconde édition des Meditationes* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994, ix.

² Scholars are of the opinion that the text of the *Meditations* was not altogether original and was linked in some way to two earlier writings of Descartes, the presumed *Traité de*

But the task looked an enormous one, and I began to wait until I should reach a mature enough age to ensure that no subsequent time of life would be more suitable for tackling such enquiries. This led me to put the project off for so long that I would now be to blame if by pondering over it any further I wasted the time still left for carrying it out. (AT VII, 17 / CSM II, 12)³

A unique feature of the *Meditations* in comparison with Descartes' other works as well as the philosophical literature of the time is the employment of the meditational genre in the composition of its text. „I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me,” Descartes states in the Preface to the Reader of the *Meditations* (AT VII, 9 / CSM II, 8). By having set his philosophical masterpiece in the meditational format, Descartes introduced an original genre into philosophical texts, comparable to the dialogical mode of the Platonic *Dialogues*, the objections and responses characteristic of the *Summa* of Aquinas, and more recently the propositional style of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The employment of the meditational form in weaving the text of the *Meditations* was a move that not only earned Descartes a niche in the hall of fame along with other great innovators of philosophical genre, but also marked in some ways a watershed in philosophical reflection. What were the reasons that prompted Descartes to adopt the meditational genre and what did he want to achieve thereby? In this paper we shall respond to these basic questions. We shall first trace the possible influences behind Descartes' choice of the meditational genre, following which we shall attempt to spell out the philosophical significance of Descartes' use of it, going beyond some of the customary interpretations in this regard.

II. Influences on Descartes' choice of the meditational genre

Which are the factors that influenced Descartes' choice and adoption of the meditational genre? It is to this query that we shall be responding at first.

Métaphysique of 1629 and the *Discourse of the Method* published in 1637. The *Meditations* can be said to crown a project on which Descartes worked for more than a decade and as such can be considered as a mature work of the Cartesian repertoire. See in this regard (Gouhier 1951, pp. 28-29), see (Crapulli 1976, pp. 428-430); (Rodis-Lewis 1987, pp. 109-123, Rodis-Lewis, 1994, pp. 153-163).

³ All citations from the text of the *Meditations* are from (Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, Kenny 1984) abbreviated here as CSM. References are also made to the standard edition of Descartes' writings: (Charles, Tannery 1964).

Right at the outset, it needs to be remembered that „Descartes was not the first person to write a work consisting of, or in some other way intimately involved with, meditations. There was by the time of the appearance of the *Meditations* an established and rich genre of meditational writing.”⁴ (Kosman 1986, p. 22) The knot of the problem is then precisely to identify the particular meditational tradition or traditions that influenced Descartes' choice of the meditational genre. There is a disarray of opinions among Cartesian scholars in this regard, which calls for an attentive steering on our part.

There have been attempts to link Descartes' meditational genre to ancient sources like the biblical and classical literary traditions. According to Amélie Oksenberg Rorty the sequence of the six meditations in the Cartesian text echo the six days of Creation in the Bible.

[...] there is Descartes' embarrassing, presumptuous echo of the six days of Creation in the six stages of the *Meditations*. The new creation is the new science of the world: Meditation I begins by Descartes' separating the light of certainty from the darkness of confusion, and Meditation VI ends with an account of the composition of a man, a being composed of mind and body, a fallible but rational being. (Oksenberg Rorty 1986, p. 10)

Rorty goes on to enumerate the six stages of the classical meditation reflected in Descartes' six meditations, claiming that the sequence of the *Meditations* clearly conforms to this traditional structure.

Stage 1: *Catharsis*, detachment, or analysis: a movement from sensation to imagination and memory, to science and mathematics, to theology.

Stage 2: *Skepsis*, despair, or nihilism.

Stage 3: Reflection (*peripeteia*), a reflection that performs a revolutionary change.

Stage 4: Recognition (*anagnorisis*) of the reflexive, corrective power of the will; the discovery of the law of non-contradiction as a methodological principle validating *reductio* arguments.

⁴Descartes scholars have brought to light a case where Francisco Sanches, a Portuguese philosopher and medical writer and a near contemporary of Descartes, used a style that resembled the meditational genre. The reference is to the opening of his *Quod nihil scitur* (1581), where Sanches „withdraws into himself” (*ad memetipsum retuli*) and „calls all into doubt” (*omnia in dubium revocans*). See (Ariew, Cottingham, Sorell 1994, p. 8) However, the parallels are shallow and limited.

Stage 5: Ascension from the psychological to the ontological order; proofs for the existence of God.

Stage 6: Reconstruction of the world and the self. (Oksenberg Rorty 1986, pp. 10-11)

Attempts have also been made to trace Stoic and Neo-Platonist influences in Descartes' employment of the meditational genre. The Stoic influence on Descartes is sought in the title of Marcus Aurelius' book originally called *Ton Eis Heauton Biblion*, „his book to himself,” which recalls in some way the reflexive and reflective style of the meditation genre (Oksenberg Rorty 1986, p. 2). At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that it is not possible to include the reflective essays of the Stoics in the meditational tradition that developed centuries later. The Neo-Platonist influences on Descartes are traced via the school of Saint Victor, and especially via Bonaventure with his theory of the *via purgativa*, the *via illuminativa*, and the *via unitiva*.⁵ The specifically Neo-Platonist echo comes to be discerned in Descartes' propounding the innate idea of extension found in the mind, analogous to the concept of the *nous* in the Neo-Platonist's intellectual ascension mode of meditations.⁶ However, these explorations have not been able to throw up direct links to the Cartesian meditational genre, and attempts to force out similarities would spell the risk of anachronism, as „collections of exemplary meditations and systematic treatises on how to meditate, however, only began to appear in the twelfth century” and „the systematic meditational practices familiar to Descartes and his contemporaries only began to develop in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.” (Bradley 1990, p. 30)

The *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), a near contemporary of Descartes, has been been posited by some as having exerted a possible influence on Descartes' adoption of the meditational genre.⁷ As Berel Lang notes, „Montaigne is often acknowledged as creator of the genre of the personal essay to which the *Meditations* is indebted in a variety of ways” (Lang

⁵ Dennis L. Sepper considers Descartes to have been profoundly influenced by the meditational tradition of Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141). See Sepper 2000.

⁶ Cf. Rorty, „The Structure of Descartes' *Meditations*,” 5. Rorty continues: „The lure of this mode is that it supports Descartes' claim that a meditator reflecting on the logical order of clear and distinct ideas must rationally believe that those ideas truthfully represent the ontological order that causes them.” *Ibid.*

⁷ For Montaigne's influence on Descartes see: (Paulsen 1988), (Williams 1978), (Burnyeat 1982), (Glouberman 1993).

1988, p. 25). But as Lang himself admits the 'I' encountered by the reader in Montaigne's *Essays* is a static one, a constant that relates to past events (Lang 1988, p. 25), whereas the 'I' of the *Meditations* is dynamic, ensuring a cumulative and sequential progress in the process of meditation.

Any possible link of the meditational genre of the *Meditations* with the Augustinian tradition of devotional meditations is also unwarranted, as Descartes had himself categorically denied any such influence.⁸ Here again any attempt to force a similarity would run the risk of anachronism. Descartes confessed going to the library in Leiden to read for the first time Augustine's *De Trinitate* (see Descartes' Letter to Colvius of 14 November 1640 – AT VIII, 247-248 / CSM III, 159), after Arnauld in his *Objections* noted traces of Augustinian influence in the *Meditations* (AT III, 247-248 / CSM III, 159-160). Arnauld writes: „The first thing that I find remarkable is that our distinguished author has laid down as the basis for his entire philosophy exactly the same principle as that laid down by St Augustine – a man of the sharpest intellect and a remarkable thinker.” (AT VII, 197 / CSM II, 139) Descartes' visit to the Leiden library occurred in November 1640, whereas the redaction of the *Meditations* is dated between November 1639 and March 1640, prior to this visit.⁹ Besides, as Bradley Rubidge points out, „Augustine's autobiography and his treatises belong to genres quite different from that of seventeenth-century devotional exercises” (Rubidge 1990, p. 44).

The *Meditations* bears closest resemblance to the devotional meditational genre, a mode popular in 17th century Europe. The comic misunderstanding reported by Gabriel Daniel in his satirical critique of Descartes, *Voyage to the World of Cartesius* (1690), is fairly instructive in this regard. Let me reproduce the incident here in Daniel's own words:

[...] not long since, a Friend of mine, not wont to be very Nice in those Matters, having read by chance the Letter at my House, which touched him; and finding

⁸ In support of the Augustinian influence on Descartes see: (Hatfield 1986, pp. 48-55). For a pointed critique of Hatfield on this argument see: Rubidge, „Descartes's Meditations and Devotional Meditations,” pp. 41-44. On close parallels between Augustine and Descartes see also Léon Blanchet, *Les antécédents historiques du „je pense, donc je suis* (Paris: Alcan 1920); (Weier 1968, pp. 239-50); (Mourant 1979, pp. 27-42); (Matthews 1992); (Vannier 1997, pp. 115-116, 665-679); (Menn 1998).

⁹ The redaction of the text of the *Meditations* appears to have been carried out during the winter of 1639-1640, a period of approximately five months spanning from November 1639 to March 1640 during Descartes' stay in Holland (Gouhier 1951, pp 28-29), (Crapulli 1976, pp. 428-430).

farther the Title of *Meditations* in the Front of the work, he seriously entreated me to lend him that Godly Book, to entertain his Devotions during *Passion Week*.¹⁰

This banal, humorous incident is a strong indication that „Descartes’ title would predictably have led seventeenth-century readers to associate his treatise with manuals of devotional exercises” (Rubidge 1990, p. 27). Here lies an important clue that is worth following. We shall therefore closely examine the possible resemblance of the meditational genre of the *Meditations* with that of the devotional meditations.

Among the myriad of devotional literature, it is the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola that most scholars identify as closest to the meditational genre adopted by Descartes.¹¹ Scholars trace a possible Ignatian influence on Descartes to his school days at La Flèche, the first college in France to have adopted the *Ratio studiorum* approved by the Society of Jesus in 1599 (Thomson 1972, p. 64). It is presumed, going also by the indications provided in this *ratio*, that „during his schooldays at the Jesuit Collège de la Flèche, Descartes would have participated in the annual Easter retreats, and it is usually assumed that he would have had some contact with Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* during these retreats.”¹² (Rubidge 1990, p. 33). These retreats were based on the Manual published in 1608 by Père Veron, himself a Jesuit and professor of philosophy at the La Flèche.¹³ Étienne Gilson, Fer-

¹⁰ Gabriel Daniel, *A Voyage to the World of Cartesius. Written Originally in French, and now Translated into English* (London 1692), pp. 4-5. I have preserved the linguistic peculiarities of the original English text. The original French edition is: [Gabriel Daniel] *Voiege du monde de Descartes* (Paris: Chez la veuve de Simon Bénard 1690), where the passage appears on page 16. The letter referred to in the citation is the Dedicatory Letter that Descartes wrote to the Doctors of the Sorbonne whose approval he sought for the text of the *Meditations* (AT VII, 1-6 / CSM II, 3-6).

¹¹ See (Thomson 1972, pp. 61-85); (Stohrer 1979, pp. 11-27); (Vendler 1989, pp. 193-224); (Beck 1965); (Rubidge 1990, pp. 27, 31-37).

¹² Rubidge cites in this regard Camille de Rochemonteix, S.J., *Un Collège des jésuites aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (4 vols; Le Mans 1889), II, pp. 140-142, (Rubidge 1990, p. 33).

¹³ François Véron, *Manuale sodalitatís beatae Mariae virginis in domibus et gymnasiis societatis Iesu toto Christiano orbe institutae, miraculis dicta sodalitate illustratum* (Paris: 1619) (first edition in 1608). We cite here the definition of ‘meditation’ in this manual. „Meditatio (quam alii orationem mentalem appellant) est attenta cognitio rei alicuius piae, ordinata ad excitandos in voluntate pios et stabiles affectus. Seu est vehemens quaedam animi applicatio ad res cum intimo cordis sensu commentandas, par quam exclusa variegata et distractione cogitationum, homo in animo suo studet penitus sentire, quid singula quae meditatur sint, quantamque illi necessitatem imponant bene vivendi. Itaque differt a lecitone et ordinaria

dinand Alquié, and Martial Gueroult, among others, noted that this contact influenced in some way the meditational genre of the *Meditations*.¹⁴ Leslie J. Beck too, recalling that Descartes would have known Ignatius of Loyola's *Exercises* from the retreats of his schooldays, claims that 'echoes' of the *Exercises*' 'technical structure' are discernible in the Cartesian text.¹⁵

Arthur Thomson extends similarities with the *Exercises* not only to the *Mediations*, but also to the *Rules* and the *Discourse*.¹⁶ (Thomson 1972, pp. 61-85). Some of the notable resemblances between the *Exercises* and the *Meditations* according to him are: the emphasis on the necessity of retiring oneself in solitude, the vital role of the practice for the application of the method, the usefulness of written instructions, the value of personal experience, particular attention to the faculties of reason and will, and on the mastery of the senses. However, as Bradley Rubidge points out, most of these traits are rather general for the tradition of devotional meditations and there is no reason to single out Loyola as Descartes' tutor in this regard.¹⁷ (Rubidge 1990, p. 36).

The conclusions that Bradley Rubidge arrives at regarding the possible link between the meditational genre of the *Meditations* and the *Spiritual Exercises*, after a painstaking study of Cartesian scholarship in this regard since the 1950s, appear to be well founded.

The evidence for a relationship between Descartes and the *Spiritual Exercises* supports only modest conclusions. Descartes was almost certainly acquainted with the *Exercises*, but the traits in the *Meditations* which might have been borrowed from Loyola's manual are not unique to the *Exercises*. Descartes

mentis cogitatione, quia ita levior sit, per multa vagetur, illa attentior, non ita varia; meditari scriptionem vel metricam vel solutam, est scribere non quod primo occurrit menti, sed quod post attentam et diuturnam mentis agitationem." *Ibid.*, C. 14, pars 4, 530-531.

¹⁴ Étienne Gilson, *Études sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien* (Paris 1930), pp. 186-87; Ferdinand Alquié, *La Découverte métaphysique de l'homme chez Descartes* (Paris 1950), pp. 31-35; Martial Gueroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, 2 vols. (Paris 1953), II, 226, note 26 (Gueroult highlights in this note also Descartes' divergence with Ignatius who in his *Exercises* had also insisted on the value of the senses and of imagination); II, 277, note 8. See also Pierre Mesnard's lecture at the 1955 Descartes Congress at Royaumont: Pierre Mesnard, „L'Arbre de la sagesse" in *Descartes, Cahiers de Royaumont, Philosophie* (Paris 1957) II, pp. 336-49.

¹⁵ See (Beck 1965, pp. 28-38). Beck identifies four such echoes which are discussed in (Rubidge 1990, pp. 34-35).

¹⁶ Thomson finds eleven apparent parallels of the *Exercises* with the *Meditations*, nineteen in the case of the *Discourse* and nine in the *Rules* (Thomson 1972, p. 89).

¹⁷ Rubidge reserves identical critique also for the study of Walter John Stohrer. See (Stohrer 1979, pp. 11-27). See also (Sepper 2000, p. 737).

could have drawn them from other devotional handbooks. The *Spiritual Exercises* are therefore best considered a probable, proximate source of the meditational features in Descartes's work, and these features are best considered as representative of the whole tradition of devotional meditations rather than uniquely Ignatian. (Rubidge 1990, p. 37)

We may conclude then that the *Meditations* are linked to the genre of devotional meditations in general, rather than to a specific text or author from the meditational tradition. The unusual title of the work has been considered as the most obvious evidence for linking the *Meditations* to the genre of devotional meditations. Here again we need to be careful not to read too much into this. In his correspondence, in fact, Descartes designates the whole work as 'ma Métaphysique' more often than as 'mes Méditations.' In various letters and prefaces Descartes calls the text a 'scriptum' (AT III, 63; VII, 10, 13, 128), an 'écrit' (AT III, 237, 238), and a 'Traité' (AT III, 239). Giovanni Crapulli resumes the discussion in this regard in a masterly footnote.

Avant que Descartes eût défini le titre de l'œuvre – ce qui advint au moins partiellement, en novembre 1640, lorsqu'il proposait à Mersenne, comme nous le verrons, le titre de *Meditationes de prima philosophia* – l'écrit sera désigné, en laissant de côté cette première indication générique de «discours», comme «essai de métaphysique» (A.-T., II, 629, 19; III, 35, 21-22), «traité de métaphysique» (III, 175, 8-9; 184, II, 185, 19) ou «petit traité de métaphysique» (183, 6-7), ou même tout simplement «ma Métaphysique» (192, 3-4; 216, 5). Après la définition partielle du titre vers la mi-novembre, l'«écrit de métaphysique» (III, 239, 5; 237, 7; 238, 18) sera mentionné encore comme «traité» (239, 17 et 21; 267, 12), mais outre cette indication générique de «Méditations» (par ex. 272, 15; 276, 11 et 27; 388, 13; une fois «Méditations de métaphysique», 260, 9-10), Descartes aura recours à l'expression déjà employée précédemment de «ma Métaphysique». (233, 17; 234, 17 et 28-29; 235, 10-11; 243, 3-4; 265, 13; 271, 8; 275, 2; 276, 3; 284, 27; 286, 19; 295, 20; 296, 24; 297, 1; 328, 2; 334, 4; 340, 4 et 7-8; 359, 7, 363, 13) (Crapulli 1976, p. 428)

In fact, the composition of the text in the case of the *Meditationes* preceded the naming of the same, a rite that he modestly petitions Mersenne to perform, as we read in a letter addressed to him dated 11 November 1640: „I am finally sending you my work on metaphysics, which I have not yet put a title to, so that I can make you its godfather and leave the baptism to you.” (AT III, 238-239 / CSMK, 158). But Descartes was quick to add, „I think, as I wrote to you in my previous letter, that it could be called *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*.” (AT III, 239 / CSMK III, 158). In the previous Letter to Mersenne, carrying the same date, Descartes had been

rather categorical about the title of the work. „Yesterday I sent my *Metaphysics* to M. de Zuylichem to post on to you; ... I have not put any title on it, but it seems to me that the most suitable would be *René Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy*.” (AT III, 235 / CSMK III, 157). Descartes, then, was obviously keen on calling his work *Meditations*, assuming thereby the paternity of the title.

In the light of the above discussion, we may conclude that the *Meditations* has to do with the meditational genre, though such a relationship appears to be more toned down than what most scholars claim. The influence of the devotional meditational tradition on the *Meditations* is to be found not so much in the content of the text, but rather in the style or medium which Descartes chose to convey his philosophical ideas. This takes the discussion on the meditational genre of the *Meditations* to the second phase – the significance of the employment of such a genre in philosophising on Descartes' part. Why did Descartes employ the meditation genre and what did he achieve by the same?

III. The significance of the use of the meditational genre

In adopting the genre of the meditational tradition Descartes was not a mere epigone, but instead made a creative and original use of the same, guided by specific motives. We shall now seek to draw out the philosophical significance of the use of such a medium on the part of Descartes.

By adopting the meditational genre in the *Meditations* Descartes appears to have furthered a twin agenda with great acumen. On the one hand, he ensured for his work the stamp of orthodoxy, having recourse to a genre closely associated with the devotional meditations which were important tools in the hands of those who spearheaded the Counter Reformation in the 17th century. It was markedly an era of spiritual retreats and of religious renaissance, and some of Descartes' own friends and benefactors like Cardinal de Bérulle and Guillaume Gibieuf were well known figures who contributed significantly in championing such a renewal. On the other hand, precisely in those years marked by the absence of the freedom of thought in France, Descartes deftly managed to introduce a new philosophy, 'camouflaging' it, so to say, under the guise of the spiritual meditational mode.¹⁸

¹⁸ See (Thomson 1972, pp. 48-49), (Hinman 1982, p. 367). The thesis of a certain dissimulation and camouflaging of real intentions on the part of the author of the *Meditations*

Such was, as is commonly recognised, the significance of the adoption of the meditational genre by Descartes. But the real import of the use that he makes of the meditational genre in the *Meditations* lies much deeper and requires further exploration. Descartes chose the ‘meditational’ genre ultimately to further his own philosophical programme. He had in mind nothing short of a Copernican revolution in philosophy, both in terms of a new epistemology and a new metaphysical *Weltbild*, a revolution which had as its central piece the exaltation of the thinking subject (the *res cogitans*) catapulted to the central stage. In awarding the thinking *ego* a position of Archimedean centrality – a watershed point in the history of human thought which earned him the appellation of the father of modern philosophy – the meditational genre became an all important tool in the hands of the skilled artisan that Descartes was. So the adoption of the meditational genre in the *Meditations* was in view of Descartes’ larger philosophical programme of ushering in a new theory of knowledge and a new worldview. This is the thesis that we shall be sustaining in the second part of this paper.

We may offer three considerations in this regard. First of all, Descartes’ employment of the meditational genre points to a new and revolutionary theory of knowledge which embeds the entire *Meditations*. It is a theory that awards reflection, and more precisely introspective reflection and self-consciousness, a primary role in the acquisition of knowledge. In his adoption of the meditational genre of the devotional meditations, Descartes had most at heart the concern that the readers would involve themselves in meditation, in thorough, attentive and studious reflection. (Rubidge 1990, p. 47) Descartes’ own words in his ‘Reply to the Second Objections’ reveal such a concern.

This is why my writing took the form of Meditations rather than that of Philosophical Disputations or the theorems and problems of a geometer; so that hence I might by this very fact testify that I had no dealings except with those who will not shrink from joining me in giving the matter attentive care and meditation. (AT VII, 157; AT IX-1, 123)

In this vein, Gary Hatfield insightfully notes: „The meditative mode of writing is chosen because it invites one to turn inward, and that is where

might prove helpful here. According to Louis E. Loeb, „[t]here are two contemporary proponents of the view that Descartes is engaged in extensive dissimulation in the *Meditations*. See (Caton 1970, pp. 224-245); (Caton 1970, pp. 355-370); (Caton 1973); (Caton 1975, pp. 87-104, esp. 97-100); and (Dorter 1973, pp. 313-340; Loeb 1986, pp. 264, note 1). Loeb’s own purpose in this essay is to discuss such a thesis.

Descartes believed his metaphysical first principles were to be discovered, lying immanent in the intellectual faculty of the meditator.”¹⁹ (Hatfield 1986, p. 53)

The theory of knowledge implicit here involves the priority of the intellect operating independently of the senses, rather than in abstraction from the senses, an operation for which the meditational genre appears eminently appropriate. The withdrawal of the mind from the senses was crucial for Descartes. Both in the ‘Epistola’ and in the ‘Preface’ that precede the six meditations, Descartes warns his readers, the prospective meditators, to detach their minds „from involvement with the senses” (AT VII, 4, 9 / CSM II, 5, 8). In a letter that he wrote to Mersenne on 24 December 1640 Descartes states: „the majority of objections (to the *Meditations*) would be drawn from things that are perceivable by the senses, whereas my arguments get their force chiefly from the need to withdraw one’s thought from these things.” (AT III, 267 / CSMK, 164) The First Meditation can be understood as an attempt to get the meditator to put aside his pre-critical, sensory-oriented picture of the world. The all powerful doubt of the First Meditation seeks to provide a way for the mind to detach itself from the senses, as Descartes himself recognises in the Synopsis.

In the First Meditation reasons are provided which give us possible grounds for doubt about all things, especially material things, so long as we have no foundations for the sciences other than those which we have had up till now. Although the usefulness of such extensive doubt is not apparent at first sight, its greatest benefit lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses. (AT VII, 12 / CSM II, 9)

The claim regarding the primacy of pure intellection over the senses in the knowing process is evident especially in the analogy of the wax in the Second Meditation where Descartes argues that its true nature is „perceived by the mind alone.” Descartes argues there that sense perception cannot do the job. (AT VII, 30 / CSM II, 20) It is the inspection of the mind alone (*solius mentis inspectio*) that reveals the nature of the wax (AT VII, 31). For Descartes, it is the mind alone, working apart from the body-connected faculties of sensation and imagination, that allows the meditator to distinguish the wax from its external forms, and consider it as if naked, having removed

¹⁹ It may also be noted that the adoption of the meditational genre also enables Descartes, according to some, to overcome the charge of circularity, a charge that was directed against the *Meditations* almost from the date of composition. See (Lang 1988, p. 27).

its clothing (cf. AT VII, 32 / CSM II, 22). The „actual world discloses itself to the *thinking* of meditation.”²⁰ (Lang 1988, p. 24)

The adoption of the meditational genre was a significant epistemological move on Descartes' part which paid him rich dividends, both in the withdrawal of the mind from the senses, and in letting the mind disclose its own innate clear and distinct ideas, elements crucial to Descartes' theory of knowledge in the *Meditations*. On this account, I concur with Hatfield's remark that the *Meditations* do not contain spiritual exercises but rather 'cognitive exercises.'

Descartes' use of the meditative mode of writing was not a mere rhetorical device to win an audience accustomed to the spiritual retreat. His choice of the literary form ... was consonant with, if not determined by, his theory of the mind and of the basis of human knowledge. Since Descartes' conception of knowledge implied the priority of the intellect over the senses, and indeed the priority of an intellect operating independently of the senses, and since, in Descartes' view, the untutored individual was likely to be nearly wholly immersed in the senses, a procedure was needed for freeing the intellect from sensory domination so that the truth might be seen. Hence, the cognitive exercises of the *Meditations*. (Hatfield 1986, p. 47)

Secondly, the meditational genre also made it possible for Descartes to pave the way for a highly subject-centred theory of knowledge. The dominating features of the meditation genre are self-examination and reflexive awareness (Kosman 1986, p. 22). It is a dialogue with oneself, an attempt by the self to plumb its own depths of interiority.²¹ The Third Meditation opens with the withdrawal of the meditator from the world of sense objects in order to enter into the depths of himself.

²⁰ In this epistemological programme of the *Meditations* realized by Descartes through the employment of the meditation genre one finds an unexpected ally in the meditational tradition of Hugh of St. Victor. In the Victorine tradition meditation was understood as a species of *cogitatio*, ordinarily translated as thought. Hugh in fact defined meditation as „a repeated cogitation that investigates the mode and the cause and the reason of every single thing” (Sepper 2000, p. 738). The original sources are Hugh of St. Victor, 'De meditatione', in *Six opusculis spirituels*, Sources chrétiennes, no. 155 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969), pp. 44-59; Migne, *Patrologiae Latinae*, clxxvi: 993-8, under the title *De meditando seu meditandi artificio*. The Victorine tradition further elaborated Hugh's psychology of cogitation-meditation-contemplation, linking cogitation and meditation together in being discursive powers of the rational soul or mind. See (Sepper 2000, pp. 738-739).

²¹ „La méditation est bien dialogue avec soi-même et regard en soi-même, inspection de l'esprit entrant dans ses propres profondeurs.’ (Soual 1999, p. 246)

I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, and withdraw all my senses. I will eliminate from my thoughts all images of bodily things, or rather, since this is hardly possible, I will regard all such images as vacuous, false and worthless. I will converse with myself and scrutinize myself more deeply; and in this way I will attempt to achieve, little by little, a more intimate knowledge of myself. (AT VII, 34 / CSM II, 24)

It is to be noted that the Cartesian meditator is a 'self-centred' lonely figure who withdraws from the sensible world already in the First Meditation, and eventually comes to reconstruct it according to the categories of the subject in the last (Sixth) Meditation. The radically first-personal nature of the Cartesian project centred around the *res cogitans* is very illuminating (Williams 1978, p. 68). The very physical setting of the First Meditation is revealing in this regard – the quiet study with the meditator seated alone by the fire! It is the meditator himself who has to seek illumination as the quest for knowledge is essentially a path of self-discovery. „He will make the thing his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he had discovered it for himself” (AT VII, 155 / CSM II, 110), affirms Descartes in the Reply to the Second Set of Objections. In fact, in the *Meditations*, the meditator becomes an active participant in the quest for certain knowledge.²² The meditational genre thus facilitates the reader to get involved in the discourse in the first person, keep pace with the author, and even inadvertently identify with the author.

In the *Meditations*, the focal points are not God and the soul, in spite of the claim to the contrary in the subtitle of the work, but the first things that can be known, namely the *ego*, its *cogitatio* and its indubitable existence. For Descartes, the *prima philosophia* has to begin with the first and primary experience of the meditating *ego* which is *cogitatio* (thought), established as the first principle of philosophy. Hegel, in fact, recognises the grandeur of Descartes as the initiator (*Anfänger*) of modern philosophy, for having made thought the first principle of philosophy.²³ As Bernard Charles Flynn

²² „The reader who was thus to be no mere observer but an agent in the same process. The genre was frankly intended to make provision for an unusual second party in the standard contract between writer and reader – not the independent ‘implied’ reader that all texts provide for, but an active participant whose role, in the end, is identical with that of the implied author: reader, in effect, becomes writer; to read a meditation, with understanding of what the meditation is, is to meditate.” (Lang 1988, p. 34)

²³ See Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, III, 2, I, A, I, in *Jubiläum Ausgabe*, 19, pp. 331, 335, 345. Cited by Jean-Luc Marion (see Marion 1986, p. 74).

notes: „with Descartes, man becomes Subject.”²⁴ (Flynn 1983, p. 10). The centrality of the Subject has been Descartes’ legacy to Modernity.²⁵

Descartes’ choice of the meditational genre must therefore have certainly been intentional, for this very project of placing the *res cogitans* at the centre of the epistemic process. The all permeating ‘I’ omnipresent and subtly dominating throughout the *Meditations* testifies to this.²⁶ It may also be noted that the *res cogitans* of the *Meditations* is not a particular, concrete individual, as might be the case in the autobiographical tradition, but a universal subject, which the meditational tradition renders eminently plausible.

Thirdly, the adoption of the meditational genre has repercussions also for the physical world (the *res extensa*). The concentration on the subject, made remarkably easy on account of the employment of the meditational genre, spells significant consequences for the understanding of the world. Accordingly, in the *Meditations* Descartes proposes a view of the world, as ‘represented’ by the knowing subject, for whom every physical entity is merely an object.

In Descartes’ thought, the subject, the I, becomes the transcendental ground of the known and the knowable. What can appear is determined in advance as what can be represented to a subject, a subject whose self-representation is the ground of all that it represents to itself. [...] an object has certitude because it is set before a subject which sets itself before itself, a subject whose being is coextensive with its consciousness of itself (Flynn 1983, p. 14).

Here the knowing process itself gets reduced to a process of representation of the object on the part of the subject, substituting the correlation between the knower and the known in traditional epistemology. Étienne Gilson makes a profound observation when he notes that the Cartesian epistemological method prohibits that the existence of the external world be proved except in terms of the contents of one’s own thought (Gilson 1970, 1999). Accordingly, in the *Meditations*, the physical thing and the world become reduced to a *res repraesentata* (cf. AT VII, 8 / CSM II, 7), as the

²⁴ According to Flynn, „the advent of subjectivity of is irreducible to preCartesian philosophy.” (Flynn 1983, p. 9)

²⁵ As Jorge Secada remarks, „Descartes’s conception of the self as a private, inner theatre, the pure realm of subjectivity, with the corresponding idealization of quality and quantification of natural reality, is a cornerstone of modern thinking.” (Secada 2000, p 268)

²⁶ As Paul Valéry remarks „Never before had any philosopher so deliberately displayed himself upon the stage of his thought, showing himself off, daring to use the first personal pronoun throughout whole pages.” (Valéry 1947, p. 17)

physical world is one sketched out according to the categories of the thinking subject. As Martin Heidegger has pointed out with great insight, the very concept of the *Weltbild*, i.e., the subject's image of the world, becomes possible only within Modernity and with the Cartesian subject in particular.

Now for the first time is there any such thing as a 'position' of man. Man makes depend upon himself the way in which he must take his stand in relation to whatever is as the objective. There begins that way of being human which mans the realm of human capability as a domain given over to measuring and executing, for the purpose of gaining mastery over that which is as a whole. (Heidegger 1977, p. 132)

The adoption of the meditational genre in the *Meditations* was thus crucially important for Descartes to further his programme of ushering in a new metaphysical *Weltbild*. It is a worldview which is totally centred around the knowing subject, to be identified with the meditator throughout the *Meditations*. More remarkably, it is a worldview which is inherently dualistic as it offers a new ontological conception of the world as radically separate from the meditating subject. The meditational mould which places the *res cogitans* at the centre and in stark contrast to everything that surrounds it contributes significantly to create and maintain a certain dualistic divide between the two heterogeneous and diametrically opposed substances of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, between the self and the surrounding physical world. A certain tension between the world outside and the inwardly turned subject is kept constant throughout the work, thanks to the meditating 'I'. In this perspective, the insistence throughout the meditations to detach oneself from the sense experience of the world, the depreciation of sense knowledge in favour of the intellectual perception of physical reality, the unfolding of consciousness that discovers itself as subject over and against objects, and the insistent hankering on the distinction of the soul from body, are all fundamental themes in the text, for the ingraining of which the employment of the meditational genre lends notable assistance.

It may then be concluded that the meditational genre pressed into use in the text of the *Meditations* has been at the service of Descartes' overall philosophical project, and was not a neutral choice. The meditational form was a highly effective instrument in the hands of Descartes to promote a subject-centred theory of knowledge and a new metaphysical *Weltbild*, with the self (*res cogitans*) enthroned at the centre and the physical world (*res extensa*) reduced to an object of the subject's act of representation. As Barel Lang observes, in the *Meditations*, „Descartes was concerned not only

to say what he had to say but, by means of the saying, to *establish* what was said" (Lang 1988, p. 34). For this Descartes could not have found a more appropriate tool than the meditational genre!

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