Descartes and the Modern
Descartes and the Modern

Edited by

Neil Robertson, Gordon McOuat and Tom Vinci

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We would like to thank our research assistants, Caroline Knox and Charissa Varma, who took a wild plethora of different formatting and presentation styles and references and began to hammer them into some kind of shape and conformity. That some inconsistency in style, reference and terminology remains attests to the necessity of respecting the particularities our individual authors and their traditional origins. John Davie, whilst worrying about his own encounter with methodology and the modern, dealt with the final edits.

Dr. Chris Elson of King’s College and the Dalhousie French Department, whose intimate familiarity with both the French language and the phenomenological style, worked tirelessly on the English translation of the French contributions and advised us on the texts. Alex Anderson showed great skill in language and learning in the translation of Chapter 10 of this volume.

And, of course, to our contributors, our greatest of thanks for reminding us that Descartes is no dead dog and there is life in the Modern yet.
Any question about what it is to be Modern turns back to René Descartes. Whether it is the birth of modern physics and the “new sciences”, the origins of the modern self, problems of modern freedom and responsibility, questions concerning the body, the passions, the mind – Descartes stands at a crossroads. We stand on this side. Nowadays there are few who would call themselves “Cartesians”. Physics is no longer Cartesian per se. We have purportedly overcome his “dualism” between mind and body (or at least we have moved beyond the *substantial* basis of that demarcation). We hesitate at his ontological proofs of God. And we think his view of the passions, and much else, is in error. Much of modernism, to say nothing of post-modernism and anti-modernism, is a strong attempt to get out of Cartesianism. Yet, the legacy and problems remain. This book seeks to explore those legacies and problems.

This collection of papers on Descartes and the Modern arises out of a year long lecture series organized by the combined programmes in History of Science, Early Modern and Contemporary Studies at the University of King’s College, where leading international Descartes scholars were invited to explore the multifarious relations between Descartes and the Modern. To give us some ground for discussion, we imagined three focal issues: Descartes’ relationship with his ancient and medieval predecessors, Descartes’ place in the early modern world and Descartes’ legacy for our own contemporary world.

Inviting leading Descartes scholars requires some ecumenicalism. Cartesian scholarship, like much of western philosophy, is rent along two main “styles” or traditions – for lack of better, more descriptive terms: the “continental” and anglo-american analytical (or, with a slightly different overlap, “phenomenological” and “naturalist”). In a deep sense, Descartes gave birth to both. Yet each has a radically different style, approach, and emphasis. While the former will lay stress on Descartes’ *Meditations*, especially the *cogito* and the move from the universal doubt to the establishment of modern self and its relationship to reflection, God and the
world and the infinite, the latter, while acknowledging the important role of the Meditations, turns rather to Descartes’ physics, psychology, geometry, and to the passions. It is in all these places that the very issue of the Modern lies and Descartes’ full legacy can be explored. This volume gives full voice to each approach, drawing on leading scholars in both traditions, in the hope that much can be learned by their dialogue. We begin by trying to figure out, what it is to be Modern.

Political philosopher Neil Robertson introduces our volume by exploring the very meaning of Modernity and Descartes’ place in it. He begins by putting Descartes in his place within the Western tradition. The issue concerns the nature of Descartes’ self-described “break”. Recent scholars have begun to suspect the abruptness of that very break, finding Cartesian resources and themes in his immediate and distant predecessors, especially in the Augustinian and Neoplatonist traditions. While exploring these important relationships between Descartes and the Augustinian and Neo-Platonist schools, Robertson stands steadfastly against certain attempts to reduce Descartes to just another veteran of that ancient project. Robertson cautions against “reading back” (as, say, in Heidegger’s own particular take on Descartes), and he resists the notion of “one long incubation period” – a completion of the metaphysical project inherited from Aristotle and Plato. While there are continuities, there are indeed breaks, and there are indeed new possibilities in the Modern. Following the Canadian philosopher, James Doull, Robertson shows that Descartes opens up a new understanding of “nature”, God, and the self – a project, he notes, that still has much life and promise (and also danger) in it. Remarkably, Robertson turns the usual understanding of Descartes’ dualism on its head. Robertson counters with the contentious claim that, with Descartes, “nature is known as inwardly derived and belonging to the self”, bringing a new kind of unity of nature, the mind and of God. Robertson’s account rescues the absolute centrality of theodicy in Descartes’ Meditations and in early modern thought in general, and he presents us with a radical conclusion: Descartes was not a dualist in the classic sense, but proposes the unity of nature in all its parts and the res cogitans in God and for self-consciousness. Here Robertson stands against Heidegger’s virtuoso take on Descartes as the apotheosis of nihilistic “onto-theology” and against other related attempts at presenting the origins of nature as mere representation and thus “available” to technology. He reminds us that, for nature’s certainty in mechanism, Descartes requires a certain relationship with God (in nature and in the knowing self). It is this particular unity that really matters, and it is decidedly Modern. Robertson’s critique opens up new possibilities for
overcoming the quick accusation of dualism that bogged our understanding of Descartes and the Modern, and the quick reduction of that project to a kind of reading already present in the tradition.

Robertson’s approach to Descartes’ relationship with that tradition, most importantly the Augustinian project, is further explored by Robert Crouse. Crouse reminds us that, rather than a monolithic face of the tradition, there are many Augustinians in late-medieval thought and it would do us well to explore Descartes complicated relationship with them. Against the influential projects of Zbigniew Janowski, Stephen Menn and others to locate the Augustinian roots and themes in Descartes, especially in the style and issue of the cogito, Crouse warns that, pace Augustine and tradition, for Descartes the cogito is the “absolute beginning”. As Robertson claims, it is that beginning that gives us a new approach between God, the self, and the world. As such, we find in Descartes an important break – a break that produces many of the unique and embedded questions of the Modern project. Crouse leaves us with a series of open questions regarding that legacy.

There are other roots and breaks in Cartesianism. Catherine Wilson begins her examination with an exploration of the supposed Epicurean roots of Descartes. Although Descartes rehearses many themes found in the Epicureans, like Robertson Wilson sees a break. Descartes is avoiding the pure externality and skepticism found in his Epicurean predecessors and he counters with two positions: Descartes as naturalist, and Descartes as theodician. Wilson presents us with a remarkably fresh reading of the Meditations, looking towards the end not the beginning of that great work. As we all know, Descartes’ account of the human body and its relation to the world climaxes the Meditations. For Wilson, this is Descartes’ own “original contribution to philosophy” – and the Meditations is its delivery vehicle. The core text is Descartes’ The Passions of the Soul. Descartes’ last work is so often quickly dismissed as an unsuccessful attempt at answering the problem of the relation between two substances, “soul” and “body” and a restatement of the Stoic philosophy on the passions. However, unlike the Stoics’ “almost theological” account of the necessity of the repression of the passions, Wilson reiterates: for Descartes morality no more requires the repression of the passions generally than health requires the repression of the vital functions generally. In the Meditations, Descartes notes that the soul does not do any of these things – doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing and unwilling, imagines, has sensory perceptions – unaided. The body is necessary. For example, Descartes provides no direct proof for the immortality of the soul (much to the chagrin of his detractors, God gets a much better treatment) other than
the general claim about substances. The Passions are exploring more than the fraught causal relation between the substances of soul and body – indeed, Descartes rehearses objections from a more materialist mindset which points out that the mind is affected by body and material substance (opium, for example). The unity is much more crucial – as a necessary part of God to bring substance to the soul. God (or nature) has fashioned a good body for the soul and that this body and its nervous system is “worthy of further detailed study...”. Following her reading of Descartes, Wilson sees the general argument as a push towards the study of the body. As such, the Meditations is not a theological work in itself, but, like the Discourse, a way to proceed – to the natural sciences, and, in this case, to the Treatise on Man. Here lies one of the grounds of the Modern.

Gary Hatfield follows up on Wilson’s suggestions and explores the psychological states and processes shared by soulless animals and humans alike. Descartes’ supposed dualism upsets the well-known Aristotelian unity and hierarchy. He does so by standing against the Aristotelian soul as the “sensitive” part of the animal soul. This sensitive part, for Descartes, is not part of the soul at all. Again, the key text is the often overlooked and often misunderstood The Passions of the Soul and The Treatise on Man. Rather than seeing the Passions as a mere apology for the connection of mind and body, Descartes points out that non-humans do not have passions in the soul, although they do possess the same or similar physiological processes as in the human. Simply, they do not possess souls. In his detailed account of the elimination of the Aristotelian unity, Hatfield also addresses Robertson’s unity of mind and body in “the Good”. But in this case this is a new good, related to the soul and to life. Remarkably, he sees it as inordinately functional. The perfection of the body consists in its “proper organization to carry out the functions of life.” In his conclusion, Hatfield shows how Descartes’ turn here leaves us with both questions of Modernity: the mechanization of the mind and the mentalisation of the physical. Yet, in the end, for Hatfield Descartes would have avoided both.

Jonathan Israel explores the general contemporary sense of “revolution” and break in Descartes and Cartesianism. Although Descartes stands at the beginning of a great confabulation in European thought, Israel warns against finding too much of a “revolution” in Descartes himself. Against some of his more radical followers, Descartes set a cautious but decisive separation between theological/moral questions and questions of nature – as witnessed by the more moderate wing of the New Philosophy. In part, this decisive separation was meant to keep at bay the monsters of heresy and atheism associated with the more radical
enlightenment. (In this separation, Israel claims, Descartes inadvertently forms the beginnings of modernist bible criticism.) Following through on themes introduced in his two monumental explorations of Early Modern thought, *Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested*, Israel delineates the “three cornered” drama between what he calls the “Enlightenment,” “Radical Enlightenment,” and the “Counter-Enlightenment”. In that drama, Descartes is a decided moderate. His supposed separation between philosophy and theology, and the two-substance solution to mind/body, certainly left the ground open for more radical forms of Enlightenment such as those of Condorcet, Diderot and d’Holbach. But he did not go there. We do well to keep this drama in mind when we encounter reductionist and monolithic accounts of the fate or “trajectory” of “The Modern” and Descartes’ place in it. Descartes’ first steps open up new intellectual territory, but it is a contested territory, full of complex breaks and threads. Descartes stands as a moderate.

This relationship between Descartes and his contemporaries is further explored in the next section of our collection where we now turn to legacies and critiques of Descartes.

Vincent Carraud alights on the crucial issue of “cause” in Descartes and the Modern and reexamines the important claim that the modernist break is grounded on the recognition that causality confers intelligibility, and especially the associated rise and domination of “efficient cause” (the supposed technocratic nihilism of the Modern). For Descartes, efficiency alone is henceforth the operator of intelligibility, in physics as well as metaphysics – the search for causes does not go beyond the efficient cause which suffices to provide a reason. However, as Carraud points out, for Descartes’ greatest follower and critic, Leibniz, this was merely the ground and the point of departure. Leibniz, a self-proclaimed mechanist, steps off the ground of efficiency to that of “sufficient reason”, a notion that confers efficiency whilst moving beyond it. Carraud’s paper teases apart this history of the Cartesian and Post-Cartesian moment, and asks, amidst the birth of the modernist project, is the position of Leibniz’s sufficient reason and Descartes the very same thing? No. Carraud points out the striking “singularity” of Descartes’ position, wherein he “provided instruments” to help build the principle of sufficient reason and at the same time opposed it. Modern metaphysics is constructed on the opposition to that which made it possible. We are not, nor can we be, pure Cartesians.

While Carraud looks one way at Leibniz, Kathryn Morris, looks the other way towards Thomas Hobbes. In the English tradition, Hobbes was Descartes’ greatest critic, even though their projects seemed to coincide at
many points. While Leibniz would elevate the principle of sufficient reason, and \textit{vis viva}, as a way of establishing bodies and things, reintroducing the ideas of force, essence and form, Hobbes agreed substantially with Descartes’ equating of matter with extension. But, for Descartes, there always remained the problem of how one body resisted another (unless by the a priori, yet unhelpful \textit{definition} of space). Morris reiterates that, for Descartes, metaphysics really mattered, and that, indeed, his matter was very much metaphysical. In Descartes, persistence of motion and rest derive from God’s immutability. Motion mattered in this sense. Immediately, Cartesianism faced a problem with pure extension. Leibniz ground his own critique on just that problem. And Morris identifies a similar problem in Hobbes. For Descartes, extension is the key, while for Hobbes it is motion. Here the issue turns on resistance: Hobbes sees resistance as a contact between two \textit{moving} bodies, or, in Hobbes’ wonderfully evocative terms: “an endeavor contrary to an endeavor”. As such, Hobbes stood foursquare against Descartes’ passive extension. They are divergent in their very notion of matter and object. Morris shows that Hobbes’ materialism indeed owes no debt to Descartes. Here we have an alternative birth of “modernity”. Rather than a monolithic notion of the new mechanical philosophy, Morris shows us how the important differences between Descartes and Hobbes give different legacies of what it is to be Modern.

Tad Schmaltz challenges another aspect of the monolithic view concerning Descartes and Modernity. He looks to the opposed forces of Dutch Calvinism and French Jansensism in the interpretation of Descartes’ view of Free Will. Surprisingly, the Dutch Calvinists would condemn Descartes for not being sufficiently Calvinist by not adhering to the doctrine that we depend totally on divine grace for our salvation, while French Catholics would condemn Descartes for denying that we are morally responsible for those actions we freely choose. Schmaltz uses these dual condemnations to tease out the essential roles of error, will and freedom in Descartes, noting that, while interpretations of Descartes could be buffeted and bludgeoned in the negotiations and condemnations of the warring side, Descartes’ own views on Free Will were remarkably “indeterminate” – that is, God wills and preordains whatever is or can be, he leaves free human actions undetermined. This position could not remain for long, and, as Schmaltz points out, while Descartes followers expanded the mechanistic side of Descartes’ project, producing a dissolution of the problem of free will in a determinist machine, post-Cartesians have continued, endlessly, to debate the compatabilism and incompatibilism of freedom and the will.
The associated issue of mechanism and the modern is taken up by Daniel Garber. Garber further examines the important reason for Leibniz, a convinced mechanist, to reject the reduction of matter to extension, and his reintroduction of substantial forms. It turns on the problem of force and matter. For, if Descartes is right and matter is only extension, then motion is only an (ill founded) phenomenon, for there is nothing to distinguish the ideal place of an object from another, its movement from one space to another with the ideal notion of place. Leibniz recognized this problem and so turned to grounding things in more than mere “extension”. While Hobbes stressed motion, Leibniz stressed force. Leibniz’s reintroduction of substantial forms and their relation to “force” is the first step in replacing extension by force as a metaphysical foundation of physics (culminating in Kant’s Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science).

Bodies are more like souls (the very problem of individuation that Descartes introduces in the Passions). Here we find the beginnings of Leibniz’s own transition from Cartesian-style mechanism, through substantial forms, and on to monads. And it is here that we can locate the beginnings of the idealistic response to Modernity and a different trajectory for natural philosophy.

Floy Doull examines the legacy of Descartes for one of those great idealist interpretations of Modernity – namely, that of Hegel, especially in his grand unfolding of the spirit of Western thought in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy. Hegel well understood the importance of the Cartesian moment for the expression of Modern philosophy and the nuanced notion of break. Yet, surprisingly, Descartes receives very short shrift in Hegel’s Lectures – appearing as a kind of simple unconscious event in the birth of the Modern. But, as Doull explains, it only “appears” so simple. Whilst acknowledging her respect for Hegel’s great work, Doull gently and playfully scolds him for not using the “proper” text when writing of the Cartesian moment. In the Lectures Hegel grounds his discussion of Cartesianism on a reading of The Principles of Philosophy – Descartes’ later “textbook” system. The Principles are bare, formulaic, “scholastic” (indeed, as Stephen Gaukroger has shown, Descartes modeled the Principles on received scholastic textbooks of philosophy). If, as Doull tells us, Hegel had concentrated on the “proper texts” – i.e., the Meditations – he would not have quickly accused Descartes of “spontaneous, but likewise uncritical, metaphysics.” A fuller Hegelian account would rightly place the metaphysical groundings of the Meditations as an important moment in the metaphysical overcoming of the bare unity of Reason and the Understanding, an important moment in the self-presenting of the Modern. In the discussion of God, the infinite,
the self, the _Meditations_ stand at a moment, an exploration of the going-beyond that is the “infinite”, an overcoming of thought relegated to what Hegel called the rigid and fixed categories of the Understanding. Therein lays the key to the development of Modern thought, one which will be taken up by later _sublation_ of one-sided mechanical thought. Here Doull addresses some of the important issues raised by Robertson in his Introduction. In Hegel’s telling, Descartes remains at an important moment, when the relation of the _cogito_ and God is explicit but only unformulated, still of the “understanding” (that is, the elements are not “derived” from the cogito, but external to it). It would take a Fichte, then a Hegel, to do that. But Descartes’ understanding of the infinite, and the place of ontological proof, were moves in that direction. He presents that moment in the unfolding of modern thought.

Our two next contributors, Jean-Luc Marion and Graeme Nicholson, speak most strongly to this particular notion – taking their cue on Descartes and the Modern from the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Heidegger. But, resisting many encounters from that school, they are not so quick to denounce Descartes as simply opening up a kind of malaise of nihilism. There is something positive to be learned from Descartes, something truly promising about the Modern. Descartes still speaks to us, and we are, in a sense, given his project to complete.

This special dialectic of infinitude/finitude, introduced by Doull, is further explored in J.L. Marion’s paper on Descartes’ finitude, the ego and the proof of God. In a detailed examination of the _Meditations_, Marion finds the crucial transcendental moment in Descartes in his inclusion of the infinite within the finite. The finite and the infinite are not a mere play of limits, but, in a sense, come with each other. But, the very possibility of thinking the finite, always, ever, brings forth the ground of the infinite. Descartes approaches two possibilities: the infinite in God (but returned to the self) or the infinite as transcendental function of the ego. Both give us the particular modern promise of philosophy. For Marion, this move by Descartes is evidence of an eminently transcendental thinker – “the finite thinks itself in its finitude only insofar as it thinks itself from the basis of its own transcendental condition of possibility”. Here we find in Descartes (and, crucially for Marion, Descartes is more or less alone amongst his contemporaries and followers) what Marion calls the phenomenological “horizon” of the ego. It is a remarkable overturning of the ontical understanding of the infinite and its relationship to the nature of God. Marion follows with a astonishing claim: in this, it is to Descartes, rather than his much more certain followers – Spinoza and Hegel for example, or even Kant and Heidegger – that we should turn for a deeper understanding
of the ego as finite, yet expressed into the horizon of the infinite, as
Marion says, “always and already positively given.” It is the ground of our
science. It is the ground of the self. And it is the ground of the very
promise of the Modern.

Graham Nicholson, on the other hand, explores the “mathematical” in
Descartes. Here he closely follows Heidegger’s reading of the Modern and
Descartes’ place in it (indeed, rehearsing a rather close Heidegerian
reading of Galileo and Newton’s). But, unlike some Heideggerian readings
of Descartes (Hubert Dreyfus, for example), the reading is not a
pessimistic one. Like Robertson, Nicholson sees in Cartesian unity of
mind and body a promise and a way forward for philosophy. In concert
with our other contributions, he warns against a quick reading of Descartes
as dualist, a reading which ignores the subtlety of the Cartesian project.
That subtlety is found in what Graham, following Heidegger, calls the
mathemaatical – that which constructs, or “gives”, simultaneously, the
knower, and the way of knowing or being. Mathematical projection is
something much more than the application of mathematics to physics –
although that indeed it is. We needn’t agree with Heidegger’s take on the
development of modern science – and few historians or philosophers of
science would now agree with it – to recognize that the fundamental
positing of Descartes’ project is, at its ground, mathematical – or
mathematical-metaphysical. That’s why he thinks extension. And that is
how he achieves the thinking subject. It is here, in the mathematical
projection (again, to use Heidegger’s term) that the very problem of mind-
body relation can be formed, and, most importantly for Nicholson, be
solved. Following Fichte and the phenomenologists, Nicholson shows the
active self-directive power of the positing at the ground of Cartesian
metaphysics. It is here, rather than the dualism grounded on a theory of
substance, that we can see the possibilities, and the dangers, of the
Modern project. In that, there is something worth rescuing in Descartes.
For Nicholson, there is little to be learned from the turn to
phenomenalism/behaviourism in Modern thoughts about the mind.
Instead, we should be thinking the kind of unity promised in the Cartesian
project – of the relationship between self, nature and God as described in
Robertson’s opening paper.

In a similar vein (although less installed in the phenomenological
reading of Descartes), Lisa Shapiro explores the feminist reading of
Descartes and finds much to commend and some to condemn. “Second-
wave” feminism, often informed by the phenomenological tradition,
located a particular gendered problem in Descartes’ own modernist split
between mind/body and the supposed Cartesian view of objectivity (the
“view from nowhere”\textsuperscript{10}). Simply, in the Modern project the male intellect was substituted as the universal, as the “view from nowhere” disguising the view from the disembodied male mind. Susan Bordo’s influential work comes to mind here.\textsuperscript{11} But Shapiro warns against these interpretations. Like our other contributors, Shapiro finds it hard to locate just that view of objectivity in Descartes. Once again she points to the Passions and their crucial claim about embodiment. She points to the important defeat of the Aristotelian hierarchies, of the resistance to “tradition”. As it turns out, this is how women – some contemporary women – read Descartes. Shapiro turns to the historical record regarding the reading of Descartes, presenting a valuable study of Seventeenth Century women’s responses to Cartesianism, She shows how strikingly liberating early modern women found Cartesianism (with its removal of Aristotle’s hylozoic grounding of women’s inequality on a naturally “defective” or incomplete soul). By reexamining the important unity of mind and body, the moderate break and sublation of tradition, the place of the knowing ego and its relation to nature, Shapiro calls on contemporary feminists to revaluate Descartes and the promises of the Modern.

Our collection concludes with philosopher Tom Vinci, representing perhaps the strongest anglo-analytic tradition in naturalist studies of Descartes. Vinci too finds much to admire, much to learn in Descartes’ project. Warning against certain foundationalist and anti-foundationalist analytic philosophies, Vinci wants to rescue the important place of “intuition” and consciousness in Descartes. His immediate engagement is with two Hilarys – Kornblith and Putnam – but his main target is the chief of modern antifoundationalism, W.V. Quine. Against Quine’s “naturalist” dissolution, Vinci thinks that there is much to be respected in Descartes non-Quinean respect for “consciousness”. As if tying all of our concerns together in this volume, Vinci starts with the problems of the ego and its relation to knowledge found in the Meditations and turns to the Passions as a place where intuition’s relation to knowledge, willing and object are rightly and deeply explored. For Vinci, we are and should be Cartesians.

As we hope to have shown, Descartes studies are alive and well, both in the analytic/naturalist and continental traditions. While the two traditions perform with remarkably different styles and, perhaps, points of departure and sites of concern, in their problematics and their deep interest in the ongoing Modern project, they can certainly coexist and even learn from each other. As our contributors have shown, Descartes is still with us.
Notes

1 That project, in part philological/morphological, compares in great scholarly
detail, say, proofs of god or radical doubt in the cogito to that of the Augustinian
project. See, for example, Z. Janowski, Index Augustino-cartésien: Textes et
commentaire (Paris: Vrin, 2000) and S. Menn Descartes and Augustine
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). These comparative morphologies
are certainly to be found, and they have rightly shown us not to take seriously
those claims – be they Cartesian or otherwise – about abrupt, free, beginnings.
Alistair MacIntyre has warned us about these claims of radical breaks. A.
MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of
Science,” The Monist 60:453-72. But Robertson shows that indeed something new
has been added. Descartes inverts, or puts the doubt to new usage.

2 “General” might be too universal a term when it comes to theodicy. Cf. Jonathan

3 Stephen Menn Descartes and Augustine (Cambridge: Cambridge University

4 For one of the quickest, see the Antonio Damasio, Descartes’ Error: Emotion,

5 See Descartes to Mersenne, December 24, 1640.

6 We need only recall Galileo’s cautious defense in his “Letter to the Grand
Duchess Christina” (1615) and the abrupt separation of such questions in the
unwritten constitution of the Royal Society, formed in 1660. See Thomas Spratt,

7 Jonathan Israel, Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), and Enlightenment Contested:
Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man (Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 2006). Amongst others, Israel is critical of certain grand narratives of
Modernity such as that presented by the Canadian Philosopher, Charles Taylor
Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard

8 See Stephen Gaukroger, Descartes’ System of Natural Philosophy (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2002).

9 It is a point resisted by more a more nuanced historical reading, such as that of
Stillman Drake in his Galileo at Work (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1997).

10 Thomas Nagel The View from Nowhere (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
1989).

11 Susan Bordo The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture.
(Albany: State U of New York Press, 1987) and her edited collection, Feminist
Interpretations of René Descartes. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State
University Press, 1999).
INTRODUCTION:
DESCARTES AND THE MODERN

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The title of this volume by simply drawing together Descartes and the Modern places us on contested ground. Who is René Descartes and what, if any, is his relation to the “Modern”? Equally, what is the “Modern”—a reality, a term of convenience or a source of confusion? Descartes is a figure familiar and indeed iconic and yet, in the scholarly world, a source of sharp disagreement both as to what he is saying and doing in his writings and what the proper effect or effects of those writings could be said to be.

Traditionally, Descartes has been understood as the father of modern philosophy, the figure who articulated the nature and centrality of modern subjectivity—the modern self. But is this way of understanding Descartes accurate either as an account of what Descartes was up to or the nature of modern philosophy? Would it be more accurate to see Descartes as more concerned with establishing modern natural science or even as a practitioner of that science than concerned with the metaphysics of subjectivity? Or again is it right to see Descartes as modern? A number of recent accounts of Descartes seek to establish his debt to late medieval developments and indeed claim that the true founding of the modern lies with Duns Scotus or William of Ockham and that Descartes’ position is really only a development from these earlier positions. Or again Descartes can be seen as really a certain kind of Augustinian or more generally a Neo-Platonist of sorts. All of this confuses the old sense of Descartes as father of modernity—he may either be really a medieval or a rather late figure in a modernity that was begun, at least at the level of philosophical principles, in the fourteenth-century.

But are we to understand the modern as something established philosophically? Could one better describe modernity as established by certain material developments—economic, social, political and technological? Is modernity inscribed in a new sense of the state, a new account of political freedom, a new relation of religion and the secular? Is
modernity established in a new conception of the individual in new aesthetic forms—the novel, opera, the sonata form and so on? Is modernity grasped best as what Heidegger and others speak of as “technology”, a new relation to man and nature such that all is reduced to moments of the will? Is it a new kind of alienation or anomie, a rise of bureaucracy or the decline of community and attendant rise of “society”? Is modernity the rule of instrumental rationality made effective in consumer capitalism and its brutal and impersonal efficiencies? But then one can ask are we to understand ourselves as “modern”? Are we better grasped as “post-modern” or contemporary—separated from Descartes and his modernity by another epochal shift? But then, is there a “modern” at all in any definable sense? Isn’t it better to see the term as at most a useful conceptual tool, reflecting no more than a way of characterizing certain historical changes that took place in various parts of Europe and later elsewhere - certainly not having the reality implied in speaking of an “epoch”?

It is, of course, a central concern of this book, as of the lecture series that it is based upon, to wrestle with these issues. What is needed is to try to think not just what Descartes or modernity are in isolation, but to try to think them through one another so that we don’t simply assume a definition or set of criteria for the modern that Descartes either meets or fails to meet—or equally to assume that the significance of Descartes is simply reducible to even his own self-conception. So the safe answer to the question of Descartes and the Modern is that this is really addressed through the collective work of this volume. So if I were wise, I would stop my introduction to this book with these questions and point to the volume as a whole as addressing them—but I am not wise. So I will venture in what follows to make a few assertions in order to get the discussion started.

My way into Descartes and the modern is by making two claims: 1) There is a positive connection between Descartes and the modern and particularly that Descartes establishes a modern standpoint that crucially distinguishes his position from either late-medieval or Renaissance positions; 2) that the modernity articulated in Descartes is not characterizable as simply self-destructive or as what Heidegger calls onto-theology or indeed any other account that reduces it to a form of nihilism.

In the first claim I am opposing those who would see Descartes as only derivatively modern, as an epigone of Duns Scotus or Suarez or some other late-medieval or renaissance figure or standpoint. Equally, in this first claim I am rejecting the claim that Descartes is not modern at all or is to be read through pre-modern forms and to be understood as still working
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(simply) within medieval categories. For instance, Jean-Luc Marion has argued that Descartes’ proofs for the existence of God are really reproducing medieval proofs and fall within a medieval account of the Divine names.3 There is certainly something illuminating in making such connections, but left as such Descartes’ argument appears confused and loses its distinctive character.

But to say that Descartes is modern is not at all original; indeed it is the traditional account against which many contemporary commentators are reacting. So for instance, Martin Heidegger argues that Descartes must be seen as the beginning of the modern—but for Heidegger this is all to show just how problematic the modern is: that in Descartes there is a radical reduction of all things to *mathesis*.*4* For Heidegger and so many others, Descartes is, if not the source, the epitome of technological thinking and “onto-theology”: the reduction of beings and especially the highest being to cause so that all beings and Being itself are resolved into an identity. So the truth of Descartes, the truth of modernity, is nihilism. The positive result for these critiques of modernity is that this association of Descartes and modernity reveals the necessity to get beyond or before modernity, which in itself is inherently unstable and, ultimately self-destructive.

But for Heidegger, Descartes’ modernity is but a new turn and radicalization of the history of “metaphysics”, a bringing to completion of the onto-theology that has dominated the West since Plato and Aristotle. The claim made recently by John Milbank and the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy, building on the thought of Etienne Gilson, that “metaphysics” begins only with Duns Scotus is but a variant on this theme—seeking to preserve portions of the Western tradition from the Heideggerian critique. For Milbank this break is the ushering in of “secularity”.5 This is also largely the position of Leo Strauss, who sees in Machiavelli, the articulation of a new modern this-worldliness.6 The claim in such accounts is that Descartes’ “modernity” is secondary and already inscribed in a turn to be located in the late-medieval or Renaissance. Milbank’s account of this is useful. He sees the turn as one from the “analogical” ontology of the high middle-ages (above all Aquinas) to the univocal ontology of Scotus. In the shift that Scotus brings, according to Milbank, is realized precisely what Heidegger speaks of as onto-theology: the reduction of all beings, including the highest being, to presence to consciousness. In this is, according to Milbank, the whole standpoint of modern secularity and a new willful worldliness.7

My primary aim in this brief introduction is to question the powerful account of Descartes established largely through the work of Heidegger that sees in the Cartesian connection to modernity the revelation of a
nihilism or self-destructiveness at the heart of both. In this account, Descartes is caught up in a fatality of “metaphysics” and “onto-theology” that pre-inscribes in it the event of nihilism. The reading of Descartes as a late-medieval or Renaissance figure is but a variant of this claim—but one whose specific character helps us to see a way beyond the Heideggerian reading of Descartes and the modern.

The claim I want to make in this paper is that this inscribing of modern secularity, of modern reason within the late-medieval or Renaissance is built on a confusion and elision of two distinctive forms of secularity. So I do not disagree with Gilson’s, Milbank’s or Strauss’s or many other accounts, that there is in the late medieval/Renaissance a “stepping back” from the ontological order, largely neo-platonic, that articulated the relation of creatures to the divine, both for the medievals and the late antique generally. What I want, however, is to distinguish the modern “stepping back” as a second and importantly distinct stepping back. In both late medieval/Renaissance secularity and modern secularity there is a return to nature: in the former, this return is in tendency confused, unstable and violent; in the latter, it is in tendency orderly, stable and pacific. For the late medieval and Renaissance, the return must be seen against an assumed background of given realities—the hierarchies of medieval culture generally. This background renders the return to nature ambiguous, and so for the late Middles Ages and Renaissance the distinction between sin and secularity is unclear. An image for this may be found in Petrarch’s vexed attachment to his beloved Laura: is it his own free activity or a distraction from higher ends?8 The possibility of an independent secularity that is not sin lies in a more radical stepping back or “disengagement,” to use Charles Taylor’s term, than that achieved in late medieval and Renaissance culture, so that in the modern the human is altogether beyond the hierarchy of finite teleology expounded by Aquinas and poetically figured by Dante.9 There are then two “stepping-backs”: the incomplete one of late-medieval/Renaissance thought and the complete one of modernity. It is important to see, however, that the source of both of these disengagements lies in medieval theology. Already in Aquinas and Dante there is a tension between the relation of the human to the hierarchy insofar as it is graciously raises him to the vision of God, and the human to the hierarchy from the standpoint of that vision. From the latter perspective the hierarchy from one side does nothing to obstruct the relation of the human soul to its end in God: from the other side, relative to this absolute end, the hierarchy is found inadequate.10 It is this insight that is the beginning point for Scotus and late-medieval theology generally. In Scotus’s assertion of both the unknowability of God and the
univocity of being, there is, as Milbank brings out, a certain stepping back
of the human and the Divine from the hierarchical procession and return.
An extreme statement of this is, of course, Ockham’s assertion that God
could have saved humanity in the form of an ass. Another example of this
new standpoint is the portrayal of creation in Pico della Mirandolla’s
Oration on the Dignity of Man. Pico describes the peculiar place of the
human in creation, a place he suggests is not properly recognized by
earlier writers:

He lastly considered creating man. But there was nothing in the archetypes
from which He could mold a new sprout, nor anything in His storehouses
which He could bestow a heritage upon a new son, nor was there an empty
judiciary seat where this contemplator of the universe could sit….Finally
the best of workmen decided that that to which nothing of its very own
could be given should be, in composite fashion, whatsoever had belonged
individually to each and every thing. Therefore He took up man, a work of
indeterminate form; and plac[ed] him at the midpoint of the world…11

Here is an image of the general character of late medieval/Renaissance
culture. The image can take one in a variety of directions, not simply that
followed by Pico: toward a more external and nominalist relation to
nature, toward a mystical relation to God, toward a univocity of being,
toward a divine voluntarism, toward a juridical appropriation of the world.
All these positions become available when the human has been separated
from and made indeterminate relative to the created order. However, what
I want to bring out is the instability in this new human dignity. The
problem is that, for Pico, while the human is beyond the hierarchy and
free, the only content for this indeterminate being is found in returning to
the hierarchy: becoming an angel or a beast. The difficulty is that no single
place in the hierarchy is adequate to the human. This disjunction between
freedom and content is the source of an unstable, and indeed insatiable,
relation of the human to the world. We find this instability in
Machiavelli’s depiction of the restlessness of humans or in Marlowe’s Dr.
Faustus’ dissatisfaction with the “orthodoxy” of the received sciences.12
For Pico, filled with the confidence arising from medieval culture that the
created order is “for us”, there is the ambition to become an Angel, and
more than an Angel, and at the same time to acquire a total and inward
knowledge of the cosmos. However, the instability of Renaissance
secularity quickly makes itself felt. The pursuit of knowledge collapses
into scepticism so that, at the end of this period, Montaigne is left with
“Que sais-je?” as his motto or Francisco Sanches with the phrase “Quod
nihil scitur”.
13 It is this nihilistic conclusion to late medieval/Renaissance
secular culture that those who would elide this period with modernity fail to recognize. Yet, without it we cannot understand the specific character of the modern. Descartes (and other moderns such as Hobbes) builds upon and builds into his position the failure of pre-modern secular forms.

The form this correction takes in Descartes is through his radical doubt at the beginning of the *Meditations*. Here, late medieval and Renaissance skepticism is radicalized and all given or assumed being is dissolved as insufficient to provide a starting point for knowledge. The givenness of nature that remains as a residual pagan element in late medieval and Renaissance culture is here retracted. For Descartes, thought will proceed only on a self-certainty itself grounded on the perfection of God. From this inner self-relation, thought can enter into and come to know a nature that is present for thought. Here Descartes can know from within himself what is believed through medieval theology—that through an inner and complete relation to God, humanity can enter into and know nature without relapse into a loss of self or confusion of ends. The inner self-consciousness that defines the specifically modern allows for a human knowing of all things within God, as Malebranche will later come to put it. There is not in this modern standpoint the opposition of late medieval/Renaissance culture, of a vanishing human knowing or freedom to an equally unstable and uncertain world, whose result is skepticism, violence and nihilism. Rather, Descartes is assured through his purely inward relation to God that what he knows certainly is also true. From this point of view, nature is a totality of causes that are open to human knowing—and thus the realm of fate and *fortuna* is altogether banished. Put to one side as inadequate is a Neoplatonic ascent of knowing to a unified standpoint beyond the division of knower and known. For Descartes, rather, the demand of certainty is to start straightway with a self-complete standpoint which then enters into the relation of knower to known, subject to object. The distinction of the natural and the supernatural, nature and grace, is overcome, at least relative to the objects proper to enlightened human subjectivity. One of the consequences of this overcoming, as we shall see, is to move toward a more developed consideration of theodicy in the early modern period.

The consequence of Descartes’ radical inwardness is that nature acquires a much more radical “otherness” and independence. Nature cannot be known as an organic cosmos, constituted through an interlocking teleological order. Nature has become a mechanism, in which motion in the older Aristotelian sense does not occur at all: all motion is external and indifferent to place. Here occurs an evacuation of natural teleology which parallels the evacuation of ethical teleology which many,
such as Alisdair MacIntyre and Leo Strauss lament in Hobbes and modern social and political thought generally. It is tempting to read this development as an atheism that makes nature indifferent to an order of participation, and so makes it subject to technological will. Indeed, Heidegger does not see it as distinguishable from a Nietzschean willing.\textsuperscript{16} I would argue that such a critique is reading back into Descartes this later development. For Descartes and the early moderns generally, up to the turn to “critique” in the 1750s and later, the “externalization” of nature as \textit{res extensa} or mechanism does not, or does not simply, mean that nature is reducible to technological will or subjective appropriation. Seeing nature as \textit{res extensa} brings to nature as a whole an objectivity and substantiality which is grounded in its divine foundation. What for Descartes makes nature both knowable to us and divinely secured in its objectivity is the “idea”—binding on human rationality, nature and God.\textsuperscript{17} As Descartes brings out in the Fifth Meditation, the whole essence of an idea (in that it is not nothing) is that it is not a construct of will, but a reality binding on thought. It is the objectivity of ideas, together with their clarity and distinctness, that allows self-consciousness to know nature in its absolute truth. This is what distinguishes modern science from the willfulness of pre-modern claims to knowing where the distinction between the imaginary construction of the object and its independent being cannot be adequately secured. As Descartes and Hobbes argue, the Aristotelian account of motion is still anthropomorphic, a construct of imagination and not a necessary idea of thought: to grasp the principle of inertia requires a de-situating or de-contextualizing of both scientist and nature.\textsuperscript{18} The very independence and externality of Cartesian nature is found not only in its mechanization—where the parts seem to fall away from an organic whole—but equally in a more complete unity of whole and part than could be attained in pre-modern science.\textsuperscript{19} Here there can be no play of \textit{fortuna} or fate or a prime matter resistant to form; rather, nature is known as inwardly derived and belonging to the self. That is to say only with the moderns is nature known as created: its independence has been negated, and its being is seen to lie directly and radically in the divine creative power.\textsuperscript{20} It is this immediate relation of God and the created order together with the radical unity of that order that gives rise to the centrality of theodicy in Descartes’ \textit{Meditations} and early modern thought generally.\textsuperscript{21} What is necessary to see in the deeply unified account of nature in modernity is that not only is there a release of nature into its own activity, but also there is a total unity to this activity—precisely because all is caused in a total mechanical set of relations, the rationality of the whole is present in each of the parts and not in spite of, but because those parts are
so indifferent to this rationality. 22 This is the end of a finite teleology but the presence of a total or substantial teleology. This sense of nature is at work in the whole early modern period, and is evidenced by the confidence in that period that nature, in its very “atheism” or independence from God, displays the divine at every point. 23

In Descartes, then, there are two totalities—the totality of res cogitans where every individual thought or idea belongs to a totality of thought (as Spinoza later brought out especially) and the totality of res extensa where every movement of matter belongs to a total movement. But what is crucial to see in Descartes is the unity of these opposed substances in God and for self-consciousness. That is, Descartes is not in the end a dualist, but is rather seeking a more complete unity of self and world, soul and body than is available on an Aristotelian or generally pre-modern account. 24 How this is to be accomplished remains under-developed in Descartes, but the principle that there is the unity in opposition and for us as well as God underlies the modern period as a whole. This is the modern confidence, that it is only through a radical alienation from nature that we can be at home in nature, with a stability unknowable by ancient or medieval lights. What Heidegger and others miss in their portrayal of Descartes as appropriating subjectivity is the inner self-completeness of the Cartesian self-consciousness that frees it from the instability in knowing and desiring that belongs to the pre-modern self, and the reconciliation to nature and body precisely in their recognized objectivity so that nature is no longer an external other to be dominated or a sheer nothingness to be willfully reconstructed.

But are the claims of a modern ontology built on self-consciousness, in fact, secure? What of Heidegger’s claim that the Cartesian standpoint is the apotheosis of nihilistic “onto-theology”? 25 Onto-theology, as this thought was developed in Heidegger is the characterization of Western (for Heidegger) or modern (for others such as Milbank) metaphysics as a radical reduction of Being and beings to representational thought and above all as “cause”, so that, at its fullest expression (Descartes’ expression), God as causa sui becomes the absolute causality of all causes. 26 All beings, even the highest, have thereby been reduced to a representational logic (onto-theo-logic). The further development of onto-theology is to its own self-undoing: onto-theology shows itself in “technology”, through this reduction of all beings to representation, to be nothing but the purest nihilistic willing: Nietzsche is the inner truth of Descartes.

At first sight, Descartes does seem to be the clearest case of an onto-theologian who through his method and radical doubt turns all beings into
representation and so available to technology. But underlying the claim that Descartes is “reducing” beings to representation (by “refusing” the standpoint of substantial forms and reciprocity) are two assumptions: 1) that there is a world of “beings” there in their own “being” that are being so reduced, and 2) that the thinking that is conceiving the world through ideas is a finite, subjective thinking imposing itself upon the pre-given world of “beings”. While these assumptions do belong, in some manner, to the neo-Kantian schools in which Heidegger was educated and from which he broke with the assistance of Husserl’s phenomenology, they are assumptions that do not belong to Descartes or the early moderns generally. In fact, Descartes’ doubt at the beginning of the *Meditations* achieves a break with “intentional” late-medieval/Renaissance theories of representation, which, due to the unstable relation, inherent in those theories, of subjective representation and objective reality were subject to skeptical dissolution. Descartes’ beginning in self-certainty - and not representational truth - is precisely for the sake of grounding, and so transforming, representation in a standpoint beyond representation’s purely finite and subjective character. Indeed, Descartes’ first proof for the existence of God is explicitly prior to the grounding of clarity and distinctness as criteria of truthful “representation”. The whole point of the *Meditations* is to move the reader from certainty to truth. In this movement, the grounding of thinking in the divine actuality is the crucial turning point. Here “ideas” (precisely not representations derived from external things) that belong to finite thinking can be thought, on the basis of the certainty of the divine substance, as forming a total science in their interconnection. These “ideas” are, in their truth, of divine origin and so not imposed upon “beings” by a subjective, finite, merely human thinking, but rather are a necessity and reality that is the truth of both human thinking and “beings”. Descartes’ science is not in principle, then, a reduction of beings to subjective representation (something he accuses pre-modern theories of doing), but rather an objective account of what actually is, grounded in the divine as infinite and undeceiving source of both what is and what thinks. Indeed, Descartes is perfectly clear that his science is limited to what can be known by finite thinking (and so not reductionist) and that what is may exceed that thinking in unknowable ways, but that nonetheless what is known within the limited sphere of finite mind is true both for thought and for beings.

In fact, it belongs to many of the anti-moderns that they cannot take seriously Descartes’ own account of his position. In order to explain Descartes’ turn to inner self-certainty to ground a science of nature, John Milbank, for instance, resorts to the same old canard that Nietzsche and
Heidegger used relative to Socrates and Plato: that in the face of the “flux” of beings, the thinker retreats in “fear” to the safe citadel of stable rationality which is then imposed on the flux. All of this is not only *ad hominem* psychologizing, but begs the crucial question: are there “beings” in the phenomenological-ontological sense that these critiques assume and which must be grasped as such, or, rather, does the world only disclose itself in its truth through a self-certain thinking grounded in the divine actuality? This may be a naively ahistorical way of putting the question, but it should at least be obvious that a) it would be completely opposed to Descartes’ deepest intentions and the whole point of his argument to impose a reductionist (and therefore falsifying) *mathesis* upon beings and b) the assumption that beings “are” prior to their being extensional “ideas” is precisely what Descartes’ own argument challenges. This is not the place to engage in a full consideration of the contemporary phenomenology and ontology that serves as the background to much of the anti-modern critique of Descartes; it is enough to see that so long as this phenomenology and ontology is simply assumed, an undistorted interpretation of Descartes is necessarily foreclosed and an understanding of modern philosophy according to its own principles, pre-empted.

The dominant account of Descartes’ relation to modernity has been established through the framework of Martin Heidegger’s account of onto-theology and metaphysics. In this account western philosophy at its roots or at some later stage engages in a turn that produces a nihilistic result. Recent adumbrations of this position have made the claim that there is a nihilism in Descartes resting upon certain late-medieval and Renaissance transformations which pre-determine Descartes’ own position. While it is certainly true Descartes is working within a problematic established through late-medieval developments, nonetheless his response to that problematic cannot be reduced to its terms—indeed, the power of Descartes’ philosophy is that it builds from the negative result—the nihilism if you will, of the late middle Ages and Renaissance. To recognize this, does not of course, simply resolve the critique of Cartesian modernity posed by the Heideggerian standpoint, but it does at least suggest the need to no longer simply pre-suppose the Heideggerian framework and its built-in reductionism. Heidegger provides a powerful account of the contemporary, but to read past figures simply relative to that account is to fail to let them speak. Only by bracketing or putting aside such a framework, can we begin again to approach the question of Descartes and the modern.
Notes


7 John Milbank “Only Theology...” 41-9.
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4 Pico della Mirandola On the Dignity of Man (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1965) 4. Pico’s originality relative to the Neo-Platonic tradition, pagan, Christian, Jewish and Islamic, is a vexed question – and one Pico himself was not unaware of. Nonetheless, Pico does argue explicitly for the originality of his conception of the dignity of man; see Mirandola, 3.

5 Machiavelli The Discourses (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 200; Christopher Marlowe Doctor Faustus Act I, I. II. 1-64.

6 The classic account of renaissance skepticism and its relation to modernity is Richard H. Popkin The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

7 This is the force of the argument of Meditations V and VI.

8 For an argument that theodicy is a driving force of early modern intellectual development, both in explicit formulations and in the Enlightenment critique of it, see Neil G. Robertson “The Doctrine of Creation and the Enlightenment” in W. Otten, W. Hannam and M. Treschow, eds. Devine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought (Leiden: Brill, 2007).


10 See Meditations V. The binding of the ideas upon God is conditional in Descartes upon the prior creation of the ideas. In subsequent rationalists this