Context, history and interpretation: the religious dimension in Descartes’s metaphysics

John Cottingham

1. Philosophizing about the past
Although Descartes’s place in the canon of great philosophers in the Western tradition has never been in doubt, the last few decades have seen a significant increase in the range and depth of scholarly interest in his thought. The work of Desmond Clarke has contributed significantly to this, and, as the editors of this volume published to honour him have noted, that contribution has been particularly concerned with the importance of context – in the first place, the importance of reading Descartes’s best known works in the wider context of his philosophical and scientific writings as a whole, and, in the second place, the value of studying these writings in the context of their time, paying attention in particular to what the new Cartesian philosophy meant to his contemporaries and immediate successors, and indeed to how the very idea of a distinctive Cartesian philosophy took shape in the early-modern period.

There can be no doubt that the closely contextualized and historically immersed approach to the history of philosophy exemplified by the work of Clarke and others pays great dividends. This is not to say that it is the only valid way of studying Descartes’s ideas. A paradigm example of a rather different approach that has nevertheless greatly enriched our thinking about Descartes is that of Bernard Williams, who makes it clear in the preface to his seminal study, Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry, that his book is ‘intended to be philosophy before it is history.’ This certainly does not mean that Williams shared the dismissive attitude of some of contemporary philosophers towards the history of philosophy; his book includes a great deal of detailed reference to a wide range of Cartesian texts, and to how Descartes shaped his ideas in response to contemporary critics. But Williams believed that in the sort of history of philosophy that was fundamentally worth doing there had to be, as he put it, ‘a cut-off point, where authenticity is replaced as the objective by the aim of articulating philosophical ideas’.

An example of this was Williams’s idea of the ‘absolute conception’ of knowledge, which he attributed to Descartes, namely the goal of reaching a special kind of truth – the truth about how things are independently of our own local ways of conceiving them. The Cartesian project, so understood, is supposed to give us the kind of knowledge that is free from the relativity arising from the preconceptions of the local cultural context in which we operate, and even free from the particular perspective of our human standpoint (for example our human modes of sensory awareness). It is clear that Williams’s interests in this idea are not primarily derived from asking whether it represents a historically faithful interpretation of Descartes, but are driven instead by his own, very twentieth-century, philosophical concerns, for example about whether the modern conception of scientific inquiry presupposes that our theories about the world are constrained by how the world really is ‘anyway’, and hence that over time our various scientific accounts (and perhaps those of any other rational inquirers elsewhere in the universe) will tend to converge, as they approach closer to the truth, ‘guided’, as Williams put it in a later work, ‘by the way things actually are’.

In ‘history of philosophy’ understood in this way, exegesis of the canonical works is, ultimately, in the service of exploring the writer’s own philosophical concerns, albeit focused through the lens of a close reading of a historical text. To put it another way, the historical

---

1 This is a draft typescript of a paper the definitive version of which will appear in S. Gaukroger and K. Wilson (ed.), Essays in Honour of Desmond Clarke Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).


3 Williams, Descartes, xvi.

4 Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (London, 1985), Ch. 8, 136.
scholarship, both textual and contextual, is never an end in itself; the point of the exercise is to bring the ideas of a writer such as Descartes into juxtaposition with the tensions and problems of our own contemporary worldview. Hence, for example, Williams’s interest in ‘the absolute conception’, and the notion of convergence, went hand in hand with what is a very unCartesian distinction between truth in the domain of science and in ethics. In ethical inquiry, unlike scientific inquiry, Williams was very sceptical about the possibility of convergence: he saw no prospect of a ‘convincing theory of knowledge for the convergence of reflective ethical thought on ethical reality in even a distant analogy to the scientific case’. Whatever one makes of the resulting set of questions (and in my view they are rich and fascinating ones), it is clear that they take us quite a distance from the philosophical world of the early-modern period, certainly that of Descartes and his followers, for whom the ‘light of reason’ discloses indubitable facts about goodness just as it does in respect of mathematical truth.

If we contrast all this with the approach to history of philosophy found in Des Clarke’s work, it becomes clear, I think, that the latter is more firmly anchored in the philosophical world of the early-modern period than is the case with Williams. But these are to some extent matters of degree rather than kind. Certainly Clarke’s way of doing history of philosophy does not aim to immerse us so entirely in the context of the times that we lose sight of our own present day philosophical preoccupations. Such an aim would be in any case incoherent, since it is impossible for any thinker to step wholly outside the contemporary cultural and intellectual milieu that necessarily shapes much of his or her thinking. And indeed some of Clarke’s most interesting discussions, for example his account of Descartes’s view of the relation between mental and physical phenomena, cast light on the Cartesian position precisely by bringing it into juxtaposition with the views of modern writers such as Nagel, Davidson, Kripke and Putnam.

In short, we can agree that worthwhile history of philosophy, of the kind that the best historically oriented work of both Clarke and Williams exemplifies, is sensitive both to nuances of history and context, and to the enduring philosophical significance of the ideas studied. But we may nevertheless think of practitioners of the history of philosophy as falling along a spectrum, with at the one end those for whom (to revert to Williams’s way of putting it) the subject is ‘history before it is philosophy’, while at the other end lie those for whom it is ‘the other way round.’ Yet despite their different priorities, there is one thing on which all those who philosophize about the past would surely agree, namely on rejecting that deracinated conception of philosophical inquiry that appears, dismayingly, to be gaining ground in many parts of the philosophical academy—a conception which entirely ignores the philosophical legacy of the past and is entirely focused on the latest ‘cutting-edge’ theories advanced supposedly out of the blue, or through debate with close contemporaries. Though practised in many ways, and with many different emphases, the history of philosophy serves as a salutary reminder that our philosophical reasoning is never a neutral, ahistorical process, but has been conditioned in countless ways by the long sweep of Western culture which delivered us to where we are today.

2. Context: forwards and backwards
One of the results of the ‘contextualised’ approach to the study of Descartes, clearly apparent in the work of Clarke and others, has been a move towards interpreting Descartes’s metaphysical

---

5 Why this distinction is indeed ‘unCartesian’ will be explained (with suitable qualifications) in section 3, below.
6 Williams, *Ethics and the Limits*, 152.
7 *Reasons of truth* and *reasons of goodness* rank *pari passu* in the Fourth Meditation, AT vii. 58; CSM ii. 40. For more on ethical knowledge in Descartes, see section 3, below.
8 Desmond Clarke, *Descartes’s Theory of Mind* (Oxford, 2003), Ch. 9.
arguments in the light of the role they play in his wider scientific agenda. In part, this is a
reversion to the older view, held for example by the great Cartesian scholar and editor Charles
Adam, that Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology are essentially subordinate to Cartesian
science. Thus, in his work on Descartes’s theory of the mind, Clarke has brought out the extent to
which Descartes was often as much or more preoccupied with working out the physical
mechanisms that he saw as underpinning our mentation than he was with abstract metaphysical
arguments about the supposed dualistic separation of the mental from the physical. Descartes’s
wider scientific programme for a new style of explanation, which he hoped would replace the
scholastic approach prevailing in the world in which he grew up, was driven by his conviction as to
the explanatory vacuity of the ‘substantial forms and real qualities which many philosophers
suppose to inhere in things’; these he condemned as ‘harder to understand than the things they are
supposed to explain’. His own mechanistic accounts, by contrast, were supposed to have an
immediate intelligibility, since they simply ascribed to the micro world exactly the same kinds of
interactions with which we are familiar from ordinary middle-sized phenomena around us. As
Clarke persuasively argues, Descartes’s efforts in Le Monde, the Traité de L’Homme and the
Dioptrique are in large part directed to showing how what we nowadays call ‘cognitive functions’,
such as visual perception, are investigated by Descartes in terms of brain events of a certain kind
(‘ideas as brain patterns’ is Clarke’s slogan). And the same applies to non-human animals, to
whom, as Clarke puts it, ‘Descartes readily concedes … everything that takes place in us apart from
thought or reasoning’. But what of the famous theory for which the label ‘Cartesian’ is, in today’s wider
philosophical community, almost synonymous, the theory of the thinking self as an immaterial
substance, totally distinct in its nature and essence from any corporeal mechanism? If we accept
Clarke’s view that the real driving force behind Descartes’s work was the programme for ‘genuine’
(i.e. mechanistic) explanations of seeing, hearing, remembering, imagining and so on, the
introduction of the incorporeal mind represents a dead end. As Clarke puts it, Descartes’s talk of a
‘thinking thing’ was ‘true [but] uninformative’, a ‘provisional acknowledgement of failure, an
index of the work that remains to be done before a viable theory of the human mind becomes
available’. The talk of ‘failure’ is appropriate, Clarke suggests, because the Cartesian claims
about thinking substances ‘add nothing new to our knowledge’ of them. Descartes is ‘claiming no
more than … that, if thinking is occurring, there must be a thinking thing of which the act of
thinking is predicated’. So the attribute of thinking can no more be of explanatory value that the
Schoolmen’s attribute of gravitas or ‘heaviness’ was any use in explaining why heavy things fall.
The charge of explanatory vacuity seems right in one way, but can nevertheless be
misleading in so far as it tacitly assumes that Descartes must have approached the phenomenon of
human thought and rationality with a view to seeing if it could be explained after the manner of his
mechanistic programme for physics. This is indeed what Pierre Gassendi thought Descartes ought
to be doing, and fiercely criticised him for failing to do: it is no more use telling us you are a
‘thinking thing’, he objected, than telling us that wine is ‘a red thing’; what we are looking for is
the micro-structure that explains the manifest properties. Descartes’s reply is instructive: he was
utterly scathing about the very idea that one might produce some ‘quasi-chemical’ micro-

10 See for example Garber, Descartes’ Metaphysical Physics (Chicago, 1992) and Stephen Gaukroger,
Descartes’ System of Natural Philosophy (Cambridge, 2002).
11 ‘Descartes ne demande à la métaphysique qu’une seule chose, de fournir un appui solide à la vérité
scientifique.’ Charles Adam, Vie et Oeuvres de Descartes [1910] in AT xii. 143.
12 Descartes, Principia philosophiae, IV, arts. 198 and 201.
13 Clarke, Descartes’s Theory of the Mind, Ch. 2.
14 Clarke, Descartes’s Theory of the Mind, 75.
15 Clarke, Descartes’s Theory of the Mind, 257 and 258.
16 Clarke, Descartes’s Theory of the Mind, 221.
17 Fifth Objections, AT vii. 276; CSM ii. 192-3.
explanation of thinking. If we look back at the argument of the Second and Third Meditations, which is the focus of this sharp exchange, we cannot but be struck by the fact that explanatory goals, in this sense, are nowhere in the offing. The metaphysical journey has its own momentum, and as the meditator goes down deep into himself ‘shutting the eyes, stopping the ears and withdrawing all the senses’, he arrives at a self-conception which leads him directly forward towards contemplating the ‘immense light’ of the Godhead, the infinite incorporeal being whose image is reflected, albeit dimly, in his own finite created intellect. The res cogitans or ‘thinking thing’ with which the meditator identifies himself may not carry any explanatory punch of the kind that is sought by modern cognitive science, but reflecting on its nature plays a very significant role indeed in guiding the subject towards the source of truth without which no rational inquiry, scientific or any other, would be possible.

This is not of course to deny that one of the goals of the Meditations, is to open the way to knowledge of ‘the whole of that corporeal nature that is the subject matter of pure mathematics.’ Descartes himself clearly regarded his metaphysics as having a foundational role with regard to the mathematical and mechanistic scientific revolution which he hoped to inaugurate. But contextuality cuts both ways. Looking forward from the seventeenth century to subsequent developments, right down to our own time, we can indeed see how Descartes’s reductionistic mechanism with respect to animal and human physiology and psychology paved the way for modern cognitive science. Yet locating a great philosopher in the context of his time should cause us to cast our eyes backwards as well as forwards. In understanding the full picture we need to reflect on how Descartes’s philosophical outlook was shaped not just by the aspirations of the new mathematical physics that he helped create, but also by the older contemplative and immaterialist tradition of Plato and Augustine that remained at the centre of his worldview. Giving right and due acknowledgement to Descartes the scientist should not lead us downplay the role of Descartes the theistic metaphysician.

3. The religious and ethical strands in Descartes’s metaphysics

If we are to be properly sensitive to the more traditionalist aspects of Descartes’s thinking just referred to, we need to pay close attention to the connotations and resonances of the language he uses in his metaphysical writings. Growing numbers of contemporary anglophone philosophers seem want to model their writing style on an austere, impersonal template reminiscent of that found in the scientific journals. But all philosophical discourse, whether we like it or not, is charged with manifold resonances, cultural connotations, and layers of meaning, and Descartes’s writing is no exception. One prominent example of this is the image of the light, which appears at many crucial points along the meditator’s journey towards the truth. The nightmare of doubt in the First Meditation leads the protagonist to wonder if he will ever be able to get back into the light, or instead remain lost in ‘inextricable darkness’ – in the original Latin, tenebrae, a term pregnant with religious significance in the culture in which Descartes was raised. The ancient Tenebrae liturgy for Holy Week commemorates the ‘darkness’ that fell over the land at the death of Christ – a darkness eventually to be dispersed as the day breaks on Easter morning. It does not need any explicit allusion in Descartes’s text for these connotations to have been subliminally operative for his

18 Fifth Replies, AT vii. 359; CSM ii. 248.
19 Third Meditation, opening sentence.
20 Third Meditation, AT vii 51; CSM ii. 35.
21 Fifth Meditation, AT vii 71; CSM ii. 49.
22 For the Augustinian influence, see Stephen Menn’s magisterial study Augustine and Descartes (Cambridge, 1998).
23 A development that is implicitly welcomed by many, for example Brian Leiter, when he speaks approvingly of the ‘naturalistic revolution in philosophy’, according to which philosophy should ‘either ... adopt and emulate the method of successful sciences, or ... operate in tandem with the sciences, as their abstract and reflective branch.’ The Future for Philosophy (Oxford, 2004), Editor’s Introduction, 2-3.
contemporary readers: the darkness of ignorance and confusion will be dispelled by the ‘immense light’ that appears at the end of the Third Meditation.

A preliminary glimmer of light appears the Second Meditation, with the meditator’s indubitable awareness of his own existence, and this is generalized, at the start of the Third Meditation, by a declaration of confidence in the truth of whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly. Not long afterwards we have the first explicit introduction of the term *lumen naturale* – the ‘natural light’, corresponding to what in Descartes’s much earlier work, the *Regulae*, or ‘Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence’, had been called the *lux rationis*, the ‘light of reason’. Metaphors of light and sunshine as an analogue for our apprehension of the intelligible world go back at least to Plato, and someone might suggest that there are no particularly religious overtones in all this, just a convenient image for clarity of intellectual vision, of the kind that is so simple and obvious, that you can see the truth in question, ‘with the mind’s eye’, as we say, as if it were right there in front of you. Certainly this is an important part of the story, as we see from Descartes’s own later definition of clear perception, where he describes it as what is ‘present and open to the attentive mind, just as we say we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze’. But in an age of faith such as the seventeenth century, and for a religiously educated individual such as Descartes, the religious connotations of the imagery of light and darkness would also have been inescapable. ‘Let there be light’, יְהיָ (yehi or), or in the Vulgate *fiat lux*, is of course the very first pronouncement of God in the Bible (Genesis 1:3), and the image of the divine as source of light shining in the darkness is recapitulated in Christianity’s seminal theological text, the first chapter of the Gospel of John.

Descartes was persuaded by the authors of the Second Set of Objections to set out his Third Meditation argument for God in geometrical terms, but the resulting formal presentation has not impressed critics either then or since, and if we look carefully at the text of the Third Meditation it soon becomes clear that a purely formal treatment cannot fully capture what is going on as the meditator struggles out of darkness towards the divine light. The key to the struggle is the meditator’s awareness of his own creaturely imperfection, which plays a pivotal role in his reaching for God. ‘How could I understand that I … lacked something, and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?’ (The phrasing, incidentally, echoes almost word for word that of Bonaventure in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, the ‘Journey of the Mind towards God’, four centuries earlier.) My awareness of my weakness and finitude carries with it, for Descartes, an implicit and immediate sense of something other than, and infinitely beyond, myself, which necessarily eludes my mental grasp. This crucial point is aptly seized on by Emmanuel Levinas in his discussion of the *Meditations*. On Levinas’s view (as expounded in a perceptive essay by Hilary Putnam):

What Descartes is reporting is not a step in a deductive reasoning, but a profound religious experience, an experience which might be described as the experience of a fissure, of a confrontation with something that disrupted all his categories. On this reading, Descartes is not so much proving something as acknowledging something, acknowledging a Reality that he

---

24 For the *lumen naturale* see Third Meditation (AT vii. 40; CSM ii. 28, and subsequently). For the *lux rationis*, see Descartes, *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* [c. 1628], AT x. 368; CSM i. 14.
26 *Qua ratione intelligerem me dubitare, me cupere, hoc est, aliquid mihi deesse, & me non esse omnino perfectum, si nulla idea entis perfectioris in me esset, ex cujus comparatione defectus meos agnoscerem?* (Third Meditation, AT vii. 46; CSM ii. 31). Cf. Bonaventure: *Quomodo sciret intellectus hoc esse ens defectivum et incompletum, si nulla haberet cognitionem entis absque omni defectu?* (Itinerarium mentis in Deum [1259], Part III, §3).
could not have constructed, a Reality which proves its own existence by the very fact that its presence in my mind turns out to be a phenomenological impossibility.\textsuperscript{27}

Despite the conventional image of Descartes as the pure ‘rationalist’, working towards the truth by logic alone, his encounter with the divine involves much more than detached, abstract reasoning, and is grounded in something like a directly apprehended relationship, that of creature to creator; we are dealing with an awestruck encounter, of a kind not wholly unlike those described in a number of striking episodes in the Bible, in the stories of Adam, or Abraham, or Moses, down to Samuel and the prophets.\textsuperscript{28} And in case you think that this is forcing Descartes into a channel that is quite alien to his purely rationalistic mode of philosophizing you have only to look at the passage which brings the Third Meditation to a close:

Here I should like to pause and spend some time in the contemplation of God. and gaze at, wonder at and adore the beauty of this immense light. \textit{Placet hic aliquamdiu in ipsius Dei contemplatione immorari . . . et immensi hujus luminis pulchritudinem . . . intueri, admirari, adorare.}\textsuperscript{29}

The verbs, piled one upon another, intueri, admirari, adorare, ring out almost like a litany, or prayer, and the faculties involved are not just intellectual. Wonder is involved – one of the passions that was later to be discussed by Descartes in the \textit{Passions of the Soul}, his treatise on ethics and psychology.\textsuperscript{30} God, the source of the ‘light of reason’ that drives Cartesian science, emerges here in the Third Meditation not as epistemic guarantor of the axioms for science (that will come later), but as the fountain of all truth and goodness, the ‘immense light’ towards which finite creatures must reach out, not just in a spirit of cold rational inquiry, but in awe and wonder, as their hoped-for future destiny and source of their present joy, as Descartes explicitly declares in the closing sentence of the Third Meditation.\textsuperscript{31}

Two crucial passages in Descartes’s \textit{ Replies to Objections} serve as valuable confirmation for this rich religious strand in Descartes’s philosophizing in the \textit{Meditations}, showing beyond doubt that his way of doing philosophy is not confined to the ‘left-brain’ mode of detached reasoning and abstract intellectual analysis.\textsuperscript{32} The first is a brief but highly significant comment in the Replies to the First Objections, where Descartes observes that when we attend to the perfections of God, we should not so much try to understand them as to surrender to them, or in the graphic Latin phrase, \textit{non tam capere quam capi} – not so much to grasp them as to be grasped by them.\textsuperscript{33} Modern philosophy in most of its branches (the philosophy of religion not excepted) tends to

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{27} Hilary Putnam, ‘Levinas and Judaism’, in S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi (eds), \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Levinas} (Cambridge, 1986), 33-70, at p. 42. The relevant Levinas text is \textit{Ethique et infini} [1982], transl. as \textit{Ethics and Infinity} (Pittsburgh, 1985), 91ff.

\textsuperscript{28} Genesis 3:9; Genesis 22:1; Exodus 3:5; 1 Samuel 3:4; Isaiah 6:8.

\textsuperscript{29} AT vii. 52; CSM ii. 36.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Les passions de l’âme} [1649], arts. 70–72.

\textsuperscript{31} The former, says Descartes, is apprehended through faith, the latter known by experience. Third Meditation, AT vii. 52; CSM ii. 36.

\textsuperscript{32} For more on the distinction between left and right brain modes of awareness, the former detached, analytical, impersonal, the latter more intuitive, imaginative and holistic, see Iain McGilchrist, \textit{The Master and His Emissary} (New Haven, 2009). It should be added that associating these two modes of awareness with the right and left hemispheres, respectively, is something of a schematic approximation, as McGilchrist himself stresses. There is evidence to suggest that in most people the respective functions do broadly correlate with neural activity in the relevant halves of the brain, but in normal subjects there is constant interaction between the halves.

\textsuperscript{33} AT vii. 114; CSM ii. 82.}
operate with what I have elsewhere called an ‘epistemology of detachment’, standing back from the propositions to be scrutinized in a cautious spirit of clinical aloofness. Some of this is no doubt in accord with Descartes’s own method of doubt, his determination to ‘bend his will in the opposite direction’, as he puts in the First Meditation, so as to cautiously withhold assent from anything that might lead him astray. But the encounter with the divine light of reason changes all that. As Descartes observes in the Fourth Meditation, the clarity of certain evident truths produces a spontaneous and irresistible assent in the will: *ex magna luce in intellectu magna consequuta est propensio in voluntate* (‘from a great light in the intellect there followed a great propensity in the will’). When you focus on a transparent mathematical truth, or a transparent moral truth you have no choice but spontaneously to declare ‘yes, it’s true – to be affirmed!’ or ‘Yes, it’s good – to be pursued!’

It is striking, especially perhaps for the modern reader, to see Descartes asserting that the scope of the ‘great light’ in the intellect encompasses the domain of ethical as well as of mathematical truth – Descartes takes the *ratio veri* (‘reason of truth’) and *ratio boni* (‘reason of goodness’) both together in the same breath. For many moral philosophers since Hume, the domains of fact and of value are sharply separated, but in Descartes’s metaphysical worldview they are part of the one and the same objective, divinely grounded reality. (To avoid possible misunderstanding it should perhaps be added that we are speaking here of the simplest and clearest ethical truths that are manifest to the natural light – perhaps truths such as ‘generosity is good’, or ‘cruelty is bad’ – truths analogous in their simplicity and clarity to a simple mathematical truth such as ‘two plus three makes five’. Descartes’s thesis about the role of the natural light in ethics does not commit him to the idea that the answer to every detailed practical question about value is to be found by turning away from the light, as Descartes’s argument in the Fourth Meditation makes clear, is the truest, the best kind of freedom for human beings. The only way such assent can be avoided is by turning away from the light – something human beings have the power to do, and unfortunately are all too prone to do, for there are times when ‘men prefer the darkness to the light’ (to quote once again from the Fourth Gospel). True freedom as spontaneous submission to the light: the religious flavour of this may seem to take us very far from the image of Descartes that our modern secularized age prefers – the cautious, sceptical, purely rational, scientifically oriented thinker. But the *Objections and Replies* once again confirm the authenticity of the religious strand. In the Second Replies, Descartes makes it clear that he affirms another source of clarity and transparency besides the natural light of reason. He articulates the idea of a ‘double source’ of clarity or transparency (*duplex claritas sive perspicuitas*), one coming from the natural light, the other from divine grace. The latter, the *lumen supernaturale*, the supernatural light, gives rise, no less than the natural light, to the irresistible assent of the intellect. Critics who don’t like to think of Descartes as religious are prone to say when he makes a comment of this kind he must be being

---

35 AT vii. 22; CSM ii. 15.
36 AT vii. 59; CSM ii. 41.
37 AT vii. 58; CSM ii. 40.
38 For the limits of deduction from first principles in science, see *Discourse on the Method* [*Discours de la méthode*, 1637], Part Six, AT vi. 64; CSM i. 144. For the practical side to Descartes’s ethics, the ‘earthly morality’ that supplements ‘angelic morality’, see Gary Steiner, *Descartes as a Moral Thinker* (Amhurst, NY, 2004).
40 John 3:19.
41 AT vii. 147-8; CSM ii. 105.
42 Second Replies, AT vii. 148, line 27; CSM ii. 106, line 12.
insincerely, or displaying cautious deference to the religious authorities. But in fact the remark closely matches his original assertion in the Fourth Meditation. From a great light in the intellect there comes a great inclination of the will, and the assent, says the Fourth Meditation, can be produced either by ‘clearly perceived reasons of truth and goodness’ or by a ‘divinely produced disposition of my thought’. In the light of the Second Replies, this passage can now be properly understood: the assent is generated either by the transparency of my rational perception (the natural light), or by an outflowing of the will generated by the supernatural light – the light of faith.43

This is actually quite an orthodox position (it harks back to the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, for example).44 For Descartes to jump in one sentence from natural to supernatural may seem quite a leap to the today’s audience, but the term ‘natural’, as in ‘natural light’ can itself mislead the modern reader. We need to beware of assimilating it to the modern secularized sense, as in the contemporary use of the term ‘naturalism’, which is now used to refer to the view that ultimately all reality is grounded in nothing more than the empirically established phenomena described by the physicist. For Descartes, by contrast, as for his medieval predecessors, the terms ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ had much richer connotations that take us well beyond the domain of merely contingent or empirical phenomena. Thus Descartes writes in the Sixth Meditation: ‘by “nature” I understand nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God.’45

Yet even if we accept that the ‘natural’ and the ‘supernatural’ are both, for Descartes, understood in ultimately theistic terms, and even if we also grant that there are some contexts (that of basic mathematical intuitions perhaps) where Descartes’s conception of free and valid assent as spontaneous submission to the light may seem philosophically defensible, nevertheless the additional idea of free and spontaneous submission to the supernatural light of faith may outrage many modern philosophers. Is it not out of tune with the ideals of rational autonomy and independence that are the hallmark of good philosophy? Even on Descartes’s own terms, how could such submission be rationally defensible, given that the ‘revealed truths’ of faith are, ex hypothesi, ones that are not susceptible of confirmation by reason or indeed normal empirical means? Worse, doesn’t it go against Descartes’s own maxim, ‘give your assent only to what is clearly and distinctly perceived’?46

This raises many fascinating questions which cannot be dealt with in the space available here, so in bringing this discussion of the religious elements in Descartes’s metaphysical thinking to a close I will confine myself instead to making one general observation, which may serve as a pointer for further inquiry. Of the two images of Descartes that have surfaced in the course of our argument, the independent, rationally autonomous Descartes that many modern philosophers prefer, and the religiously oriented Descartes that many would like to forget about, it is the former, the autonomous self-sufficient conception, that emerges on further reflection as a confused and untenable ideal. We may like to think that in our use of reason we are lordly, wholly independent beings, but the idea that we could produce a self-standing justification of the ‘natural light of reason’ is a fantasy. As Thomas Nagel has recently argued, in the case of our most basic logical reasonings, no appeal to natural evolutionary history, or pragmatic success, or any other court can ever produce an adequate vindication: ‘Eventually the attempt to understand oneself in evolutionary naturalistic terms must bottom out in something that is grasped as valid in itself – something without which the evolutionary understanding would not be possible.’47 We are not self-creating beings, and the idea that reason could validate itself is inherently absurd.

43 AT vii. 58 lines 1-2; CSM ii. 40, lines 23-25. My argument in this section draws on material from J. Cottingham, Cartesian Reflections (Oxford, 2008), Part V, to which the reader is referred for more detailed treatments of the various ways in which God occupies a central role in Descartes’s philosophy.

44 See for example Thomas Aquinas, De trinitate 1.1, ad 5; 1.3; Summa theologiae Ia Iae, qu. 109-114.

45 AT vii. 80; CSM ii. 56. For various sense in which the term ‘nature’ is used in the Sixth Meditation, see J. Cottingham, ‘Descartes, Sixth Meditation: The External World, “Nature” and Human Experience’, in V. Chappell (ed.), Descartes’s Meditations: Critical Essays (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 207-223.

46 Fourth Meditation, AT vii. 62; CSM ii. 43.

Even those sympathetic to this may still baulk at the idea of the light of faith, objecting that faith in such contexts boils down to no more than accepting the authority of others, and bowing to a given religious or cultural tradition. And of course there is an individualistic strand in much of Descartes’s own thought that revolts against the idea of deferring to authority.48 But as Linda Zagzebski’s ground-breaking book *Epistemic Authority* has recently demonstrated, epistemic self-reliance turns out to be a confused and probably incoherent ideal; any rational and self-reflective person, she argues, must in the end be committed to believing and acting on authority.49 If that is right, then the question, for a rational philosopher, is not whether we can do without faith, but which faith we give our allegiance to.

None of this of course means that Descartes should be interpreted as an apologist for the religious establishment. He is known to have been wary (for good reason) of being drawn into theological controversies,50 and was very scathing about the arbitrary use of power by the ecclesiastical authorities, such as ‘those who had Galileo condemned, confusing Aristotle with the Bible and abusing the authority of the Church in order to vent their passions’.51 Nevertheless, if the argument canvassed above is on the right lines, Descartes’s philosophy, for all its progressive scientific aspects, is located within an overarching epistemic and metaphysical framework that acknowledges our fundamental human dependence, the ‘weakness of our nature’, as the very last sentence of the *Meditations* reminds us. Descartes may have spoken of starting afresh, ‘right from the foundations’,52 but the very process of philosophical inquiry itself could not even begin without an implicit reliance on a stable rational order at the heart of things, and an implicit faith that what comes to us from that source will point us towards the truth. Though Descartes’s subsequent philosophical system will aim to appeal only to our innate human ‘good sense’,53 from the start the Cartesian conception of our dependent human status is one that implicitly keeps open the door to religious faith. Those who think we can dispense with all this, as an outmoded relic of a discredited world outlook, would do well to reflect on how far our own contemporary secular worldview can make good its implicit claim to be a rational and well-founded system of thought.

48 See for example *Discourse*, part one.
50 See Descartes, *Conversation with Burman* [1648], AT v. 178; CSMK 353.
51 Descartes, Letter to Mersenne of 31 March 1641. AT iii. 349-50; CSMK 177.
52 First Meditation, opening sentence.
53 ‘Le bon sens’: *Discourse on the Method*, opening sentence.