

CABBAGE À LA DESCARTES

DEVIN SANCHEZ CURRY

University of Pennsylvania

This article offers an interpretation of Descartes's method of doubt. It wields an examination of Descartes's pedagogy—as exemplified by *The Search for Truth* as well as the *Meditations*—to make the case for the sincerity (as opposed to artificiality) of the doubts engendered by the First Meditation. Descartes was vigilant about balancing the need to use his method of doubt to achieve absolute certainty with the need to compensate for the various foibles of his scholastic and unschooled readers. Nevertheless, Descartes endeavored to instill willful, context-independent, universal doubt across his readership. If all goes well, readers of the *Meditations* are like method actors; the Meditator is the character they are meant to bring to life, via the method of meditating on reasons for doubt. The article concludes with the suggestion that Descartes was the same kind of skeptic as the early Academic skeptics Arcesilaus and Carneades.

1. Introduction

Many interpreters insist that Descartes's method of doubt produces doubts that are somehow 'artificial', as opposed to 'sincere' (Broughton 2002: *xi*, 16–17, 52, 61). These interpreters make one or both of two related charges. First, they charge that Descartes merely pretended (or was warranted only in pretending) to will himself to suspend all of his beliefs.¹ Second, they charge that Descartes doubted only within the narrow context of his metaphysical meditations.

Interpreters also frequently, and aptly, describe Descartes as having had a "purely 'methodological' interest in skepticism" (Brown 2013: 25). Descartes was not enamored of doubt for doubt's sake. He reported that he "had seen many an-

1. Unlike most of his predecessors and many contemporary philosophers of mind, Descartes held belief, disbelief, and suspension of belief to be operations of the will. See Jayasekera (2016), in this journal, for discussion.

Contact: Devin Curry <dcurr@sas.upenn.edu>

cient writings by the Academics and Sceptics on this subject, and was reluctant to reheat and serve this stale cabbage.” Nevertheless, he “could not avoid devoting one whole Meditation to it.” Why? Because “the best way of achieving a firm knowledge of reality is first to accustom ourselves to doubting all things” (CSM 2:94, modified; AT 7:130).² Descartes used the method of doubt as a mere means to an anti-skeptical end. However, the fact that Descartes undertook the method of doubt for instrumental purposes—the fact that the method is artificial—does not entail that the doubts resulting from that method are artificial.

Descartes’s use of skeptical arguments is undeniably methodological. Nevertheless, in this article I argue that the resultant doubts are sincere. The second section unpacks the two respects in which interpreters have taken Descartes’s doubts to be artificial. The third section examines Descartes’s tactics for instilling doubt across his intellectually diverse readership, as exemplified in his dialogue *The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light* as well as his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The fourth section wields this study of Descartes’s pedagogy to argue that the doubts engendered by the First Meditation are not artificial in either of the respects described in the second section. The fifth section suggests that the sincerity of Descartes’s own doubts, together with his attitude towards inquiry, render him a skeptic in the same sense that the early Academics were skeptics.

2. Two Varieties of Artificiality

David Rosenthal has provided a recent reading of the *Meditations* that construes Descartes’s doubts as artificial. Rosenthal highlights the methodological role played by the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation:

The doubting described [in the First Meditation] will strike most readers as so outlandish as to be not worth taking seriously. But they underwrite an important methodological purpose. A careful reading makes clear that Descartes’s concern there is not whether the things he doubts might turn out not to be true, nor even that we might turn out not to have good epistemological grounds for believing them. Rather, the doubting of Meditation I is an exploration of how much it is psychologically possible to doubt if one puts as much mental effort into the doubting as one can. (2015: 541)

2. Descartes’s writings are cited by standard abbreviations (explained in the Abbreviations section below).

As Rosenthal reads it, the First Meditation reports an intellectual exercise—if we try to doubt everything, how much can we successfully doubt?—that aims at reaching a criterion of truth. Once this criterion is grasped, meditators should scrap the ladder of doubt used to reach it.

The Meditation I doubting is important not for showing that we are actually uncertain about the things we seem able there to doubt. Rather, the doubting is important in revealing that what matters in getting at the truth is whether an intentional content is clear and distinct. (Rosenthal 2015: 543)

For Rosenthal, the doubts conjured in the First Meditation are artificial insofar as they do not leave the meditator ‘actually uncertain about the things we seem able there to doubt’. Though Descartes was able (with great mental effort) to doubt everything, his doubts fell away as soon as they fulfilled their purpose. Crucially, Descartes never sincerely ceased to believe the truths he found himself (temporarily) psychologically capable of doubting.

Rosenthal attempts to vindicate this reading in a footnote, writing that “As Descartes in effect notes in Meditation II: ‘[O]ne who wants to achieve knowledge above the ordinary level should feel ashamed at having taken ordinary ways of talking as a basis for doubt’ (AT VII 32)” (2015: 543 Footnote 6; cf. CSM 2:21). But the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation do not rely on ordinary ways of talking. As the Meditator reflects, the conclusion that “there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised . . . is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons” (CSM 2:14–15; AT 7:21–22). Descartes may have been ashamed at having taken ordinary ways of talking as a basis for analyzing perception in the Second Meditation, but he was surely not ashamed at having taken (apparently) powerful and well thought-out reasons as a basis for doubt in the First Meditation. The quotation that Rosenthal pulls from the Meditator’s reflection on beeswax in the Second Meditation has nothing to do with whether the Meditator is actually uncertain about the things she doubts in the First Meditation.

Nevertheless, by construing the doubts of the First Meditation as artificial, Rosenthal aligns himself with two interlocking strands of Descartes interpretation with long histories. According to the first strand, Cartesian doubts are artificial because they do not (or, normatively speaking, need not) involve a willful suspension of belief. According to the second strand, the doubts are artificial because they apply only in the theoretical context of the *Meditations*.

In the Objections and Replies to the *Meditations*, Marin Mersenne asserted

that Descartes's "vigorous rejection of the images of all bodies as delusive was not something you actually and really carried through, but was merely a fiction of the mind" (CSM 2:87; AT 7:122). Generalizing Mersenne's point, Pierre Gassendi wrote that "no one will believe that you [Descartes] have really convinced yourself that not one thing you formerly knew is true" and accused Descartes of "resort[ing] to artifice, sleight of hand and circumlocution" (CSM 2:180; AT 7:258). Mersenne and Gassendi thought Descartes psychologically incapable of willing himself to suspend all of his beliefs. So, they concluded, he must have just pretended. Two centuries later, Charles Sanders Peirce repeated this charge and added another.

To make the reflection that many of the things which appear certain to us are probably false, and that there is not one which may not be among the errors, is very sensible. But to make believe one does not believe anything is an idle and self-deceptive pretence. (Peirce 1931–58: 4:71)

According to Peirce, Descartes's pretense was not only self-deceptive (since he was psychologically incapable of universal doubt) but also idle. Descartes had no good reason to will himself to suspend all of his beliefs; he just had reason to regard each of his beliefs as (in principle) dubitable. In line with Peirce's analysis, Harry Frankfurt has argued that Descartes's "resolution to overthrow all his opinions requires . . . no more of him than a recognition that the slate of his proposed theory is clean because he does not yet know any proposition to have a legitimate place in the system of knowledge he wishes to construct" (1970/2007: 24). According to Peirce and Frankfurt, the method of doubt need not produce sincere doubts. In other words, whether or not he was psychologically able, Descartes was never warranted in willing himself to suspend all of his beliefs; it was methodologically sufficient to conduct his metaphysical inquiry with all dubitable beliefs intellectually bracketed, as if he had willfully ceased to believe them. For example, undertaking the method of doubt did not require Descartes to come to sincerely doubt that $2+3=5$. It required only that he intellectually refrain from allowing $2+3=5$ to count as one of the things he knew, in his official capacity as a metaphysician, until he proved it to be indubitable.

As Edwin Curley notes, Frankfurt's "concept of indubitability here is a normative one" (1978: 83). Whereas Rosenthal treats the method of doubt as "an exploration of how much it is psychologically possible to doubt if one puts as much mental effort into the doubting as one can" (2015: 541), Frankfurt treats the method of doubt as a rational procedure for determining which beliefs one is warranted in doubting and which one is unwarranted in doubting. In the third and fourth sections of this article, I defend a third interpretation: that the method of doubt is a procedure for determining which beliefs one is normatively war-

ranted and unwarranted in doubting via an exploration of how much it is psychologically possible to doubt.

Whereas the first strand questions whether the method of doubt requires an unfeigned suspension of belief, the second strand asserts that the Meditator is required to suspend belief only within the narrow theoretical confines of the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes variously referred to the doubts (and reasons for doubt) of the First Meditation as ‘slight’, ‘exaggerated’, ‘hyperbolic’, and ‘metaphysical’ (CSM 2:16, 2:121, 2:159, 2:308, 2:373, 2:408–409; AT 7:14, 7:172, 7:226, 7:460, 7:546, 10:513). Janet Broughton has argued that Descartes treated suspending belief like playing a game. In the context of the game that is meditation on first philosophy, even the slightest and most metaphysically obtuse reason to doubt a proposition is ipso facto sufficient reason to withhold belief from that proposition. However, Broughton argues that ceasing to believe on the basis of any old argument for doubt—of the slightest reason to be uncertain—“would be ridiculous behavior if [the meditator] weren’t playing the game” (2002: 50). The component of the method of doubt that demands the suspension of belief in everything the meditator is capable of doubting is thus, according to Broughton, “highly artificial. It is a maxim useful to someone with a special aim, not a rule meant to be naturally expressive of the norms of conscientious belief” (2002: 51–52). The skeptical arguments of the First Meditation have currency—they rationally warrant the suspension of belief—only within the meditational context.³

Descartes did proclaim that his skeptical arguments lack a certain sort of currency outside of the meditational context. While responding to Gassendi’s charge that he had merely pretended to doubt the testimony of the senses, Descartes allowed that “when it is a question of organizing our life, it would, of course, be foolish not to trust our senses . . . no sane person ever seriously doubts such things.” However, in the very next sentence he cautioned that “when our inquiry concerns what can be known with complete certainty by the human intellect, it is quite unreasonable to refuse to reject these things in all seriousness as doubtful and even as false” (CSM 2:243; AT 7:351). Bernard Williams has insisted, with reference to these passages, that

There is no question, we must always remember, of hyperbolic doubt playing any rational role within ordinary life: the Doubt is to be taken

3. Broughton also seems to endorse the first strand of interpretation. For Broughton, the suspension of belief, even in the meditational context, is not a sustained act of the will to withhold assent from dubitable beliefs, but merely “the setting aside of claims by regarding them as no better than false, or by ‘pretending’ (CSM 2:15; AT 7:22) that they are false” (2002: 116). (I analyze the Meditator’s use of pretense in Section 3.3.) Indeed, Broughton writes that “I do not mean to be saying anything, one way or the other, about the power of the human mind to enter a state of doubtfulness about a proposition” (2002: 99).

entirely seriously in the context of an enquiry about what can be most certainly known to us, he tells Gassendi, but ‘one must bear in mind that distinction which I [Descartes] have insisted on in various places, between the actions of life and the search for truth’ (AT VII 350); and the existence of the external world is something which ‘no one of serious mind ever seriously doubted’ (AT VII 15–16). (1978: 46; cf. CSM 2:243, 2:11)

For Williams as for Broughton, Descartes drew a consistent contextualist line between the status of beliefs in the library and the status of those same beliefs in the marketplace. Beliefs that are considered dubious in the former context may well be considered certain in the latter.

Against Rosenthal, Mersenne, Gassendi, Peirce, Frankfurt, Broughton, and Williams, I maintain that the method of doubt rationally warrants the unfeigned, willful suspension of all dubitable beliefs, in the marketplace as well as the library. Descartes recognized that he could successfully disseminate his new metaphysical system only by first getting his readers to doubt sincerely. In order to defuse the two charges of artificiality just scouted, it will therefore be helpful to understand the pedagogical tactics that Descartes employed to reach the different audiences he envisioned for his work. These tactics are on full display in Descartes’s largely neglected dialogue, *The Search for Truth*.

3. Four Cartesian Doubters

Descartes set two goals for *The Search*: to expound Cartesian epistemology and metaphysics, and “to make these truths equally useful to everybody” (CSM 2:401; AT 10:498). Descartes knew that the latter was an ambitious aim. No single rhetorical strategy could make his philosophy useful—much less ideologically acceptable—to everybody.

The Search features three interlocutors: Polyander and Epistemon are visitors to Eudoxus’s country home.⁴ Polyander, the everyman, has an “outstanding and inquiring” mind but “has never studied at all” (CSM 2:401; AT 10:498–499). Epistemon is a name-dropping Aristotelian who “has a detailed knowledge of everything that can be learned in the Schools” (CSM 2:401; AT 10:499). Finally, Eudoxus is Descartes’s mouthpiece, oh-so-humbly described as “a man of mod-

4. Nobody knows when Descartes composed the posthumously published *Search*. Red Watson (2002: 245–246) has suggested that *The Search* is based on a visit from Desbarreaux (the alleged inspiration for Polyander) and Picot (the alleged inspiration for Epistemon) in the early 1640s. Others suggest an earlier date of composition; see Ariew et al. (2003: 230) and Rodis-Lewis (1999: 196–197, Footnote 6). Of *The Search* itself, Watson writes that “the dialogue is awful” (2002: 246). I disagree.

erate intellect but possessing a judgement which is not corrupted by any false beliefs and a reason which retains all the purity of its nature" (CSM 2:401; AT 10:498). Unlike the fictional narrator of the *Meditations*, Eudoxus is a straightforward replica of Descartes. Descartes/Eudoxus, Epistemon, Polyander, and the Meditator are four distinct Cartesian doubters, whose respective doubts (and paths to doubt) deserve separate consideration. I consider the doubts of Polyander, Epistemon and the Meditator in the present section. I return to Descartes's own doubts in the fifth section.

Eudoxus is sensitive to the fact that convincing Polyander and Epistemon to adopt his method of doing philosophy (and attendant metaphysics) will necessitate individualized pedagogical techniques. He guides Polyander slowly and carefully through the first stages of the Cartesian method. Epistemon complains about how long the process takes (CSM 2:418; AT 10:525). Meanwhile, rather than engaging Epistemon in the sort of high-level debate the schoolman is accustomed to, Eudoxus urges Epistemon to witness as Polyander continues to model the method using only "common sense, and his reason [which] has not been marred by any false preconceptions" (CSM 2:420; AT 10:527). In so doing, Eudoxus walks a balance beam betwixt the devil of losing Polyander to dogmatic skepticism and the deep blue sea of allowing Epistemon to retain his false preconceptions.

3.1. Polyander

In the thirteen extant pages of *The Search*, Eudoxus focuses most of his argumentative attention on ushering Polyander through the method of doubt and to the celebrated Cogito insight that since he is doubting, he must exist.⁵ Eudoxus is sanguine about his ability to help Polyander discover truths. When the unschooled Polyander laments his poor epistemic position relative to the learned Epistemon, Eudoxus responds that "on the contrary, Polyander, I think it is you who will gain the greater benefit from [this discussion] since you are unprejudiced; and it will be far easier for me to set on the right track someone who is neutral than to guide Epistemon, who will often take up the opposite position" (CSM 2:403; AT 10:502). Polyander may not be in a position to discover the Cogito on his own, but he does not resist Eudoxus's guidance.

The path to the Cogito is paved with radical doubt, and Eudoxus duly leads Polyander to doubt everything he once thought he knew. Upon being presented with the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation, and then following Eu-

5. In *The Search*, the Cogito is tellingly spelled out "I am doubting, therefore I exist" (CSM 2:417; AT 10: 523), as opposed to the *Discourse's* "I am thinking, therefore I exist" (CSM 1:127; AT 6:32) or the Second Meditation's "I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind" (CSM 2:17; AT 7:25).

doxus's instructions to have "the courage" to will himself to doubt everything, Polyander reveals himself as being "forced to confess that I know nothing with any certainty, that I am doubtful about everything and certain of nothing" (CSM 2:408–409; AT 10:513–515). But global doubt is just a pit stop in Polyander's search for truth. Eudoxus leads Polyander back out of doubt as easily as he was led in. Struck by the force of the Cogito, Polyander declares himself to be newly certain that he exists so long as he is doubting.⁶

Elsewhere, however, Descartes worried that many undereducated people would be harder to lead out of doubt than Polyander, their champion in *The Search*. The very lack of education—and consequent weakness of mind—that allows Polyander to be more easily led than Epistemon might cause other laymen to become lost in doubt forever. In particular, Descartes worried that once undereducated readers began sincerely doubting, they would be wont to succumb to the trendy dogmatic skepticism of 17th century Europe, and let their doubts adversely impact their practical affairs.⁷ Descartes published the *Discourse on Method* for a wide, French-speaking audience: for curious readers of Polyander's ilk as well as Epistemon's. In the *Discourse*, Descartes noted that "the world is largely composed of two types of minds for whom [the resolution to abandon all the opinions one has hitherto accepted] is quite unsuitable." People with one type of mind "have enough reason or modesty to recognize that they are less capable of distinguishing the true from the false than certain others by whom they can be taught; such people should be content to follow the opinions of these others rather than seek better opinions themselves." People with the other type of mind "cannot avoid precipitate judgments and never have the patience to direct all their thoughts in an orderly manner; consequently, if they once took the liberty of doubting the principles they accepted and of straying from the common path, they could never stick to the track that must be taken as a short-cut, and they would remain lost all their lives" (CSM 1:118; AT 6:15).

Polyander exhibits both of these weaknesses in *The Search*. He exudes modesty, asserting things like "I fear that I should simply go wool-gathering if I tried to consider such abstract matters" (CSM 2:408; AT 10:512; cf. CSM 2:403; AT 10:502). This modesty allows Polyander to be content allowing Eudoxus to "guide us step by step along simple and easy paths to knowledge of the things

6. Interestingly, in *The Search*, Eudoxus identifies his Archimedean point not with the Cogito, but with the state of universal doubt preceding it (CSM 2:409; AT 10:515).

7. Descartes differentiated two sorts of education—formal schooling and philosophical reflection—and took the latter to correlate strongly with strength of mind (CSM 1:111–116; AT 6:1–10). For example, he questioned the mental fortitude of (the Epistemon-like) Reverend Father Bourdin by challenging Bourdin's "learning" and comparing him to a "layman", possessing "a sharpness of intellect more suited to a bricklayer than a Jesuit priest" (CSM 2:385; AT 7:564–565). Descartes expected Polyander to be more susceptible to the *crise pyrrhonienne* than Epistemon insofar as the layman had exercised his intellect less than the schoolman.

you want to teach us” (CSM 2:412; AT 10:518; cf. CSM 2:414; AT 10:520). Despite his eagerness to be led, Polyander frequently strays too far ahead of Eudoxus’s lead, away from the path to knowledge. He fails to avoid precipitate judgments time and time again; only Eudoxus’s interventions force him, for example, to “admit that [a hasty answer] no longer seems adequate to me, especially when I think of the confusion and uncertainty into which, as you have shown me, it can plunge us if we want to make the answer clearer and understand it better” (CSM 2:411; AT 10:516; cf. CSM 2:412; AT 10:518). Without Eudoxus to rescue him, Polyander would never find his way out of radical doubt. Eudoxus “confess[es] that it would be dangerous for someone who does not know a ford to venture across it without a guide, and many have lost their lives in doing so. But you have nothing to fear if you follow me” (CSM 2:408; AT 10:512).

Polyander is the archetype for a broad class of potential readers of Descartes’s work. Unfortunately, Descartes could not hold each of his undereducated readers’ hands as they worked through his method. He therefore warned readers not to stray from the path he set before them. He also excluded discussion of the hyperbolic doubts—those that arise from the deceptive God, defective origins, and evil demon hypotheses of the First Meditation—from the *Discourse*. As Descartes wrote to Vatier, he “did not dare to go into detail about the arguments of the skeptics, or say everything which is necessary to withdraw the mind from the senses” because “these thoughts did not seem to me suitable for inclusion in a book which I wished to be intelligible in part even to women while providing matter for thought for the finest minds” (CSMK 86; AT 1:560).⁸ Descartes expounded this reasoning in a letter to Mersenne.

I left [the hyperbolic doubts] out on purpose and after deliberation, mainly because I wrote in the vernacular. I was afraid weak minds might avidly embrace the doubts and scruples which I would have had to propound, and afterwards be unable to follow as fully the arguments by which I would have endeavored to remove them. Thus I would have set them on a false path and been unable to bring them back. (CSMK 53; AT 1:350)

Descartes did not want the weak-minded to become so lost in the abyss of doubt that they could not be retrieved by first philosophy. Doubts are not for wallowing in; they are for swallowing and then purging. Both of Descartes’s central metaphors for the method of doubt bear this out. Digging a hole in the ground is a prerequisite for building a house on a secure foundation. But, in

8. Descartes did not consider all women to be Polyanderish; Elisabeth of Bohemia, for instance, neatly fit neither the Polyander nor Epistemon archetype.

the course of a successful construction project, the hole gets filled in (CSM 2:12, 2:366–383, 2:406–407; AT 7:17, 7:336–361, 10:509). Likewise, the wise apple picker does not constantly check her basket for rotten apples. She empties her basket of all its apples once, and then makes sure to put only flawless fruit back in (CSM 2:324, 2:349; AT 7:481, 7:512).

This is the sense in which the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation are methodological: they serve a greater good, and should be discarded once that good has been secured. Nevertheless, Descartes expected the doubts produced by those arguments to be sincere. He worked hard to ensure that their sincerity would not get over-earnest readers like Polyander into trouble.

3.2. *Epistemon*

While recognizing that Polyander is in danger of doubting too fervently, Eudoxus is not confident he can convince Epistemon to doubt at all. Eudoxus avers that

someone who, like him, is stuffed full of opinions and taken up with any number of preconceptions finds it difficult to submit himself exclusively to the natural light, for he has long been in the habit of yielding to authority rather than lending his ear to the dictates of his own reason. He would rather question others and ponder on what the ancients have written than consult his own thoughts about what judgement he should make. From childhood he has taken for reason what rested only on the authority of his teachers; so now he puts forward his own authority as reason, and is anxious that others should submit to him in the way that he himself once submitted to others. (CSM 2:416; AT 10:522–523)

The Cartesian method of inquiry begins with doubting what the inquirer learned as a child. Epistemon does not merely fail to doubt the falsehoods of his youth. He actively propagates them.

Eudoxus seldom engages Epistemon directly in *The Search*. There are three plausible (and compatible) explanations for this lack of engagement. First, *The Search* is incomplete; Descartes promised two books of dialogue, but we have only thirteen pages of the first book. Perhaps Descartes never got around to writing the Epistemon-centric section of the text, or perhaps it was lost. Second, *The Search* was not aimed chiefly at a scholastic audience. *The Search*, like the *Discourse*, was written in French. Moreover, in the extant text Epistemon is presented not as one of Eudoxus's pupils but as his Aristotelian foil. As Eudoxus shows Polyander the Cartesian method, Epistemon frequently interjects that the scholastic way of doing things is superior. Perhaps Descartes meant his unschooled readers to observe for themselves that Eudoxus offers Polyander a more fecund

philosophical methodology than Epistemon. Third, Eudoxus realizes that engaging Epistemon directly would degenerate into pedagogically useless logic chopping. Descartes did not think the explicit juxtaposition of Cartesianism and Aristotelianism was the best way to introduce his new philosophy to interlocutors like Epistemon.

Regardless of its rationale, the lack of a dialogue in which Eudoxus engages Epistemon directly is not too great an obstacle to uncovering Descartes's plan for his scholastic readership. The *Meditations* were aimed at readers cut from Epistemon's cloth. Descartes wrote (and originally published) the *Meditations* in Latin, and courted the endorsement of the "Dean and Doctors" of the Sorbonne (CSM 2:3; AT 7:1). Descartes knew that the Sorbonne's stamp of approval would help convince scholastic audiences to refrain from condemning the *Meditations* as heretical, and ideally to study the work diligently.

In the Fourth Replies, Descartes explained that he had reserved the hyperbolic skeptical arguments (which "are not suitable to be grasped by every mind") for the *Meditations*: "which I warned should be studied only by very intelligent and well-educated readers" (CSM 2:172; AT 7:247; cf. CSM 2:8; AT 7:9–10). Descartes also confided to Mersenne that

I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle. (CSMK 173; AT 3:297–298; cf. CSMK 157; AT 3:157)

Through the *Meditations*, Descartes attempted to convince dogmatic readers to give up their Aristotelianism for Cartesianism without realizing they were doing so. Descartes realized that explicitly contrasting his own principles with those of Aristotle would not do him any favors. As Eudoxus laments in *The Search*, Epistemon "would rather question others and ponder on what the ancients have written than consult his own thoughts about what judgment he should make" (CSM 2:416; AT 10:523). If Descartes presented Cartesianism as a rival to Aristotelianism from the outset, Epistemon and his brethren would be compelled to defend their old ways rather than consider the possibility that Descartes was on to something. In the Second Replies, Descartes explained that this realization drove him to write the *Meditations* as meditations, rather than quasi-geometrical proofs. Cartesian metaphysical ideas

conflict with many preconceived opinions derived from the senses which we have got into the habit of holding from our earliest years, and so only

those who really concentrate and meditate and withdraw their minds from corporeal things, so far as is possible, will achieve perfect knowledge of them. Indeed, if they were put forward in isolation, they could easily be denied by those who like to contradict just for the sake of it. This is why I wrote ‘Meditations’ rather than ‘Disputations’, as the philosophers have done, or ‘Theorems and Problems’, as the geometers would have done. In so doing I wanted to make clear that I would have nothing to do with anyone who was not willing to join me in meditating and giving the subject attentive consideration. For the very fact that someone braces himself to attack the truth makes him less suited to perceive it, since he will be withdrawing his consideration from the convincing arguments which support the truth in order to find counterarguments against it. (CSM 2:111–112; AT 7:157)

This passage dovetails with the third explanation I proffered for Eudoxus’s lack of engagement with Epistemon in *The Search*. Eudoxus could have butted heads with Epistemon from the beginning of the dialogue, but they would have gotten nowhere.

The letter to Mersenne indicates that Descartes thought of a better way to convince schoolmen to convert, and wrote the *Meditations* accordingly. In the extant pages of *The Search*, Eudoxus refuses to argue with Epistemon, and instead insists that he patiently listen as Polyander meanders through the method of doubt. Eudoxus’s pedagogical goal is to enable Polyander to demonstrate for Epistemon how the Cartesian method can produce metaphysical certainties. In the *Meditations*, Descartes cut out the middleman. He sought to lull readers into the meditative mood and then nudge them into reenacting his metaphysical discoveries. Gary Hatfield has persuasively argued that “Descartes repeatedly emphasizes the need to spend days and weeks in the study of each Meditation, not merely because the subject matter is difficult and full attention is required, but because he is asking the reader literally to think in a new way” (1986: 53). It is an especially onerous task to get people to think in a new way about an ideologically weighty subject matter. However, if Aristotelian readers could be convinced to shut up and meditate long enough to suspend their erstwhile dogmas via the method of doubt, then they could be persuaded to adopt Cartesianism before realizing that it fundamentally contradicted their schooling.

Descartes hoped that Epistemon would undertake the method of doubt in earnest. By meditating on reasons for doubt, Epistemon could sincerely doubt everything, and thereby suspend his dogmas. By suspending his dogmas, Epistemon could submit himself exclusively to the natural light and embrace Descartes’s new metaphysics.

3.3. Meditator

How, then, did Descartes convince his readers to meditate?

The *Meditations* is a work of fiction (like *The Search*), not autobiography (like the *Discourse*). Descartes did not really discover the metaphysical foundations of his science by meditating for six days. In some ways, the Meditator who narrates the *Meditations* is less like Descartes than like one of his readers. For example, the Meditator claims that “whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses” (CSM 2:12; AT 7:18). Polyander says as much in *The Search*, and Epistemon backs him up (CSM 2:407–408; AT 10:510–512). Descartes, on the other hand, long held the truths of mathematics to be more certain than the deliverances of the senses (CSM 1:114; AT 6:7–8). However, the Meditator also shares experiences with Descartes that are alien to his readers. Consider the opening sentence of the First Meditation: “Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them” (CSM 2:12; AT 7:17) Neither Polyander nor Epistemon harbor such doubts before meditating on first philosophy. The Meditator is a fictional amalgam, partially reminiscent of each of Descartes, Polyander, and Epistemon. Descartes’s hope was that, while having enough in common with Descartes to motivate the method of doubt, the Meditator would also have enough in common with Descartes’s readers to allow them to identify with the narrator and make her metaphysical meditations their own.⁹

Descartes’s method of doubt consists of a series of cognitive exercises that help the doubter clear the conceptual and psychological ground for Cartesian metaphysics. These cognitive exercises are carried out in two key phases. The first phase involves skeptical arguments that summon increasingly radical doubts. Appeals to illusion establish the dubiety of some ordinary perceptual beliefs, the dream argument purports to establish the dubiety of all sense perceptions, and the deceiving God hypothesis purports to establish the dubiety of all clear and distinct ideas (including the axioms of mathematics and the Cogito).¹⁰ The second phase involves the resolution to “hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt” (CSM 2:12; AT 7:18). In service of this second phase, the Meditator recommends the following exercise:

9. Kosman (1986) and Broughton (2002) provide more detailed analyses of the Meditator qua fictional amalgam.

10. I follow Secada (2000: 43–46) in interpreting the Cogito to rest on the same epistemic ground as other clear and distinct ideas, as evidenced by the discussion at the beginning of Meditation Three (CSM 2:24–25; AT 7:35–36).

I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary. I shall do this until the weight of preconceived opinion is counter-balanced and the distorting influence of habit no longer prevents my judgement from perceiving things correctly. (CSM 2:15; AT 7:22)

Note that the Meditator does not (need to) pretend that her former opinions are dubious. They are dubious. She pretends that they are ‘utterly false’, until she has trained her will to follow her intellect as opposed to her preconceived opinions and habits. The method of doubt as a whole thus involves the intellectual use of skeptical arguments to conjure doubts about everything, and then the willful suspension of all belief.

The method itself is reasonably construed as artificial, in this narrow sense: Descartes’s interest in the method of doubt was restricted to the metaphysical rewards he and his readers could reap therefrom.¹¹ In a letter to Elisabeth of Bohemia, Descartes advocated discarding the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation once the Princess had successfully squeezed Meditations II–VI out of them (CSMK 228; AT 3:695). However, the artificiality of the method of doubt does not entail the artificiality of the doubts it engenders. The method by which Descartes whipped himself (and his readers) into doubt must be distinguished from the state of doubt his method produced.

Consider an analogy with method acting. Method actors achieve verisimilitude by training themselves to experience the same emotions as the characters they play. Lee Strasberg’s Method comprises a series of exercises intended “to strengthen the capacity not just to remember, but to revive, that is, to relive, the emotion” (Strasberg 1987: 188). The Strasberg Method is artificial. The method actor strategically works herself into character in order to play a role convincingly, in the context of a play or film. But the emotional exercises involved also have powerful effects on actors themselves. Strasberg writes that

in life, if we believe something is true, we behave as if it were literally true. The actor’s task is to create that level of belief on stage, so that the actor is capable of experiencing the imaginary events and objects of the play with the full complement of those automatic physiological responses which accompany a real experience. (1987: 132)

11. Indeed, Descartes took the chief among those metaphysical rewards—the establishment of a non-deceiving God and consequent general vindication of clear and distinct ideas—to contradict the deceiving God hypothesis and thereby constitute a cure for the resulting hyperbolic doubts (CSM 2:121; AT 7:172).

The emotions produced by method acting are psychologically and physiologically sincere, and many method actors experience them at home as well as on the stage. Al Pacino (n.d.) has reported that “the actor becomes an emotional athlete. The process is painful—my personal life suffers.”

Pacino’s emotions are plausibly rationally warranted, as well as sincerely felt, insofar as they contribute to compelling performances.¹² There is a famous story about Laurence Olivier confronting Dustin Hoffman during the filming of *Marathon Man*. Hoffman appeared on set disheveled, having forgone sleep for three days in order to live his part. Olivier quipped: “my dear boy, why don’t you try acting? It’s so much easier.” Upon hearing this story, Daniel Day Lewis has remarked that “I think it says more about what Olivier failed to understand about the process of . . . film acting . . . He’s missing the point there; he’s just missing the point” (Brown 2005: 15:28–15:56). The point that Olivier is missing is that the (sometimes painful) process by which method actors produce sincere emotions is warranted because psychologically and physiologically unfeigned emotions enable superior performances.

Like Strasberg’s Method of acting, Descartes’s method of doubt can be construed as an artificial performance aid. Even so, the doubts it produces are unfeigned. Descartes and his readers are method actors who endeavor to bring to life the Meditator as scripted. As Jorge Secada puts the point, “Descartes hoped that readers of his meditations would actually be meditators living through the meditative process, a transformative process. The *Meditations* does not describe this undertaking; rather, it aims to become the expression of the reader’s own transformation” (2013: 202). In other words, readers are not supposed to observe the Meditator transform. They are meant to take the place of the Meditator and transform themselves. Gary Hatfield highlights the indispensable role of the method of doubt in this transformation: “it serves as a kind of exercise for the mind” that “provides the means for freeing one’s attention from sensory ideas in order to attend to an independent source of knowledge: the pure deliverances of the intellect” (1986: 47). If readers fail to exercise themselves into willful doubt while reading (and rereading) the First Meditation, then they inevitably fail to transform. Such readers may passively follow the Meditator’s report of her discoveries of the Cogito and idea of God, but they never ascend to the meditative state necessary to discover these metaphysical mainstays for themselves.

12. Of course, it is lamentable that Pacino’s personal life suffers for his art. Perhaps the benefits of method acting are not worth this personal cost, especially since it may be impossible to keep sincere emotions from interfering with how one lives one’s life. If so, here stands a disanalogy between the methods of Strasberg and Descartes and, in particular, between sincere emotions and sincere doubts. Unlike sincere emotions, sincere doubts need not interfere with one’s ability to lead a good life. As we shall see, Descartes protected himself against the possibility of doubt interfering with his daily affairs by adopting a morally (though not absolutely) certain provisional moral code.

This point is worth unpacking. In the First Meditation, the Meditator sees “plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep” (CSM 2:13; AT 7:19). It is thus always (psychologically and rationally) possible to doubt the evidence of the senses: we can always convince ourselves we might be dreaming. In the second Meditation, the Meditator discovers the Cogito: “I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (CSM 2:17; AT 7:25). It is (psychologically and rationally) impossible to doubt the Cogito while considering it directly;¹³ we cannot help but affirm it as true.¹⁴ The question is: how do we, as Cartesian meditators, come to know with absolute certainty that the Cogito is absolutely indubitable (while considering it directly)? After all, Descartes often warned that when not meditating on first philosophy, obscure and confused ideas (including those stemming from the senses) might appear “true and certain” (CSM 2:48; AT 7:70).

Once we read the *Meditations* as cognitive meditations, and take the Meditator to be a part for real meditators to play, we can see that the ability to clearly and distinctly perceive—which involves the absolutely certain recognition that our perception is indeed clear and distinct—emerges from the transformative process of the method of doubt. We can only know that it is impossible to doubt the Cogito (while considering it directly) if we have trained our will to suspend belief in everything our intellect is capable of doubting. Otherwise, we cannot rule out the possibility that we are capable of doubting the Cogito directly, and simply have not yet considered the appropriate skeptical argument. The First Meditation is not a laundry list of reasons for doubt. It is a training regimen. As Étienne Gilson puts it, we should treat the First Meditation “not as a theory to understand, but as an exercise to practice” (1951: 186).¹⁵ Cartesian inquirers become capable of clearly and distinctly perceiving that they exist during the Second Meditation if and only if they have already succeeded at sincerely doubting everything during the First Meditation. Likewise, readers are capable of clearly and distinctly perceiving God’s objective perfections during the Third and Fifth

13. On my reading of the *Meditations*, it is psychologically possible to doubt the Cogito (along with all other clear and distinct ideas) by invoking the deceiving God hypothesis (and thereby ceasing to pay full, direct attention to the clear and distinct idea itself). This possibility leads to the need to establish the existence of a non-deceiving God (and in turn to the infamous Cartesian Circle, which lies beyond the ken of this article).

14. As John Carriero explains, “current clear perceivings are never mere representations, of doubtful relation to reality. To think otherwise—to understand the cogito experience as if there were room for a metaphysical doubt that is somehow not currently available to the meditator transfixed by the clarity of her perception—is to forget what perceiving clearly *is* for Descartes.” For Descartes, clear and distinct perceptions—qua psychological states of both intellectual recognition and willful affirmation of indubitability—“connect us to the truth” (2009: 358). Descartes makes no room for metaphysical doubt in a place of real psychological certainty.

15. I have lifted this translation from Curley (1978: 43).

Meditations if and only if their wills have been trained to refrain from attributing properties to the idea of God that their intellects have not clearly and distinctly perceived as belonging thereto. Descartes's method of doubt rationally warrants the suspension of all belief because absolute certainty is (initially) attainable exclusively from within a psychologically real state of universal doubt.

The Meditator's discoveries, contemplated at arm's length by a reader not inhabiting the meditational mood, are epistemologically bankrupt. The Cogito can serve as an Archimedean point only if the reader clearly and distinctly perceives it, and she can only clearly and distinctly perceive it from within a meditative state of universal doubt. Likewise, the idea of God can serve as the linchpin of Descartes's proofs of God's existence only if the reader finds that idea—and clearly and distinctly perceives its objective perfections—within her own mind. On paper, the Meditator's doubts are artificial in the same sense in which, in a script, the stage direction *Juliet weeps* is artificial. There are no genuine tears, nor genuine doubts, until willfully enacted by method actor or meditator.

The paper Meditator whips up fictive doubts via an artificial method of doubt. But the Meditator's doubts, on paper, are insignificant.¹⁶ The Meditator is a fictional stand-in whose job is to get real people doubting. Those real meditators' doubts are significant.

Though his paper Meditator's doubts can be dismissed as artificial, Descartes endeavored to instill sincere, global doubts in Polyander and Epistemon. Eudoxus is optimistic about Polyander's ability to undertake the project of inquiry in *The Search*. (And although Descartes excluded the hyperbolic skeptical arguments from the *Discourse*, he eventually published a French translation of the *Meditations* for a Polyanderish audience.) Indeed, Eudoxus's main struggle lies in getting Polyander's will to follow—and not err by failing to follow—his intellect's lead. Epistemon, meanwhile, could undergo the transformative process of the *Meditations* only if his doubts were sincere. Descartes knew that Aristotelian readers would not intend to use their doubts as a means to overthrow and replace Aristotelianism. (Descartes expected them to quite like Aristotelianism at

16. This insignificance of paper doubts grounds Peirce's objection to the method of doubt. Obviously referring to Descartes, Peirce wrote that "some philosophers have imagined that to start an inquiry it was only necessary to utter a question whether orally or by setting it down upon paper, and have even recommended us to begin our studies with questioning everything! But the mere putting of a proposition into the interrogative form does not stimulate the mind to any struggle after belief. There must be a real and living doubt, and without this all discussion is idle" (1931–58: 5:232). Peirce held that the purpose of inquiry was the fixation of beliefs that had already been disturbed by real (as opposed to paper) doubts. What Peirce overlooked was that Descartes quite agreed that only sincere doubt would enable the search for truth. Whereas the Meditator doubts only on paper, Descartes himself had deep doubts that led him to struggle after belief his whole life (as discussed in the fifth section of this article), and he hoped to instill the same real and living doubts in his readers at the outset of inquiry. For in-depth discussions of Peirce's relationship to Descartes, see Loeb (1998) and Anderson (2006).

the outset of the *Meditations*!) In order to gradually recognize the truth of Descartes's principles, "before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle" (CSMK 173; AT 3:298), scholastic readers would have to begin by scrubbing their minds of the principles of Aristotle. Otherwise, just as Epistemon is immediately affronted by Eudoxus's pronouncements in *The Search*, orthodox readers of the *Meditations* would reject Descartes's principles as heterodox long before they recognized their truth. Descartes needed Epistemon to trust the meditative process and work himself into sincere doubt. Only then could he properly entertain the Cogito, and begin to separate the flawless apples from the rotten.

4. Sincere, Meditative Doubt

We are now well placed to address the two respects in which the doubts of the First Meditation have been interpreted to be artificial. Reflection on Descartes's strategies for getting Polyander to train his will to doubt, and getting Epistemon to abandon Aristotelianism, will clarify why the doubts must be unfeigned. Reflection on Descartes's strategies for protecting his readers from dogmatic skepticism will clarify why he sometimes downplayed the doubts as applicable only in a peculiar context.

Recall that the first strand (defended by Gassendi, Mersenne, Peirce and Frankfurt) denies that Descartes's skeptical arguments result in or warrant an actual (as opposed to pretend) suspension of all belief. Descartes himself had no patience for this strand of interpretation. In response to Mersenne, he politely explained that, while he was reluctant to use skeptical arguments, "the best way of achieving a firm knowledge of reality is first to accustom ourselves to doubting all things, especially corporeal things." He suggested that his readers "devote several months, or at least weeks, to considering the topics dealt with [in the First Meditation] before going on to the rest of the book" (CSM 2:94; AT 7:130). His response to Gassendi was less polite.

You continue to employ rhetorical tricks instead of reasoning. You pretend that I am playing a game when I am serious . . . When I said that the entire testimony of the senses should be regarded as uncertain and even as false, I was quite serious; indeed this point is so necessary for an understanding of my *Meditations* that if anyone is unwilling or unable to accept it, he will be incapable of producing any objection that deserves a reply. (CSM 2:243; AT 7:350)

Descartes did not want readers of the First Meditation to note, briskly, that the author wanted them to play along by pretending to disbelieve. He

wanted them to work themselves, painstakingly, into the sincere suspension of belief.

Even putting Descartes's replies to his contemporaries aside, there are a couple problems with Peirce and Frankfurt's claim that the Meditator's "resolution to overthrow all his opinions requires . . . no more of him than a recognition that the slate of his proposed theory is clean" (Frankfurt 1970/2007: 24). This intellectualist interpretation contradicts the main thrust of the Meditator's resolution to "hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false" (CSM 2:12; AT 7:18). In the Fourth Meditation, the Meditator emphasizes that the meditative process centers on training the will to align with the intellect, such that "although probable conjectures may pull me in one direction, the mere knowledge that they are simply conjectures, and not certain and indubitable reasons, is itself quite enough to push my assent the other way" (CSM 2:41; AT 7:59). If the reader needed merely to intellectually bracket her beliefs rather than sincerely cease believing them, then such a sustained act of the will (for weeks or even months on end) would not be required. But Descartes expected more than pretense from his readers.

If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly. If I go for the alternative which is false, then obviously I shall be in error; if I take the other side, then it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth, and I shall still be at fault since it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will. (CSM 2:41; AT 7:59–60)

Descartes's pedagogical vision required his readers to faithfully immerse themselves in the First Meditation until their wills were trained to affirm only clear and distinct ideas. Contra Frankfurt, merely directing the intellect away from dubitable beliefs is not enough. Just as Olivier fails to understand the process of film acting, Frankfurt fails to understand the process of meditation on first philosophy. In order to arrive at the truth by pure reason (rather than pure chance), Cartesian meditators must train their wills to freely and faithfully follow the intellect's lead.¹⁷

For example, Polyander's metaphysical slate is cleaned easily at the begin-

17. Broughton (2002: 60) and Perin (2007: 63) notice but gloss over the tension between their interpretations and the role of the will in Descartes's method of doubt. It is a mistake to gloss over the Fourth Meditation insofar as the will plays a central role in both the cognitive exercises that

ning of *The Search*: he immediately recognizes the rational power of the dream and deceiving God arguments (CSM 2:408; AT 10:512). But a purely intellectual understanding of reasons for doubt is not enough to set the Cartesian method in motion. Instead, Eudoxus spends a page of dialogue urging Polyander to train his will to follow where his intellect has already led. Polyander complies: “I shall apply my mind to the task of doubting” (CSM 2:409; AT 10:514). Despite his previous recognition of the rational strength of Eudoxus’s skeptical arguments, Polyander is not “forced to confess that I know nothing with any certainty” until he has meditated on those arguments (CSM 2:409; AT 10:514). And Polyander is subsequently able to clearly and distinctly perceive the Cogito only after bending his will to the suspension of all belief. The ability to clearly and distinctly perceive—to be absolutely certain that truths such as the Cogito and $2+3=5$ are beyond all doubt—is predicated on the ability to enter a psychologically robust meditative state in which the will is inclined to assent to clear and distinct ideas alone.

Peirce and Frankfurt also miss the subversive element of Descartes’s pedagogy. The latter five Meditations contradict many of the scholastic principles suspended during Meditation One. As the Meditator notes,

cases in point are the belief that any space in which nothing is occurring to stimulate my senses must be empty; or that the heat in a body is something exactly resembling the idea of heat which is in me; or that when a body is white or green, the selfsame whiteness or greenness which I perceive through my senses is present in the body; or that in a body which is bitter or sweet there is the selfsame taste which I experience, and so on. (CSM 2:56–57; AT 7:82)

While some formerly suspended beliefs come back in full force after Descartes’s first philosophy is established, these others are revealed to be rotten apples. If Epistemon were merely to intellectually bracket (rather than willfully suspend) his beliefs, he would never fail to realize that the *Meditations* destroy the principles of Aristotle. On the other hand, if Epistemon came to doubt all of his erstwhile beliefs sincerely, training his will to suspend them, he might be able to grow accustomed to Descartes’s principles, and accept them as true, before realizing that they contradict the principles of Aristotle.

So much for the first strand of artificiality interpretation. What about the second strand (defended by Broughton and Williams), which claims that the doubts apply only in the game-like theoretical context of the *Meditations*? Broughton

constitute the meditative process and the acts of judgment that underlie Descartes’s metaphysical results.

and Williams are correct that Descartes took pains to distinguish the role reasons for doubt should play in theory from the role they should play in practice. What is more, they are correct that Descartes thought it foolish to expect the metaphysical doubts to inform action directly. Descartes stressed that when it comes to living our lives, we can safely ignore the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation. Descartes's standard of action was moral certainty—"which measures up to the certainty we have on matters relating to the conduct of life which we never normally doubt, though we know that it is possible, absolutely speaking, that they may be false" (CSM 1:289 Footnote 2; AT 9B:323)—not absolute certainty. However, these facts do not entail that Descartes considered his skeptical arguments to provide sufficient reason to suspend belief solely within the narrow context of meditation on first philosophy. In other words, they do not entail that Descartes took merely moral certainty to warrant belief—as opposed to action—in any context.

The apples that Descartes threw out were rotten, no matter where they were consumed. For example, the aforementioned Aristotelian dogma that perceived colors resemble physical properties of their objects is false according to the new Cartesian metaphysics. Epistemon's belief in the resemblance thesis is dubious—the result of an error in judgment—in any context, even if it does not undermine his ability to shop for red apples.

Descartes's declaration that the doubts of the First Meditation were somehow insulated from ordinary life was a stopgap measure to help his followers conduct their quotidian human affairs while Cartesian science, medicine, and ethics were still in their infancy. In the *Discourse*, Descartes described a detailed "provisional moral code . . . lest I should remain indecisive in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgments" (CSM 1:122; AT 6:22–23; cf. CSM 2:243; AT 7:350–351). The key distinction here is not between judgments in the library and judgments in the marketplace, but between judgments and actions. If Descartes's doubts did not provide sufficient reason to suspend belief for the purposes of everyday life as well as the purposes of philosophy, then he would hardly have had use for a provisional code of conduct.¹⁸ Until the Cartesian framework matures sufficiently to inform day-to-day life, Cartesians have to act

18. Myles Burnyeat (1997: 120) lucidly argues that there is no insulation between philosophical judgments and the judgments of ordinary life; the latter are also "rendered completely and utterly doubtful" by the method of doubt. Broughton (2002: 90–93) agrees with Burnyeat that Cartesian skeptical judgments are not strictly insulated from ordinary life. The skeptical arguments show we lack absolute (as opposed to moral) certainty in propositions like 'here is a hand' in ordinary life. But Broughton argues that 'slight' reasons for doubt only warrant the suspension of belief within the meditational context. In contrast, I am arguing that Descartes held all reasons for doubt to warrant willful suspension even within ordinary life (at least until he established an absolutely certain foundation for the sciences).

as if they have retained some of the dubious beliefs they have suspended. But this guide for living is where the pretense comes in; rather than pretending to suspend belief while playing the game of philosophy, the Cartesian doubter pretends to believe while playing the game of life. Cartesians have a great need to live by a provisional moral code because the sincere, willful doubts generated by Descartes's metaphysical method (psychologically and rationally) sustain the suspension of belief even outside of the meditational context.¹⁹

What, then, are we to make of Descartes's tendency to insist that nobody in their right mind ever seriously doubted the existence of the external world? Broughton and Williams take such statements to suggest that Descartes suspended belief only within the insulated meditational context. However, consideration of Descartes's pedagogy reveals another way of interpreting his occasional caveat. Descartes's new metaphysics was radical; it called into question many dogmas that most people had never seriously doubted. (Of course perceived colors resemble physical properties of their objects! Who could doubt that?) But Descartes evidently did seriously doubt that the external world exists, just as he seriously doubted that perceived colors resemble physical properties of colored objects. The only difference is that one of these propositions turned out to be true and the other false.

Descartes sometimes downplayed his doubts as unserious, 'metaphysical', 'hyperbolic', 'slight' and 'exaggerated' in order to keep readers like Polyander from succumbing to dogmatic skepticism as a way of life. Indeed, Descartes explicitly avowed this rhetorical aim:

For *when it is a question of organizing our life*, it would, of course, be foolish not to trust the senses, and the sceptics who neglected human affairs to the point where friends had to stop them falling off precipices deserved to be laughed at. Hence I pointed out in one passage that no sane person ever seriously doubts such things. (CSM 2:243, emphasis added; AT 7:351)

As we have seen, Descartes took pains to make sure his lay readers used the method of doubt only for its intended purpose. Given Descartes's refusal to mention the hyperbolic skeptical arguments in the *Discourse*, it should come as no surprise that, when finally invoked, they came adorned with (slightly fa-

19. Michèle LeDoeuff and Lisa Shapiro have argued that "both English-language and French commentators have misunderstood the expression *par provision*" (Shapiro 2008: 450), "a juridical term meaning 'what a judgment awards in advance to a party'" (LeDoeuff 1989: 62). 'Provisional' does not mean 'temporary', but rather 'in advance' and "not liable to be put in question by the final judgment" (LeDoeuff 1989: 62). Whether or not Descartes used the legal notion of '*morale par provision*', he needed such a code because the method of doubt left his prior beliefs in shambles.

cautious) qualifiers. The willful suspension of judgment across contexts plays a crucial role in the search for truth. Nevertheless, Descartes reassured his readers that they both could and should continue to act as if they believed many of the morally certain (yet dubitable) propositions that meditation on reasons for doubt had led them to stop believing.

Descartes's anti-skeptical tone in these passages is also partially explained by the fact that after the Meditator establishes the existence of a non-deceiving God in the Third Meditation, any serious reason to doubt clear and distinct ideas has been preempted. Descartes's readers nevertheless have serious reason to suspend all belief earlier in the meditative process. As Eudoxus advises Polyander and Epistemon, "these doubts . . . are like phantoms and empty images which appear at night in the uncertain glimmer of a weak light: if you flee from them, your fear will follow you, but if you approach as if to touch them, you will find nothing but air and shadow and you will be more confident the next time such an encounter may occur" (CSM 2:408–409; AT 10:513). Descartes's genius (if ill-starred) epistemological insight was that willful, method-driven yet sincere doubt about everything affords the only possible way to achieve absolute certainty about anything.

5. Cartesian Classical Skepticism

Descartes dug the psychological foundations for his new metaphysical edifice by teaching his readers to doubt sincerely. The question remains whether Descartes's own doubts were sincere.

According to the *Discourse*, Descartes's doubts began twenty-odd years before he set them in their authoritative form in the First Meditation. After graduating from his Jesuit school, La Flèche, Descartes "found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance" (CSM 1:113; AT 6:4). These doubts compelled Descartes to take a hiatus from serious philosophical theorizing. He explained that "regarding philosophy, . . . seeing that . . . there is still no point in it which is not disputed and hence doubtful, I was not so presumptuous as to hope to achieve any more in it than others had done" (CSM 1:114–115; AT 6:8). Descartes could not discern which apples were rotten, so he quit trying to sort them.

Descartes took refuge in mathematics and other rigorous sciences, including subject areas in which he would continue to work for the rest of his life. But he soon came to realize that scientific certainty was subservient to metaphysical certainty (CSM 1:121–122; AT 6:21–22). If Descartes wanted to make real progress in natural philosophy, he could not afford to ignore metaphysics. Luckily,

pure mathematics—in the methodicalness of its process and the absolute certainty of its results—provided a perfect model for a new metaphysical system.

In order to bestow his first philosophy with the sort of quasi-mathematical certainty that Aristotelian philosophy lacked, Descartes returned to the doubts of his youth. Around 1628, he drafted the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, including an initial formulation of the method of doubt: “we reject all such merely probable cognition and resolve to believe only what is perfectly known and incapable of being doubted” (CSM 1:10; AT 10:362). This method was an attempt to cash in on the sincerity of Descartes’s youthful doubts by “uprooting from my mind any errors that might previously have slipped into it” (CSM 1:125; AT 6:28). It took nine years of devotion to this project to “reject as if absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see if I was left believing anything that was entirely indubitable” (CSM 1:127; AT 6:31). Only then was Descartes prepared to sort his apples, as well as pluck some new ones from the tree of knowledge.

Autobiographically, then, Descartes did not first realize that the method of doubt could lead him to certainty, and then begin to doubt. Descartes initially took his doubts to preclude fecund work in philosophy. Only later did he realize that he could put his stale yet ever-sincere doubts to novel philosophical use. He proceeded to employ the method of doubt for two ends. First, he used it to construct a foundationally indubitable philosophical system. Second, he used it to convince readers like Polyander and Epistemon to doubt sincerely, so that they too could discover Cartesian metaphysical principles and escape the shadow of dubiety.

Is it reasonable to call Descartes a skeptic on the basis of the sincerity and (temporary) universality of his doubts? Descartes himself did not think so. He professed in the *Discourse* that “I was not copying the skeptics, who doubt only for the sake of doubting and pretend to be always undecided; on the contrary, my whole aim was to reach certainty” (CSM 1:125; AT 6:29). In reply to Hobbes, Descartes explained why, as an avowed anti-skeptic, he had decided to overcome his reluctance and dish out warmed-over cabbage.

I was not trying to sell [the arguments for doubting] as novelties, but had a threefold aim in mind when I used them. Partly I wanted to prepare my readers’ minds for the study of things which are related to the intellect, and help them distinguish these things from corporeal things; and such arguments seem to be wholly necessary for this purpose. Partly I introduced the arguments so that I could reply to them in subsequent Meditations. And partly I wanted to show the firmness of the truths which I propound later on, in the light of the fact that they cannot be shaken by these metaphysical doubts. Thus I was not looking for praise when I set out these arguments; but I think I could not have left them out, any more

than a medical writer can leave out the description of a disease when he wants to explain how it can be cured. (CSM 2:121; AT 7:171–172)

Skepticism was personally and pedagogically crucial to Descartes's method of inquiry. Indeed, Descartes presented the disease analogy facetiously. He did not need merely to describe the disease in order to explain the cure; he needed his readers to contract the disease in order to discover the cure for themselves. But Descartes did not think this methodological commitment to sincere doubt made him a skeptic. On the contrary, he asserted that "I became the first philosopher ever to overturn the doubt of the skeptics" (CSM 2:376; AT 7:550).

Most interpreters see no reason to quibble with Descartes on this point. Bernard Williams summarizes the orthodox interpretation: "Descartes was not a sceptic. One has to take a distant and inaccurate view of his writing to suppose that he was" (1983/2006: 232). Harry Frankfurt says, of Descartes's purported skepticism, that "it is inappropriate to describe it as skepticism at all" (1970/2007: 23). Gail Fine emphasizes that "Descartes is *not* a skeptic . . . Bourdin mistakenly views Descartes as a patient, suffering the disease of skepticism; Descartes replies that he is the doctor with the first sure cure" (2000: 198–199).²⁰ And Edwin Curley, after arguing that the writings of the 16th century skeptic Montaigne had a major influence on Descartes, admits that "Descartes is not Montaigne. He is too much a child of the scientific revolution for that, too much an optimist about the possibility of knowledge and of progress in knowledge" (1978: 20). Curley's book is duly titled *Descartes against the Sceptics*.

I do not disagree substantively, with either Descartes or the orthodox interpretation. Descartes was not a skeptic—he fought against the skeptics—as he understood skepticism. But I do want to quibble. Descartes had a very narrow conception of skepticism, of what makes a skeptic a skeptic. He noted, of hypothetical skeptics who "had perceived something clearly", that "they had ceased to doubt it, and so had ceased to be skeptics" (CSM 2:321; AT 7:477). According to Descartes, a skeptic doubts dogmatically, for doubting's sake. Descartes did nothing of the sort. He doubted first because he was struck by uncertainty, and later in order to discover absolutely certain truths (and never need to doubt so deeply again).

Nevertheless, there is another kind of skepticism that Descartes would have found more palatable. Michael Frede has distinguished the 'classical' skepticisms of the New Academy and Pyrrhonian school from the 'dogmatic' skepticisms of the later Academy and Early Modern period. The fundamental difference between the two sorts of skeptic is that "the classical skeptic *perhaps* comes to be left with the impression that nothing is, or even can be known, whereas the dogmatic skeptic takes

20. For Descartes's entertaining exchange with Bourdin, see the Seventh Objections and Replies (CSM 2:302–383; AT 7:451–561), as well as the "Letter to Father Dinet" (CSM 2:384–397; AT 7:563–603).

the position that nothing can be known” (Frede 1997: 138). The classical skeptic perhaps finds that it occurs to her, upon considering reasons for doubt, that she knows nothing. The dogmatic skeptic righteously asserts that nothing can be known.

The dogmatic skeptic identifies his skepticism with the maintenance of his doubts, and obsesses over the impossibility of knowledge. When accused, after publishing the *Meditations*, of still harboring doubts, Descartes asked “what could be more perverse than to ascribe to a writer a view which he reports simply in order to refute?” (CSM 1:309; AT 8B:367). He was referring to the dogmatic skeptic’s view that nothing can be known. Descartes rightfully denied that he was a fashionable dogmatic skeptic.

But might Descartes have been a (dreadfully unfashionable) classical skeptic?²¹ Classical skepticism is characterized by an epistemically rigorous attitude towards inquiry. Classical skeptics uncover difficulties within dogmatic frameworks, while acting on passively held views that they refrain from actively endorsing. Descartes’s provisional moral code closely parallels these passively held views. Descartes and the early Academics and Pyrrhonists all acted according to provisional tenets that they (simultaneously) sincerely doubted. Their codes of conduct allowed them to handle their daily affairs (as if they believed dubious propositions) while living by a strict ethics of belief.

Moreover, classical skeptics never propound skeptical arguments solely for the sake of the doubts they produce. Classical skeptics invoke reasons for doubt because doubt illuminates the path to some greater good. Indeed, like Descartes, the Academic skeptics Arcesilaus and Carneades employed skepticism for distinctly epistemic ends.²² “Arcesilaus fought with [the Stoic] Zeno not for the sake of criticizing him, but from a wish to discover the truth” (Cicero 2006: 2.76–2.77), and Carneades held “that a wise man’s whole function is exhibited in the quest for truth” (Long & Sedley 1987: 68P). Arcesilaus, Carneades, and Descartes all understood the willful production of sincere doubt to play an indispensable methodological role in the search for truth.²³

21. This is a conceptual question. I am not asking whether Descartes thought of himself as a classical skeptic. (He did not.) Nor am I asking whether Descartes’s skepticism was inspired by classical skepticism. (He took some ideas from the skeptical tradition, but some of his skeptical ideas were wholly original.) Instead, I am asking whether Descartes’s attitude towards inquiry sufficiently resembles that of the early Academic skeptics to justify tagging him a ‘classical skeptic’.

22. More famously, Pyrrhonian skeptics like Aenesidemus and Sextus Empiricus sought *ataraxia*, or tranquility. We have no evidence that the early Academics were concerned with *ataraxia* (Schofield 1999: 331). The Renaissance Pyrrhonists Montaigne, Charron, and Camus, meanwhile, combined Pyrrhonian skepticism—and the accompanying insight that *epoché* (suspension of belief) yields *ataraxia*—with fideism—and the insight that *epoché* clears the ground for revelation (Popkin 1979: 42–65). While the Pyrrhonian fideists doubted as a leap of faith, they maintained that only faith itself delivered truth.

23. Lennon (2008: 242–244) highlights the same parallel between Descartes and the early Academics.

Classical skepticism exists only in relation to a dogmatic framework. Frede argues that the classical skeptic's "primary function is to present the dogmatic with the difficulties which arise from the framework of notions and assumptions within which the dogmatic moves. And we should expect a proper skeptic to question not only the assumptions arrived at within this framework, but the very framework itself" (1997: 151). By this standard, Descartes was a skeptic. The primary function of the early Academic skeptics was to pursue wisdom by showing their Stoic interlocutors the flaws in their dogmatic framework. Descartes had two primary functions qua metaphysician. The first was to show the philosophical community of the 17th century—including both Epistemonian dogmatists and Polyanderian laymen of good sense—that the Aristotelian metaphysical framework could not stand. The second was to replace Aristotelianism with a new, foundationally indubitable metaphysical framework. Most interpreters allege that this positive function belies the notion that Descartes was "a thinker of a skeptical frame of mind" (Grene 1999: 557–558). I demur. Descartes was uniquely positioned to construct his new metaphysics precisely because he possessed a sincerely skeptical frame of mind, and his success as a teacher depended on his ability to foster the same mindset in his students. Descartes was a new kind of classical skeptic, to be sure. Making skepticism give birth to metaphysical certainties was a new trick. But it was a trick only a proper skeptic could try to pull off.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Karen Detlefsen and Gary Hatfield for encouraging my interest in Descartes's pedagogy, as well as giving me several rounds of precise, insightful comments. This article also benefited from criticism from Amelia Brockman, David Curry, Daniel Garber, Nabeel Hamid, Susan Sauvé Meyer, Dominik Perler, Jordan Taylor, my anonymous area editor at *Ergo*, several anonymous referees, the Early Modern Research Group at Penn, and participants in the 2015 HPPC Early Modern Philosophy Workshop at Princeton.

Abbreviations

For works by Descartes:

AT = Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Eds.) (1964–76). *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Vols. 1-11). CNRS/J. Vrin. Cited by volume and page number.

CSM = John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Eds. and

Trans.) (1984–85). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Vols. 1-2). Cambridge University Press. Cited by volume and page number.
 CSMK = John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Eds. and Trans.) (1991). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Vol. 3). Cambridge University Press. Cited by page number.

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