

## Descartes' debt to Teresa of Ávila, or why we should work on women in the history of philosophy

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**Abstract** Despite what you have heard over the years, the famous evil deceiver argument in Meditation One is not original to Descartes (1596–1650). Early modern meditators often struggle with deceptive demons. The author of the *Meditations* (1641) is merely giving a new spin to a common rhetorical device. Equally surprising is the fact that Descartes' epistemological rendering of the demon trope is probably inspired by a Spanish nun, Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), whose works have been ignored by historians of philosophy, although they were a global phenomenon during Descartes' formative years. In this paper, I first answer the obvious question as to why previous early modernists have missed something so important as the fact that Descartes' most famous publication relies on a well-established genre and that his deceiver argument bears a striking similarity to ideas in Teresa's final work, *El Castillo Interior* (*Interior Castle*, 1588)? I discuss the meditative tradition at the end of which Descartes' *Meditations* stands, present evidence to support the claim that Descartes was familiar with Teresa's proposals, contrast their meditative goals, and make a point-by-point comparison between the meditative steps in Teresa's *Interior Castle* and those in Descartes' *Meditations* which constitute (what I call) their common *deceiver strategy*. My conclusion makes a case for a broader and more inclusive history of philosophy.

**Keywords** Descartes · Teresa of Ávila · Meditations · Evil deceiver · Early modern women

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Despite what you have heard over the years, the famous evil deceiver argument in Meditation One is not original to Descartes (1596–1650). Early modern meditators often struggle with demons. The author of the *Meditations* (1641) is merely giving a new spin to a common rhetorical device. Equally surprising is the fact that Descartes' epistemological rendering of the demon trope is probably inspired by a Spanish nun, Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), whose works have been almost entirely ignored by historians of philosophy, although they were a global phenomenon during Descartes' formative years.

How can this be? Given the extensive scholarly work done on the *Meditations*, how could scholars have missed something so important as the fact that Descartes' most famous publication relies on a well-established genre and that his deceiver argument bears a striking similarity to ideas in Teresa's final work, *El Castillo Interior* (*Interior Castle*, 1588)? In what follows, I answer these questions and display significant parallels between the epistemological role of Teresa's demonic deceiver and Descartes' own. One implication of this account is that our histories of philosophy need to be more inclusive.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Inclusive scholarship

The standard story about Descartes' creation of a "new philosophy" that broke radically with the past was invented by German scholars responding to Kant's and Hegel's own accounts of that history. The story's formation is too complicated to review here. Suffice it to say that many of Descartes' contemporaries did not see him as doing anything new, outside of his physics,<sup>2</sup> and that it was probably a German historian, Kuno Fischer (1824–1907), who first put Descartes forward as the father of modern philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Fischer's lengthy, detailed account of pre-Kantian "new" philosophy was codified in the early twentieth century by prominent German philosophers like Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) who claimed that Descartes created the rationalist Geist, to which the empiricists responded, and out of which Kant and Hegel arose as liberating angels (Cassirer 1932). Once the story took hold, it was reiterated and supported as historians burrowed down into the great systems of the period's great men. Such burrowing, then and now, has produced rich philosophical materials and significant work in the history of philosophy.

Since the 1980s, however, there has been a growing recognition among early modernists that a broader historical scope reaps rich rewards. Some historians have successfully contextualized canonical figures and significantly increased our

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Roberta Ballarin, Heather Battaly, Jamie Tappenden, Raphaelle Debenedetti, Maria Berbara, and the Folger Library.

<sup>2</sup> Due to space limitations, the primary materials cited here are limited. On the status of Descartes among his contemporaries, see Digby (1644), Sturm (1686, pp. 161–165). For more citations, see Mercer (2001, 27–49).

<sup>3</sup> Fischer (1878, Vol. 1, 147–50, 440). Fischer tells a gripping story of the Cartesian "school" and its impact on subsequent philosophy emphasizing its important for German philosophy from Kant through Hegel and Schopenhauer to sundry other German thinkers. See Fischer (1854–1877).



understanding of the period's philosophy. A subset of these contextualist historians have followed the example set by Eileen O'Neill in attempting to teach and research women philosophers in order to make philosophy more inclusive.<sup>4</sup> In my own case, after working and writing on Leibniz for years, I was keen to contribute to the project of recovering prominent women in philosophy's past. Although I hoped to discover some long-lost gems, my primary motivation was a sense of duty.

Nothing could have prepared me for the discoveries that seemed to fall in my lap when I turned my attention to long-forgotten women. I was soon finding rich and unnoticed ideas, reconsidering standard assumptions about early modern philosophy, and seeing canonical figures and texts in new ways. My recent work on the English Platonist, Anne Conway (1631–1679), revealed a metaphysical system of astonishing originality, significantly changing my thinking about central currents in seventeenth-century thought and confirming suspicions about Leibniz's heterodox tendencies, including long-missed ideas in his famous *Theodicy* (1710).<sup>5</sup> Fascinated by Conway's claim that suffering is a necessary condition for certain kinds of insights, I searched for her predecessors and quickly unearthed a treasure trove of ideas. I fell upon twenty years of scholarship by intellectual, cultural, and art historians on materials rich in philosophical ideas. Although ignored by historians of philosophy, these materials constitute a crucial link between medieval and early modern views on topics central to early modern thought.

Between 1250 and 1500, a form of spiritual meditation arose, which included new accounts of the role of self-knowledge in the pursuit of knowledge of God. Not only were many of the most prominent of these meditations written by women, they contain philosophical insights about self-knowledge, the relation between mind and body, and the cognitive benefits of suffering. There is much to say about these women's contributions to the development of early modern philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Here I focus on one of the most dramatic results of my new research, namely, that Teresa of Ávila's final work, *Interior Castle*, is full of philosophical insights and probably influenced Descartes' *Meditations*. In this paper, I concentrate on the common features of Teresa's and Descartes' epistemological rendering of the traditional demon trope.

Let me be clear. Scholars have not analyzed in any detail Descartes' innovative transformation of the meditative genre familiar to all of his contemporaries, nor have they analyzed in any serious fashion the relation his meditative project bears to Teresa of Ávila's *Interior Castle*, which is arguably the most influential meditation of the seventeenth century. In the next section, I answer the obvious question as to

<sup>4</sup> O'Neill's great accomplishment was to take an imprecise map sketched by her feminist predecessors and add prominent landmarks drawn in precise detail. She then motivated her students, friends, and colleagues to use her revised map to explore ever more specific areas. See O'Neill (1998a, b). Many of us working on early modern women would not have done so without O'Neill's philosophical, scholarly, and personal support.

<sup>5</sup> Mercer (2014a).

<sup>6</sup> Prominent historians of philosophy have ignored the works of women in this period. For example, Perler (2011) presents "the history" of the passions 1270–1670 without discussing the views of a single woman although they had much to say about the passions in the period.



why previous early modernists have missed the likely influence of Teresa on Descartes. There is insufficient space here either to articulate the details of Teresa's proposals or to examine the full debt Descartes might owe them. The main content of this paper is limited to a relatively brief account of the meditative tradition at the end of which Descartes' *Meditations* stands (Sect. 3), the most significant evidence to support the claim that Descartes was familiar with Teresa's proposals (Sect. 4), an account of their contrasting meditative goals (Sect. 5), and a point-by-point comparison between the meditative steps in Teresa's *Interior Castle* and those in Descartes' *Meditations* which constitute (what I call) the *deceiver strategy* (Sect. 6). I conclude with a call for a broader and more inclusive history of philosophy (Sect. 7).

## 2 Descartes and other great men

Given the enormous attention lavished on Descartes' thought, how have we missed something so important as the fact that the *Meditations* borrows from a well-established genre, in a way that closely corresponds to ideas in Teresa's *Interior Castle*?<sup>7</sup>

Previous scholars have examined the sources of Descartes' meditative strategy, but have restricted their investigation to well-known men in that tradition. Because Descartes was educated in a Jesuit school and because the Jesuits all practiced the meditative exercises written by their founder, Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), scholars have turned to Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* as the most likely source of Descartes' own *Meditations* (Rorty 1983; Hatfield 1985; Vendler 1989).<sup>8</sup> Because Ignatius's meditative recommendations have so little in common with the *Meditations*, the scholarly consensus has been that the one great man did not significantly influence the other (Rubidge 1990). As Stephen Gaukroger makes the point in his intellectual biography of Descartes:

The *Meditationes* read like an account of a spiritual journey in which the truth is only to be discovered by purging, followed by a kind of rebirth. The precedents for this seem to come from writers such as Ignatius Loyola, and more generally from the manuals of devotional exercises at this time.

Although “the sense of purging that one gets in the first Meditation endows scepticism with a quasi-religious imperative,” Descartes' meditative exercises “do not rely in any way on the genre of devotional meditations for their context, or, indeed, for anything precise (Gaukroger 1995, p. 336). Like so many of his predecessors, Gaukroger mischaracterizes the meditative genre and restricts his search for the sources of Descartes' meditative strategy to prominent men.

<sup>7</sup> For important studies of Descartes' medieval and scholastic sources, see Gilson (1930, 1932) and Ariew (1992, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> The exercises were written 1522–1524, increasingly practiced by Jesuits, and formally approved by Pope Paul III in 1548.



As I show in the next section, Descartes' *Meditations* owes a great deal to the meditative tradition that developed in late medieval and early modern Europe, a tradition to which women significantly contributed. When Descartes entered the Jesuit secondary school in La Flèche at the age of 10, Teresa of Ávila had already achieved fame for turning the rich meditative tradition she inherited into something fresh and original, adding arguments, distinctions, and clarity.

Our original question was: how did we miss something so important as the fact that Descartes' most famous work relies on a well-established genre and that his deceiver strategy bears an evident similarity to Teresa of Ávila's? The answer to the question is shockingly simple: historians have missed Descartes' debt to the meditative tradition in which Teresa occupies such a prominent place because they have ignored the women who might have influenced him.

### 3 Teresa, Descartes, and the meditative tradition

When Descartes invites his readers to meditate on first philosophy, he conspicuously places himself in a methodological tradition well known to his contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> Like generations of authors before him, he attempts to motivate meditators to rethink their beliefs in order to begin the arduous journey toward truth and enlightenment. Although details of *Meditations on First Philosophy* differ significantly from the tradition, Descartes asks his readers to do what hundreds of meditators had done before him, namely, to seek self-knowledge as a step to a new and more stable conception of reality. As Augustine of Hippo had made the point twelve hundred years previously, it was necessary "to return to my own self" before advancing to any knowledge of ultimate truths. Writing directly to God he explains: "Under Your guidance I entered into the depths of my soul.... I entered, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw the Light that never changes casting its rays ... over my mind" (1992, pp. 123–24).

After generations of meditative practices based loosely on Augustinian ideas, thirteenth-century Europe witnessed the beginning of a movement to more systematic meditative treatises. Given our interests, the most important feature of the new form of spiritual exercise as it developed between 1250 and 1500 is that meditations were increasingly written by women who were considered especially talented at the kind of introspection and compassion required for enlightenment.

The Protestant revolution of the sixteenth century led to significant changes in spiritual practices. Traditional forms persisted, but new ones were invented. In response to reformers' criticisms, Catholic theologians began to shape, in the words of one scholar, "new models of spiritual accomplishment" (Leone 2010, p. 1). Catholics moved quickly to promote innovative spiritual teachers and encourage proper spiritual development. Teresa of Ávila became one of the most significant counter-reformation spiritual leaders. Her psychologically subtle and clear-headed writings—composed in her native Catalan for the order of Carmelite nuns she

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<sup>9</sup> For more on Descartes' adroit use of the meditative genre, see Mercer (2014b).



oversaw—became a global phenomenon, quickly translated into Latin, French, English and various other European vernacular languages, gaining popularity even in Protestant circles. Arguably her most famous work and what she considered her best, the *Interior Castle*, became a worldwide phenomenon.

In the medieval tradition of spiritual meditations, it was common for authors to share advice about how to move through levels of heightened spirituality, acquire greater self-knowledge, and become increasingly more familiar with the divinity. They often instruct meditators to read specific Biblical passages and utter prayers, while offering warnings about temptations and challenges. Although fifteenth- and sixteenth-century meditations tend to be more systematic than their medieval forerunners, they rarely contain either philosophical analyses or psychological subtlety.

Teresa's writings were different and seen to be so. They include heart-felt personal elements, clear-headed practical advice, and philosophically astute questions about self-knowledge, the role of the faculties in the pursuit of ultimate knowledge, and the constituents of a virtuous life. She describes with some precision the cognitive and emotional elements of the enormous hardships involved in acquiring the right sort of self-knowledge. The metaphor she so richly employs—of a multi-roomed castle or mansion—emphasizes the multifaceted nature of the soul or self. The point of Teresa's *Interior Castle* is first to motivate the proper entrance into the castle or soul and then to lead the explorer to its sacred "inner rooms." Teresa is clear that the journeyer will not succeed without constantly reflecting on and more fully comprehending herself. Urging her sisters: "to strive to make improvement in self-knowledge" (I: 2, 9 (292)), she explicates exactly what constitutes such progress.<sup>10</sup> In the end, the meditator seeks a form of perfection: "For perfection as well as its reward does not consist in spiritual delights but in greater love and in deeds done with greater justice and truth" (III: 2, 9 (313)).

The main steps recommended by Teresa to achieve spiritual progress are fairly standard: the meditator begins to recognize her failure in grasping the truths and finding the stability she seeks, understands increasingly the limits of her own powers, becomes appropriately humble, and so prepares herself to accept God's will and receive divine help. What makes Teresa's meditative instructions so original and appealing is her skill in mixing intimate stories about her own personal struggle toward spiritual improvement with brilliantly clear analyses of difficult topics like the nature of humility and virtue, the role of the faculties in spiritual development, and the precise manner in which divine love functions. As a Spanish theologian, Thomas Hurtado, makes the point not long after her death:

Mother Teresa, who, in her books, but chiefly in the *Mansions* [i.e., *Interior Castle*], has cleared up in simple language the most difficult questions of this divine theology, and has brought forth light from darkness.... No one has ever

<sup>10</sup> Teresa of Ávila (1577). The *Interior Castle* is divided into "dwelling places" or main parts of the castle. Each dwelling place contains one or more chapters, each of which has several sections. Citations given here include dwelling place, chapter, section, and page number of the Kavanaugh and Rodriguez translation. So, I: 2, 9 (292) is first dwelling place, second chapter, ninth section, p. 292.



turned theory into practice in a more convincing or more catholic manner. The most profound secrets of this supernatural wisdom are here treated with such ease, so amiably, so delightfully, they are illustrated by such nice and homely examples, that instead of awe-inspiring obscurity, we find ... an avenue [through which] the soul passes onwards (Fuente 1881, pp. 331–332).<sup>11</sup>

Teresa became a spiritual rock-star by transforming the traditional meditative genre into something poignant, subtle, and clear.

#### 4 Descartes and Teresa of Ávila

Because Descartes is well known for exaggerating his own originality and leaving his sources unacknowledged (Clarke 2006, pp. 68–71; Vendler 1989, p. 195), we will probably never know exactly what he read by Teresa. But we can be certain he was familiar with her life and ideas. As a student at a Jesuit school and interlocutor with prominent French theologians and philosophers, there were ample opportunities to learn about her ideas.

Early modernists have long discussed the relevance of Descartes' Jesuit education to his philosophical development, rightly noting the progressive elements in the *Ratio atque Institutio Studiorum Societatis Iesu* [*The Official Plan for Jesuit Education*]. The Jesuits' *Ratio studiorum*, as it came to be called, was a progressive approach to education practiced in some sixteenth-century schools and instituted in 1599, soon forming the basis for hundreds of Jesuit schools throughout the world. Because the *Ratio Studiorum* included rigorous training in mathematics and natural philosophy, historians of philosophy and science have often discussed the lessons Descartes might have drawn from his Jesuit training.

But the primary motivation behind the pedagogy of the Society of Jesus was to create an elite class of spiritually informed religious and political leaders. As the sixteenth-century authors of the *Ratio Studiorum* make clear, “the chief concern” of every Rector of every school “should be the spiritual development of the young men committed to his care” (Farrell 1970, p. 15). Rectors were not only required to organize weekly lectures on spiritual topics, many of which would be given by older boys to the younger ones, they were responsible to “encourage spiritual conversations” and so ensure that each and every pupil receive “proper spiritual training” (Farrell 1970, pp. 18, 358–359). In a major work published while Descartes was still attending school, leaders of Jesuit order concur that the main goal of their schools is to prepare pupils for a proper spiritual life (De Angelis 1615). One Superior General writes, for example, “devotion to learning and knowledge [*scientia*]” must always be “combined with a commitment to spiritual matters” (De Angelis 1615, pp. 50–52).

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<sup>11</sup> Teresa and her works were not universally endorsed. Although Jesuits supported her beatification (including the influential Spanish scholastic, Francis Suarez (Fuente 1881, vol. 6, p. 278), some Catholic leaders argued that no woman could have written such a book and concluded that Teresa must have been helped by the devil (Slade 1995, p. 129).



There is abundant evidence that the Jesuits took Teresa's spiritual teachings very seriously. As the self-proclaimed "army" of the counter-reformation, leaders of the Society of Jesus would have been well disposed to her as a rising star of that movement. But the Society also had personal, theological, and political ties to Teresa. Spanish Jesuits contributed to the young woman's development and were major supporters of her beatification. Her most prominent spiritual mentor, Francis Borgia (1510–1572), was her confessor before he became the third Superior General of the Society in 1565 and before Teresa began to reform the Carmelite order. Borgia expanded the reach of the Jesuits to such an extent that he is considered "the second founder of the order," developing strong relations in France.<sup>12</sup> It was partly due to Jesuit support that Teresa was beatified in 1614, while Descartes was still at La Flèche.

There can be little doubt, then, that Teresa's teachings were a component of the spiritual lessons taught in Jesuit schools in the early decades of the seventeenth century, especially at a flagship school like the one Descartes attended. Founded in 1604, the school in La Flèche was taken to be one of the most prominent Jesuit institutions in France when Descartes entered in 1606, at the age of 10, with a well-respected Rector whom Descartes described as his "second father" (Gaukroger 1995, p. 38). The young Descartes studied for 8 years alongside students who would become prominent missionaries and leaders of the Jesuit order and with whom he would have meditated (Vendler 1989, pp. 194–195). In brief, given the Society of Jesus' overall commitment to the spiritual development of the pupils attending their schools and given their enthusiasm for Teresa's spiritual writings, it is likely that the spiritual training of Descartes and his fellow pupils would have included ideas drawn from Teresa's teachings.

Nor would Descartes' familiarity with Teresa's meditative proposals have ended when he left La Flèche. Upon her canonization in 1622, only forty years after her death, her writings were reissued and more thoroughly discussed (Deville 1990, p. 19). As her fame increased in the first decades of the seventeenth century, especially in France, the young Descartes would have had plenty of opportunities to think seriously about her proposals. By the time he was composing his own meditative exercise in the late 1630s, Teresa had become a favorite among the Catholic elites across France. To cite one prominent example among many, Princess Henrietta Maria, the Queen of England and the daughter of the King of France, was a well-known fan.<sup>13</sup> Several of Descartes' interlocutors were keen supporters of Teresa.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps most significantly, Descartes' long-time interlocutor and adviser,

<sup>12</sup> Ghezzi (2000). Borgia, who was beatified in 1624, wrote a meditation that has neither the philosophical subtlety nor psychological insights of Teresa's work. See Borgia (1620).

<sup>13</sup> An early translation of Teresa's autobiography, *La Vida*, from Spanish into English includes a dedication to "Princess Henrietta-Maria of France, Queen of Great Britain, France and Ireland" who has committed herself to "protecting and enlarging the glory of an incomparable Saint, S. Teresa" (Teresa 1642).

<sup>14</sup> For example, the prominent French Cardinal and Statesman, Pierre de Bérulle, was instrumental in supporting Teresa's Carmelite order of nuns in France and promoting her ideas. He was also a supporter of Descartes with whom he met. See Howells (2015), Gaukroger (1995, pp. 183, 186).



Marin Mersenne, thought very well of Teresa and her works (Mersenne 1634, pp. 69–72). Moreover, given Descartes' keenness to promote his mechanical physics and the metaphysics on which it rested, it would have been strategic to make subtle use of the popular saint's ideas. Given the enormous respect shown Teresa in the most powerful French circles, he might have hoped to diminish criticism and increase interest in his project by riding her methodological coattails.

In the end, there can be little doubt that Descartes was familiar with Teresa of Ávila's ideas when he composed his own *Meditations* in the 1630s.

## 5 Teresa and Descartes: meditative goals

There are several striking similarities between the meditative strategy in Teresa's *Interior Castle* and Descartes' *Meditations*. I focus here on their common epistemological rendering of the demon trope or what I call "the deceiver strategy."

When Descartes was coming of age in the early seventeenth century, Europe was in turmoil. Religious wars and political skirmishes had devastated the continent. Although belief in demonic possession predated Christianity, in the words of one scholar, "widespread fear of demons" was "at a peak in Europe" in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when "the devil seemed to be more powerful and menacing than ever before, capable of assuming an ever-increasing variety of forms" including wholesale deception (Watt and Rodgers 2009, p. 3). The common assumption was that demons were eager to divert even the most committed meditators from their course. Unsurprisingly, early modern spiritual exercises are full of advice about how to escape demonic powers. Given the religious and philosophical turmoil of the seventeenth century and given the common warnings about demons, Descartes' early modern readers must have found his rendering of the deceiver argument particularly poignant.

Scholars have long discussed the argumentative strategy and cogency of the three arguments of Meditation One. But Descartes' creative reimagining of standard meditative components has not been noticed. Like previous meditators, his deceiver arrives on the scene and forces the meditator into disbelief; unlike his predecessors, the French philosopher construes the deceiver's powers in subtle epistemological terms, a demon whose mere possibility undermines the certainty of knowledge. Descartes' rendering of the deceiver trope is an innovative transformation of the tradition and bears a striking similarity to Teresa's own ground-breaking retelling.

In the remainder of this section, I briefly contrast the meditative goals of Teresa's *Interior Castle* and Descartes' *Meditations*. In the next, I describe and compare the six steps that constitute their deceiver strategy.

The goal of the *Interior Castle* is to teach the exercitant how to forge a relation with God which requires both self-knowledge and knowledge about the divinity. Teresa addresses her sisters: "As for ourselves, we should care only about moving quickly [through the rooms in the castle] so as to see the Lord" (III: 2, 8 (312)). After noting the close relation between self-knowledge and knowledge of God, she exhorts: "Let's strive to make more progress in self-knowledge. In my opinion we shall never completely know ourselves if we don't strive to know God" (I: 2, 9 (p.



292)). In the end, the proper understanding of oneself leads to knowledge of God on the basis of which a proper relation with the divinity can be forged.

Descartes is cagier about his goals. Like Teresa, he sees a close relation between knowledge of oneself and of God. As he makes the point in the Synopsis of the *Meditations*, “the one thing I set myself” to show is the means to “knowledge of our own minds and God” (7: 16).<sup>15</sup> But in the Preface he explains that while seeking this knowledge, “I am also going to deal with the foundations of First Philosophy in its entirety” (7: 10).

Like Teresa and other meditators, Descartes takes knowledge of a perfect God to be a requisite for all other knowledge, but unlike his predecessors, the fundamental truths that he seeks include those concerning “corporeal nature.” As he writes at the end of Meditation Five:

Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him. And now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge of countless matters, both concerning God himself and other things whose nature is intellectual, and also concerning the whole of that corporeal nature which is the subject-matter of pure mathematics (7: 71).

There is much more to say about the similarities and dissimilarities between Teresa’s and Descartes’ views about the relations among knowledge of God, soul or mind, and other truths. For our purposes here, it is sufficient to note that each expects to lead meditators to certainty about fundamental truths, each employs demonic deception as a strategic means to that goal, and each transforms the common deceiving-demon trope into something with a powerful epistemological punch.

## 6 Teresa, Descartes, and demons

In the beginning sections of *Interior Castle*, Teresa escorts her readers through the first perilous steps in the exploration of their interior castle (or soul) as the means to knowledge of ultimate truths and God. The process she describes is similar to those in the *Meditations* with one noteworthy difference. Like Descartes, Teresa offers her meditators a path away from false beliefs to certain knowledge. But Descartes breaks with Teresa in the kinds of beliefs that motivate the first steps of his exercise. The beliefs that provoke Teresa are normative ones like “Public honor is valuable” and “It is sensible to attend to one’s possessions,” which are taken by some to be among the constituents of a virtuous life, whereas the beliefs motivating Descartes’ meditator are descriptive claims like “I’m sitting in front of the fire” and

<sup>15</sup> All citations are to Descartes (1964–1976), cited by volume and page numbers; translations from Descartes (1985–1991).



(notoriously) “ $2 + 3 = 5$ .” For the sake of the account here, we can treat these kinds of beliefs as the same.

I now turn to the steps that readers of the *Interior Castle* and *Meditations* are asked to take along their path away from false beliefs to certainty about fundamental truths. Teresa and Descartes diverge from tradition in rendering the first steps of their meditative journey in epistemological terms, employing deceiving demons to force truth-seekers into extreme skepticism about their current beliefs, which leads to self-exploration. It is this *deceiver strategy* that sets Teresa's and Descartes' meditative exercises apart from their predecessors.

### 6.1 Step 1: Recognizing the problem

The meditator recognizes that many of her past and current beliefs need to be reevaluated.

Relying on her own youthful experience, Teresa describes how easy it is, even for the most ardent truth-seekers, to become lost in a state of “blindness,” wallowing in “darkness itself” so that their faculties remain undeveloped and their goals unreached (I: 2, 14 (294)). Although they have “so rich a nature and the power to converse with none other than God” (I:1, 6 (286)), they remain trapped in “great misery” when they have the wrong beliefs. By “carrying on in this way like brute beasts,” they remain “blighted souls” who will never acquire the understanding they seek (I: 1 7–8 (286)). Following in the footsteps of Augustine and generations of spiritual advisers, Teresa argues that exercitants' misery is evidence of their misguided approach to the world. At the end of the *Interior Castle's* first main section (or “dwelling place”), Teresa hopes to have convinced her readers that many of their current concerns and beliefs need to be reevaluated.

Descartes begins Meditation One with his own succinct version of Step 1: “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” (7: 17).

### 6.2 Step 2: Beginning anew

The meditator sees the need to set aside current beliefs as a first step in the discovery of fundamental truths.

Instead of maintaining the beliefs that have made them so unhappy, Teresa beseeches her exercitants to reexamine both their beliefs and the manner of acquiring them. Using a Biblical example that dramatically expresses the danger they face, she writes: “If these souls do not strive to understand and cure their great misery, they will be changed into statues of salt, unable to turn their heads to look at themselves” (I:1, 6 (286)). That is, people who do not reject their present beliefs and begin to reexamine the means of acquiring truth will become too fallow to nourish any spiritual growth. Without the chance to develop their faculties appropriately and become responsible “custodians” of their souls (I: 2, 4 (289)), they will become “deaf mutes” to the truth (II: 1, 2 (298)). Unless the soul begins to pursue a new means to knowledge, it will live



in a world “filled with falsehood... and contradictions” so that “neither security nor peace will be found” (II: 1, 4 (299)). But if her readers take “the right road from the beginning” of their meditative exercise by setting aside their present beliefs (II: 1 (297)), they will eventually find the truths they seek (II: 1, 2 (298)). Teresa offers the *Interior Castle* as a detailed roadmap to those truths.

Descartes also relies on a vivid (though perhaps less dramatic) metaphor: “I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last” (7: 17)). Like Teresa, Descartes offers his readers an escape route from epistemological insecurity to a state of certainty about fundamental truths.

### 6.3 Step 3: Severing ties

The only proper way to begin anew and attain secure knowledge of fundamental truths is for the meditator to refrain from assenting to present and former beliefs about the external world.

For hundreds of years, one of the first goals of most meditative exercises was to learn to strengthen one’s will so the exercitant could avoid assenting to her former concerns. The point was to train oneself not to *care* about the external world as she previously had and thereby develop a new way of relating to it.

Teresa is unusual in the epistemological spin she gives this task. Like her predecessors, she insists that in order to “proceed correctly” in the pursuit of secure knowledge, her exercitants must reject their standard way of being “involved in external matters.” But instead of merely exhorting the exercitant to reject his past ties to the world, Teresa hopes to show that the justification for many of her meditator’s longstanding beliefs is insecure and that he must seek a more secure grounding for them. However obvious it might seem, for example, that “Public honor is valuable,” the meditator must not assent to the claim. The danger here is not just that he might hold a false belief, but also that in holding such beliefs, he can become too attached to external matters, which can “occupy” him so fully that he is unable to explore the truth in anything other than a “hurried fashion” and so can make no real progress toward his goal of discovering the most fundamental truths (I: 1, 8 (286–287)). In such a state, it is “impossible ... to get” to fundamental truths unless the exercitant severs his ties to all present beliefs about the external world (I: 2, 14 (294)). For Teresa, then, the exercitant must refrain from assenting to past and current beliefs about the external world.

Descartes agrees with Teresa that the exercitant will make no progress unless he withholds assent from longstanding beliefs and that he must review the justifications for his beliefs.<sup>16</sup> For example, however obvious it might seem, in Descartes’ words, that “I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on,” I must not assent to it (7: 18). Even those beliefs that seem to be “transparent truths” like “two and three added together make

<sup>16</sup> There is much disagreement about how to interpret the main point and arguments in Meditation One. I ignore these complications here. For an overview of the debate see Newman (2014).



five" must not be endorsed (7:20). Descartes' underlying point and its implications are the same as his Spanish predecessor: because the exercitant cannot be certain of her present beliefs, she must withhold assent from them and reevaluate their justifications. In words that Teresa would endorse, Descartes insists: "So in future I must withhold my assent from these former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods, if I want any certainty" (7:22).

#### 6.4 Step 4: Former beliefs return

Immediately after the meditator commits to withholding assent from her former beliefs, those beliefs return so that she is tempted to recommit to them.

In the *Interior Castle*, the meditator commits herself to refrain from assenting to former beliefs only to be overwhelmed by their forceful return. She becomes so "absorbed with" her customary concerns that she is tempted to endorse them. In Teresa's colorful account, such beliefs are like "poisonous vermin" that demand our attention and cannot be easily ignored: "These beasts are so poisonous and their presence so dangerous and noisy that it would be a wonder if we kept from stumbling and falling over them" (II: 1, 2 (298)). The vivid return of these customary beliefs creates a significant barrier to the meditator's progress.

In the *Meditations*, Descartes makes the same point also emphasizing the pull of customary opinions: "My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom." Upon their return, Descartes' meditator worries that he will "never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions," which still seem "much more reasonable to believe than to deny" (7: 22)). Like Teresa's exercitant, Descartes' meditator is tempted to endorse his former beliefs and thereby fails to achieve even the first step in the progress he seeks.

#### 6.5 Step 5: The evil deceiver

A deceiving demon further confounds the meditator and stops her progress.

Caught between her desperate desire to meditate properly and the attack of poisonous vermin (her former beliefs), Teresa's meditator totters between old and new commitments only to face a new onslaught. Deceitful demons arrive at this moment of heightened disorientation to further confound her. What happens then is maximally dangerous. Not only do the demons "bring to mind the esteem one has in the world, one's friends and relatives, one's health," but they make these former commitments and beliefs especially attractive because "the devils represent these snakes (worldly things) and the temporal pleasure of the present as though almost eternal" (II: 1, 3 (299)). That is, the demons have such power that the exercitant's former beliefs become extremely appealing (I: 2, 16 (295)). It becomes almost impossible for the meditator not to recommit to them. Her meditative progress is brought to an abrupt halt.

Descartes takes up Teresa's deceiver strategy and gives it a new twist. The *Meditations* breaks significantly with the meditative tradition by introducing the evil



deceiver as a mere possibility, cleverly avoiding any commitment to the reality of demonic powers. Descartes writes: “I will suppose therefore” that “some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me” (7: 22). The hypothetical power of Descartes’ demon to deceive “deliberately and constantly” forces the meditator to reconsider the likelihood of progress. Like Teresa’s exercitant, Descartes’ meditator is unable to proceed.

## 6.6 Step 6: The move to self-knowledge

The meditator sees the need to rethink her way forward, which requires self-exploration.

For Teresa, the meditator’s failure to muster the right strength to fight off her demons constitutes an important lesson: she is not yet able to sever ties to her former beliefs, although she sees that “the whole world is filled with falsehood” (II: 1, 4 (299)). Returning to the metaphor of poisonous vermin, she exhorts: “Let us strive to do what lies in our power and guard ourselves against these poisonous little reptiles.” Given that “we err in the beginning” of our meditative journey, we are forced to recognize our present incapacity to avoid error. After asking, “what kind of stability will this edifice have?” she explains that we will not succeed in our attempt to create a stable foundation for truth unless we develop our individual will in the right way (II: 1, 8 (301)). But in the face of these “grave dangers” and “great trials,” how can we garner our resolve in a manner that will render us properly “determined to fight” our demons and “anything else that gets in our way” (II: 1, 5–6 (300))? According to Teresa, the only way forward is for the meditator to “work and prepare himself with determination and every possible effort to bring his will into conformity with God’s will” because the “greatest perfection attainable along the spiritual path lies in this conformity” (II: 1, 8 (301)).

In short, the confrontation with deceiving demons in Step 5 forces the meditator to see that she will not proceed unless she strengthens her will. For Teresa, the next task is to learn to submit to the divine will, which she will do “through self-knowledge.” That is, the only way to escape “our own misery” and avoid falsehood is to “practice self-knowledge” (I: 2, 8–9 (291–292)).<sup>17</sup> As she vividly puts it: “Well now, it is foolish to think that we will enter heaven without entering into ourselves, coming to know ourselves” (II: 1, 11 (303)).

Although Descartes’ demon is only hypothetical, it causes the same kind of epistemological havoc. His exercitant is forced to admit that he is currently unable to follow through with his commitment to withhold assent to former beliefs. As Descartes puts it,

I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labor when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised (7:23).

<sup>17</sup> See the quotation from Augustine’s *Confessions* in Sect. 3.



In the face of such difficulties and darkness, Descartes' meditator recognizes his incapacity to move ahead and struggles to find a new plan. Like Teresa, his response also concerns the will, though in his case he decides to "turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false" (7: 22). At the outset of Meditation Two, when Descartes' exercitant has sunk into this "whirlpool" of confusion, he discovers a way out: he recognizes that he is "a thinking thing" and begins to explore what that thing is.

The *Interior Castle* and the *Meditations* have led the meditator through a series of steps at the end of which she has begun the task of self-exploration, which will soon lead to knowledge of God and an understanding of her dependence on the divine nature. Meditation Three ends in words that Teresa might have written: "when I turn my mind's eye upon myself, I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent" on God and so will take a moment's rest from my meditative journey to "gaze with wonder and adoration" on this "immense light" (7: 51).

## 7 Conclusions

I want to make four points by way of conclusion. First, there is good reason to believe that Descartes was familiar with Teresa's ideas as he was writing his own *Meditations*. Because he left such paltry evidence about his sources, we will probably never know whether or not he read the *Interior Castle* with care, but I have presented significant circumstantial evidence that he devised his own meditative exercise cognizant of Teresa's deceiver strategy.

Second, the parallels noted here between the deceiver strategies of the *Interior Castle* and the *Meditations* raise important new questions about their authors. Although Teresa has been categorized for centuries as a mystic and ignored by philosophers, her works are richly philosophical and deserve study. Isn't it worthwhile to analyze her ideas and their influence on early modern thought? Although Descartes' *Meditations* has been discussed for centuries, its brilliant reimagining of the meditative genre has not been explored. How might key claims and arguments look different when seen as steps along a meditative path? According to Teresa, the exercitant moves from a confused conception of herself to an increasingly clear understanding of her soul and its dependence on God. She glimpses truths in one "dwelling place" only to understand them with greater clarity in the next. Does the epistemological progress of Descartes' meditator look different in the context of Teresa's proposals? For example, might the *cogito* argument and Cartesian circle look different in this context?

Third, the recognition of Teresa of Ávila's global influence in the seventeenth-century offers significant evidence of what has become increasingly clear to many early modernists: the history of philosophy is much richer than the standard story would have us believe. It is time finally to reject the narrative created in the nineteenth century about pre-Kantian philosophy. There are wonderful discoveries to be made when we explore more fully the diverse landscape of late medieval and early modern thought.



Finally, a main goal of this paper has been to show that philosophy's past contains brilliant women making important philosophical contributions. Although their modes of expression are sometimes unfamiliar, their writings and ideas are worth the effort. In the end, it is indubitable that inclusive history of philosophy pays off, big time.

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