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Reflections on Descartes' Vocation as an Early Theory of Happiness

Patrick Brissey

Charleston

Abstract: In this paper, I argue that Descartes developed an early theory of happiness, which he rhetorically claimed to have stemmed from his choice of vocation in 1619. I provide a sketch of his theory in the *Discours*, noting, however, some problems with the historicity of the text. I then turn to his *Olympica* and associated writings that date from this period, where he literally asked, "What way in life shall I follow?" I take Descartes' dreams as allegorical and provide an interpretation of his curious claim that poets are better equipped to discover truth than philosophers, made at a time when he chose to become a philosopher and not a poet. My way out of this conundrum is to identify in this text a philosophical psychology that I argue is consistent with the *Regulae* and the *Discours*, is part of what he took to be his "foundation of the wonderful science," and is the essence of his early theory of happiness.

Keywords: René Descartes, *Olympica*, *Cogitationes privatae*, *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, imagination, method, happiness.

Scholars of Descartes' moral theory have primarily focused on his later writings:¹ the "morale provisoire" of the *Discours de la méthode* (1637), the correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (1643-1649), *Les Passions de L'Ame* (1649), and, in some cases, the Fourth Meditation of the *Meditationes* (1641).² There are, however, interesting normative claims scattered

¹ For instance, see Deborah Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; John Marshall, *Descartes's Moral Theory*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998; Donald Rutherford, "On the Happy Life: Descartes vis-à-vis Seneca," in Steven K. Strange and Jack Zupko (eds.), *Stoicism: Traditions and Transformations*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004; Lisa Shapiro, "Cartesian Generosity," in Tuomo Aho and Mikko Yrjonsuuri (eds.), *Norms and Modes of Thinking in Descartes, Acta Philosophica Fennica* 64 (1999), pp. 249-275; Tom Sorell, "Morals and Modernity in Descartes," in Tom Sorell (ed.), *The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 273-288; Byron Williston and André Gombay (eds.), *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003.

² In this paper, I use the following abbreviations: AT = René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 11 vols., 2nd edition, Paris: Vrin, 1964-1974; CSM = René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols., trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-1985, vol. I and II; CSMK = René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols., trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, vol. III; *Dioptrique* = René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, trans. Paul Olscamp, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001, pp. 65-173; *Les Météores* = *ibid.*, pp. 263-361; *Olympica* = John R.

throughout Descartes' early writings. My principal interest is his 1619 claim that he chose his vocation because it secured human happiness. On first inspection, this proposal is commonplace, as used by ancient, medieval, and Renaissance philosophers to persuade readers of their grand philosophical programs.³ However, on a closer examination, or so I argue in this paper, there are grounds for holding that Descartes did not merely provide an empty claim concerning his choice of vocation, but, in the spirit of his ethical predecessors, provided an early theory, a method for attaining happiness.

This I take as the goal of this paper. In the first part, I begin with Descartes' depictions of his 1619 choice of vocation in the autobiographical portions of the *Discours*, which provides an introduction to, if not a definitive perspective on, Descartes' early theory. I explain that his provisional morality links his method, choice of vocation, and scientific investigations to his quest for happiness. I note, however, that while the *Discours*, Descartes' 1637 mouthpiece, is at times legitimately autobiographical, it also includes highly rhetorical and misleading comments, in which Descartes exaggerates events for his own purposes.⁴ In the second part of the paper, I provide a targeted account of Descartes' *Olympica* (1619-1620), where he literally asked, "What way in life shall I follow?"⁵ I take *Olympica* as an allegorical tale, written in the spirit of, say, Boethius' (480-524) *Consolatio Philosophiae* (525-526), Johann Valentin Andreae's (1585-1684) *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutz anno 1459* (1616), or Johannes Kepler's

Cole, *The Olympian Dreams and Youthful Rebellion of René Descartes*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992, pp. 32-40; and *Conversation with Burman = René Descartes, Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, trans. John Cottingham, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.

³ For instance, Étienne Gilson cites Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. W.D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Richard McKeon, New York: Random House, 1941), I.2, 1094a1-b. See Étienne Gilson, *René Descartes. Discours de la méthode, texte et commentaire*, Paris: Vrin, 1925, p. 259. See also Plato, *Republic* (ed. by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), X, 618c-620d; Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. R.G. Bury, New York: Prometheus Books, 1990, pp. 17-18; Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. R.E. Latham, London: Penguin Books, 2005, pp. 167-168; Thomas Aquinas, *A Shorter Summa*, ed. by Peter Kreeft, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993, pp. 131-162; Michel de Montaigne, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," in J.B. Schneewind (ed.), *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁴ For instance, Gilbert Gadoffre argues that Descartes' provisional morality was not created in 1619, before his travels, but that it was fabricated in 1637 to avoid civil censure, because of doubts regarding Part Four. See Gilbert Gadoffre, "La chronologie des six parties," in *Le Discours et sa Méthode*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987, pp. 36-37. For a response, see Patrick Brissey, "Descartes' *Discours* as a Plan for a Universal Science," *Studia UBB Philosophia* 58 (2013), pp. 58-60. John Schuster also argues that Descartes' method discourse was a fiction. See John A. Schuster, *Descartes-Agonistes: Physico-Mathematics, Method and Corpuscular-Mechanism 1618-33*, Sydney: Springer, 2013, chapters 5 and 6.

⁵ For dates of Descartes' *Early Works*, see Henri Gouhier, *Les premières pensées de Descartes*, Paris: Vrin, 1958. See also Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, chapter 4.

(1571-1630) *Somnium* (1634).⁶ With this orientation to the text, I explain a curious, seemingly un-Cartesian passage where Descartes seems to claim that poets are better equipped to discover truth than philosophers, a claim made when, in this period, Descartes chose to become a philosopher and not a poet. My resolution to this dilemma is to hold that, while he thought that the poet's and the Scholastic's philosophical toolset included faculty psychologies with corresponding procedures that had important strengths, he also thought that both were deficient for his own project. His substitution, that is, his own toolset, was partly given in the allegorical presentation of the *Olympica*, which provides a depiction of the faculties in action that discloses the proper roles of the imagination and the intellect. His new psychology was partly his "foundation of the wonderful science," which had epistemic, ontological, and moral features. The latter I take to be his early theory of happiness.

1. Volitional Archery: Target Practice and the Method of Willing Inside the Intellect

In Part Three of the *Discours*, Descartes recounts that he wanted to "live as *happily* as [he] could";⁷ to this end, he "review[ed] the various occupations [...] in order to try to choose the best" and, without passing judgment on those of others, decided to "devote his whole life to cultivating [his] reason [...]."⁸ His choice of vocation in 1619 seemed to be significant to the young savant,⁹ for he later placed it front stage in the *Discours*. For instance, it was a permanent maxim of his "*morale provisoire*."¹⁰ Moreover, in the preamble, he once again gave a programmatic depiction of his choice. He says that he "cast a philosophical eye upon the *various activities and undertakings of mankind*," but this time did pass judgment on the vocation of others for, he thought, "there are almost none that are not vain and useless."¹¹ In contrast, his

⁶ I do not provide an argument for this claim in this paper. For an account, see Paul Arnold, "Le 'songe' de Descartes," *Cahiers du Sud* 35 (1952), pp. 272-291, and Richard Kennington, "Descartes's *Olympica*," in P. Kraus and F. Hunt (eds.), *On Modern Origins: Essays on Early Modern Philosophy*, New York: Lexington Books, pp. 79-104, at pp. 83-85.

⁷ Part Three, AT VI, 22; CSM I, 122; emphasis added.

⁸ Part Three, AT VI, 27; CSM I, 124.

⁹ In addition, he thought that his philosophy would augment the body. See Part Six, AT VI, 62; CSM I, 142-143; AT VI, 231; *Les Météores*, p. 263; AT VI 81; *Dioptrique*, p. 65.

¹⁰ See fn. 8. In his summaries of his provisional morality, he, at times, omits this maxim. See August 4, 1645, to Princess Elizabeth, AT IV, 265-266; CSM I, 257-258.

¹¹ Part One, AT VI, 3; CSM I, 112, emphasis added.

own vocation, again viewed through the “*œil de philosophe*,” had real value: “if any *purely human occupation* has solid worth and importance, it is the one I have chosen.”¹²

He thus chose his vocation because he thought that it had value, that is, “solid worth and importance,” but why was this? He explained in Part One of the *Discours* that his philosophical musings in his youth helped him to happen upon certain paths from which he formed a “method,” and, through its use, he continually achieved psychological contentment, or “unperturbedness” as Sextus Empiricus once put it.¹³ For instance, Descartes writes: “[...] I have already reaped such fruits from this *method* that I cannot but feel *extremely satisfied* with the progress I think I have already made in the *search for truth*.”¹⁴ Similarly, in Part Three, he adds: “Since beginning to *use this method* I have felt such *extreme contentment* that I did not think one could enjoy any sweeter or purer one in this life [...]” and “[...] I could not have *limited my desires, or been happy*, had I not been following this path [...]”.¹⁵ The story of the *Discours*, then, was that his choice to become a philosopher had value because his particular version of methodical, natural philosophy not only could produce results in the sciences, but also, in some sense, enabled him to achieve contentment.¹⁶

This claim was twofold: first, he thought his methodical investigations increased human happiness because they would eventually produce inventions that would assist the body, promoting health and physical comfort; second, and most importantly, his investigations would improve the use of his will, enabling him to realize which objects were within his control, and promoting contentment by properly ordering his faculties. In terms of the former, he provided material that he thought would eventually comfort the body. By 1637, he had proposed an explanation of weather phenomena in *Les Météores* and a description of a hyperbolic lens grinder in *Dioptrique*, and laid the foundations of his physics and physiology in *Le Monde* and *L’Homme*.¹⁷ His aim in this endeavor was to produce “inventions of innumerable devices” that

¹² Part One, AT VI, 3; CSM I, 112. See also, Part Six, AT VI 63; CSM I, 143; April 15, 1631, to Balzac, AT I, 198; CSMK III, 30; August 4, 1645, to Elizabeth, AT IV, 267; CSMK III, 258.

¹³ Part One, AT VI, 3; CSM I, 112. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, p. 17.

¹⁴ Part One, AT VI, 3; CSM I, 112.

¹⁵ Part Three, AT VI, 27, 28; CSM I, 124, 124-125, emphasis added.

¹⁶ For an alternative account of method and happiness during this period, see Sorana Corneanu and Koen Vermeir, “Francis Bacon on the Imagination and the Medicine of the Mind,” *Perspectives on Science* 20 (2012), pp. 183-206.

¹⁷ John A. Schuster’s work on Descartes’ early science has plausibly shown that Descartes did not use his method in his scientific discoveries. See Schuster, *Descartes-Agonistes*, chapters 4 and 6.

would promote the “maintenance of health [which is] undoubtedly *the chief good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life.*”¹⁸

Securing physical comfort, however, did not amount to a theory of happiness. At best, as Descartes puts it, it was merely a foundation, promoting but not ensuring psychological contentment. As far as the latter is concerned, he provided a sketch, which he linked with his initial choice of vocation. In his “*morale provisoire,*” he writes: “My third maxim was to try always to master myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than the order of the world.”¹⁹ His account, under this banner, was not yet explicitly methodical, or directly connected to his choice of vocation. Following the Stoics, he held that “nothing lies entirely within our power except our thoughts,” and, consequently, that we ought to withhold our assent from matters not within our control. For example, we should relinquish our desire “to be healthy when ill or free when imprisoned,” and, it was in such control of one’s volition that, he thought, “lay the secret of those philosophers who in earlier times were able to escape the dominion of fortune and, despite suffering and poverty, rival their gods in happiness.”²⁰

This maxim, however, is not all that Descartes had to say on the matter in 1637, for his method, in the end, was devised to enable an agent to discover what in fact was under his or her control, indicating what ultimately could be known. He says in the final maxim of Part Three that he “review[ed] the various occupations which men have in this life, in order to try to choose the best” and decided to devote his “whole life to *cultivating reason* and advancing as far as [he] could in the knowledge of the truth, *following the method I had prescribed for myself,*” a method that made him feel “*extreme contentment* that I did not think one could enjoy one any sweeter or purer in life.”²¹ He then connected the fourth maxim of the provisional morality with the third. In the former, he tried to separate his view from the ancients, distinguishing appeals to authority from his rational method of discovery.²² He informed his readers that he did not follow the path

¹⁸ Part Six, AT VI, 62; CSM I, 143, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Part Three, AT VI, 25; CSM I, 123. Descartes did not identify the source of his maxim in the *Discours*, but connected it specifically to Seneca in his *Correspondence*. He, however, thought that many ancient philosophers held a formulation of the maxim—e.g., Zeno, Epicurus, Aristotle, as well as others—and, for this reason, he criticized the ancient moral philosophers in Part One, not specifically the Stoics. See August 4, 1645, to Princess Elizabeth, AT IV, 263-268; CSMK III, 256-258.

²⁰ Part Three, AT VI, 25-26; CSM I, 123-124. See also August 4, 1645, to Princess Elizabeth, AT IV, 266; CSMK III, 258.

²¹ Part Three, AT VI, 27; CSM I, 124, emphasis added.

²² See also Descartes’ statements immediately after his evaluation, Part One, AT VI, 9; CSM I, 115.

of the Stoics or the ancient ethicists,²³ as he seemed to have suggested in the third maxim,²⁴ for he claimed to have discovered “truths,” via the method, that were “generally unknown to men,”²⁵ which made him confidently remark in the preamble:

I consider myself very fortunate to have happened upon certain paths in my youth which led me to considerations and maxims from which I formed a method whereby, it seems to me, I can increase my knowledge gradually and raise it little by little to the highest point allowed by the mediocrity of my mind and the short duration of my life.²⁶

Owing to its practical results, his method undercut that of the ancients in that he thought he had discovered a veracious method of discovery, which either the ancients did not have or chose not to disclose.²⁷ The ancients, in short, lacked a method of discovery [that is, they did not describe a useful procedure for discovering truths (or, rather, clearly and distinctly cognizing objects)].²⁸ For this reason, he writes, he was not “obliged to rest content with the opinions of others,” not even “for a single moment,” for his method had shown that he could discover “better ones.”²⁹ This, as he explained in Part One, was the principal defect of the ancient ethicists, for their method resulted in false virtues and this was because, “they do not adequately explain how to *recognize virtue*.”³⁰

In some sense, then, Descartes thought his version of the ancient maxim—willing what was within one’s control—was a result of his method, which has been noted by Descartes commentators. He began Part Two of the *Discours* with his definition of knowledge: “*never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth.*”³¹ His procedure to meet this goal required one to reduce the initial obscure proposition or question, step-by-step, to an intuition (or a number of intuitions) and then, based on the content of the intuition(s), deduce an

²³ See Part One, AT VI, 7-8; CSM I, 114.

²⁴ It is clear that the Stoics inspired his maxim. See fn. 19. Some claim Descartes’ position on Stoicism in the *Discours* was inconsistent. See Gadoffre, “La chronologie des six parties,” pp. 22-23.

²⁵ Part Three, AT VI, 27; CSM I, 124. See Schuster, *Descartes-Agonistes*, chapters 4 and 6.

²⁶ Part One, AT VI, 3; CSM I, 112.

²⁷ He claimed this in regard to the ancient ethicists. See *Discours*, AT VI, 8; CSM I, 114, and *Regulae*, AT X, 376-377; CSM I, 18-19.

²⁸ In the *Regulae*, he did think that the ancient mathematicians had a method but did not disclose it. See Rule IV, AT X, 376-377; CSM I, 19.

²⁹ Part Four, AT VI, 27; CSM I, 124.

³⁰ Part One, AT VI 8; CSM I, 114, emphasis added.

³¹ Part Two, AT VI, 18; CSM I, 120, emphasis added.

answer to the question, as he explained in the second and third precepts.³² Then, in the final precept, he required the agent to reduce the complex deduction to an immediate intuition, one that is known all at once, with no movement of the mind. Now, in the *Discours*, we only get a programmatic presentation, with no definitive connection to any actual scientific content.³³ Nevertheless, at this theoretical level, Descartes thought that his potential intuited simples and deduced composites would be known by definition, and, if willed, would have internal properties of clarity and distinctness, resulting in knowledge and ultimately contentment.

This largely theoretical account was dependent upon an underlying faculty psychology, which is evident in the text of the *Regulae*, for the methods of reduction and composition, summarized in Rule V, were based on his definitions of intuition and deduction in Rule III.³⁴ In the *Discours*, however, the story is a bit more complicated, for Descartes did not divulge a full-fledged faculty psychology in his depiction of his 1619-1620 activities.³⁵ Despite this, I think there is a semblance of his early faculty psychology here as well. For instance, he writes in his fourth maxim: “I could not have *limited my desires*, or been *happy*, had I not been following a *path* by which I thought I was sure to *acquire all the knowledge of which I was capable* [...]”³⁶ This “path,” Descartes broadly claimed, was his method, and the goal was to will objects or, in this case, desire objects inside the intellect. As he explains in this maxim, “our *will* naturally tends to desire only what our *intellect* represents to it as somehow possible; and so it is certain that if we consider all external goods as equally beyond our power, we shall not regret the absence of goods [...]”³⁷ He continues: “God has given each of us *light* to distinguish the *truth*

³² *Discours*, AT VI, 18; CSM I, 120; Rule V, AT X, 379; CSM I, 20. For an interpretation of Descartes’ procedure, see Roger Florka, “Problems with the Garber-Dear Theory of the Disappearance of Method,” *Philosophical Studies* 117 (2004), pp. 131-141; Daniel Garber, *Descartes’ Metaphysical Physics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, chapter 2; Peter Schouls, *The Imposition of Method: A Study of Locke and Descartes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980; and Schuster, *Descartes-Agonistes*, chapter 6.

³³ At best, we get an interpretation of his discoveries in terms of the method: mainly, the anaclastic curve of the *Regulae* (Rule VIII, AT X, 393-395; CSM I, 28-29) and his explanation of the rainbow in the Eighth Discourse of *Les Météores* (AT VI, 325-342; *Les Météores*, pp. 332-345.). See also February 22, 1638, to Vatier, AT I, 559; CSMK III, 85.

³⁴ Rule III, AT X, 368-369; CSM I, 14.

³⁵ Descartes did provide a reduction of the faculties in the metaphysics of Part Four. He, however, dates this material to his 1629 investigations, during his composition of the *Traité de métaphysique*. See Part III, AT VI, 31; CSM I, 12; July 18, 1629, to Gibieuf, AT I, 17; CSMK III, 5-6; and November 25, 1630, to Mersenne, AT I, 182; CSMK III, 29. See also Vincent Carraud’s introduction and notes in René Descartes, *Étude du bon sens, La recherche de la vérité et autres écrits de jeunesse (1616-1631)*, ed., trans., and notes by Vincent Carraud and Gilles Olivo, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013, pp. 217-227.

³⁶ Part Three, AT VI, 27-28; CSM I, 124-125, emphasis added. See also Part Six, AT VI, 62; CSM I, 142-143.

³⁷ Part Three, AT VI, 25-26; CSM I, 124, emphasis added.

from falsehood,” and then reiterates the point: “our *will* tends to pursue or avoid only what our *intellect* represents as good or bad [...].”³⁸ On this picture, Descartes thought that objects in the intellect had special properties—e.g., clarity and distinctness³⁹—such that, when one cognizes them, the will has a natural inclination to affirm them. Descartes’ claim, then, is that what is in our power, that is, what is potentially known, are ideas in the intellect, and, on the other hand, the objects that are not known, those that result in error, are those that are constructed by the imagination and do not have intellectual qualities.

We are presented with a similar explanation in the preamble to the *Discours*. He opens with a general account of his faculty psychology when he writes: “the *power of judging well* and of *distinguishing the true from the false*—which we properly call ‘good sense’ or ‘reason’—is naturally equal in all men.”⁴⁰ In his opening statements, he did not tout his extraordinary intellect and volition, but described both the will and the intellect as “the best distributed thing in the world” and denied that his own intellect was, in any way, “more perfect than that of the ordinary man.”⁴¹ Rather, he desired a “sharp and distinct imagination” and “an ample or prompt memory.”⁴² That is, he wanted to increase the aids to the intellect, not the intellect itself, for, on his view, men are distinguished because “we direct our thoughts along different paths and do not attend to the same things.”⁴³ But why was this? The difference, that is, the game changer, Descartes thought, was the function of the imagination in his methodical procedure of reduction. He says in Part Three of the *Discours* that he refused to blatantly adopt opinions without trying to “expose [their] falsity or uncertainty,” and explains:⁴⁴

I kept uprooting from my mind any errors that might previously have slipped into it. In doing this I was not copying the sceptics, who doubt only for the sake of doubting and pretend to be always undecided; on the contrary, my whole aim was to reach certainty.⁴⁵

³⁸ Part Three, AT VI, 27, 28; CSM I, 124, 125, emphasis added.

³⁹ *Regulae*, AT X, 400-401; CSM I, 33; *Discours*, AT VI, 18; CSM I, 120; *Meditationes*, AT VII, 35; CSM II, 24.

⁴⁰ Part One, AT VI, 2; CSM I, 111, emphasis added.

⁴¹ Part One, AT VI, 1; CSM I, 111.

⁴² Part One, AT VI, 2; CSM I, 112.

⁴³ Part One, AT VI, 2; CSM I, 112.

⁴⁴ Part Three, AT VI, 29; CSM I, 125.

⁴⁵ Part Three, AT VI, 28; CSM I, 125. See also Part Two, AT VI, 13-14; CSM I, 117.

He thus thought that the methodical role for his “sharp and distinct imagination” of the preamble was to construct well-targeted, skeptical scenarios that determined whether a set of premises was necessarily connected to a conclusion, a thesis that he later developed in the *Meditationes*.⁴⁶ In this light, he wrote in the *Discours*:

For since our will tends to pursue or avoid only what our *intellect* represents as good or bad, we need only to *judge well* in order to act well, and to judge as well as we can in order to do our best—that is to say, in order to acquire all the virtues and in general all the other goods we can acquire. And when we are certain of this, *we cannot fail to be happy*.⁴⁷

On this picture, Descartes’ philosophical vocation led him to a method that required him to use his active imagination to determine whether an object is naturally implanted in the intellect. He proposed doubts to test whether his hypothetical explanations were indeed veracious. The imagination, in this role, helps the will to understand, to be unperturbed, to be happy. In addition, such doubts pragmatically aid one to not wish for things outside of one’s control, e.g. to desire to have extra limbs, lavish wealth, or to be free when one is imprisoned.

2. Olympian Target Practice: Scholastics High, Poets Low, and Descartes’ Bull’s Eye

My account of Descartes’ proposed 1619 theory of happiness, to this point, depends on his 1637 intellectual autobiography, which, to some, may seem a bit suspicious, for his “*morale provisoire*” was added to the *Discours* under compulsion, immediately before publication, and, for this reason, may seem to be trumped up, and not part of Descartes’ actual 1619 activities.⁴⁸ In fact, Descartes seems to downplay its significance in Frans Burman’s (1628-1679) *Responsiones Renati Des-Cartes* (1648). In this interview, Descartes said: “The author does not like writing on ethics, but he was *compelled to include these rules* [his provisional morality] because of people like the schoolmen [...]”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ For his claim that one should will inside the intellect, see Fourth Meditation, AT VII, 58; CSM II, 40-41.

⁴⁷ Part Three, AT VI, 28; CSM I, 125, emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Brissey, “Descartes’ *Discours*,” pp. 44-45, and Gadoffre, “La chronologie des six parties,” pp. 36-37.

⁴⁹ *Responsiones*, AT V, 178; CSMK III, 97; *Conversation with Burman*, p. 49. See also April or May 1638, to Renier for Pollot, AT II, 35; CSMK III, 972. Descartes also said that he limited the presentation of his doubts for this reason. See February 27, 1637, to Mersenne, AT I, 350; CSMK III, 53; May 1637, to Silhon, AT I, 353-354;

There is evidence that Descartes held a similar view around 1619, at the time when, according to the *Discours*, he made his decision to become a philosopher. In the *Olympica*, preserved in Adrien Baillet's (1649-1706) *La vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes* (1691),⁵⁰ we get a rare moment when Descartes provides a depiction, better yet, a rhetorical presentation, of his initial decision to become a philosopher. In this work, Descartes described three dreams where, in the last, he literally asked, "*Quod vitae sectabor iter?*," that is, "What road in life shall I follow?,"⁵¹ and decided, shortly thereafter, to pursue philosophy.⁵² Moreover, during this period, he provided similar reasons for becoming a philosopher. As he wrote in the *Regulae*, "I have in mind [...] respectable and commendable ends [...]—ends such as the pursuit of the sciences conducive to the comforts of life or to the pleasure to be gained from contemplating the truth, which is practically the only happiness in this life that is complete and untroubled by any pain."⁵³ Thus, we can broadly take the *Olympica* and associated texts, mainly the *Studium bonae mentis*, the *Regulae*, and Leibniz's notes on the *Olympica*, published posthumously under the title *Cogitationes privatae*, as the principal source of the choice that resulted in the *Discours* narrative that dates from this period. To be clear, however, the story of the *Olympica* was most likely not an actual depiction of Descartes' initial choice of vocation, for he had been conducting investigations in natural philosophy and ruminating thereupon, most notably with Isaac Beeckman (1588-1637), well before its composition.⁵⁴ Rather, this presentation is best construed as the moment when Descartes settled upon, or solidified, his choice of vocation, or better said, as the manner in which Descartes presented his choice.⁵⁵ Besides, we also need to specify what we should hope to achieve in utilizing Descartes' posthumous early works, for it may seem that sketching Descartes' early theory of happiness from comments in his *Olympica*, *Cogitationes*, *Regulae*, and *Studium* is unnecessarily daunting, maybe even misguided, for, with the scant evidence available during this period, it seems needlessly hopeful to get an accurate portrayal of Descartes' activities, hopes, and goals, much less of the specific propositions and explanations

CSMK III, 55-56; February 22, 1638, to Vatier, AT I, 560; CSMK III, 85-86; and Forth Set of Replies, AT VII, 47; CSM II, 172.

⁵⁰ See AT X, 179-188.

⁵¹ AT X, 83; *Olympica*, p. 35. See also *Cogitationes Privatae*, AT X, 216; CSM I, 4.

⁵² AT X, 186; *Olympica*, p. 39.

⁵³ Rule I, AT X, 361; CSM I, 10.

⁵⁴ See Schuster, *Descartes-Agonistes*, pp. 99-163, and Klaas van Berkel, *Isaac Beeckman on Matter and Motion*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2013, chapter 1.

⁵⁵ See fn. 5.

that the young savant was ruminating on. Although the texts were preserved in his Stockholm trunk, Descartes never published them during his lifetime and the originals are now lost.⁵⁶ It seems that one can only hope to paint a blurred image of Descartes' *Olympica*, providing a roundabout depiction, a perspective among many perspectives.⁵⁷ With this caveat, however, I propose here an interpretation.

Let's begin with a general depiction of Descartes' allegorical tale and then turn to his early theory of happiness. To fully appreciate this work, its symbols and analogies, it is important to understand how the *Olympica* is connected with Descartes' early intellectual biography. In the *Discours*,⁵⁸ Descartes said that, from his childhood, he sought "clear and certain knowledge," and, in this endeavor, he matriculated into the College of La Flèche and then the University of Poitiers, where, upon graduation, he evaluated the various occupations.⁵⁹ He, in fact, provides a synopsis of his evaluation in Part One, listing the positive and negative attributes of each, and, in the end, his resolution to learn from "the great book of the world" and seek "what could be found in [himself]" by discovering "reasons for doubting," correcting errors that "obscure the natural light."⁶⁰ Thus, upon departing from school, the young Descartes was, step-by-step, evolving into a Cartesian philosopher.

It is this general story of the *Discours* that is depicted in the *Olympica*. However, in this case, it was cast in a poetic or perhaps a hyperbolic manner. For instance, in the first two dreams, the reader is introduced to an exaggerated account of Descartes' epistemic position as he completed College. Descartes recounts that he found himself asleep, dreaming, where "ghosts" ("*fantômes*," later described as a "*mauvais Génie*") presented themselves and "frightened him"

⁵⁶ For Hector-Pierre Chanut's (1601-1662) Stockholm Inventory, see AT X, 7.

⁵⁷ For instance, many take the *Olympica* as a description of actual dreams. See Cole, *The Olympian Dreams*; Sigmund Freud, *Some Dreams of Descartes: A Letter to Maxime Leroy*, trans. J. Strachey, London: Hogarth Press, 1953; Gouhier, *Les premières pensées de Descartes*; Michael Keevak, "Descartes' Dreams and Their Address for Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1996), pp. 376-396; Jean-Luc Marion, "Does Thought Dream? The Three Dreams, or The Awakening of the Philosopher," in *Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999; Gregor Sebba, *The Dream of Descartes*, ed. by Richard A. Watson, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987. For an allegorical interpretation, see Arnold, "Le 'songe' de Descartes," and Kennington, "Descartes's *Olympica*." Richard Watson holds that, in large part, Baillet made up the specifics of the dreams. See Richard Watson, *Cogito, Ergo Sum: The Life of René Descartes*, Boston: David R. Godine, 2002, pp. 129-135.

⁵⁸ It is also interesting that Descartes never mentioned the dreams in his anonymously published intellectual autobiography.

⁵⁹ Part One, AT VI, 4-5; CSM I, 112-113.

⁶⁰ Part One, AT VI, 9, 30; CSM I, 115, 126. His *Studium* corroborates this explanation. See AT X, 191-192; Baillet, *La Vie*, I, pp. 26, 33-34.

into “thinking that he was walking down the road when he was not.”⁶¹ Such epistemic worries, in fact, run throughout his presentation. Again, in the first dream, he symbolizes his psychological state as “whirlwinds,” or doubts, which constantly spin him in circles. He also walked with an acute pain in his left side and could not “hold himself upright.” What is noticeable is that the other individuals, mainly one “Monsieur N.” and the crowd of people around him, stood upright, confident, and full of dogmatic assurance. Descartes, however, was bent, lacking confidence, as he proceeded through the dream. Moreover, after the second dream, Descartes awoke and viewed sparks or flashing lights that were scattered throughout the room. Utterly frightened, he pondered whether the phenomenon was sent from God to punish him for his sins or whether the deceiving demons were behind it. Nevertheless, he later diagnosed it as a physiological phenomenon.⁶² Thus, Descartes was filled with doubts in his dreams, both practical and hyperbolic.

This skeptical imagery, moreover, was present while he perceived himself to walk down the street. In terms of the allegory, his pursuit down the street to an unknown destination amounted to his claim that he did not know his ultimate path or purpose in life as he told in the *Studium* and the *Discours*.⁶³ In this state, he noticed a “school” in the distance, La Flèche, and began to proceed towards the “school church,” presumably to seek solace through appeals to authority, revelation, and God. Descartes, however, was not to become a theologian.⁶⁴ Rather, he met an old friend and together they carried a fruit from a foreign land (a melon) to the scholars standing upright at the center of La Flèche.⁶⁵ His “melon,” which I take to imply fruit of knowledge stemming from his method,⁶⁶ amounted perhaps to doubts similar to the cultural relativism of Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais* (1580), displayed prominently in Parts One through

⁶¹ AT X, 185; *Olympica*, p. 38.

⁶² It is notable that the skeptical scenarios of the *Olympica*—sensory illusions, dreaming, and evil geniuses—are similar to those of the *Meditationes*. Despite the resemblances, he had not yet developed his method of doubt. He simply had scenarios that resembled his mature ones.

⁶³ For instance, see Baillet, *La vie*, II, p. 406; *ibid.*, I, p. 26; *Discours*, AT VI, 3; CSM I, 112.

⁶⁴ Descartes briefly mentions theology in Rule III of the *Regulae*. See AT X, 370; CSM I, 15.

⁶⁵ For a summary of the vast interpretations of Descartes’ “melon” as a symbol, see Alan Gabbey, “The Melon and the Dictionary: Reflections on Descartes’ Dreams,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59 (1998), pp. 651-668.

⁶⁶ Descartes used his tree of knowledge metaphor in the *Principia*, which was composed well after the composition of the *Olympica*, a metaphor that I think is connected to his claim here of presenting a melon, a fruit of the method, to the scholars at La Flèche. See AT IXB, 14; CSM I, 186. Nevertheless, the meaning of the tree metaphor, i.e. the interconnectedness of the sciences, was a central doctrine during Descartes’ early philosophy.

Three of the *Discours*,⁶⁷ or maybe even the more hyperbolic doubts of the *Olympica* itself.⁶⁸ This interpretation, first, seems to follow from the epistemic context of Descartes' transition from the street to the school scenario; that is, Descartes turned to the scholars of La Flèche to remove his doubts, and, for this reason, he joined a friend not to present positive knowledge but, rather, the doubts that preoccupied his mind. Second, Descartes thought that doubt, or eliminating false hypotheses, was one of the fruits of the method, and considered his methodical take on this epistemic state beneficial enough to present to his teachers. As he writes in the *Regulae*:

If anyone observes the above Rules exactly when trying to solve some problem or other, but is instructed by the present Rule [Rule VIII] to *stop at a certain point* [that is, when a proposition is susceptible to doubt] he will know for sure that no amount of application will enable him to find the knowledge [...] *His recognition of this point is just as much knowledge as that which reveals the nature of the thing itself.*⁶⁹

Nevertheless, the general plan was to present doubts to the scholars in order to assess the knowledge claims of the scholastics. His presentation, however, was to no avail. The scene of the first dream closes with Descartes bent over full of doubt and the crowd of savants standing upright.

By the third dream, Descartes' doubts had dissipated and he now presented his main theses of his emerging philosophy. What is notable is that, unlike the *Meditationes*, there does not seem to be a direct effort to justify his proposals, but, rather, he presents them in a poetic fashion. For instance, a *Dictionary* magically appeared on a table directly in front of him and then disappeared, and, not long thereafter, another book appeared on the table, one *Corpus Poetarum*, but it likewise disappeared. In his interpretation of these events, he claimed that the *Dictionary* represented the unity of the sciences, a book that revealed the true axioms that could be used to deduce results in the sciences.⁷⁰ The *Corpus Poetarum* similarly represented the union of philosophy and wisdom, where philosophy was to have a practical aim, not seeking to

⁶⁷ There is evidence in the *Discours* that Montaigne influenced Descartes during this period. See Étienne Gilson, *René Descartes, Discours de la méthode, texte et commentaire*, p. 236. See also Part One, AT VI, 10; CSM I, 115-116; Part Two, AT VI, 16; CSM I, 118-119; and Part Three, AT VI, 23-24; CSM I, 122-123.

⁶⁸ For an alternative perspective of Descartes' early skepticism, see Matthew J. Kisner, "Skepticism and the Early Descartes," *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13 (2005), pp. 207-32.

⁶⁹ Rule VIII, AT X, 393; CSM I, 28. See also Rule II and Descartes' example of Socrates doubting everything. Rule XII, AT X, 421; CSM I, 46.

⁷⁰ The *Discours* and the *Principia* (1644) were Descartes' development of this project.

solve this or that Scholastic problem, but attempting to discover the essence and scope of human knowledge with the aim to improve the human condition.⁷¹

When Descartes opened the anthology, he chanced upon the verse, “Which way in life shall I follow?” Not long thereafter, an unknown man appeared and handed him a piece of poetry, mainly the verse “*Est & Non*, that Descartes’ knew was one of the *Idylls* of Ausonius in the anthology on the table. Descartes later interpreted this verse as “Truth and Falsehood in human understanding and the profane sciences,” again a central doctrine of his methodology.⁷² Nevertheless, in the story Descartes tells us that he knew this verse very well and searched for it in the anthology but could not find the passage. The man asked how did he discover it, “*Est & Non*,” and Descartes, likewise, did not know. One way we can take this passage is that it is an instance of his well-known methodological doctrine: “[...] it is far better never to contemplate investigating the truth about any matter than to do so without a method.”⁷³ In the story, Descartes was thumbing through the book with the hope that he would chance upon the truth that he once knew, which, he tells, is similar to approaches in science. He explains in the *Regulae* that many proceed unmethodically and “direct their minds down untrodden paths, in groundless hope that they will chance upon what they are seeking.”⁷⁴ In his dream, likewise, he is sought “the truth and falsehood,” *Est & Non*, by appealing to an external authority and hoping that he could remember the content of the text. In this case, he had trouble remembering the placement of the passage in the anthology, much less the content of the text. On this approach, Descartes holds that truth is missing. He thus could not provide a response to the inquirer’s question as to how he discovered the verse and implied that he needed a new approach, a new method, which was soon thereafter developed in the *Studium* and *Regulae*. After his failure to discover the verse, the *Dictionary* reappeared, though it was now incomplete. Descartes concludes: “This last dream [...] seemed [...] to reveal the future, and it showed him nothing but what would happen in the rest of his life.”⁷⁵ He was to complete the *Dictionary* and discover the unity of the sciences and the union of philosophy and wisdom.

⁷¹ These two are well-known doctrines of the *Studium* and the *Regulae*.

⁷² AT X, 184-185; *Olympica*, p. 37.

⁷³ Rule IV, AT X, 371; CSM I, 16.

⁷⁴ Rule IV, AT X, 371; CSM I, 15.

⁷⁵ AT X, 185; *Olympica*, p. 38.

From this vantage point, the *Olympica*, like the *Discours*, provides a depiction of Descartes' choice of vocation. This thesis is supported by the recent and innovative work of Vincent Carraud and Gillies Olivo in *Écrits de jeunesse (1616-1631)*, who argue that in the late 1619, during the period of the composition of the *Olympica*, *Studium*, and *Regulae*, Descartes chose to become a philosopher.⁷⁶ The proposal is premised on Descartes' transition during three autumns (1618, 1619, and 1620) from a method to solve any problem in mathematics to a universal method that aims to explain the unity of the sciences, which, in large part, they explain, was developed in the *Studium* (1619-1623), a work that has been largely ignored by Cartesian scholarship. In fact, they claim that the *Studium* and the *Regulae* (1619-1620, 1626-1628) form a single presentation of Descartes' early systematic project at its fetal stages before it was later developed in *Le Monde*. This thesis, moreover, is consistent with the present allegorical reading of the *Olympica*.⁷⁷ The question for us, then, is how was Descartes' method, theory of happiness, and choice of vocation connected in the *Olympica* and associated texts.

I enter this theatre through a seemingly un-Cartesian quote. The controversial idea, or, rather, what Descartes actually seems to have claimed, is that the imagination is a higher faculty than the intellect, a claim that is inconsistent with Descartes' later works.⁷⁸ The best evidence for this view is given in Leibniz's notes. He writes in the *Cogitationes*:

Just as the imagination employs figures in order to conceive of bodies, so, in order to frame ideas of spiritual things, the intellect makes use of certain bodies which are perceived through the senses, such as wind and light. By this means we may philosophize in a more exalted way, and develop the knowledge to raise our minds to lofty heights.

It may seem surprising to find weighty judgements in the writings of the poets rather than the philosophers. The reason is that the poets were driven to write by enthusiasm and the force of imagination.

⁷⁶ They make a general argument in the Foreword. See Carraud and Olivo, *Écrits de jeunesse*, pp. 5-10. However, they hold that, in large part, the budding philosopher provided a sketch of his explanation of the interconnectedness of the sciences in the *Studium*. See *ibid.*, pp. 117-128.

⁷⁷ Carraud and Olivo, *Écrits de jeunesse*, p. 125. In addition, Geneviève Rodis-Lewis has plausibly argued, though from a different perspective, that Descartes' "elaboration of a method" is connected to the provisional ethics of the *Discours*, thus supporting the "great historicity of part 3." See Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, *Descartes: His Life and Thought*, trans. Jane Marie Todd, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 47.

⁷⁸ For instance, see Dennis L. Sepper, *Descartes's Imagination: Proportion, Images, and the Actuality of Thinking*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pts. I and II.

We have within us the sparks of knowledge, as in a flint: philosophers extract them through reason, but poets force them out through the sharp blows of the imagination, so that they shine more brightly.⁷⁹

Veronique Foti writes about this passage that, unlike in the later works, “Descartes [...] describes a close co-operative relationship between reason and imagination” and that, in the *Olympica*, “preference is given to imagination, where-upon reason is relegated to a secondary role.”⁸⁰ Dennis Sepper, similarly, calls this passage the “two-imaginations note” and interprets the “lower” imagination as one that functions “by means of figures and images that allow an understanding of bodies,” while the “higher” imagination, the “intellectual imagination,” is “more directly in touch with the highest things than is reason (*ratio*) [...]”⁸¹ Peter Schouls concurs with Foti and Sepper, emphasizing that the imagination plays a much more important role here than in Descartes’ mature works. Henri Gouhier suggested that this shows that, at this time, Descartes was a man of the Renaissance.⁸²

The Foti-Gouhier-Schouls-Sepper thesis, broadly construed, relies on an interpretation of Leibniz’s notes that string together various statements under the independent titles “*Praeambula*,” “*Experimenta*,” and “*Olympica*.” In response, I think there is reason to doubt this heterogeneous reading, that there are inconsistent faculty psychologies in the *Olympica* and the *Regulae*. A popular interpretation of Rule IV-B of the *Regulae* holds that the second half of the text was drafted in 1618, before his November 1619 dreams.⁸³ In this entry, Descartes, like in the mature rules, gives the imagination a lower status than to the intellect. He writes: “And there is nothing more futile than devoting our energies to those superficial proofs [in mathematics] which are discovered more through chance than method and which have more to do with our eyes and *imagination* than our *intellect* [...]”⁸⁴ This passage, of course, does not make the distinction between the corporeal and the intellectual imagination. Instead, it seems to suggest that before the composition of the *Olympica* it was the intellect that was the chief faculty, not the high

⁷⁹ *Cogitationes Privatae*, AT X, 217; CSM I, 4. Gouhier takes the *Cogitationes* in general as Leibniz’s commentary on the *Olympica*.

⁸⁰ Veronique Foti, “The Cartesian Imagination,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 46 (1986), pp. 631-642, at pp. 632, 635.

⁸¹ Sepper, *Descartes’s Imagination*, p. 37.

⁸² Peter Schouls, *Descartes and the Possibility of Science*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 67; Gouhier, *Les premières pensées*, pp. 84-86.

⁸³ Jean-Paul Weber, *La constitution du texte des Regulae*, Paris: Société d’édition d’enseignement supérieur, 1964, pp. 3-17, 247-149; Schuster, *Descartes-Agonistes*, chapter 7.

⁸⁴ Rule IV-B, AT X, 375; CSM I, 18, emphasis added.

imagination, a faculty on which it is silent. Moreover, when we turn to the 1619-1620 portion of Rule IV (Weber's IV-A), Descartes defines the intellectual faculties, intuition and deduction, as self-evident faculties,⁸⁵ cognitive acts that cannot be taught, as he tells, "The method cannot go so far as to teach us how to perform the actual operations of intuition and deductions [...]"⁸⁶ Again, Descartes proposes self-evident faculties without any mention of the intellectual imagination.⁸⁷

There also seems to be good reason for holding that the imagination in the *Cogitationes* and *Olympica*, like in the *Regulae*, is an aid to the intellect.⁸⁸ In terms of the objects of knowledge, Descartes explains that we are born with innate knowledge that is located and known in the agent's intellect, and the purpose of the imagination is to test objects, to strike them with force, to fire up sparks, ultimately aiding the will to know whether an object is clear and distinct and inside the intellect. For instance, in the *Olympica*, like in the *Cogitationes*, he writes that the "the strength of the Imagination," like the "sparks of fire in [flint] stones," brings out the "seeds of wisdom that are found in all men's minds."⁸⁹ In a similar fashion, he writes in Rule IV-B (1618): "But I am convinced that certain *primary seeds of truth naturally implanted* in human minds thrived vigorously in that unsophisticated and innocent age."⁹⁰ He explains that, by this "same light of the mind [the intellect]," the ancients made indubitable discoveries not only in mathematics but also in philosophy: that "virtue is preferable to pleasure, [and] the good preferable to the useful."⁹¹ His point is that the intellect cognizes indubitable discoveries, not the

⁸⁵ Based on his definition of deduction in Rule III (AT X, 369; CSM I, 15), Descartes claims in Rule II, "deduction or pure inference of one thing from another can never be performed wrongly" (AT X, 365, 368; CSM I, 12, 14). Moreover, he tells that "intuition" is "self-evident" and "certain" (AT X, 369; CSM I, 14) and that

⁸⁶ AT X, 372; CSM I, 16. See also AT X, 440; CSM I, 57.

⁸⁷ Rule IV-A, AT X, 372; CSM I, 16. My claim here is not that there is no intellectual imagination but that it is neither univocal nor a higher faculty than the intellect.

⁸⁸ It seems that Descartes' theory implicitly necessitates an intellectual imagination to cognize incorporeal hypothetical explanations but this admission does not replace the self-evidence of intellectual perceptions.

⁸⁹ AT X, 184; *Olympica*, p. 37. This passage corresponds to Leibniz's notes in the *Cogitationes*: see AT X, 217; CSM I, 4.

⁹⁰ Rule IV-B, AT X, 376; CSM I, 18.

⁹¹ Rule IV-B, AT X, 376; CSM I, 18. In fact, Jean-Luc Marion and Fredrick Van de Pitte have plausibly interpreted Descartes' "mathesis universalis" in Rule IV-B as "universal learning" or "universal method," which included, "in addition to arithmetic and geometry, sciences such as astronomy, music, optics, mechanics, among others [...]." See AT X, 377; CSM I, 19. If we take Descartes' "order and measure" to include all objects capable of indubitable cognition (cognitions like those in mathematics), his universal mathematics could encompass ethics and other more qualitative disciplines. See Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur l'ontologie grise de Descartes*, second ed., Paris: Vrin, 1981, pp.

lower faculties. In addition, he writes in Rule IV-A (1619-1620): “For the human mind has within it a sort of *spark of the divine*, in which the first seeds of useful ways of thinking are sown.”⁹² In this case, he identifies the seeds of wisdom, the spark of the divine, as “the primary rudiments of human reason” that extend to “the discovery of truths in any field whatever.”⁹³ Thus, in terms of the objects of knowledge, Descartes thought, we have innate truths⁹⁴ that are clouded by the objects of the senses, prejudice, and probabilistic constructions of the imagination; as Leibniz put it in the *Cogitationes*: “The sciences are at present masked, but if the masks were taken off, they would be revealed in all their beauty.”⁹⁵ The goal of his faculty psychology, then, was to explain how the will could come to know which objects are in the intellect, that is, what is within one’s control.

It is at this point that Descartes makes his interesting claim that poets discover truth better than philosophers. We should note, again, that this statement was made when, during this same period, he decided to become a philosopher and not a poet.⁹⁶ Based on this, it seems that he thought that something was lacking in the methodologies. For instance, in the early *Regulae*, Descartes says that the principal problem with philosophers is that they proceed without a method.⁹⁷ The difficulty for the scholastics, he adds, is that the syllogistic method involves “our *reason* taking a holiday while we are investigating the truth,” for an inquirer using this method cannot discover a true conclusion unless they are already in possession of it in the premises.⁹⁸ For Descartes, the philosopher relies on the logical form and has no viable procedure for discovering the content of the premises. It is in this sense that he writes: “philosophers *extract* [knowledge] *through reason* [*rationem*],” that is, through syllogistic forms.⁹⁹

55-69; Fredrick Van de Pitte, “The Dating of Rule IV-B in Descartes’s *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29 (1991), pp. 375-95.

⁹² Rule IV-B, AT X, 374; CSM I, 17.

⁹³ Rule IV-B, AT X, 374; CSM I, 17.

⁹⁴ For an alternative interpretation of this passage, see Desmond Clarke, *Descartes’ Philosophy of Science*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982, pp. 186-194.

⁹⁵ *Cogitationes Privatae*, AT X, 215; CSM I, 3. Also see Rule XII (1626-1628), AT X, 410-430; CSM I, 39-51.

⁹⁶ Although he had been delving in natural philosophy for some time, he was somewhat tentative about his decision in the *Olympica*. Nevertheless, he was open about his choice in Rule I. See Rule I, AT X, 359; CSM I, 9.

⁹⁷ Rule IV, AT X, 371; CSM I, 17-16. Descartes also claims that we should ignore the objects of the senses and give heed to “good sense” and “universal wisdom.” See Rule One, AT X, 360; CSM I, 9.

⁹⁸ Rule X, AT X, 406; CSM I, 36-37. See also Rules II and IV, AT X, 365, 372-372; CSM I, 12, 16, and *Discours*, AT VI, 17; CSM I, 119. For an account of Descartes’ logic, see Stephen Gaukroger, *Cartesian Logic: An Essay on Descartes’ Conception of Inference*, New York: Clarendon Press, 1989.

⁹⁹ *Cogitationes Privatae*, AT X, 217; CSM I, 4.

The strength of the poets, on the other hand, lies in the fact that they, “even the most mediocre, were full of maxims that were [1] more serious, [2] more sensible, and [3] better expressed than anything in the writing of the philosophers maxims.”¹⁰⁰ In the *Discours*, however, Descartes provides the key reason why he decided not to become a poet. The necessary condition, he thought, was to have the “ability to express [the most pleasing conceits] with the most embellishment and sweetness.”¹⁰¹ This requirement, however, does not necessitate knowledge, not even that of a “theory of poetry.”¹⁰² The rhetorical mode of presentation Descartes took as a gift of the mind, perhaps even revelation, rather than a fruit of study.¹⁰³ In fact, when Descartes turned to an examination of the “moral writings of the ancient pagans,” most likely referring to poetic-oriented philosophers, he thought they built “magnificent palaces” and made the virtues “appear more estimable than anything in the world,” emphasizing the mode of presentation, but, in terms of content, he thought their foundation was ultimately “sand and mud,” for they got many of the virtues wrong, and, most importantly, they, like the scholastics, did not have a method of discovery.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, the poets got something right; as he put it, “poets force [knowledge] out through the sharp blows of the imagination, so that they shine more brightly.”¹⁰⁵ This blacksmith metaphor, remotely similar to the one later used in Rule VIII,¹⁰⁶ distinguishes the immutable objects of knowledge from the force of the imagination. Now, in Rule IV-B, he says that the “primary seeds of truth [*prima quaedam veritatum semina*]” were “naturally implanted in the human mind,” and the intellect, the “light of the mind,” is where they are implanted.¹⁰⁷ This passage is noticeably similar to that of the *Olympica*, where he tells us that the imagination drives out “seeds of wisdom [*semences de la sagesse*] naturally implanted in the mind.”¹⁰⁸ It seems that one can consistently hold that the intellect, where these seeds of wisdom are

¹⁰⁰ AT X, 184; *Olympica*, p. 37.

¹⁰¹ Part One, AT VI, 7; CSM I, 114.

¹⁰² Part One, AT VI, 7; CSM I, 114.

¹⁰³ Part One, AT VI, 6, 7; CSM I, 113, 114.

¹⁰⁴ Part One, AT VI, 8; CSM I, 114. Descartes held that the mathematicians chose not to disclose their method. See Rule IV, AT X, 375-376; CSM I, 18-19.

¹⁰⁵ *Cogitationes Privatae*, AT X, 217; CSM I, 4.

¹⁰⁶ Rule VIII, AT X, 397; CSM I, 31. For an interpretation, see Brissey, “Rule VIII of Descartes’ *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*,” *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 3 (2014), No. 2, pp. 9-31, at pp. 22-24. For an alternative, see Garber, *Descartes’ Metaphysical Physics*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁷ Rule IV, AT X, 376; CSM I, 18.

¹⁰⁸ AT X, 184; *Olympica*, p. 37.

contained, is where indubitable cognitions occur, the intuitions and deductions explained in Rule IV-A. Based on this, we can hold that he, as a developing natural philosopher, adopted this portion of the poet's toolset, using the imagination to aid the will's determination as to which objects were in the intellect.

In this task, the imagination cognizes hypothetical propositions and constructs reasons for doubt, or probable scenarios, which test the certainty of a hypothesis, in order to drive out those objects which are dubitable. This, in fact, is the point of his procedure of sufficient enumeration described in Rule VII (1619-1620), to answer a question by proposing hypothetical answers and testing them with practical doubts.¹⁰⁹ When a discovery occurs, Descartes tells us that it is known through the intellect. Nevertheless, as an aid to the will, the imagination makes distinctions and attempts to form doubts, striking the truth with force, establishing a firm and decisive judgment of his will. In fact, this seems to be an important point of the first dream, where Descartes questions whether he is walking down the road. He explains that he was dreaming and, in the dream, evil demons deceived him into thinking that he was walking when indeed he was not. In short, Descartes' imagination cast doubts to test his proposal that he was walking down the road. It, moreover, was the faculty that was to help insure that his volition had achieved certainty and the one that would help build the lattice structure of knowledge to make up the *Dictionary* depicted in the dream. It is in this sense that Descartes writes: "poets force [seeds of wisdom] out through the sharp blows of the imagination [that is, through doubts], so that they shine more brightly [to one's will]."¹¹⁰

3. Conclusion: The "Foundation for the Wonderful Science" as a Theory of Happiness

¹⁰⁹ For example, see his explanation that "Rational soul is not corporeal" (Rule VII, AT X, 390; CSM I, 26-27). Also see L. J. Beck, *The Method of Descartes: A Study of the Regulae*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, pp. 134-143.

¹¹⁰ *Cogitationes Privatae*, AT X, 217; CSM I, 4. There are other troubles for this thesis, pitfalls that I think shed light on the text of the *Olympica*. In Leibniz's notes, he says that objects "perceivable by the senses are helpful in enabling us to conceive Olympian matters." He, moreover, names a series of such objects, e.g., "wind signifies spirit," etc. See *Cogitationes*, AT X, 218; CSM I, 5. I think that passages like this one in the *Cogitationes* refer to figures in Descartes' allegory. For instance, the whirlwind in the first dream identifies Descartes' state of confusion as he emerged from La Flèche.

On November 10, 1619, Descartes claimed to have discovered “the foundation of a wonderful science.”¹¹¹ One would be inclined to think, based on this statement, that the young Descartes was enmeshed in serious metaphysics, perhaps even an early version of the *Meditationes*, where he would begin with foundational principles and then proceed to build up his science. This, however, is far from the case. Descartes had hardly worked all that out at this early stage of his development. At best, he was beginning to devise a plan for a systematic program, not actually conducting one, as he says in Part Three of the *Discours*.¹¹²

Nevertheless, I believe that, at least in part, his early philosophical psychology was his foundation. As he tells us in the *Regulae*, no matter the question that comes before the human mind, an agent should proceed methodically; that is, one should not assume a desired proposition or explanation is true by whim, but should view it as a hypothesis and test it with doubt, to discover whether the object is indubitable.¹¹³ On this picture, the foundational task is to first properly order our faculties, to know what we are looking for and how to find it. This was determined by his programmatic, reductive procedure, to reduce complex propositions step-by-step to simple ones until an intuition is discovered. On the other hand, his faculties determined the procedure at each step, and this amounted to an early theory of happiness. For instance, when Descartes discovers an intuition, the force of the imagination strikes the indubitable object and that object is thus shown to be beyond doubt. On this picture, the agent’s will cognizes the object in the intellect and knows it with certainty, while the imagination casts doubt to insure that this is the case. In this state, Descartes held that the will knows, is content, and does not desire external matters that are not within one’s control. In short, the methodical Cartesian is happy.

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¹¹¹ AT X, 181; *Olympica*, p. 33.

¹¹² Part Three, AT VI, 30ff.; CSM I, 126.

¹¹³ Rule One, AT X, 359; CSM I, 9.

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