SCEPTICAL DETACHMENT OR LOVING SUBMISSION TO THE GOOD? REASON, FAITH AND THE PASSIONS IN DESCARTES[1]

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1. The myth of Cartesian independence

The standard view of Descartes among contemporary analytic philosophers sees him above all as an epistemologist, obsessed with the threat of scepticism, and as a rationalist (in the broad sense), deploying the weapons of pure rational argument to establish the foundations of knowledge. Fairly characteristic of the standard view is the comment of Alistair MacIntyre, in his latest book, which describes Descartes as claiming that 'anyone who follows [his] procedure … arguing … through the Cogito [and] the arguments for the existence of God … will have defeated the sceptic.'[2]

Building up the foundations of all knowledge from scratch seems a very tough undertaking for those wishing (as Descartes did) [3] to defend the cause of religion, and most philosophers now think it is hopelessly over-ambitious. MacIntyre sums up the typical verdict when he says: 'Everything turns on the *arguments* for the existence of God and those arguments fail.'[4] But there is another, and I think more fruitful way of reading Descartes, as less of an obsessive epistemologist, and more of what we might call a rational intuitionist. Yes, he was a champion of reason, and of the mind's innate power to apprehend clearly perceived truths; but his reaching for those truths was not conducted in quite the epistemic vacuum that the scepticism-driven reading of his work suggests. On the contrary, if we look beneath the surface we can see his stance as having more in common with the 'faith seeking understanding' tradition, reflecting the ideas of some of his patristic and medieval mentors, whose presence, I shall argue, can be clearly felt at some of the most crucial stages of the *Meditations.*

The idea that *all* human knowledge should or can be rebuilt from the bottom up is in any case a fantasy— and one that Descartes himself would surely have rejected. First, even in the extremities of doubt in the First Meditation, the meditator clearly has to rely on a stable domain of ideas and meanings which are not of his making, and whose structure as reliable guides to the truth he has to take on trust— or else no systematic doubt, no reflection, no meditation would be possible in the first place. Science (*scientia*) may need to be reconstructed; but the mind's fundamental power of intuiting or cognizing basic truths and their logical connections— what Descartes called *cognitio*— is, and must be, taken for granted.[5] Secondly, Descartes implicitly believes from the outset that the source of this reliable cognitive power of the mind must be the divine creator, source of all truth. Even when the method of doubt appears to extend as far as questioning God, and substituting the

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[1] The definitive version of this typescript was published in *Faith and Philosophy* 28:1 (2011), pp. 44-53.

[2] Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (London: Continuum, 2009), 116.

[3] See for example Descartes's letter to Mersenne of 25 November 1630, AT I 181: CSMK 29. In this paper, 'AT' refers to the standard Franco-Latin edition of Descartes by C. Adam & P. Tannery, *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76); 'CSM' refers to the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and 'CSMK' to vol. III, The Correspondence, by the same translators plus A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l991).

[4] MacIntyre, loc. cit., emphasis supplied.

[5] *Cognitio* is an important quasi-technical term in Descartes, often employed to convey a direct and isolated mental apprehension which does not require to be evidenced, or deduced from other propositions. For *cognitio* versus *scientia*, see Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 1641], Second Replies, AT VII 141: CSM II 101 (and my footnote in CSM *ad loc.*).

nightmare scenario of demonic deception, the meditator immediately draws back, and almost by automatic reflex acknowledges his maker: 'I will suppose that not God, *who is supremely good and the source of truth*, but rather some malicious demon … is bent on deceiving me.'[6] As for the demon, like Satan he retreats as soon as he is confronted: when I focus on the sum of two plus three, says Descartes, I spontaneously declare that however powerful and vicious he is, he could not make it now true that the answer is more or less than five.[7] The entire project of the *Meditations* in effect presupposes faith in the reliability of the mind's fundamental semantic and logical intuitions, which only a theistic worldview can properly underpin. As it is phrased in the interview Descartes gave to the young Dutchman Frans Burman in 1648, 'a reliable mind was God's gift to me'.[8]

2. Reaching God: demonstrative proof or direct encounter?

Properly understood, then, Descartes's philosophy is far from subscribing to the delusion of pure, presuppositionless inquiry by an isolated and wholly autonomous meditator; on the contrary, it effectively presupposes from the outset our complete cognitive dependence on God. Yet in that case, what are we to say of the famous Cartesian 'proofs' for God's existence— the 'trademark' argument in the Third Meditation (that the content of my idea of God shows it must have been placed in me by God),[9] and the Fifth Meditation argument that God's existence is inseparable from his essence? Are these not presented by Descartes as self-standing, purely rational arguments— exercises of reason supposed to be entirely independent of any presuppositions of faith?

If by faith is meant acceptance of certain revealed truths, for example regarding the Incarnation, or the Trinity, then certainly Descartes thought the philosopher should steer clear of them and leave them to the theologians.[10] Indeed, his famous rule— accept only what is clear and distinct— might seem to put such mysteries entirely off limits for the Cartesian meditator. But in fact Descartes insisted that there was another source of clarity and transparency besides the natural light of reason. In the Second Set of Replies to the *Meditations*, he articulates the idea of a 'double source' of clarity or transparency (*duplex claritas sive perspicuitas*), one coming from the natural light, the other from divine grace.[11] The latter, the *lumen supernaturale*,[12] gives rise, no less than the natural light, to the irresistible assent of the intellect. The key passage for understanding Descartes's views about this comes in the Fourth Meditation, where Descartes declares true human freedom to reside not in the maintaining of some detached critical stance, but in spontaneous submission to the light. From a great light in the intellect there comes a great inclination of the will; and this assent, says Descartes, can be produced *either* by 'clearly perceived reasons of truth and

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[6] *Meditations*, First Meditation, AT VII 22: CSM II 15, emphasis supplied.

[7] *Meditations*, Third Meditation, AT VII 25: CSM II 25.

[8] '*Non me fallit ingenium, quia illud a Deo rectum accepi'* ('My mind does not deceive me, since a reliable mind was God's gift to me.' [or 'since I received it in good shape from God']). *Descartes's Conversation with Burman* [1648], AT V 148: CSMK 334. In arguing for Descartes's indebtedness to the 'faith seeking understanding' tradition, I would not wish to deny there are important divergences from his predecessors. The trust which is presupposed from the outset of the *Meditations* is of a fairly austere variety, relating to the reliability of our (God-given) cognitive faculties, whereas a more comprehensive kind of submission is found in Augustine or Anselm. I shall however go on to argue in Section 2 that there are passages in Descartes where the tone is much closer to one of humble submission than is commonly recognized.

[9] AT VII 51: CSM II 35.

[10] See *Conversation with Burman*, AT V 159: CSMK 342.

[11] AT VII 147-8: CSM II 105.

[12] Second Replies, AT VII 148, line 27: CSM II 106.

goodness' (the natural light) *or* by a 'divinely produced disposition of my thought' (the supernatural light).[13]

We have to remember here that Descartes, in writing about God, was steeped in a meditative and contemplative tradition, stretching from Augustine (in his *Confessions*), through Anselm (in the *Proslogion*), to Bonaventure (in his *Journey of the Mind towards God*), a tradition that intermingles philosophical reasoning with humble praise and worship.[14] The two elements may seem incompatible to the modern analytic mind, but they coexist happily in the tradition. It is noticeable for example (though to modern readers perhaps baffling) that Anselm actually *addresses* God, humbly prays to him, at the very moment he is about to embark on trying to prove his existence by deploying the famous ontological argument: 'I will not attempt, Lord, to reach your height, for my understanding falls so far short of it. But I desire to understand your truth just a little, the truth that my heart believes and loves.'[15]

Anselm here recapitulates Augustine, for whom God can never be brought wholly within the grasp of our human comprehension, for that would be the best indication that what was so grasped was not God: *[Deus] non est, si comprehendisti*— if you claim to have grasped him, what you have grasped is not God.[16] Thus, for Anselm, God is precisely *not* the 'greatest conceivable being' (as the account commonly found in undergraduate essays inaccurately, if understandably, puts it); on the contrary, he always recedes beyond the horizon of our thinking— he is that 'than which nothing greater can be thought'. In similar fashion, Descartes stresses in many of his writings how far the human mind falls short in its grasp of the infinite. We should, he warns, not so much try to grasp the perfections of God as surrender to them— *non tam capere quam capi*.[17] And in a passage at the end of the Third Meditation, whose style and tone is such that that it could easily have come from Augustine or Anselm, Descartes expresses the longing 'to gaze at, wonder and adore the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it.'[18] This is hardly the tone of the dispassionate analytic philosopher, engaged for purely instrumental reasons on the epistemic project of validating the edifice of knowledge. Rather, it is the voice of the worshiper, one for whom philosophy would make no sense without the divine source of truth and goodness that irradiates it from start to finish.

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[13] AT VII 58 lines 1-2: CSM II 40. See further J. Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 228. I have drawn on material from this collection of papers in developing several of the other themes broached in the present paper, and the reader is referred in particular to Part V of the volume in question for more detailed treatments of the various ways in which God occupies a central role in Descartes's philosophy.

[14] Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones* [397-401]; Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* [1077–8]; Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* [1259].

[15] *Proslogion*, Chs 1 and 2.

[16] '*Quid ergo dicamus, fratres, de deo? si enim quod vis dicere, si cepisti, non est deus: si comprehendere potuisti, aliud pro deo comprehendisti. si quasi comprehendere potuisti, cogitatione tua te decepisti. hoc ergo non est, si comprehendisti: si autem hoc est, non comprehendisti.*' ('What then shall we say, brothers, of God? Whatever you say, if you have grasped it, that is not God. For if you have been able to grasp it, what you have grasped is something other than God. If you have been capable in any way of grasping him in your thought, then by your thought you have deceived yourself. So if you have grasped him, it is not God, and if it is God, you have not grasped him.') Augustine, *Sermones* [early 5th cent] 52:16.

[17] *Meditations*, First Replies, AT VII 114: CSM II 82. Compare the letter to Mersenne of 27 May 1630: 'I say that I know [that God is the author of everything, including the eternal truths], not that I conceive it or grasp it; because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful although our soul, being finite, cannot grasp or conceive him. In the same way we can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it as we could put them around a tree or something else not too large for them. To grasp something is to embrace it in one's thought; to know something it is sufficient to touch it with one's thought.' Letter to Mersenne of 27 May 1630, AT I 151: CSMK 25.

[18] '*immensi hujus luminis pulchritudinem, quantum caligantis ingenii mei acies ferre poterit, intueri, admirari, adorare.*' Third Meditation, final paragraph.

Admittedly, the passage just quoted comes at the *end* of Descartes's reasoning to support God's existence in the Third Meditation, whereas Anselm is prepared to pray, and to adore, before even embarking on his own reasoning. But Descartes's acknowledging of his creator's existence actually hinges on a very basic and straightforward intuition. To be sure, he does take some time to elaborate his reasoning in the Third Meditation[19] (just as, for that matter, Anselm does for his own very different reasoning in the *Proslogion*); but the rational intuition involved can be compressed down to a single nugget of cognition, which Descartes encapsulated in his earlier writings by means of a tag that deserves to be much better known: *Sum, ergo Deus est*— 'I am, therefore God exists.'[20]

The key to this is Descartes's awareness of his own creaturely imperfection, which plays a pivotal role in his reaching for God. 'How could I understand that I … lacked something, and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?' (The phrasing, incidentally, echoes very closely that of Bonaventure four centuries earlier.)[21] My awareness of my weakness and finitude carries with it, for Descartes, an implicit and immediate sense of something other than, and infinitely beyond, myself, which necessarily eludes my mental grasp. This crucial point is very aptly seized on by Emmanuel Levinas in his account of the *Meditations*. On Levinas's view (as neatly summarized by Hilary Putnam):

> What Descartes is reporting is not a step in a deductive reasoning, but a profound religious experience, an experience which might be described as the experience of a *fissure*, of a confrontation with something that disrupted all his categories. On this reading, Descartes is not so much proving something as *acknowledging* something, acknowledging a Reality that he could not have constructed, a Reality which proves its own existence by the very fact that its presence in my mind turns out to be a phenomenological impossibility.[22]

What the Levinas reading in effect succeeds in uncovering, I think, is a luminous paradox at the heart of the Cartesian cognition of God. On the one hand the Cartesian programme cannot proceed unless the meditator has a 'clear and distinct' idea of God— the need for such clarity and distinctness is the chief slogan of Cartesian philosophy, the very hallmark of the system. But on the other hand, it is crucial to the apprehension of that idea of God as authentic that it exceeds the complete grasp of the human mind, that it cannot be fully encompassed by my finite intellect. If this is right, then Descartes's line of thought about God, not just in his version of the ontological argument, but also in the earlier so-called 'Trademark argument' of

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[19] Nor should anything I say here be taken to imply that this elaboration is not worth detailed analytic scrutiny – something I have offered elsewhere. See Cottingham, *Descartes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), Ch. 3, 48-57.

[20] *Rules for the Direction of Our Native Intelligence* [*Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, *c.* 1628], AT X 421: CSM I 46.

[21] *Qua ratione intelligerem me dubitare, me cupere, hoc est, aliquid mihi deese, & me non esse omnino perfectum, si nulla idea entis perfectioris in me esset, ex cujus comparatione defectus meos agnoscerem?* (Third Meditation, AT VII 46: CSM II 31.) Cf. Bonaventure: *Quomodo sciret intellectus hoc esse ens defectivum et incompletum, si nulla haberet cognitionem entis absque omni defectu?* (*Itinerarium*, Part III, §3).

[22] The wording here is not that of Levinas himself by comes from the admirable discussion by Hilary Putnam, in his 'Levinas and Judaism', in S, Critchley and R. Bernasconi (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 33-70, at page 42. The relevant Levinas text is *Ethique et infini* [1982], transl. as *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 91ff. In Descartes's words, 'the entire luminous power of the argument depends on the fact that this ability to have within us the idea of God could not belong to our intellect if the intellect were simply a finite entity (as indeed it is) and did not have God as its cause.' *Meditations*, First Replies, AT VII 105: CSM II 77.

the Third Meditation, hinges in one crucial respect on a very similar mode of reflection to that we find in Anselm's, namely reflection on what happens when the finite creature attempts to confront its infinite creator— when, as Anselm put it, the 'wretched mind' is 'stirred up to contemplation of God.'[23]

To avoid any possible confusion, I am not of course suggesting that Descartes's Third Meditation argument is a kind of ontological argument: the formal presentations of the arguments of the Third and Fifth Meditations are quite different— the former (in both its phases) hinging on considerations about causality, the latter depending on analysis of essences (and the geometrical analogy with a triangle). But the question of how Descartes came to weld such seemingly quite distinct types of argument together into the basic structure of his metaphysics deserves to be asked more than it is. No commentator, to my knowledge, has ever provided a really satisfactory explanation of why the meditator addresses the question of God's existence twice— and indeed many students may well go away from the standard lecture course on the *Meditations* feeling that Descartes may have been afflicted by the 'two leaky bucket' syndrome (nervously deploying the Fifth Meditation reasoning because of residual suspicions that that of the Third Meditation may not have been watertight). But once we being to think along the lines suggested by Levinas, I would argue that we can begin to see that the two pieces of reasoning, for all their formal differences, are informed by essentially the same movement of thought— the reflective finite mind's direct confrontation with something that infinitely transcends it.

In one of the best recent studies of the *Meditations,* John Carriero seems to me to go a fair way to discerning the true character of Descartes's approach, when he contrasts Descartes's position on the cognition of God with that of Aquinas. For Aquinas, whose famous 'five ways' infer God as the mysterious 'something' behind the observed features of the cosmos, our knowledge of God is oblique; only by divine grace, as for the blessed in heaven, is one enabled to have a more direct cognition of him.[24] Descartes, by contrast, is, as Carriero puts it, 'launching an argument for the existence of God in the midst of a cognitive situation that he takes to resemble the beatific vision.'[25] In contrast to the obliqueness which in the Thomist account applies to our cognitive relation to God, the Cartesian meditator has a cognitive access to God which is much more direct: the idea of God 'confers access to a subject-matter so that [the meditator] may *recognize* its truths and understand *why* they hold.'[26] Yet if Levinas's analysis is right, we can push this even further. 'Cognitive access' is no longer a matter of simply reflecting on an idea; it becomes, as its name implies, *access*— what Gilbert Ryle would have called a 'success' verb.[27] Just like another 'success-verb', and one which Descartes himself uses in connection with our knowledge of God, it is a mental 'attaining' (*attingere*) or 'touching' (*toucher*)— a touching of something which, like a mountain, is hugely beyond my power to encompass, but which my mind can truly reach.[28]

3. The role of the passions

The language of adoration with which Descartes concludes the Third Meditation, as he 'gazes at, wonders at, and adores the beauty of this immense light' (*intueri, admirari, adorare*),

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[23] Anselm *Proslogion*, Ch. 1. I have elsewhere called this interpretation of what Descartes's meditator is doing the 'cognitive confrontation' view ('The Desecularization of Descartes').

[24] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266-73], Ia, Qu. 12, art. 5.

[25] John Carriero, *Between Two Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 181.

[26] Carriero, *Two Worlds*, 213.

[27] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* [1949] (London: Penguin, 1988), 143-7.

[28] The Latin term *attingere* is used in my relation to the existence and perfections of God in the Fifth Meditation (AT VII 51: CSM II 350; the verb is a compound of *tangere*, to touch. *Toucher de la pensée* ('touching in thought'), and the image of the mountain, is in the letter to Mersenne of 2 May 1630 (AT I 152: CSMK 25), cited in my translation of the Third Meditation at CSM II 32 (AT VII 46), and quoted above, note 16. See also Carriero, *Two Worlds,* 176-7.

involves a remarkable fusing of cognitive intuition with an outpouring of passion. Wonder, *l'admiration*, is one of the important passions discussed by Descartes in his last published work, *Les Passions de l'âme* (1649). So should we say that the passions have an accepted place in the Cartesian journey towards God, alongside the elements of reason and faith which (as I hope has begun to emerge) are already intertwined in his meditations?

The answer is a complicated but I think fascinating one. In line with the Platonic and Augustinian method of *aversio*, leading the mind away from the senses, Descartes aims in the *Meditations* to deliver the mind from the confusion and obscurity arising from the corporeal part of our nature, so that the *lumen naturale*, the light of our pure intellectual intuition, can disclose the truth about ourselves and God. Given this Platonic orientation, the privileging of pure intellect, one might have expected Descartes to shun the passions as a source of sin and error, since, like the senses, they depend on our corporeal nature. The Cartesian recipe for escaping error is 'avoid what is obscure and confused';[29] and any cognition derived from the passions is characteristically obscure and confused, compared with the transparent light of rational intuition. So just as the senses can distort our perception of the truth (making us judge the moon is as large as the sun, for example, when mathematical reason tells us, correctly, that it is far, far smaller),[30] so the passions can distort our perception of the good. This indeed is the direction Descartes himself seems to want to take in many of his ethical writings, as when he writes to Princess Elizabeth:

> Often passion makes us believe certain things to be much better and more desirable than they are; then, when we have taken much trouble to acquire them, and in the process lost the chance of possessing other more genuine goods, possession of them brings home to us their defects; and thence arise dissatisfaction, regret and remorse. And so the true function of reason is to examine the just value of all the goods whose acquisition seems to depend in some way on our conduct, so that we never fail to devote all our efforts to trying to secure those which are in fact the more desirable.[31]

Yet alongside this (very traditional) view of the suspect nature of the passions, there is another strand in Descartes which (to borrow a theological term) I would venture to call *incarnational*. In discussing the relation between mind and body, Descartes insists that we are *not* incorporeal creatures like angels, pure minds inhabiting the machine of the body; on the contrary, we are very closely intermingled with it to form a true unity— what he called *verus homo* (or in French le *vrai homme*) the genuine human-being.[32] Our human nature, an integral compound of spirit and matter, was given us by God; and its operation, says Descartes, is in principle designed to benefit us. Our sensory, imaginative and passional apparatus furnishes us, not, to be sure, with clear and distinct truths, but with powerfully motivating signals that alert us to what is beneficial or harmful for the mind-body composite. This apparatus, Descartes frequently points out, operates, like all God's creation, in accordance with *uniform and immutable principles*; and the inevitable result of this is that it is bound to lead us astray from time to time (as when sugar continues to taste good to the seriously obese person, or

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[29] Compare Fourth Meditation, final paragraph.

[30] Third Meditation, AT VII 39: CSM II 27.

[31] Letter of 1 September 1645 (AT IV 284-5: CSMK 264). Descartes goes on to say that the passions often 'represent the goods to which they tend with greater splendour than they deserve and they make us imagine pleasure to be much greater before we possess them than our subsequent experiences show them to be.' The letter concludes with the observation that 'the true function of reason in the conduct of life is to examine and consider without passion the value of all the perfections, both of the body and of the soul, which can be acquired by our conduct, so that since we are commonly obliged to deprive ourselves of some good in order to acquire others, we shall always choose the better.'

[32] See letter to Regius of January 1642 (AT III 493: CSMK 206) for the contrast between an angel and a genuine human (*verus homo*); cf. *Discourse*, Part Five, AT VI 59: CSM I 141 (*vrai homme*).

when the dropsical patient continues to feel a raging thirst). But the system as a whole (feelings of hunger and thirst, passions of fear and love) directs us to what is *generally and in the long run* beneficial to us embodied creatures, and so 'there is absolutely nothing to be found there that does not bear witness to the power and goodness of God.'[33]

This theodicy of the passions, for it is nothing less than that, leads Descartes in a different direction both from his predecessor Augustine, who often connects our passional nature with the fall, and also from his early-modern contemporary Blaise Pascal, who issues a severe indictment of the senses, imagination and passions as contaminated by their inherent corporeal involvement.[34] Descartes, by contrast, has a far more optimistic view. Let us take, by way of illustration, the biblical story of the Fall.[35] What happened to Eve was, in the words of Genesis (3:6), that she saw the tree was 'good for food and pleasant to the eye'. On the Cartesian analysis there would be nothing wrong with that in itself: the sensory and passional faculties did indeed alert her to something genuinely attractive and nutritious; but because she focused exclusively on that, she was led to suppose that tasting the apple was (to borrow Descartes's phrase) 'more desirable than it really was'— in comparison with the far greater good of obedience to God. The conclusion to be drawn from this type of case as regards the Cartesian assessment of the passions is consistent with the more moderate line found in St Thomas: the passions are neither good nor bad in themselves, but need to be put to the service of the good.[36]

This, of course, is exactly what happens in the scenario described at the end of the Third Meditation. The passion of wonder reinforces and supports the rational contemplation of the 'immense light', source of all goodness and truth. The passional part of our nature, provided it is harnessed to the service of the good, conduces to our fulfilment (an idea whose roots go right back to Plato, with the notion in the *Republic* that the spirited part of our nature can serve as a valued auxiliary of reason).[37]

But how *do* we harness the passions? One of the effects of the Fall, as Augustine pointed out, is infirmity of the will.[38] In Cartesian terms, the weakness of our nature means we are unable always to keep focused on the good and the true, and this allows scope for us to be led astray by lesser or specious goods. Yet Descartes stresses that since our human nature is given us by God, it operates regularly and consistently; and this gives us the opportunity to retrain and re-programme it. Descartes's scientific theories of conditioned responses, and his psychological inquiries into how events in childhood can set up powerful associations which remain dormant in adult life, but which can later be investigated and modified[39]— all this, when properly studied, offers us humans the chance to *manage* our passions, so as to make sure they operate in the service of the good.

This optimistic vision contrasts with Pascal's view of the wretchedness of man, and our need for divine redemption; set against this, Descartes's more independent stance can seem to prefigure the arrogance of the modern technological age, which aims to take salvation wholly into our own hands, through manipulating our physiology and psychology to whatever ends we decide to pursue. Descartes clearly shared something of this vision: the new science, as he announced in the *Discourse*, would give us mastery of the natural world

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[33] Sixth Meditation, (AT VII 87: CSM II 60).

[34] For the war between imagination and reason, see Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no 44. Cf. William D. Wood, 'Axiology, Self-Deception and Moral Wrongdoing in Blaise Pascal's Pensées, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37:2 (2009), 355-384.

[35] I take this as a convenient illustration, but it is not so employed by Descartes himself.

[36] Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de malo* [1266-72], 3, 9, ad 15.

[37] Plato, *Republic* [*c.* 375 BC], 439d-440d.

[38] Augustine, *De correptione et gratia* [426], Ch. 11.

[39] For an exploration of these themes in Descartes, see J. Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the passions in Greek, Cartesian and psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 3.

and of the conditions for our own health and welfare.[40] But we need to remember that this ambitious programme still remains at the service of the theistic worldview that shines out so clearly in the *Meditations*. Descartes would never have subscribed to the modern Nietzschean fantasy that we chose our own ends; for in his view these are already laid down for us by the light of reason— perceived via the faculty of clear and direct intuition of goodness and truth, which is bestowed on us as the gift of God. The passions, themselves part of the divine gift of our embodied or incarnate nature, can play a part here, as reinforcers and motivators, but only against a background where our reason glimpses what faith has never really doubted: the eternal source of truth and goodness on which every moment of our existence depends. Finite and weak though our creaturely nature may be, we can be sure, as Descartes resoundingly declares, that it contains 'absolutely nothing that does not bear witness to the power and goodness of God.'[41]

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[40] Descartes, *Discourse on the Method* [*Discours de la méthode*, 1637], part vi (AT VI 62: CSM 142-3).
[41] See note 32, above. This paper was originally presented at the January 2010 conference on 'Faith Rationality and the Passions' at Cambridge University, sponsored by the John Templeton foundation. I am grateful to the organizer, Sarah Coakley, and to John Hare, Catherine Pickstock, Charles Taylor, Eleonore Stump, and several other participants at that event for stimulating discussion. I am further indebted to Katia Saporiti and other participants at an April 2010 workshop on *Ideas in Early Modern Philosophy* at the University of Zurich for additional helpful discussion.