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Philosophical Discourse and Ascetic Practice: On Foucault's Readings of Descartes' *Meditations*

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Abstract
This paper addresses the multiple readings that Foucault offers of Descartes' *Meditations* during the whole span of his intellectual career. It thus rejects the (almost) exclusive focus of the literature on the few pages of the *History of Madness* dedicated to the *Meditations* and on the so-called Foucault/Derrida debate. First, it reconstructs Foucault's interpretation of Descartes' philosophy in a series of unpublished manuscripts written between 1966 and 1968, when Foucault was teaching at the University of Tunis. It then addresses the important shifts that took place in Foucault's thought at the beginning of the 1970s, which led him to elaborate a new approach to the *Meditations* in terms of 'discursive events'. Finally, it argues that those shifts opened up to Foucault the possibility of developing an original reading of Descartes' philosophy, surprisingly close to his own interest in ancient *askēsis* and the techniques of the self.

Keywords
Descartes, discursive events, madness, regimes of truth, techniques of the self

I

The few pages of the *History of Madness* (1961) dedicated to the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and in particular to the exclusion of madness in the path of the Cartesian doubt,[1] have attracted the attention of scholars in an (almost) exclusive way when addressing the topic of Foucault's reading of Descartes. The fact that, with the exception of *The Order of Things* (1966), Descartes is virtually absent from the other books that Foucault published during his lifetime, together with the famous Foucault/Derrida 'debate' on the *History of Madness* that took place

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between the early 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s (Derrida, 1963; Foucault, 2001b, 2001c),[2] greatly contributed to confining the scholarly discussion to this specific point, even though Foucault made it very clear that Descartes only played a marginal role in the *History of Madness*, and his interpretation of the *Meditations* could have been left out of the book without any significant consequence for its main argument (Foucault, 2001c: 1150 [575–6]).

This paper aims to address the so far neglected *multiplicity* of Foucault's readings of Descartes, and notably of the *Meditations*, as they unfold during the rest of Foucault's intellectual career, up to the end of his life.[3] Instead of discussing once again Foucault's characterisation of the *coup de force* operated by Descartes in order to silence madness (Descartes, 2008: 14) – which Foucault construes as the condition of possibility for the emergence of the modern subject – it focuses, first, on his interpretation of Descartes' philosophy in a series of unpublished texts he wrote and lectures he gave when teaching at the University of Tunis between 1966 and 1968 (Section II). It then addresses the important shifts that took place in Foucault's thought at the beginning of the 1970s, which contributed to shape his new reading of the *Meditations* in terms of 'discursive events' (Section III). Finally, it argues that those shifts opened up to Foucault the possibility of developing an original interpretation of Descartes' philosophy, surprisingly close to his own interest in ancient *askēsis* and the techniques of the self (Section IV). I thus hope to show that it would be a mistake to contrast Descartes and Foucault as the archetypal examples of two diametrically opposite ways of practising philosophy.[4]

II

A few months after the publication of *The Order of Things*, Foucault obtained a secondment from the University of Clermont-Ferrand to teach philosophy at the Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines of the University of Tunis. In the autumn of 1966, he thus moved to Sidi Bou Saïd. He would permanently leave Tunisia only two years later, in October 1968.[5] Among the texts that Foucault wrote and the lectures that he gave during those years, two are particularly interesting for the purpose of this paper. On the one hand, an autograph manuscript titled *Le discours philosophique* (*Philosophical Discourse*), which was probably the first version of a book that Foucault subsequently abandoned (Foucault, ms1).[6] On the other hand, a lecture course on Descartes in which Foucault offers a detailed analysis of the *Discourse on the Method* and the *Meditations on First Philosophy*.[7]

In these texts, Foucault presents Descartes as both the 'founder of modern philosophy' and the 'perverter [*dévoyeur*] of philosophy in general' (Foucault, ms2: 1), thus combining a traditional claim with one that

is far more surprising and enigmatic. In order to explore this twofold role played by Descartes in the history of Western philosophy, in what appears to be the final lecture of his course Foucault addresses the (opposite) readings of Descartes developed by Hegel and Nietzsche, on the one hand, and by Husserl and Heidegger, on the other. Foucault's main claim, here, is that 'the question of Descartes is linked to the whole interpretation that we give of what philosophy is and should be' (p. 20), or better, of what 'philosophical discourse' is and should be 'in its totality and in its own nature' (p. 22). The problem that Foucault raises in these texts is therefore different – and much broader – than the simple issue of the exclusion of madness in the *Meditations*.[8] It is rather for him a matter of studying the historical transformations (and, albeit indirectly, the contemporary status) of philosophical discourse, thus emphasising both its singularity and its multiple relations with other forms of discourse: scientific discourse, literary discourse, everyday discourse, religious discourse. In other words, after tracing an archaeology of the human sciences (Foucault, 1966),[9] and before – or while he was also – discovering the Anglo-American 'analytic' philosophy (Lorenzini, 2019) and starting to gather materials for *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault decided to write the archaeology of the discipline he was for the first time 'officially' teaching: philosophy.

Since the beginning of Greek philosophy, Foucault argues, philosophers have always been called upon both to interpret and to heal, that is, to use their discourse both to formulate meaning and to conjure evil. Contemporary philosophical discourse, however, eschews the 'intertwined figure of meaning and evil': it is not an interpretation and it refuses to be a therapeutic (Foucault, ms1: 4). Philosophers nowadays 'must simply say *what there is*', without any hindsight or distance in the moment they speak: they must say, or better, *diagnose*, 'what "today" is' (p. 5).[10] Philosophical discourse thus appears to be a strange, unique discourse which aims to understand the status of, and the singular relation it establishes with, the subject who utters it 'here' and 'at present [*à présent*]' (p. 37). In other words, Foucault defines philosophical discourse not on the basis of its content or form, but focusing on 'the relation it establishes with what supports it – with this now [*maintenant*] which, from within its statements [*énoncés*], locates its here, its at present and its subject' (p. 37).

With respect to the history of this strange, unique discourse, Descartes plays, according to Foucault, a *pivotal* role: his work constitutes a moment of rupture while also marking a new beginning. This is why the formula 'Western philosophy since Descartes' recurs incessantly, like a mantra, in *Le discours philosophique*. But what precisely do this rupture and new beginning consist in? The answer, Foucault argues, is to be found in Descartes' elaboration of a new way of conceiving of the subject. However, Foucault emphasises that, by newly questioning the

subject, philosophy since Descartes does not seek to solve the enigma of interiority, nor to analyse consciousness (i.e. what it is to think), nor to define the essence of the 'I'. These are only the main visible consequences, at the level of philosophical themes and objects, of what Foucault presents as a necessity intrinsic to philosophical discourse as such, or better, to philosophical discourse as it was (re)defined by Descartes. In relation to the triad of the 'I-here-at present' that philosophical discourse could not eschew, the theory of the subject had (and still has, at least in part) a very precise function to perform: preventing the irreducibility of the 'now' of its formulation from taking away the value of universal truth that philosophical discourse is supposed to have (Foucault, ms1: 19). In other words, the function of the modern theory of the subject consists in authorising philosophical discourse 'to circulate, without alteration, as an anonymous discourse', thus allowing it, 'in spite of the indelible now [*maintenant*] of its original formulation, to be uttered under any sky and by anyone' (p. 19).[11] Detached from its 'now' and transformed into a pure self-consciousness, the subject can have access to a truth which presents itself in the form of the founding *évidence*,[12] thereby construing itself as a *universal subject*. Thus, what Foucault calls the 'functional cycle of the subject in relation to discourse' comes full circle: 'Only a self-conscious and universal subject can guarantee the validity of a discourse such as that of Western philosophy' (p. 20).

Consequently, Descartes' *cogito* plays a crucial role in Foucault's eyes because, in a sense, it contributed to define the whole discursive regime of modern Western philosophy. Since Descartes, Foucault claims, philosophy has experienced 'as a danger to itself that which endangers the sovereignty of the "I think"', thus considering 'anything that escapes the form of the *cogito*' as an illusion or a 'naive objectivity' (Foucault, ms1: 20). Once again, Foucault clearly insists that this 'inseparable entanglement' of the *cogito* with the very existence of Western philosophy is neither 'the result of an interest in the human being and the secrets of his interiority', nor the increasingly profound oblivion of the original openness of truth. It is rather an intrinsic necessity of philosophical discourse as it came to be defined in the seventeenth century, notably by Descartes (pp. 20–21). The Cartesian subject, that is, the subject of modern philosophy, is therefore considered by Foucault as a mere 'discourse effect' – the effect of a discourse which, since Descartes, is unique, isolable and perfectly singular (p. 22). Indeed, in Descartes' time and (at least in part) through his work, a 'general mutation in the order of discourses' took place: religious, scientific, literary and philosophical discourses all began to function in a new way (p. 53). This 'new way', Foucault suggests, is still largely *ours* because, notwithstanding a fundamental rupture introduced in the order of philosophical discourse by Nietzsche's work (I will come back to this point in Section V), 'we still easily recognise our thinking, our system of truth, our order of

things in what was inaugurated in the first half of the seventeenth century' (p. 55).

The main feature of this crucial transformation 'to which Descartes' work bears witness' consists in the fact that philosophical discourse for the first time freed itself from the influence of the other major types of discourse, suddenly assuming the form it has retained until today (Foucault, ms1: 68). Admitting no other starting point than the simple *évidence* of the 'I think', Western philosophy established itself in its autonomy, that is, it set itself apart from all the other kinds of discourse and marked 'its appearance as a discourse which establishes immediate, ineffaceable and indefinite relations with its own now [*maintenant*]' (p. 69). On the one hand, since Descartes, philosophical discourse resembles a religious commentary of Scripture, insofar as both must justify 'the relation between a truth without place or time and the singularity of a discourse in which this truth is manifested'; however, these two discourses also clearly differ from one another in that philosophical discourse aims to 'show how the now [*maintenant*] of a discourse, whatever it may be, can allow it to gain access to a truth that does not depend on it' (pp. 70–71). Thus, with Descartes and after him, philosophy does keep speaking of God, the soul and the world, as the demonstrative order of the *Meditations* plainly shows. Yet this continuity is misleading, Foucault argues, for a decisive shift occurs in Descartes' text: 'God, the soul and the world have ceased to be objects for philosophy'; instead, they have become 'functional elements within its discourse', and they are now part of 'the economy of philosophical discourse and of the indefinite relation it establishes with its now [*maintenant*]' (pp. 79–80). In other words, in Descartes' work, God, the soul and the world have lost 'their privilege as primary and constitutive objects, entering instead a system in which they might as well not exist, since their non-existence and the forms it may take play exactly the same role as they do' (p. 80).

This, according to Foucault, explains

> why Western philosophy has not ceased, for three centuries now, to be destruction and end of Metaphysics. Indeed, as it was transmitted to the seventeenth century by a long tradition, metaphysics was a discourse that had the soul, the world and God as its objects. Without the need to demonstrate their unquestionable non-existence, without even ceasing to speak of them – or their equivalents – in one way or another, without having to turn away from them, philosophy gave up being metaphysics from the moment in which, paradoxically, it came as close as possible to these 'objects', assimilating and internalising them, transforming them into functional elements of its discourse. (Foucault, ms1: 82)

It surely does not come as a surprise that, according to Foucault, the decisive mutation in this regard took place in 'those *Meditations* which bore precisely the title of *Metaphysics* and in which the existence of God, the knowledge of the soul and the reality of the world were summoned to found the truth of [philosophical] discourse' (Foucault, ms1: 83).

III

Most of the ideas developed in *Le discours philosophique*, and notably in the reading of Descartes's work he offers there, will remain central to Foucault's views in the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, in the 9 December 1970 lecture of his first course at the Collège de France, *The Will to Know*, Foucault claims that 'the text in which Descartes sets out his desire to arrive at the truth, lists the reasons for doubting and excludes the possibility of he himself being mad', deserves to be considered as a 'philosophical operator' – that is, as one of those rare texts concerning and acting on 'the status of philosophical discourse in general' (Foucault, 2011b: 7 [6]). In the early 1970s, however, Foucault's reading of the *Meditations* also undergoes very significant transformations, the most important of which is explicitly addressed in a letter that Foucault wrote to Jean-Marie Beyssade in November 1972.[13] There, Foucault insists on the importance of emphasising the 'series' of the 'meditative exercise' in the analysis of Descartes' *Meditations*, instead of focusing exclusively on the 'order of reasons': indeed, it is only at the level of 'the discursive events of the text that the relation to madness becomes problematic' (Foucault, 2011a: 92).

Foucault thus acknowledges that, compared to 1961, his view has changed. It was precisely because, in the *History of Madness*, he had centred his analysis on the 'order of reasons' that the exclusion of madness had appeared, in relation to it, as a furtive and violent gesture, one that seemed to contradict the systematicity of Descartes' discourse. Ten years later, after developing his archaeological method, the question that Foucault wants to explore is different. Consequently, his interpretation of the exclusion of madness in the *Meditations* is also different:

> My attention had to be drawn to the 'discursive events', the modalities of the subject's inclusion in the discourse, in order to allow me to grasp the coherence of a movement that is specific, but that also fits the order of reasons; the procedures taking place [in the *Meditations*], the game of qualifications and disqualifications, do not interfere with the order of reasons. (Foucault, 2011a: 93)

In 'My body, this paper, this fire' (1972), while refraining from formulating any explicit self-criticism, Foucault insists on the same point and makes it the cornerstone of his response to Derrida.[14] Indeed, if

Derrida and the other 'classical commentators' did not notice the difference that exists, in Descartes' text, between his treatment of dream and error on the one hand, and of madness on the other, it is precisely – Foucault argues – because they did not employ the archaeological method. Relying on this 'pedagogy which teaches the student that there is nothing outside the text', they reduced discursive practices to textual traces, thus ignoring discursive events and 'leaving only marks for a reading' (Foucault, 2001b: 1135 [573]). Consequently, they ended up erasing the subject's concrete modes of involvement in discourse. By contrast, Foucault famously defines the project of an archaeology of knowledge in terms of a '*description of discursive events* as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it': the archaeologist does not analyse language (*la langue*) as a 'finite body of rules that authorises an infinite number of performances', but studies discourse (*le discours*) from the perspective of 'discursive events', i.e. 'a grouping that is always finite and limited at any moment to the linguistic sequences that have been formulated' (Foucault, 1969: 38–9 [29–30]). In other words, while the analysis of language focuses on the rules according to which a given statement was constructed, and thus other similar statements *could* be constructed, the 'description of discursive events' asks why 'one particular statement appeared rather than another' (p. 39 [30]).

But what exactly does it mean to address Descartes' *Meditations* from an archaeological perspective? To the points already developed in *Le discours philosophique*, Foucault now adds that it is crucial to pay attention to the title of Descartes' text. If any discourse 'is made up of a group of statements which are produced each in their own space and time, as so many discursive events', it is their exact status that must be analysed in its singularity. When this status is that of a pure demonstration, the discourse must be studied at the level of the formal rules linking the statements to one another. In this case, the 'subject of the discourse' is not involved in it and remains, in relation to the demonstration, 'fixed, invariant and as though neutralised' (Foucault, 2001b: 1125 [562–3]). This is what Foucault suggested in the *History of Madness*: by focusing on the 'order of reasons', he developed an analysis of Descartes' text as a purely demonstrative discourse, and he thus interpreted the exclusion of madness as an *extra*-discursive event – one produced by a *coup de force* establishing that the subject of the *Meditations* could not be mad.

By contrast, to construe the exclusion of madness in the path of the Cartesian doubt as a 'discursive event' means to deny that Descartes' text is *purely* demonstrative. A 'mediation', Foucault argues in his response to Derrida, is a specific kind of discourse, which produces discursive events (the *cogito* being one of them) involving 'a series of modifications in the enunciating subject' (Foucault, 2001b: 1125 [563]).[15] Thus, far from being fixed, invariant and neutralised, the subject of Descartes' *Meditations* is 'mobile and capable of being modified by the very effect of the discursive

events that take place': not only is he transformed through what is said in the meditation and 'ceaselessly altered by his own movement', but his own discourse produces effects, exposes him to risks and subjects him to tests [*épreuves*] that confer upon him a status 'which he in no sense possessed at the initial moment' (p. 1125 [563]).

The exclusion of madness, therefore, does not occur outside the discourse of the *Meditations*, but within and through it. The *cogito* does not 'unveil', in the course of a pure demonstration, a subject already presupposed by Descartes' discourse. On the contrary, the subject of the 'I think, therefore I am' is *produced* by the discourse of the *Meditations* – it is one of its main *effects*. Foucault now argues that Descartes' text deserves to be considered as a 'demonstrative meditation', that is, both as 'a group of propositions forming a *system*, which each reader must run through if he wishes to experience their truth', and as 'a group of modifications forming an *exercise*, which each reader must carry out, and by which each reader must be affected, if he wishes in his turn to be the subject enunciating this truth on his own account' (Foucault, 2001b: 1125–6 [563]). For instance, in the First Meditation, Descartes establishes in a *demonstrative* fashion that 'waking can never be distinguished from sleep by any conclusive indications', and he similarly discusses the dream-hypothesis and the hypothesis of a deceitful 'evil spirit' (Descartes, 2008: 14–17). These passages, in Foucault's terms, form a *system*. There are other moments, however, in which it is clear that Descartes' demonstrative arguments are not enough and need to be supplemented by *ascetic exercises*. Think of Descartes' claim that 'it is not enough to have realised all this, I must take care to remember it: for my accustomed opinions continually creep back into my mind, and take possession of my belief, which has, so to speak, been enslaved to them by long experience and familiarity, for the most part against my will'; think also of his acknowledgement, at the end of the First Meditation, that 'to carry out this plan [i.e. never to give his assent to anything false] requires great effort' because 'there is a kind of indolence that drags me back to my customary way of life' (pp. 16–17).[16]

It is thus through a constant alternation of *systematic statements* and *ascetic exercises* that the reader of the *Meditations* is led to the truth – one which is not and cannot be simply 'demonstrated', but must be 'experienced' thanks to a meditative practice that the reader is asked to perform in order to both transform himself and gain access to the truth.

IV

Foucault's reading of Descartes' *Meditations*, as originally presented in the *History of Madness*, undergoes significant revisions well before the 1980s – a point that has rarely been emphasised by commentators. If there is little doubt that Foucault, between 1982 and 1984, elaborates

a new approach to Descartes' text (Monod, 2013), it is important to notice that he does so by building on ideas already developed in *Le discours philosophique* and in his response to Derrida more than ten years before.

Foucault mentions Descartes once again in the 6 February 1980 lecture of his course at the Collège de France, *On the Government of the Living*. There, after (re)defining the concept of 'regime of truth' as 'that which determines the obligations of individuals with regard to procedures of manifestation of truth' (Foucault, 2012a: 91 [93]),[17] Foucault raises the example of the regime of truth inaugurated by Descartes. When, in the *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes (2006: 28) affirms the unquestionable truth of the 'I think, therefore I am' (*cogito ergo sum*), he can only do so, according to Foucault, because under the explicit and theoretically unanswerable 'therefore' of this proposition lies another, implicit 'therefore', which indicates the subject's acceptance of a certain regime of truth: 'It is true, therefore I submit'. *Évidence* alone cannot explain the subject's acceptance of the truth of the *cogito*: the subject accepts this truth only because he has been 'qualified in a certain way', and in particular because the path of the Cartesian doubt has already excluded the possibility for him of being mad (p. 96 [98]). In order for the subject to be able to say: 'When it is true, and evidently true, I will submit' and, when faced with the proposition 'I think, therefore I am', to be able to say: 'It is evident, therefore I submit', the subject must not be mad (p. 96 [98]). Foucault thus argues that the *cogito* has binding force only for a subject who has been *constituted* within a regime of truth which gives coercive power to *évidence* itself. Once again, it is clear that the 'order of reasons' (the *demonstrative* aspect of Descartes' text) cannot be detached from the *ascetic* modifications undergone by the subject: it is only because the subject has constituted himself – and has been constituted – in a specific way, within a specific regime of truth imposing certain obligations on him, that he ends up considering the proposition 'I think, therefore I am' as an indisputable truth which he has no choice but to accept.

Foucault famously takes up these ideas in the first lecture of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, where he advances the distinction – inspired by Pierre Hadot (2002) – between 'philosophy' and 'spirituality'. While the former can be defined as 'the form of thought that asks what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject's access to the truth', the latter, Foucault explains, consists in 'the search, practice and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth' (Foucault, 2001g: 16 [15]). On the basis of this distinction, Foucault defines two major 'phases' in the history of Western philosophy.

On the one hand, throughout Greek, Hellenistic and Roman antiquity, philosophy – that is, the question of the subject's access to the truth – was

indissolubly linked to the practice of spirituality: philosophy was conceived as an activity and an experience of self-transformation that qualified the subject in such a way as to enable him to have access to the truth. Indeed, spirituality postulates that 'truth is never given to the subject by right', by a 'simple act of knowledge' justified 'simply by the fact that he is the subject', but rather that the subject must change and become 'other than himself' in order to have the right of access to the truth.[18] The subject, *as he is*, is not capable of truth, and thus 'there can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject' (Foucault, 2001g: 17–18 [15]).

On the other hand, the modern age is characterised, Foucault argues, by a completely different way of structuring the relation between the subject and truth: it is now knowledge, and knowledge alone, that gives the subject access to the truth. The subject is thus no longer required to transform himself in his own being, but only to perform an act of knowledge. Consequently, philosophy is divorced from the practice of spirituality: the subject, *as he is*, becomes capable of truth, and access to the truth, 'whose sole condition is henceforth knowledge, will find reward and fulfilment in nothing else but the indefinite development of knowledge' (Foucault, 2001g: 19–20 [17–18]).

In Foucault's account, Descartes plays once again a decisive, pivotal role. It should not come as a surprise, however, that the function that Foucault attributes to Descartes' work in the path that led philosophy to separate itself from spirituality and to incorporate the structure of knowledge characterising modern science turns out to be *ambiguous*. On the one hand, Foucault argues that what he calls the 'Cartesian moment' has philosophically requalified the principle of the 'know yourself' (*gnothi seauton*), while discrediting the practice of the 'care of the self' (*epimeleia heautou*). This twofold movement finds its origin in the *Meditations*, where Descartes has grounded philosophy on the *évidence* – i.e. the indubitable character – of the subject's own existence. Self-knowledge has thus become the privileged path to truth, whereas the ascetic demands associated with the care of the self have been excluded 'from the field of modern philosophical thought' (Foucault, 2001g: 15–16 [14]). However, as I already observed when addressing Foucault's reading of Descartes in *Le discours philosophique* and in his response to Derrida, things are more complex than they seem: not only Foucault, in talking of a 'Cartesian moment', refrains from suggesting that this shift took place 'on the day Descartes laid down the rule of *évidence* or discovered the *cogito*' (p. 28 [26]), but he also elaborates a far subtler interpretation of Descartes' work itself.

It is helpful to refer here to Hadot's criticism of Foucault's interpretation of the role played by Descartes in the history of the relations between philosophy and spirituality. In the interview, 'On the genealogy of ethics: An overview of work in progress' (1983), Foucault discusses

some of the main ideas of his lecture course, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. He notably argues that, in antiquity, 'a subject could not have access to the truth if he did not first operate upon himself a certain work which would make him susceptible to knowing the truth', and that Descartes 'broke with this when he said: "To accede to truth, it suffices that I be *any* subject which can see what is evident"' (Foucault, 1984: 371). Thus, '*évidence* is substituted for ascesis' and 'the relationship to the self no longer needs to be ascetic to get into relation to the truth' (p. 371). A few years later, Hadot resolutely criticises this reading and argues that, 'when Descartes chose to give one of his works the title *Meditations*, he knew perfectly well that the word designated an exercise of the soul within the tradition of ancient and Christian spirituality': each 'meditation' is to be taken as a *spiritual exercise*, 'which must be finished before one can move to the next stage' (Hadot, 1995: 396 [264]). According to Hadot, Descartes' *Meditations* urge the reader to engage in a practice of self-transformation as a necessary condition for reaching the truth. Consequently, Hadot concludes, Foucault is mistaken in maintaining that Cartesian *évidence* is accessible to *any* subject, because '*évidence* can only be perceived through a spiritual exercise' (Hadot, 2002: 310–11).[19]

Hadot's criticism, however, misses its target. Indeed, in the French version of the interview to which Hadot refers, and already in his response to Derrida, Foucault makes it abundantly clear that Descartes' 'substitution' of *évidence* for *askēsis* 'was only possible for Descartes himself at the cost of a process which was that of the *Meditations*, during which he constituted a relationship of self to self qualifying him as a subject of true knowledge in the form of *évidence*' (Foucault, 2001d: 1449). In the English version of the interview, Foucault explicitly claims that 'Descartes wrote "meditations" – and meditations are a practice of the self' (Foucault, 1984: 371). However, according to Foucault, through the *Meditations* Descartes 'succeeded in substituting a subject as founder of practices of knowledge for a subject constituted through practices of the self' (p. 371). As he argues in another interview from 1984:

> Reading Descartes, it is remarkable to find in the *Meditations* this same spiritual concern [as in ancient philosophy] with the attainment of a mode of being where doubt would no longer be permissible, and where one could finally know. But by thus defining the mode of being to which philosophy gives access, one realises that this mode of being is defined entirely in terms of knowledge, and that philosophy in turn is defined in terms of the access to the knowing subject, or to what qualifies the subject as such. From this perspective, it seems to me that philosophy superimposes the functions of spirituality upon the ideal of a grounding for scientificity. (Foucault, 2001f: 1542 [294])

In all these texts from the 1980s, Foucault develops a reading of Descartes, and notably of the *Meditations*, that is far subtler than what Hadot suggests. As was already the case in *Le discours philosophique*, Descartes plays, in Foucault's view, a *pivotal* role: while being situated in continuity with the ancient tradition which considers philosophy as essentially linked to the demands of spirituality, Descartes' work also has the function and effect of 'turning' this tradition *against itself*, relying on the resources of spirituality in order to constitute a subject of knowledge henceforth freed from ascetic obligations (McGushin, 2007: 192). This is just another way of saying that the regime of truth grounded on the *évidence* of the *cogito*, after emerging from an ascetic exercise of transformation of the subject, hides its historical origin (and the very fact that it is a 'regime') behind the idea that the 'therefore' linking the 'I think' and the 'I am' is an *évidence* that *any* subject (provided he is not mad) must recognise and accept.

V

More than 20 years after the publication of the *History of Madness*, Foucault's reading of the *Meditations* thus settles on the claim that, although it has a 'subjective character' and belongs to the tradition of spirituality, Descartes' text ultimately aims to constitute – through a series of ascetic exercises – an 'anonymous "I"' (Foucault, 2001a: 579). From that moment on, the truth of the *cogito* became accessible to *everyone* without the need for them to undertake a 'spiritual' transformation. As Foucault already wrote in one of his Tunis manuscripts, 'Descartes' "I" in the *Discourse* is not the "I" of the *Meditations*': while the former is a 'biographical "I" who is looking for a method (perhaps not valid for everyone)', the latter is an 'anonymous "I" that everyone can inhabit' (Foucault, ms3: 4). Everyone except for the madman, of course.

In this paper, I hope to have shown that Foucault's reading of Descartes becomes increasingly complex and subtle between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s, thus opening up to him the possibility of developing, a few years later, an explicitly 'ascetic' interpretation of the *Meditations* – one that turns out to be surprisingly close to his own interest in ancient *askēsis* and the techniques of the self.[20] At the same time, however, it is clear that Foucault still wants to *criticise* the effects of this specific practice of the self.[21] Indeed, the aim or *telos* of Descartes' text is paradoxical: to constitute, through *askēsis*, a subject who, in order to gain access to the truth, will no longer need ascetic exercises, but only rules of method modelled on those characterising the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Thus, what Descartes accomplishes through the *Meditations* goes far beyond the mere exclusion of madness from the domain of reason: by indissolubly linking truth and *évidence*, he 'tricks' the reader into thinking that he no longer needs to work on and transform himself in order to attain the truth.

In short, Descartes ultimately excludes from the domain of reason – and of philosophical discourse – what we could call the *ascetic subject*.[22]

According to Foucault, Nietzsche's work would eventually induce a new shift in the history of Western thought, thus transforming the mode of philosophical discourse inaugurated by Descartes.[23] Indeed, contrary to Descartes and his 'metaphysics of knowledge' (Foucault, ms2: 5), it is impossible 'to say "I" in Nietzsche's place' (Foucault, 2001a: 579):

> Instead of the philosopher who erases himself from his own discourse, [...] who removes from his own discourse all the demonstratives that can refer to his own existence, we now have the philosopher who makes his character speak, together with his complexion, his disease, the irritation of his nerves, and who must then designate the subject of philosophical discourse in the rigorously demonstrative form: *Ecce homo*. (Foucault, ms1: 153)

Nietzsche's *Ecce homo* 'reverses term by term the features of the philosophical subject': where since Descartes, and due to his suppression of the ascetic subject, there reigned a pure personal pronoun – a non-ascetic subject – whose 'meaning could rightfully be carried out by any subject speaking in turn', with Nietzsche 'a pure and simple statement [arises] made by the philosopher about himself: here he is' (Foucault, ms1: 153). This transformation opens up once again the possibility of the mad philosopher – the possibility, that is, for madness of exercising 'its right over the philosopher's discourse', as was already the case with all the other kinds of discourse (p. 156).

To preserve and incessantly reactivate this possibility by reintroducing the ascetic subject into philosophical discourse is one of Foucault's main goals – a goal which became more explicit at the end of his life (notably in his study of ancient techniques of the self and *parrēsia*), but which, as I argued in this paper, can be traced back to some of his writings from the 1960s. This project had to address Descartes' *Meditations* in order to lay bare the ambiguity that lies at the heart of his 'discovery' of the *cogito* and to construe philosophy once again as a task and an exercise that entails an indefinite *risk*: since the truth is not given to the (philosophising) subject by right, it could very well remain unattained. It is only by accepting this risk that philosophy can be conceived and practised as a truly creative and experimental endeavour.

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in French in my contribution to the volume *Les formes historiques du cogito: XVIIe–XXe siècles* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019), edited by Kim Sang Ong-Van-Cung. For illuminating conversations and insightful comments that informed the final version of this paper, I am indebted to Arnold Davidson, Stuart Elden, Orazio Irrera, Sabina Vaccarino Bremner and five anonymous reviewers.

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Notes

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. Foucault (1972: 56–9 [44–7]) famously argues that, when encountering madness on the methodical path of his doubt, Descartes does not evade its dangers 'in the same way that he sidesteps the possibility of dream or error'. Indeed, 'it is not the permanence of truth that ensures that thought is not madness', but rather 'an impossibility of being mad which is inherent in the thinking subject rather than the object of his thoughts': one simply *cannot* suppose to be mad, 'even in thought, for madness is precisely a condition of impossibility for thought'. Therefore, according to Foucault, Descartes' *Meditations* bear witness to the reduction of madness to silence characteristic of the modern 'age of reason': 'Madness has been banished. While *man* can still go mad, *thought*, as the sovereign exercise carried out by a subject seeking the truth, can no longer be devoid of reason. A new dividing line has appeared, rendering that experience so familiar to the Renaissance – unreasonable Reason, or reasoned Unreason – impossible'.
2. On the Foucault/Derrida debate, see among others Allen (2016); Boyne (1990); De Ville (2010); Evangelou (2017: 187–203); Huffer (2016); Macherey (2016); McGushin (2016); Rekret (2017); Revel (2016).
3. A relevant exception to the rule is McGushin (2007: 175–94), who rightly notes that 'Foucault's encounter with the thought of Descartes spans the length of his intellectual career' and suggests that Foucault's earlier interpretation of Descartes in the *History of Madness* and *The Order of Things* should be reconceived in light of his later work on the care of the self and *parrēsia* (p. 175). McGushin's reading, however, departs from mine in that he tends to simply *apply* Foucault's ideas from the 1980s to his texts from the 1960s and 1970s: for him, Foucault is describing the emergence of 'a new practice of subjectivity' already when addressing Descartes' *Meditations* in the *History of Madness*–one that, moreover, can be straightforwardly read in terms of the notion of the 'Cartesian moment' coined in 1982 (pp. 177–8). Therefore, McGushin does not address the successive changes in Foucault's reading of Descartes' *Meditations* that I reconstruct in this paper. In addition, by arguing that Descartes' text attempts to 'free us by placing us under the proper authority and figure of government: reason defined in terms of method and evidence [*évidence*]', and thus that it constitutes 'a new foundation for, and form of, philosophical *parrēsia*' (p. 180), McGushin risks downplaying the critical dimension of Foucault's reading of Descartes, one that can be found also in his analyses of *parrēsia* – for instance, when Foucault explicitly contrasts

parrēsia as a 'verbal activity' and the 'mental experience' of Cartesian *évidence* (Foucault, 2019a: 42). On this point, see Lorenzini (2017: 66–72).
4. As Prado (1992), among others, does.
5. For more details on the different aspects of Foucault's stay in Tunisia, see the papers collected in the special issue of the journal *CELAAN*, 'Michel Foucault en Tunisie (1966–1968)' (vol. 12, no. 1–2, Spring 2015), as well as Medien (2020). See also Séglard (2007), who focuses specifically on two lectures that Foucault gave in 1967 at the Tahar Haddad Club in Tunis, and which were recently published in Foucault (2019b).
6. The critical edition of this manuscript and of Foucault's lecture course, *La place de l'homme dans la pensée occidentale moderne* (*The Place of Man in Modern Western Thought*), is currently being prepared by Orazio Irrera and myself. It is scheduled to be published in 2023 as part of the new Seuil-Gallimard book series 'Cours et travaux de Michel Foucault avant le Collège de France'.
7. Unfortunately, only the autograph manuscript of a lecture on Descartes – probably the final lecture of Foucault's course, on 'The History of Cartesianism' (Foucault, ms2) – and a manuscript offering a schematic analysis of the *Meditations* (Foucault, ms3) seem to have been preserved. For a detailed plan of Foucault's lecture course on Descartes, see Boubaker-Triki (2008: 112–13).
8. It is worth noticing that, in the manuscript on the *Meditations*, Foucault does not mention this topic at all (Foucault, ms3). The issue of the exclusion of madness only (and briefly) comes up in *Le discours philosophique*, specifically when Foucault addresses the 'mutation' introduced by Nietzsche's work at the level of the relations between philosophical discourse and its utterer – one that opens up 'the possibility of the mad philosopher', which had previously been excluded by Descartes (Foucault, ms1: 155–6). I shall come back to this point in Section V.
9. In *The Order of Things*, Descartes is only mentioned a few times as his work, according to Foucault, contributed to the emergence of the 'Classical age', that of representation (Foucault, 1966: 65–6 [56–8]).
10. Foucault famously takes up again the (philosophical) question of 'today' in his texts on Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?*, one of which also addresses the singularity of Kant's approach to this question compared to his predecessors', and namely to Descartes' (Foucault, 2001e: 1498–9).
11. For a similar characterisation of what Foucault, in 1973, calls 'scientific knowledge' or 'truth-demonstration' (a truth that is 'everywhere, in every place and all the time'), see Foucault (2003: 235 [236]).
12. Here and in countless other places throughout his work, Foucault is referring to the first rule of Descartes' method, which, in France, is known as '*règle de l'évidence*': '*Ne recevoir aucune chose pour vraie que je ne la connusse* évidemment *être telle*'. This sentence is translated into English by Ian Maclean as 'Never to accept anything as true that I did not *incontrovertibly* know to be so' (Descartes, 2006: 17). The problem is that Foucault usually refers to this rule simply by using the term '*évidence*', which cannot be translated as 'evidence' (as unfortunately most of the existing translations of Foucault do), nor for that matter as 'clarity and distinctness' – Descartes

famously claims that this rule entails including 'nothing in my judgments than that which presented itself to my mind so *clearly* and *distinctly* that I would have no occasion to doubt it' (p. 17). In this paper, I thus decided to use the French word '*évidence*'.

13. Jean-Marie Beyssade had sent Foucault his article '"Mais quoi, ce sont des fous": Sur un passage controversé de la Première Méditation', which would be published the following year (Beyssade, 1973). In his letter, Foucault responds to the arguments developed in that article.
14. Going into the details of Derrida's reading (and criticisms) of Foucault's project in the *History of Madness* is clearly outside the scope of this paper. What is relevant here is, above all, Derrida's claim that 'no historical question about [Descartes]–about the latent historical meaning of his discourse, about its place in a total structure–can be answered before a rigorous and exhaustive internal analysis of his manifest intentions, of the manifest meaning of his philosophical discourse has been made' (Derrida, 1963: 475 [53]). According to this 'internal analysis', Derrida argues, the dissociation that Foucault operates between delirium and madness on the one hand, and sensation and dreams on the other, turns out to be incorrect: indeed, the reference to dreams is not put off to one side 'in relation to a madness potentially respected or even excluded by Descartes', but constitutes 'the hyperbolical exasperation of the hypothesis of madness', since the latter is *not* 'a good instrument of doubt' as it is only 'a single case – and not the most serious one – among all cases of sensory error' (p. 482 [61–2]). On the dream-hypothesis in Descartes' First Meditation and the related controversy between Foucault and Derrida, see McGushin (2018).
15. According to the notes that Mohamed Jaoua and Mouldi Younis took during Foucault's lecture course on Descartes at the University of Tunis, already in that context Foucault mentioned the 'religious connotation' of the word 'meditation', arguing that the latter 'is an exercise of the intellect and of the will' which played a very significant role in the history of Christian spirituality – one that Descartes took up when writing the *Meditations*. On this point, see Foucault (2012a): 'We should never forget that Descartes' malicious demon is not at all the bizarre and extreme invention of a radical attempt by philosophy to retake possession of itself. The malicious demon, the idea that there is something in me that can always deceive me and that has such power that I can never be sure it will not deceive me is the absolutely constant theme of Christian spirituality' (p. 298 [303]). See also Foucault (2012b: 167–8 [170]). It is important to emphasise, however, that when Foucault speaks of the *Meditations* as a 'spiritual' practice in the 1980s, the word 'spiritual' has lost its exclusively religious connotation and has come to indicate more generally the necessity for the subject to transform himself in order to gain access to the truth. On the crucial influence exerted on Descartes by the Christian spiritual tradition, see Menn (1998) and Mercer (2014, 2017).
16. For the analysis of (some of) the aspects that allow us to construe the *Meditations* as a kind of exercise, see McGushin (2007), who rightly focuses on the frequent references in the text 'to the passage of time and to Descartes' spatial situation as he engages in the meditation': 'The duration of the *Meditations*, the use and experience of time and the effects of the passage of time are all ingredients in the work of meditation. This is not the

case in an argument where time is perceived as inessential, or even an obstruction. In addition to time, Descartes refers to his spatial situation frequently, and it is clear that being in the right kind of space, in the right place, is also essential to the successful meditation' (pp. 182–3).
17. On the concept of regime of truth, see Lorenzini (2015a).
18. For Foucault's first elaboration of the link between spirituality and self-transformation, see Foucault (2020).
19. For a Hadotian reading of Descartes' *Discourse* in terms of spiritual exercises, see D'Agostino (2017: 93–162). For a Foucauldian reading of Descartes' *Meditations* as a series of spiritual exercises that aim to modify the subject's being in order to give him access to the truth, see McGushin (2007: 175–194). On the *Meditations* as a spiritual exercise, see also Rorty (1986).
20. Foucault defines the latter as the set of techniques 'which permit individuals to effect, by their own means [or with the help of other people], a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, or to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on' (Foucault, 2015: 25). For an analysis of Foucault's study of ancient techniques of the self that puts it in conversation with Hadot's work on spiritual exercises and Stanley Cavell's notion of moral perfectionism, see Lorenzini (2015b).
21. McGushin (2007) interestingly claims that 'approaching the *Meditations* as spiritual exercises produces the opposite effect in a modern, Cartesian reader as it would have produced in a premodern reader', and that 'recovering the ascetic dimension of the *Meditations* serves therefore to destabilise the *cogito* – without destroying it – by giving it back its foundation: the practices of the self which bring it into being' (p. 194).
22. On this point, see Guenancia (2002), who argues that, in the 1980s, the issue for Foucault is no longer Descartes' exclusion of madness, but his exclusion of 'a certain form of subjectivity' (p. 240).
23. On the different roles that the reference to Nietzsche plays in Foucault's work between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1970s, see Bernard Harcourt's paper in this special issue.

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