

Fable, Method, and Imagination in Descartes

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Descartes

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To my mother

PREFACE

This project began as a doctoral dissertation at DePaul University in Chicago, in particular with a graduate seminar in which I was struck by how strange it seemed that Descartes, the philosopher of clear and distinct ideas, would refer to one of his fundamental works on science, *The World*, as a fable. To some degree, this fact still seems strange to me. In trying to work out why Descartes would have done this, I discovered a strand of literature on the subject and eventually realized that paying close attention to it could have a significant impact in how we understand the father of modernity.

As the father of modernity, Descartes can seem distant from our ostensibly postmodern world. However, certain readers make clear that he is much closer to ourselves than we might always want to admit. And yet, his paternity does not exist in a vacuum and those other readers help lay out the conditions under which Descartes was writing and philosophizing. Attending to the status of something as strange as the fable in Descartes should, it seems to me, take care to acknowledge both of these aspects, the strange closeness and the historical distance. The foundations of modernity occur in a time when an astonishing number of concepts concerning the world and methods of how to engage it were at play and in flux, leading to an impressive creativity and imaginativeness on the part of those involved in laying its foundations. In this way, we can acknowledge that there may be more to this moment than what the tradition has told us even as we are careful about the context in which it emerged.

With those conditions and possibilities in mind, I attempt to give an account of how we can understand the status of the fable in Descartes'

overall philosophy. Chapter 1 gives some context to the turn to fable in Descartes, especially in comparison to others. Chapter 2 explores the use of the word as relates to his arguments in physics and in training the mind. Chapter 3 takes the understanding of this relationship into other moments in Descartes' corpus where he makes similar claims, though without using the precise word 'fable'. In doing so, a pattern emerges of new beginnings as requiring a way of deploying his new philosophy without defending it on the grounds of the old, a pattern I consider structurally crucial for Descartes. Chapter 4 examines how this structure affects the way we understand his methodology, especially in the traditional understanding that it is purified of things like history, or perhaps storytelling more generally. Chapter 5 then looks at Cartesian psychology with all of this in mind to show that the imagination, especially in its relationship to the will, is more important to achieving our philosophical and scientific potential than we may have acknowledged. Finally, Chap. 6 attempts to draw all of this together to offer a way to read Descartes anew.

Too many people to name contributed to this work's development in the form of invaluable conversations at various points of its development, although Alicen Beheler, William Meyerowitz, and Amanda Parris were of particular help. Most importantly, I would like to thank Richard A. Lee, Jr., Michael Naas, Peg Birmingham, and the anonymous reader of the original manuscript for their comments and guidance in seeing it to completion. Any errors of course remain my own.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AT René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 12 vols. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1897–1913). Followed by volume number in Roman numerals.
- CED Princess Palatine Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, ed. and tr. Lisa Shapiro (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- CSM René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, tr. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–1985). Followed by volume number in Roman numerals.
- CSM-K René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, tr. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- DCB René Descartes, *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, tr. John Cottingham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).
- E René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, tr. Paul J. Olscamp (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001).
- HR René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, tr. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Followed by volume number in Roman numerals.

- LMD Adrien Baillet, *The Life of Monsieur Des Cartes, Containing the History of his Philosophy and Works: as also, The most Remarkable Things that befell him during the whole Course of his Life* (abridged), tr. S. R. (1693).
- TM René Descartes, *Treatise of Man*, tr. Thomas Steele Hall (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).
- VMD Adrien Baillet, *La Vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes*, 2 vols. (1691). Followed by volume number in Roman numerals.
- W René Descartes, *The World, or Treatise on Light*, tr. Michael S. Mahoney, <http://princeton.edu/~hos/mike/texts/des-cartes/world/world.htm>, accessed January 10, 2008.