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SOMNIO ERGO SUM: DESCARTES' THREE DREAMS

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DESCARTES' THREE DREAMS

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What is remarkable about Descartes' dreams is not that he dreamed (for even philosophers presumably dream), but that he wrote down a description of his dreams and of his interpretation of them and then kept this record\* for more than thirty years, until his death. What is remarkable, in a word, is that this thinker who prided himself on his rationalism and who has come to represent, at least to philosophers, the very spirit of rationalism, should have taken his dreams so seriously.

Philosophers -- perhaps because the dreams conflict with their view of Descartes, perhaps because they conflict with their view of themselves and their discipline -- have tended to play down the dreams or to ignore them altogether. Thus, though Bernard Williams, the author of the latest volume on Descartes, refers to the dreams as "a significant event" he proceeds in a footnote to undercut the adjective by quoting Christian Huyghens, apparently with approval, to the effect that the dreams "shows a great weakness [in Descartes], and I think that it will seem much the same to Catholics who have freed themselves from bigotry." If we try to free ourselves from what seems to be a standing<sup>1</sup> philosophical prejudice against dreams and dreaming, what can Descartes' dreams tell us about his theories? -- that is the topic of this paper. But before I can tackle it, I must

deal, even if only in a very sketchy and inadequate way, with the question, what sorts of procedures exist or can be devised for verifying or falsifying interpretations of dreams?

## I

A dream is a cultural product.<sup>2</sup> So is a painting; so is a poem; so is a scientific theory. So far that matter is the ride-thumbing gesture made by a hitchhiker standing beside the road. In interpreting any cultural product whatsoever, we always run the dual risks of under-reading -- missing some of the meaning this product contains -- and of over-reading -- finding more in this product than it contains. How can we avoid these risks? How, when two or more readings of the same product conflict, can we ascertain which is the more nearly correct?

I shall begin with a (relatively) simple case. A recent article on Monet by Robert Herbert argues that "Monet was not simply the instinctual painter of legend. He was, on the contrary, a thinking man who was very much in charge of what he was doing."<sup>3</sup> Herbert is arguing -- in the language I have just used, that heretofore art critics have under-read Monet's paintings: they express more than the critics have read in them, because the background structures by means of which Monet was organizing the paint on his canvases contained elements that these critics are unaware of.

As supporting evidence for this thesis Herbert offers a new interpretation of the "Terrace at Sainte-Adresse." In this painting there is much activity at sea; many ships are to be seen -- some sailing

ships, some steamers. Herbert maintains that this "parade of shipping stands both for the transition between sail and steam and for the moment at which Sainte-Adresse was losing its old identity as a fishing village and turning into a resort for the moneyed classes of Le Harre."

Is Herbert's interpretation of this cultural product correct? Or is the older interpretation, that the ships are in the painting simply because they happened to be moving on the sea when Monet was standing at his easel? Our answer must turn on whether Monet made any independent references to the sociological changes which Herbert finds to be expressed in the "Terrace." The important word here is "independent": it won't do to cite other canvases by Monet in which sailing ships and steamers appear. For the ambiguity of the images in the "Terrace" (Do the painted images mean merely ships, which any fool can see? or do they in addition mean change-from-sail-to-steam?) is equally present in those other images in those other canvases; hence reference to them cannot resolve the dispute. What is needed therefore is reference in other media, references which one may hope are not involved in ambiguity -- at least, not in the same ambiguity -- as the painted images are. Accordingly, we ought to search Monet's letters, journals and notes for the year in question<sup>4</sup> for references to the change from sail to steam or from fishing village to resort. If we find such references Herbert's interpretation is probably correct; without such references we might feel justified in concluding that he is probably over-reading.

This case is (relatively) simple to settle because it is only the reading of the painted images on the canvas that is at issue. It is highly unlikely that there will be a dispute about the meaning of any verbal statements in the journals and letters. Hence such sentences confirm by the presence, or falsify by their absence, the disputed reading of the images on the canvas. And note that the reading of the images is disputed because they are ambiguous: we know part of what they mean (the images mean ships), but we do not know how much more they may mean (do they also mean change-from-sail-to-steam?).

But what if all the cultural products that can be offered as evidence for a given reading are themselves subject to a variety of interpretations? Unfortunately, this is more often than not the case. How, for instance, are we to decide whether a hitchhiker's gesture expresses optimism or pessimism, or whether it is neutral in this respect? The gesture is more like the painted image of the ships than it is like the verbal statement we sought in Monet's letters. For there is the same sort of ambiguity in the gesture as there is in the painted images: Does the gesture mean merely "I want a ride," as any fool can see? or does it also mean "Please stop; I am very discouraged?"

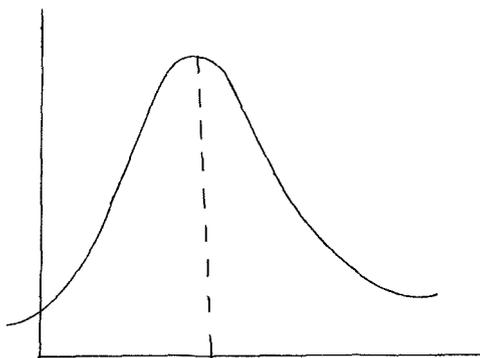
It might be thought that the way to decide between conflicting interpretations of the gesture would be to follow the procedure suggested for the Monet case: we look for a confirming verbal statement. Hence we may propose asking the hitchhiker, "Are you feeling optimistic or discouraged?" But this is unsatisfactory

as a general procedure -- the hiker may refuse to answer; he may lie; he may intend to tell the truth but be incapable of describing his state of mind accurately. Or he may be unavailable, run down by a passing car. In any event, though a verbal statement, if obtainable, may be sufficient in this relatively simple case, verbal statements may be just as ambiguous as nonverbal cultural objects, such as painted images or gestures.

In lieu, then, of settling this dispute about the hitchhiker's state of mind by appeal to his verbal report of what his state of mind is, we can make a film clip of his gesture and show it to a randomly selected group of observers, asking each of them to rate the gesture on an optimism/pessimism scale. If a statistically reliable consensus emerges from this procedure -- if there is a distinct clustering of ratings at one point on the scale -- we will say that the hitchhiker's gesture expressed optimism (or pessimism, or neutrality, as the case may be). That is, we define "what the gesture really expressed" in terms of the interpretations of a statistically reliable consensus of observers. This is something we can hope to discover, and this is all that we can hope to discover, about the "meaning" of the gesture. It is pointless, then, to think of the gesture as having a meaning that is different from what the consensus finds it to be.

And suppose that we want to find out, not whether the hitchhiker was optimistic or pessimistic on this particular occasion, but whether he is generally optimistic or pessimistic, i.e., whether he has an optimistic or pessimistic disposition, or outlook on life? To answer this question we must make film clips of the hitchhiker's

behavior on numerous occasions -- mornings, afternoons, evenings; childhood, youth, maturity; work and play. . . . If we show these film clips to independent sets of observers and record their ratings, we obtain a profile of the following kind, where the x-axis represents the optimism/pessimism scale and the y-axis represents the number of observations:



The central tendency of this distribution, whatever it proves to be, represents the hitchhiker's disposition. It is hardly necessary for me to say that it would be exceedingly tedious to carry out such an investigation. But as long as we know how such a study could be designed and how it could be executed, we know what we mean by attributing such-and-such a disposition to such-and-such an individual. And what is more, we know where to look for confirming or disconfirming evidence for any interpretation that has been proposed: we look for the expression of the background element in question in other media and on other occasions. The convergence of independent readings,

drawn from a variety of media and from a number of occasions, on someone particular reading will tend to support that reading, even if, initially, it may have seemed speculative or even implausible.

This general procedure seems applicable to the interpretation of all kinds of cultural products, including the interpretation of dreams. For, though the interpretation of dreams is more hazardous than the interpretation of other cultural products -- more exposed to the charges of over- and under-reading -- there is no difference in principle between the problem of interpreting some dream correctly and the problem of interpreting any other cultural product correctly. What distinguishes a dream is merely the fact that all of the dream's meaning is implicit, the expression of unintended elements in the dreamer's background structure, whereas, in the case of other cultural products, some -- perhaps most -- of what is expressed is explicit. Nondream cultural products, that is to say, are components in Wittgensteinian language games, intended to influence the course of those games. It follows that our interpretations of dreams lack the sort of built-in check that exists for our interpretations of other cultural products -- the check of observing whether our interpretations conform to the way those cultural products function in the language games of which they are components.

Accordingly, since our interpretation of dreams lacks this kind of check, it seems reasonable, when interpreting any dream, (1) to concentrate on those aspects of the dream that are relatively straightforward and "surface," and (2) rather than beginning with the dream itself, to start with nondream materials -- materials in which

one can hope that the submerged elements in the dreamer's background structure (those elements which it is our aim to uncover) have been expressed more openly and so less ambiguously than in the dream itself.

## II

I shall therefore begin my attempt to interpret Descartes' dreams, not with the dreams themselves, but with two of his best known philosophical writings, The Discourse on Method (1637) and the Meditations on First Philosophy (1641). The Discourse is particularly relevant to our inquiry because it "covers" the period in which the dreams occur, but in a very different medium from that of the Olympica and at a latter date. The Discourse was in fact a discreet, as it were sanitized, version of the whole long voyage of discovery in which the dreams were but one, if nonetheless a critical, episode.

Descartes, he tells us, had been educated "at one of the most celebrated schools in Europe," and he had not been judged by his instructors "inferior" to his fellow students. Yet, on completing his course of study, he found himself "embarrassed with so many doubts and errors" that the only result of his efforts to instruct himself had been the "increasing discovery" of his own ignorance. Having gone through all the sciences of his time -- languages, literature, rhetoric, theology, philosophy -- without learning anything of consequence, he had then turned to travel, to seeing courts and armies, hoping thereby to discover the answers he sought "in the great book of the world." But alas! he found in the opinions of "other men almost as much diversity as [he] had formerly seen in the opinions of philosophers."<sup>5</sup>

At this point in his life he chanced to be in Germany, returning from the coronation of the Emperor. Winter overtook him in a small village near Ulm "where, since I had no society to divert me, while fortunately I had also no cares or passions to trouble me, I remained the whole day shut alone in a stove-heated room, where I had the leisure to occupy myself with my own thoughts," and where he "resolved" to make himself "an object of study" and to employ "all the strength of my mind in choosing the road I should follow" (H&R, I, 87). "But like one who walks alone and in the twilight I resolved to go so slowly and to use so much circumspection in all things, that if my advance was but very small, at least I guarded myself well from falling." And he saw that what he needed before trying to advance even the first step was "the true Method" of testing all various conflicting opinions that he had encountered (H&R, I, 91).

He had studied logic, geometrical analysis and algebra in his youth, and though these sciences were so flawed, at least in the state in which he had been taught them, as to be useless, he nonetheless thought that some other procedure could be found which, "comprising the advantages of the three, is yet exempt from their faults." He therefore decided to "borrow all that is best in Geometrical Analysis and Algebra, and correct the errors of the one by the other." This was so successful that, "in two or three months time," he had arrived "at the solution of many questions which he had hitherto regard as most difficult" (H&R, I, 92-93). Indeed, his success was such that he saw no reason why this extremely simple, easily learned method need be confined to mathematics; it could be a

universal method applicable to all the sciences. "What pleased me most in this Method was that I was certain by its means of exercising my reason in all things. . . . Not having restricted this Method to any particular matter I promised myself to apply it as usefully to the difficulties of the other sciences as I had done to those of Algebra" (H&R, I, 94). He was then but "three and twenty," and he spent the next fifteen years or so in the successful application of his method to more and more fields of inquiry -- to optics, to meteors to the physical universe as a whole, and to metaphysics.<sup>6</sup>

I shall first outline the steps of the method and then illustrate its use by reference to the Meditations on First Philosophy. The method consists in two distinct stages: a stage of analysis and a stage of construction. In the stage of analysis we divide any problem with which we are confronted "into as many parts as possible." The stage of construction consists in arranging these parts "in due order, commencing with objects that [are] the most simple and easy to understand, in order to rise little by little, or by degree, to knowledge of the most complex" (H&R, I, 92). Each of these simple steps, including, of course, the first step of all by means of which one lays the foundations for the whole subsequent edifice, must be indubitable. That is, the proposition in which each step is formulated must contain "nothing more than what is presented to [the] mind so clearly and distinctly that [one] could have no occasion to doubt it." To say that each step must be indubitable is to say not merely that it is psychologically impossible to doubt it, but logically impossible: any challenge to it reinstates it; it is

self-evident. If each step in the journey, each stone in the edifice, each link in the chain<sup>7</sup> is indubitable, then the final step, stone, link is equally secure; though initially far from indubitable, it becomes indubitable by a systematic and rigorous application of the method. "Provided only that we abstain from receiving anything as true which is not so, and simply retain the order which is necessary in order to deduce the one conclusion from the other, there can be nothing so remote that we cannot reach it, nor so recondite that we cannot discover it" (H&R, I, 92).

Without pausing at this point for interpretation, I now pass on to the Meditations where we find the method in action: it is used there to demonstrate two important propositions in natural theology, first, that God exists and, second, that the human soul is immortal, i.e., that it "does not perish with the body." These are propositions, Descartes points out, that "it is quite enough for us faithful ones to accept by means of faith" but which, if we hope to "persuade infidels of any religion," we must prove "by means of the natural reason," for infidels lack faith and neither of the two propositions is logically self-evident. (H&R, I, 133).

So far, Descartes' position is completely unexceptional: he could be St. Thomas composing the Summa contra Gentiles. What is unusual is not the professed aim but the strategy Descartes adopted and the points at which the weight of his argument rests. These differences in strategy and emphasis suggest that more considerations than merely the expressed aim are operating here.

First, as regards the formal structure of the argument: the proof does not begin, as it would with Thomas or any medieval theologian, with a proof of the existence of God; it begins with a proof of Descartes' own existence. And the proof of his own existence is preceded by, is dependent upon, systematic doubt of the validity of every belief he has ever entertained or might conceivably entertain, including especially all beliefs derived from sense perception. For instance, can Descartes be sure of what his senses tell him, that he is sitting here before his fire, attired in his dressing gown? No; "I must remember that . . . I am in the habit of sleeping, and in my dreams representing to myself . . . things . . . even less probable than do those who are insane in their waking moments. How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality I was lying undressed in bed!" (H&R, I, 145-46).

But apart from such episodic sensory illusions (which we recognize as illusions as soon as we waken), how, Descartes asks, can he be sure that the whole physical world is not a gigantic, permanent hallucination? For all he knows (i.e., knows with absolute certainty) "some evil genius not less powerful and deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me." Perhaps "the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity" (H&R, I, 148). Is there anything about which such an infinitely powerful and malignant spirit could not deceive Descartes? Yes; there is one thing and only one thing:

Descartes cannot be deceived about his own existence. Let there be "some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, who ever employs his ingenuity in deceiving me. Then without doubt I exist also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think I am something. So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it" (H&R, I, 150).

Here then is the absolutely firm foundation stone on which the subsequent argument will be erected. "I think, therefore I am" exactly meets the requirements of the method: it is indubitable, because, each time that I try to doubt it, I reaffirm it. In order to doubt that I exist, I must exist. From this starting point Descartes proceeded, step by step, to prove, first, the existence of God and then the existence of the physical world. But these proofs seem almost anti-climatic; it is as if the "point" of the Meditations had really been to establish his own existence. And, as a matter of fact, those proofs have been much criticized by subsequent philosophers who, supposing that the whole function of the Meditations in Descartes' personal economy was to prove the propositions with which it professes to be concerned, conclude that Descartes was a badly programmed computer.

What else, beyond the more or less successful execution of the professed aims, is going on in the Meditations? What does the form of Descartes' argument -- the order of presentation, rather than

the conclusions presented -- suggest about the background structure operative in this argument?<sup>8</sup> I have already referred to the way Descartes turns the Thomist argument upside down, making the existence of God depend on the Descartes' own existence. Another transformation is Descartes complete rejection of the Aristotelian method that the Thomists had adopted in the domain of natural knowledge. Aristotle's method was probablistic and empirical -- it consisted in the collection and close inspection of cases, whether these be cases of state constitutions or of chicken embryos<sup>9</sup> in an attempt to discover, if possible, features common to all these cases, though it was never supposed by Aristotle that these common features would be exactly uniform in all cases, still less that exactly the same procedures could be automatically applied in all fields: experience counted more than adherence to a set of rules. And as for certainty, he held that it is the mark of an educated man not to demand more precision of any science than that science is capable of.<sup>10</sup>

Descartes' method, in contrast, aimed at absolute certainty, and about Descartes' need for certainty there is not likely to be much dispute. He is not the only philosopher to have experienced this need -- Dewey, forgetting himself and Nietzsche, thought the "quest" for certainty was a hallmark of philosophy -- but he is notable, I think, for the intensity of this passion.

What is my evidence for this assertion? To begin with, let us examine the metaphors of the Discourse. The metaphors a philosopher uses are a likely place to look for elements in his background structure that may be operative in all of his writings but difficult

to detect in (say) a passage for formal argument. In metaphors the control exercised by the argument is relaxed, and elements not normally visible become visible as they determine the choice of the images. Descartes's modal metaphor<sup>11</sup> is architectural: it is the image of an edifice which may either be precarious because the foundations are weak or firm because the foundations are solid. Thus, for instance, he writes that in the sciences of his day "one could have built nothing solid on foundations so far from firm" (H&R, I, 86); he discusses the desirability of "rebuilding the house which we inhabit" (1, 95) and of "pulling down the old house" (1, 99). But all the metaphors of the Discourse have the same expressive force: we are travelers lost in the woods who must search for the right path (1, 96); we must "reject the quicksand and mud in order to find rock or clay" (1, 99); he wants to "walk with confidence"; he has "chosen the road" he intends to follow (I, 87). And so on. But we do not need to depend on a reading of the metaphors to see what is going on in the Discourse; Descartes' tells us quite explicitly what his attitudes are.<sup>12</sup> He knows, he writes, that "we are all subject to delusion" (H&R, I, 83). He has always had "an excessive desire to distinguish the true from the false" (H&R, I, 87). Of all the subjects he studied in his youth he was most "delighted with Mathematics because of the certainty of its demonstrations and the evidence of its reasoning" (H&R, I, 85).

It is in the light of these assertions and metaphors of the Discourse that we can now turn back to the Meditations and try to interpret what is being expressed in the extraordinary opening moves of

the argument. There is the doubt that he is not awake but dreaming; there is the possibility that some "very powerful and very cunning spirit [has] plotted to deceive him about everything. . . ." If these are not mere intellectual exercises, they suggest a neurotic, possibly even psychotic, obsession with the dangers to which one is daily exposed -- of losing one's way, of missing one's footing in the twilight, of falling, of sinking into quicksand, of having the whole edifice in which one dwells and in which one foolishly feels secure suddenly come crashing down -- in a word, the possibility of accepting as true something that is false. Descartes, it would seem, longed to escape from the torments of doubt, in much the way that some saint yearns to be freed from the contamination of sin. And, just as the saint is more scrupulous than the ordinary sinner in searching out the secret sin that may be buried in his heart, so Descartes is more demanding than the ordinary man in exposing and eliminating every possibility, however small, of deception.

But though Descartes wanted to be reassured about all things -- about the existence of God and the existence of the physical world -- what chiefly concerned him, we may suspect, was his own existence. This explains why he inverted the normal progression of the argument, from God to man, and made it run from Descartes to God. Descartes' proof of his existence was not important as the logical starting point for an argument leading elsewhere (for any self-evident proposition could, logically, serve this purpose). It was important because it was his existence that was being proved: it was assurance on this point that he sought. It was not so much that he doubted his

momentary existence -- his existence at this or that moment in time. What he wanted reassurance on was his necessary continuous existence over time and beyond time. And what made his continuous existence doubtful was his view of the nature of time; time consists in a succession of encapsulated moments, each of which is so distinct from every other moment that there can be no reason, prima facie, why anything happening at any particular moment is connected in any way with anything happening at any other moment: "All the course of my life may be divided into an infinite number of parts, none of which is in any way dependent on the other; and thus from the fact that I was in existence a short time ago it does not follow that I must be in existence now" (H&R, I, 168). And he added, even more explicitly, in his Reply to the First Set of Objections: "I deem the various parts of time to be separable from each other, and hence it does not follow that, because I now exist, I shall in future do so" (H&R, II, 14).

In a word, and in the language of my world views studies, Descartes had an unusually strong discreteness bias, that is, a disposition to experience the world as being only a loose aggregation of distinct, encapsulated parts, rather than as being an organic unity. His philosophical theory, we may say, has the particular form it has because this form expresses the conflict between the cosmological orientation and the desire for continuous existence -- just as the hitchhiker's gesture has the particular shape it has because this shape expresses the discouragement he feels.

We can see the sort of background structure that I am attributing to Descartes in Antoine Roquetin, the protagonist of Sartre's Nausea. Think for instance of the passage in which Sartre describes Roquetin's attempt to finish his biography of the Marquis of Rollebon:

How can I, who have not the strength to hold to my own past, hope to save the past of someone else?

I picked up my pen and tried to get back to work. . . .

But as my eyes fell on the pad of white sheets, I was struck by its look and stayed, pen raised, studying this dazzling paper. . . .

The letters I had just inscribed on it were not even dry yet and already they belonged to the past. . . .

I had thought out this sentence, at first it had been a small part of myself. Now it was inscribed on the paper . . . I didn't recognize it any more. . . . It was there, in front of me; in vain for me to trace some sign of its origin. Anyone could have written it. But I . . . I wasn't sure that I wrote it. The letters glistened no longer, they were dry. That had disappeared too. . . .

I looked anxiously around me: the present, nothing but the present. Furniture light and solid, rooted in its present, a table, a bed, a closet with a mirror -- and me. The true nature of the present revealed itself: it was what exists, and all that was not present did not exist. The past did not

exist. Not at all. Not in things, not even in my thoughts. . . . Now I knew: things are entirely what they appear to be -- and behind them . . . there is nothing. . . . An immense sickness flooded over me suddenly and the pen fell from my hand. . . .<sup>13</sup>

This passage articulates (in highly skillful literary prose) elements in the background structure of the fictional Roquetin which a real-life Roquetin probably could not, and would not, have articulated so explicitly.<sup>14</sup> I have quoted it at length because my hypothesis is that some features of Descartes' philosophical writings -- e.g., the inversion of the standard argument, the focus on a method that yields indubitability, the architectural metaphors, the confession of his "excessive desire" for certainty -- are signs of a desperate insecurity below the surface similar to that openly expressed by the fictional Roquetin. Descartes, too, experienced nausea.

### III

Can we find any supporting evidence for this hypothesis in Descartes' record of his dreams? First note some striking parallels between the language in which the dreams were recorded and the much later language of the philosophical writings: in both there is a fear of falling; there is the experience of walking in twilight, in a world of shadows; there is the choice of a road to follow in life; there is the malus spiritus. Moreover, in both the dreams and the Discourse the discovery of the method is central, for the heading of the

Olympica and the marginal note<sup>15</sup> can hardly refer to anything but the new method so sedately described in the Discourse. The Discourse thus seems to be the recollection in tranquillity<sup>16</sup> of the intense excitement he experienced during the night of November 10/11, 1619.

Turning now from such parallels to the imagery of the dreams as Descartes reports them, the first thing that strikes us is Descartes' isolation: Phantoms pass before him as he walks in the street. Though later on the first dream becomes well populated, the people whom he encounters are strangers and they and he are silent. He passes the only individual whom he recognizes, missing a chance to speak with him. When he is addressed by another individual, he does not reply. In the third dream a few disjointed exchanges do occur, but they are abortive; nothing like a conversation develops. Throughout the dreams Descartes is virtually cut off from human contact; he is alone in a silent world.

The second notable feature of the dreams is the series of abrupt transitions. In the first dream he has to shift without warning from his right to his left side; he finds himself unexpectedly near a college and decides to visit it. In the second dream, the illumination is provided by many sparkling lights scattered about. In the third dream, a book appears from nowhere and then disappears as inexplicably. Another book suddenly appears; then the first reappears; when it does, some of its pages are missing; this volume is not the one he expected it to be; in turning over the pages he comes upon some engravings he had not expected.

The third feature is Descartes' desire to control his movements and his inability to do so. He is tossed about by a whirlwind; he drags himself along; when he decides to go into the college he is blown there, rather than being able to proceed by his own volition; he fails to find the acquaintance whom he has passed; he alone of the people in the college quadrangle is bent and staggering; he is frustrated when he proposes to read a poem -- he cannot find the place.

All of this, in one way or the other, is imagery of discontinuity, temporal and spatial, causal and interpersonal. In the dreams the normal pattern of interaction is constantly broken interrupted in unpredictable, disturbing ways. From such hazards in real life, we would expect Descartes to flee, just as in the dream he sought refuge in the college chapel. And this is just what we find spelled out in the Discourse: "I resolved to remove myself from all places where any acquaintances were possible, and to retire to a country . . . where I can live as solitary and retired as in deserts the most remote" (R&H, I, 100). So he settled in the Netherlands, where he lived in seclusion. In a letter, describing his life in Amsterdam, he wrote: "I take my walk every day amidst all this confusion of people with as much independence and as repose as you know in your own park. And I take no more notice of the men here than I would of the trees in your forest or the animals which pass." Such relations as he maintained with other people were largely conducted by correspondence, rather than by direct personal contact; it was interaction at a distance that he preferred.

This pattern of life once again suggests Roquetin, who spoke of the Self-Taught Man with contempt: "I don't want any communion of souls. I haven't sunk so low." In a world which is perceived as being fragmented into radically discontinuous states, among which interactions must remain unpredictable, Descartes adopted the strategy of Roquetin and, for that matter, the strategy of the Stoics, "those philosophers who in ancient times were able to free themselves from the empire of fortune" (R&H, I, 97). One teaches oneself to limit one's desires to the little that, given the nature of things, one can expect to achieve.

And solitude of course did not mean merely escape from the hazards of the unexpected. The repose Descartes sought was not merely social; it was, even more, intellectual, that is, escape from the corroding acid of doubt. These reflections throw some light, I think, on Descartes' own interpretation of the melon as the delights of solitude. At first sight that is a very puzzling reading: what do solitude and a melon have in common that would lead Descartes to read this part of his dream in that way? The answer, I believe, is that a melon is a self-enclosed, self-contained sphere, firmly encapsulated; if it were a self it would be exactly the sort of self that Descartes wanted to be, that he desperately doubted he was, and that, in the Meditations, it was his first concern to prove himself beyond all question to be.

#### IV

So far, the Olympica seems to confirm the reading that I proposed for the Discourse and the Meditations. I turn now to a more

speculative matter -- Descartes' own reading of the wind that buffeted him. Assuredly, because the wind frustrated his desire it was plausible to read it as evil, but not as the (or, at least, an) evil spirit. Moreover, Descartes' dream encounter with the wind, as he records it, cannot possibly account for the terror that he records himself as having experienced. Accordingly, it would seem that Descartes' interpretation of the wind was a case of under-reading. In putting forward my own interpretation of Descartes' interpretation of the dream I shall try to uncover elements present in the waking background structure (the one interpreting the dream) that caused it to miss important elements in the background structure that was generating the dream.

Before I can do this I must return briefly to that marvelous discovery, the method, and point out an aspect of it that I have not yet discusses. The method delighted Descartes, I have emphasized, because by eliminating doubt it brought him the certainty he sought. But he was equally delighted by its universality. Let us therefore look at the method once more and from this point of view. It linked discrete propositions in long chains in "due order." When some chain had been completed each separate proposition was bound at each end to another proposition. So far as this particular chain was concerned, order had been restored to -- rather, imposed on -- some otherwise fragmented segment of the world. But now, if the method was truly universal in its application, as Descartes had begun to see, if it applied not merely to algebra but to "the other sciences" as well (I, 94), if nothing was "too remote" or "too recondite" to be brought

within its scope, then in principle everything would be linked in this linear fashion to everything else. There would be a single, immensely long proposition in which every truth about the universe would be formulated; nothing would be left out, everything would have its proper place. Accordingly, the sciences -- which in Descartes' day had the appearance of "those ancient cities which, originally mere villages, become in the process of time large towns, [with] large buildings and small buildings indiscriminately placed together, thus rendering the streets crooked and irregular" -- would be brought into "the uniformity of a rational scheme" (H&R, I, 87-89).

Of course, this would not be the same as, not so satisfactory as, knowing everything all at once, in a single inclusive intuition. But it would be the next best thing, and it would assuredly be the best knowledge that is possible in a universe that was itself only an aggregation of discrete entities. No wonder, then, that Descartes was exalted when he realized the potentialities of his newly discovered method -- especially if, as we may suspect, the discovery of the method saved him from following a seductive alternative path.

Here one thinks of Goethe's Faust. Like the Faust of the first monologue, the Descartes of the Discourse had run through the curriculum in philosophy, medicine, law and even theology. And like Faust, at the end of his studies he found himself just as learned as he was before he began. Descartes had even tried and found wanting the life of action, the great book of the world, which the Faust of the first monologue had still before him. Like Faust again, what Descartes wanted above all was insight into the heart of things -- was

die Welt in immersten zusammenhält. Or, in Descartes' own language, in a letter to Beekman, written in the spring of that momentous year, 1619: "I want to penetrate to the very heart of the kingdom of knowledge." And like Faust, Descartes was convinced that there must be some key which, if he could but find it, would open the sealed door, enable him to escape from those "crooked and irregular" streets in which he felt enclosed, and give him an understanding of the whole all at once. tota simul.

Perhaps, like the Faust of the first monologue and frustrated by the failure of "one of the most celebrated Schools of Europe" to provide this key, he too had turned to magic. In Faust's case, as we know, the spirit that magic evoked proved to be a schreckliches Gesicht; in Descartes' case perhaps it was the malus spiritus that terrified him in his dream, whose memory years later still haunted the pages of the Meditations.

If Descartes had indeed dabbled in magic, it is not surprising that he felt an anxiety that is expressed in the images of the first dream. For there was not merely the matter of social disapprobation; there was also the possibility of contamination and even damnation, all very unnerving for a young man of Descartes' cautious disposition.<sup>17</sup> If he had dabbled in magic it is not surprising that he would have experienced terror in the course of his encounter with the evil spirit of the first dream; nor is it surprising that he felt a corresponding relief in the third dream when it appeared that, after all, he had not traveled too far down the magical road to retreat, and that the option of choosing the right

path -- the path of reason and science -- was still open to him.

Read in this way the "Quod vitae sectabor?" is more sinister than it appears to be either at the surface of the dream or in Descartes interpretation of it. In the surface meaning of the dream it is merely the old Pythagorean choice between the active and the contemplative life;<sup>18</sup> his interpretation is even more bland: the poem is "the good advice of a wise person or even Moral Theology." And the "Est et Non," other poem that appears in the dream, is interpreted in the same way, as repeating the Pythagorean choice. That, indeed, is what the title suggests, but the poem is about something else altogether. It is actually an attack on discursive reasoning as an arid, meaningless exercise. And that is exactly the criticism of reason that the magical world view, with its emphasis on totality, would launch.

Now what is interesting about all this is that the "Est et Non" was handed to Descartes by a man whom he did not know and that when Descartes sought to find it in the Corpus Poetarum he could not locate it. Instead, he proposed to read to the man the "more beautiful" (and, we may note, safer) "Quod vitae sectabor iter?" It thus looks as if the dream were suppressing the attack on reason that it contains in order to make the magical path look less inviting. If that is the case, perhaps the choice between the two paths had not yet been firmly made.

But of course no hint of any of this appears in the dream itself, still lest in Descartes' interpretation of it: In the dream it is only the easy choice between the life of action and the life of

contemplation that Descartes faces. In the interpretation there were indeed warnings (in the first two dreams) that his life had not been "as innocent in the eyes of God as it was to men," but there is no suggestion of what he must have thought the warning was a warning about. And in the interpretation he is already on the right path. The warning is really unnecessary, for the spirit of God had already "made him take his first steps toward the church." That is, armed with his new method, he is safely embarked on the path of science and reason.

If my interpretation of Descartes' interpretation of the dream is not an over-reading, all of this is superficial, though it presumably functions successfully to allay the anxieties of the dreamer. The only feature of Descartes' interpretation that seems to me at all "deep" was his reading of the encyclopedia as "nothing more than all the branches of learning brought together." That is exactly what he thought the universality of his marvelous new method would accomplish. Perhaps he did not allow himself to dream of the dangers of the magical path until the night following the day in which the discovery of the mirabilis scientiae fundamentum had held out to him the possibility of an alternative, safer path.

## FOOTNOTES

- \* John Benton has translated this report for this seminar. See pp. 32-41.
1. I have been wryly amused to note that in the first edition of A History of Western Philosophy I do not so much as mention the dreams, whilst in the second edition I allot them but ten lines.
  2. In earlier papers I have defined a "cultural product" as anything that results from process in which some medium (words, pigment on canvas, modit bodily movements) has been organized by a background structure (feelings, beliefs, attitudes). The product "expresses" the operative background structure; some of what is thus expressed may be intended; much, however, is always implicit and unintended.
  3. John Russell, "Shedding New Light on Monet," New York Times, 14 October 1979.
  4. These have recently become accessible in volume 3 of Daniel Wildenstein's Claude Monet: Vie et Oeuvre.
  5. Discourse on Method, translated by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, in The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Cambridge University Press, 1931), Vol. I, pp. 83-86. (Cited hereafter as H&R.)
  6. The Dioptrics and the Meterology were both published in 1637; the work on physics (Le Monde) had been finished as early as 1634 but was withheld from publication because of Descartes' alarm at the hostile ecclesiastical reaction to Galileo's Dialogues.

7. The metaphors are all Cartesian.
8. This corresponds to attending to the shape the ride-thumbing gesture takes on this particular occasion and asking what else it expresses, in addition to whatever it happens to tell us about the hiker's desire for a ride.
9. As a preliminary for his study of politics, Aristotle collected data on the constitutions of 158 Greek cities. For his work on the chicken embryo, see the Historia Animalium, VI, 3.
10. Nic. Ethics, I, 3.
11. By "modal metaphor" I mean simply the most frequently recurring metaphor.
12. It is not only that the hiker's gesture looks discouraged; he says that he feels discouraged.
13. Nausea, translated by L. Alexander (New Directions, 1959) pp. 130-31.
14. But possibly elements in the background structure of the real-life Sartre.
15. John Benton has pointed out (see note 1, appended to his translation) that "1620," which appears in the text of Baillet's Life (as Adam

and Tannery print it) does not appear in the inventory of 1650 (as Adam and Tannery print that document). We must therefore conclude either that the date has been inadvertently omitted from the inventory or inadvertently inserted in the text. I believe that the latter mistake is the more likely: it is intrinsically implausible to suppose that a whole year passed before Descartes "began to understand the basis" of his method, and in any event the Discourse suggests that he at once began to put it to work. Moreover, and finally, an exact coincidence in date is difficult to accept: that is the sort of thing one expects to find, and does find, in the Vita Nuova, but not in Descartes.

16. At the start of the Discourse Descartes enjoins his reader to regard "this Treatise as a history, or, if you prefer it, a fable" (I, 83). In other words, I shall not lie to you, but do not assume that I shall tell you the whole truth.
  
17. Since I developed this notion of Descartes as a tentative magician I have read Frances Yates' review of Symphorien Champier and the Reception of the Occultist Tradition in Renaissance France (NYRB, XXVI, 18, Nov. 22, 1979). Taken together, the review and the book show that an interest in the occult and the magical was widespread in sixteenth and early seventeenth century France and that this interest was accompanied by fear of heresy and also by fear of "the forces they might be invoking, anxiety to keep on the safe side in dealing with them." At the end of her review, and after

referring to Newton's concealment of his interest in alchemy, Yates asks, "Does this concealment of part of their outlook also affect other famous figures, for example, Descartes?"

18. This is the version of the choice which the Discourse also described him as having faced: he decided, he says, "to be a spectator rather than an actor in all the comedies the world displays" (H&R, I, 99).

DESCARTES'S OLYMPICA

The text which follows is a translation of a seventeenth-century French paraphrase and translation by Adrien Baillet of the Latin text in which Descartes recorded three dreams he had in the night of 10 November 1619, when he was twenty-three years old. Only a few fragments of the first-person Latin record survive, though there is enough to show that the French paraphrase was reasonably accurate.

He [Descartes] informs us that on 10 November 1619, after going to bed full of inspiration and completely absorbed by the thought of having that very day discovered the foundations of marvelous knowledge,<sup>1</sup> he had in a single night three consecutive dreams, which  
5 he believed could only have come from on high. After going to sleep, his imagination was struck by the appearance of some phantoms who appeared to him and who frightened him so much that, thinking he was walking through the streets, he was forced to turn over on his left side in order to get to the place where he wanted to go, because he  
10 felt a great weakness on his right side, on which he could not support himself. Ashamed of proceeding in this fashion, he made an effort to stand up, but he felt a wind-storm which, carrying him along in a sort of whirlwind, made him make three or four pirouettes on his left foot.

So far this did not frighten him. The difficulty he had in dragging  
15 himself along made him expect to fall at each step, until he saw along  
his route an open college and went into it to find shelter and a  
remedy for his problem. He tried to reach the college chapel, where  
he first thought he would go to pray, but realizing that he had  
passed a man of his acquaintance without greeting him, he wished to  
20 retrace his steps to address him properly and was violently hurled  
back by the wind which blew against the church. At the same time he  
saw in the middle of the college courtyard someone else, who in a  
respectful and polite fashion called him by name and said to him  
that if he was willing to go find Monsieur N., he had something to  
25 give him. M. Descartes fancied that it was a melon which had been  
imported from some foreign country. But what surprised him more was  
to see that the people who joined this man in gathering around to  
converse with him were erect and steady on their feet, while he,  
standing in the same place, remained bent and staggering, and that  
30 the wind, which he had thought several times would blow him over, had  
greatly diminished. With this fancy in mind he woke up, and at that  
moment he felt a sharp pain, which made him fear lest this be the  
working of some evil spirit which wished to captivate him. Immediately  
he turned on his right side, for he had gone to sleep and had the  
35 dream on his left side. He prayed to God to ask protection against  
the evil spirit of his dream and to be preserved from all the  
misfortunes which could threaten him as a damnation for his sins,  
which he realized were serious enough to draw anathema on his head,  
although until then he had led a life which men found irreproachable.

40 In this state he went to sleep again, after an interval of  
 nearly two hours of various thoughts on the blessings and evils of  
 this world. Immediately he had a new dream in which he believed he  
 heard a sharp and shattering noise, which he took for a clap of thunder.  
 The fright it gave him woke him directly, and after opening his eyes  
 45 he perceived many sparkling lights scattered about the room. The  
 same thing had often happened to him at other times and it was not  
 very unusual for him, when he awoke in the middle of the night, to  
 have his eyes clear enough to catch a glimpse of the objects  
 closest to him. On this particular occasion, however, he wished to  
 50 recur to explanations taken from Philosophy, and he drew from it  
 conclusions satisfactory to his mind, after having observed,  
 by alternately opening and then closing his eyes, the quality of the  
 sensible forms which appeared before him. Thus his fear was dispelled  
 and he fell asleep again with considerable composure.

55 A moment later he had a third dream, which unlike the first  
 two contained nothing frightening. In this last dream he found a  
 book on his table, without knowing who had put it there. He opened  
 it, and seeing that it was an encyclopedia [Dictionnaire] he was  
 delighted, hoping that it could be of great use to him. At the same  
 60 instant he felt under his hand another book, equally new to him,  
 without knowing where it had come from. He found that it was an  
 anthology of poems by different authors called the Corpus Poetarum.<sup>2</sup>  
 He was drawn by the desire to read something in it and on opening the  
 book, he fell on the verse

65 Quod vitae sectabor iter? etc. [What path of life shall I pursue?] <sup>3</sup>

At the same moment he became aware of a man he did not know,  
who handed him a piece of poetry, beginning with "Est & Non,"<sup>4</sup>  
and who praised it to him as an excellent composition. M. Descartes  
told him that he knew what it was, and that this poem was one of the  
70 Idylls of Ausonius contained in the big anthology of poetry on his  
table. He wanted to show it to the man and began to leaf through the  
book, whose order and arrangement he prided himself on knowing  
thoroughly. While he was looking for the place, the man asked him  
where he had gotten the book, and M. Descartes replied that he could  
75 not say how he had it, but that a moment before he had been handling  
another book, which had just disappeared, without knowing who had  
brought it to him nor who had removed it. He had not finished before  
he saw the book reappear at the other end of the table. But he found  
that the encyclopedia was no longer complete as it had appeared the  
80 first time. Meanwhile he went on to the poems of Ausonius, in  
the anthology of poetry through which he was leafing, and being unable  
to find the poem which begins "Est & Non," he said to the man that  
he knew another by the same poet which was even more beautiful than  
this one, and that it began "Quod vitae sectabor iter?" The man asked  
85 him to show it to him, and M. Descartes set about to look for it, when  
he came upon several copper-plate engravings [gravez en taille douce]  
of small portraits. This led him to say that the book was quite  
handsome, but that it was not the same edition as that with which he  
was familiar.<sup>5</sup> He was just at that point when the books and the man  
90 disappeared and faded away from his imagination, without, however,  
waking him. The remarkable thing to note here is that, while wondering

if what he had just seen was a dream or a vision, he not only decided in his sleep that it was a dream, but he had interpreted it before he awoke. He decided that the encyclopedia meant nothing other  
 95 than all the branches of learning brought together, and that the anthology of poems, called the Corpus poetarum, indicated in particular and in a most precise fashion Philosophy and Wisdom joined together. Indeed, he did not believe that one should be so very astonished to see that the poets, even those who write nothing but twaddle, were  
 100 full of sayings more serious, more sensible, and better expressed than those found in the writings of the philosophers. He attributed this marvel to the divinity of Inspiration and to the power of Imagination, which produce the seeds of wisdom (which are found in the spirit of all men, like sparks of fire in pieces of flint) with  
 105 much greater ease and even much greater brilliance than Reason can produce in philosophers.<sup>6</sup> M. Descartes continued to interpret his dream in his sleep, judging that the poem on the uncertainty of the type of life one should choose, which begins by Quod vitae sectabor iter?, indicated the good advice of a wise person, or even Moral  
 110 Theology.

At this moment, wondering if he was dreaming or thinking, he woke up unperturbed, and with his eyes open continued the interpretation of his dream along the same line. By the poets collected in the anthology he understood the Revelation and the  
 115 Inspiration by which he did not despair of seeing himself favored. By the poem Est & Non, which is the Yes and the No of Pythagoras [marginal note:  $\nu\alpha\acute{\iota} \chi\alpha\acute{\iota} \omicron\upsilon\grave{\iota}$ ], he understood Truth and Falsity in

human understanding and profane learning. Seeing that the application of all these things succeeded in suiting him so satisfactorily, he  
 120 was bold enough to conclude that the Spirit of Truth had chosen to use this dream to reveal the treasures of all the disciplines of learning to him. All that remained for him to explain were the little engraved portraits which he had found in the second book, and he no longer sought their explanation after an Italian painter paid him a  
 125 visit no later than the next day.<sup>7</sup>

This last dream, which contained nothing but the most pleasant and agreeable things, seemed to him to indicate the future, and it was limited to those things which should happen to him in the remainder of his life. But he took the two earlier dreams as warnings  
 130 concerning his past life, which might not have been as innocent in the eyes of God as it was to men. And he believed that this was the reason for the terror and fright which accompanied these two dreams. The melon which someone wanted to give him in the first dream, he said, signified the delights of solitude, though presented by purely  
 135 human appeals. The wind which blew him toward the college chapel, when his right side was hurting him, was nothing other than the evil Spirit which tried to throw him forcefully into a place where he had planned to go of his own free will. [A marginal note by Descartes read, "A malo Spiritu ad Templum propellebar" -- I was driven to the  
 140 Church by the Devil.]

This is why God did not permit him to go further and let him be carried, even to a holy place, by a Spirit which He had not sent, although he was convinced that it had been the Spirit of God which

had made him make his first steps toward this church. The fear which  
145 struck him in the second dream indicated, in his opinion, his  
synteresis, that is, the prick of conscience concerning the sins  
which he could have committed up to that point in his life. The  
thunder which he heard was the signal of the Spirit of Truth which  
descended on him to take possession of him.

150           This last imaginative interpretation surely smacks of  
Inspiration, and it would easily lead us to believe that M. Descartes  
might have been drinking the evening before he went to bed. It was,  
indeed, the eve of Martinmas, an evening when it was customary in the  
place where he was, as in France, to devote oneself to revelry.<sup>6</sup> But he  
155 assures us that he had passed the whole day and the evening in complete  
sobriety, and that it had been three months since he had last drunk  
wine. He adds that the Spirit which excited in him the inspiration  
which he had felt affecting his brain for several days had predicted  
these dreams before he retired to bed, and that his human spirit had  
160 no part in it.

## NOTES

Translated by John F. Benton from Oeuvres de Descartes, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris, 1897-1913), X, 179-186. Suggestions for improving the translation will be welcome. For literature see Lewis S. Feuer, "The Dreams of Descartes," American Imago 20 (1963), 3-26; cf. Freud, Complete Works 21, 203-204. Marie-Louise von Franz's Jungian paper of 1952 on the dream has been translated in Timeless Documents of the Soul (Evanston, Ill., 1968), pp. 55-147.

1. The Latin text of the opening sentence was transcribed: "X. Novembris 1619, cum plenus forem Enthousiasmo, et mirabilis scientiae fundamenta reperirem." A marginal note at the beginning of the work read: "XI. Novembris, coepi intelligere fundamentum inventi mirabilis" -- 11 November I began to understand the basis of the marvelous discovery. This is the form given in the inventory of Descartes' papers published in the Oeuvres de Descartes, X, 7. The sentence quoted in Baillet's Vie, as printed in Oeuvres de Descartes, X, 179, adds the year 1620. Is this an error or did Descartes take a year to begin his understanding?
  
2. A marginal note read: Divided in five books, printed at Lyon and Geneva, etc. This information helps to identify the work as the Corpus omnium veterum poetarum latinorum, edited by Pierre de Brosset, which appeared in two editions before 1619, the first at

- Lyon in 1603, the second at Geneva in 1611. The Corpus was "big," being composed of two volumes in quarto, the first of 1426 pages and the second of 888 pages (895 in the 1611 edition).
3. The poem, entitled Ex Graeco Pythagoricum, de ambiguitate eligendae vitae, Edyllium XV, was printed in vol. II of the Corpus, p. 655 (first edition), or p. 658 (second edition). It is printed with an English translation as Eclogue 2 in Ausonius, ed. H. G. E. White, Loeb Library (2 vols., London, 1919), 1, 162-169. On Ausonius' Eclogue and the crossroads of Pythagoras, see S. K. Heninger, Jr., Touches of Sweet Harmony (San Marino, CA, 1974), pp. 269-271.
  4. The poem Est et Non is the fourth Eclogue of Ausonius, ed. White, ibid., pp. 170-173. The poem vigorously attacks empty dialectic debate. According to Norman K. Smith, New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes (London, 1952), p. 35, the two poems of Ausonius appear on the same page of the 1603 edition of the Corpus poetarum, the edition which Descartes surely used at the Jesuit College of La Flèche, and on facing pages of the edition of 1611.
  5. Neither of the editions of the Corpus printed before 1619 contained copper-plate engravings.

6. This passage is very close to the Latin of the Cogitationes privatae, printed in Oeuvres, X, 217: Mirum videri possit, quare graves sententiae in scriptis poetarum, magis quam philosophorum. Ratio est quod poetae per entusiasmum et vim imaginationis scripsere: sunt in nobis semina scientiae, ut in silice, quae per rationem a philosophis educuntur per imaginationem a poetis excutiuntur magisque elucent.
7. This passage is the only indication that Descartes considered a detail of the dream predictive.
8. Descartes was with the imperial army at Neuberg on the Danube when he had this dream. Three months before (when he had last drunk wine) he attended the coronation of the emperor Ferdinand II at Francfort.