

THE MATTER OF MIND:  
REASON AND EXPERIENCE IN THE AGE  
OF DESCARTES

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CHRISTOPHER BRAIDER

# The Matter of Mind

Reason and Experience in the  
Age of Descartes

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*for the Boys, big and little*

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THE MATTER OF MIND

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# Introduction. Experience and the Matter of Mind: Dualism, Classicism, and the Myth of the Modern Subject in Seventeenth-Century France

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Reason as logic, or reason as motive? Or reason as a way of life?

– John Le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*

The following book sets out to topple a tenacious idol to which most accounts of the early modern West pay homage. It is by way of being an axiom of early modern literary and cultural studies that the crucial turning point in Western modernity was the advent of the so-called modern subject, the sovereign rational mind personified by René Descartes. Whether applauded as the spring of self-determining freedom Hans Blumenberg, Jonathan Israel, and Desmond Clarke celebrate or lamented as the fount of alienated enslavement Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, and Charles Taylor indict, the dualist severance of mind and body is said to have inaugurated a new era grounded in reason's critical and instrumental detachment both from physical nature and from the cultural allegiances inherited from the past.<sup>1</sup> Against this view, I argue that we cannot take the dualist self of modern rationality at what we have come to think of as face value. The Cartesian 'invention of the mind'<sup>2</sup> was not just the heroic break with prejudice, fantasy, and error that Blumenberg chronicles. But neither was it simply the hubristic mask for the new rationalist tyranny epitomized by Foucault's favourite icons of the modern technocratic state – the insane asylum, the panoptical prison, and the barracks-like public school. The rationalist ego was a perplexed *response* to the historical experience it set out to reduce to order. The self Cartesian reason laboured to emancipate and reform declared its inextricable entanglement in the modes of physical, psychological, and cultural embodiment it purported to overcome.

This was already obvious to many of Descartes's contemporaries, including the authors of the six sets of critical objections published in the first edition of the Cartesian *Meditations* themselves. The model human being (Jacob Burckhardt's civic individual, Norbert Elias's courtly *homo clausus*)<sup>3</sup> was indeed portrayed as being at least fitfully capable of rational self-control. Whence the mental discipline demanded not only by philosophical method but by the intricate ethical codes set forth in the conduct manuals for which Baldassare Castiglione set the standard or in the Machiavellian literature of political prudence that reached a summit in Baltasar Gracián.<sup>4</sup> Yet the mind that grants this power was seen less as an autonomous nature or substance than as a predicate of *person*, a term that, in denoting the concerted roles people played, underscored the contingent socio-physical bodies that anchored those roles in human space.<sup>5</sup> Nor should we overlook the constraining settings in which early modern persons played their parts. The Italian Renaissance city state and the absolutist court not only provided a passive backdrop for the self-fashioning individuals who inhabited them; they also called those individuals into existence as a function of the artificial modes of life city and court made possible and policed. Accordingly, where period readers like the objectors Thomas Hobbes and Pierre Gassendi did not merely ridicule Descartes's picture of mind as self-evidently false, they joined later writers like Blaise Pascal and Molière in exposing it to critical experiments designed to restore it to the natural order over which it arrogates dominion.<sup>6</sup>

Far from taking the Cartesian ego as a model to which they rigorously conformed, the monuments of early modern literary, artistic, and intellectual history undermine the traditional dualisms (mind and body, spirit and flesh, male and female, truth and error, reality and appearance) to which, for all his critical modernity, Descartes remained loyal. They thereby challenge the very notion of a pervasive rational subject imagined as escaping the multiple determinations of incarnate historical experience. Insofar as early modernity can be said to have had a single overarching theme, it is precisely that there is no mind but embodied, no spirit but in flesh, no male but feminized, no truth but in error, no reality beyond the endless play of metamorphic appearances. In declaring the dualist subject a standard universally endorsed, we cast the spell we congratulate ourselves for breaking.

To test this hypothesis I focus on the time and place to which Descartes most plausibly set his seal, the so-called classical age of seventeenth-century France. The *grand siècle* is seen as the pre-eminently Cartesian era



of classical dualism and the order of synoptic representation classicism enjoins. From this standpoint, the period's central task was a work of critical discrimination aimed at distinguishing the true nature of things, at clarifying their systematic relations, and at giving them proper names. Dualism lays out the metaphysical framework for this project by divorcing the rational mind from the encumbering body and the sources of irrational disorder the body both causes and symbolizes: our deceptive bodily senses; the 'humours' and passions for which the senses serve as vehicles and stimulants; and the multiple cultural predispositions with which sensuous experience is complicit – the customs, idioms, and identities we acquire as historical inhabitants of a socially prefabricated world. Scholars have kept the agonistic dimension of the classical enterprise in view by directing attention to the overdetermining political, ideological, and material interests classicism covertly advances. Dualism thus becomes a target for the paradoxes and anamorphic reversals that enable the Foucauldian archaeology of power, Bourdellian sociology, structuralist semiotics, or Lacanian psychoanalysis to upend the putatively common-sense evaluation of the cultural past by showing how, to a sophisticated eye, the truth is invariably the opposite of what conventional wisdom decrees.<sup>7</sup> However, the basis for such critiques remains the claim Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and the rest ironically share with conventional wisdom: the *grand siècle* marks the triumph of dualist representation; and what sustains that triumph is the thoroughgoing repression of the social, sexual, and historical modes of embodiment that disturb the rational 'clarity' and 'distinctness' to which the disembodied mind aspires.

One may nonetheless wonder if the Cartesian order of French classicism was ever as triumphant as period proponents and latter-day antagonists have a common stake in urging. Even leaving aside the extent of the period debt to Descartes, it is an open question how far the era was properly 'classical' at all. As Hélène Merlin-Kajman and Alain Génétiot have recently reminded us, the label used less to characterize than to taxidermize the decades from the foundation of the Académie Française in 1635 to the death of Jean Racine in 1699 is a late coinage designed to impose retrospective coherence on developments contemporaries experienced in often conflicted as well as conflicting ways.<sup>8</sup>

The label does afford a certain purchase in that the era's consistent (if still not uniform) goal was to rescue some sort of working communal order from the chaos of historical events and the clashing passions and prejudices that, in clouding human judgments, threatened peaceful

coexistence. A feature of this pursuit was a thirst for consensus and the orthopsychic discipline consensus was felt to require. The Cartesian principle of method is indeed exemplary from this standpoint in that it supposed not merely the need for *some* kind of method but the existence of a single *right* one – what the title of Descartes's book on the matter calls not just 'method' but '*the* method' alone capable of hunting down '*the* truth.'<sup>9</sup> For every question it was taken for granted that there had to be one answer, that the key to this answer was to be sought in the nature of the problems or phenomena at issue, and that, to find that key, it sufficed to exercise the faculty of right reason with which human beings were naturally endowed for this very purpose. The ideal of natural and rational self-government invoked against this background was, moreover, regularly associated with the authoritative example of the 'classical' past of pagan Greece and Rome. It is largely in recognition of the special emphasis the French gave to putatively 'ancient' standards of nature and reason conceived as coordinated principles of social and political as well as mental, emotional, and artistic order that I will, in what follows, conform to traditional usage in this regard. Despite the many deep and abiding differences that divided them, seventeenth-century poets, critics, philosophers, and divines succeeded in debating everything from the nature of reality or the mandates of the cult to the moral springs of beauty and the art of civilized conversation without reverting to the savage violence epitomized by the wars of religion Henri IV had brought to an end. That they did so pays tribute to a shared commitment to the social virtues of urbanity, rationality, and balance for which classicism is as good a name as any.

The fact remains that, as witnessed by the debate conducted with undiminished heat ever since Jean Rousset's hypothesis of a French baroque first challenged the supposed supremacy of the classical norm, even figures as incontestably enlisted in the classical cause as self-styled *anciens* like Racine, Nicolas Boileau, or Jean de La Bruyère were liable to deviate from the norm in spectacular ways.<sup>10</sup> Nor is it just that, for all their cultivation of the arts of rational self-government, the seventeenth-century French were as often (if agonistically) drawn to the same disordering affects and ambitions as their more self-evidently baroque contemporaries in Spain, Italy, Germany, or Britain. The classical itself was subject to a wide range of interpretations capable of leading down any number of rival paths. As far back as 1950, E.B.O. Borgerhoff wrote of the 'freedom' French classical writers enjoyed in open opposition to the dogmatism announced in the verdict handed down by the

Académie Française on the controversy surrounding Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid*. The same era that gave us authoritative classical unities and rules also gave us the *je ne sais quoi* of an increasingly 'liberal' taste whose sources lay in what figures as diverse as René Rapin, Dominique Bouhours, Boileau, and La Bruyère called the 'secrets' and 'hidden beauties' of unmediated aesthetic feeling and the unregulated experiences feeling inspires.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, John Lyons explores the 'kingdom of disorder' both represented in and engendered by not only classical tragedy, whose fables of pity and fear depend on the breakdown of the moral and political order classicism champions, but the emergence of the institution of dramatic criticism, whose efforts to formulate canons of critical judgment wound up parading the quarrelsome anarchy of private aesthetic response.<sup>12</sup> To this we may add the recent renewal of interest in the sublime: a phenomenon, exhibited above all by Corneille before being theorized by Boileau, whose demonstration of poets' power to produce feelings of quasi-theological awe by breaking the rules of art has fundamentally changed scholarly assessments of the moral, political, and aesthetic bearing of seventeenth-century literature.<sup>13</sup> The convenience and even justice of the classical label should not, then, blind us to the degree to which the harmonious rational order the term implies was a reflex of the disorders classicism has been understood to school.

Such is, besides, the testimony of the material interests to which modern-day critics of classical culture in a specifically Cartesian register draw attention. More than a settled system, classical dualism was a strategic ideal whose key doctrines raised difficulties that consistently defied it. Whatever classical theory might decree, classical practice and the material conditions that beset it engendered problems theory never managed to solve. It is not just that classicism was resisted in its own day by the younger Pierre Corneille or by the libertine Cyrano de Bergerac, writers whose stridently baroque portrayal of human motives, potentialities, and desires deliberately subvert the rational pieties of the cultural establishment. The disreputable facts classical culture is alleged to have suppressed – the 'scandal of the talking body' and the verbal and erotic bases of identity (Shoshana Felman); the idolatrous psycho-political fantasies of Œdipal symbolism (Mitchell Greenberg); the 'four-letter' truths of human sexuality and the scandal-mongering press that exploited them for profit (Joan DeJean)<sup>14</sup> – are not the invasive opposites of classical mind. They are the very matters of which classical minds were made.

This radical reassessment of the classical canon cashes out in a series of interdisciplinary readings keyed to the material conditions that, in determining the thingly contours of human experience, also determined the surprising variety of forms in which French poets, artists, and philosophers both pictured mind and exposed it to critical experiment. In chapter 1, 'Front Matter: Placing Descartes's *Meditations*,' rather than read the master text of rationalist thought as the anthology of dualist pronouncements we tend to see in it today, I present it as a telltale product of the socio-economic circumstances surrounding its publication. Thanks to prior circulation in manuscript and uncorrected proofs overseen by the eclectic impresario Marin Mersenne, the text that reached the public first in Latin (1641) and then French (1647) was accompanied by objections and responses in which Descartes duels with a wide range of critics – the Dutch Thomist Caterus, the materialists Hobbes and Gassendi, and the Jansenist Antoine Arnauld as well as Mersenne himself. The effect of these interventions was to turn the metaphysical monologue on which Descartes's reputation rests into a dramatic dialogue in which he defends himself against attacks levelled not only at his arguments but at his character as a specific, socially located individual. The printed text is moreover preceded by a growing body of front matter (a dedication, a preface, a bookseller's notice to the reader) that, in trying to frame the book's reception while assuring the widest possible sales, shows how far it remained in thrall to the alienating processes of commodification, translation, and critical uptake. The result confirms the embodiment Cartesian metaphysics set out to refute. Descartes haughtily insisted that he was no *faiseur de livres*, a venal hack writing books for prideful publicity's sake; his only motive in publishing was the disinterested love of truth. This noble aim was nonetheless trumped by the worldly forces shaping both the actual book and a public persona far more protean and vulnerable than the main body's abstract first-person hero.

Chapter 2, 'A State of Mind: Embodying the Sovereign in Poussin's *The Judgment of Solomon*,' analyses a complex royal icon intended to grant the disembodied ideal of absolutist monarchy a memorable and persuasive visual expression. In choosing the Bible's Solomon as a type for the reigning monarch, the most Cartesian of artists identifies the source of royal sovereignty with the self-composing mind of which Solomon's court turns out to be an emblem. However, the resulting image questions both the royal theory it endorses and the Cartesian picture of sovereign reason it incorporates to that end. For the first beneficiary of

the move by which the picture subordinates political authority to an intellectual authority that as such transcends the historical person of the king is Nicolas Poussin himself, as author of the compositional invention on which the painting turns. Yet the acknowledgment of Poussin's sovereignty as an artist is itself subject to an act of judgment on the beholder's part: as witnessed by the extraordinary exegetical lengths to which Poussin's acolyte Charles Le Brun had to go to explain how his pictures work, it is only when interpreted (and so constructed) by well-informed spectators that the painting achieves the form and meaning to which it aspires. The picture's ultimate theme, consciously or not, is thus the ungovernable play of the emphatically plural minds on which painting, meaning, artist, and sovereign all depend. In developing this theme, the painting materializes the solipsistic potential inherent to Descartes's picture of vision as an exclusively mental rather than a sensory act, the work of an autonomous intellect that, in detaching itself from the world of material bodies it inhabits, gives that world the form of a rational spectacle. In inviting us to look *at* a mind, Poussin invites us to look *into* one: Solomon's first of all, and then his own; but also and most fundamentally *ours* since it is finally there, in the 'sensorium' housed within the human skull, that we forge the image we receive and the understanding needed to grasp its import.

In chapter 3, 'The Witch from Colchis: Corneille's *Médée*, Chimène's *Le Cid*, and the Invention of Classical Genius,' the experience of painting gives way to that of the 'sister' art of theatre. The chapter opens by reminding us of another crucial expression of the notion of sovereignty in seventeenth-century France, that associated with the figure of the great classical Author. One of the signal achievements of the French classical age, making it indeed the *grand siècle* in whose giant shadow later eras of French literature stand, is the creation of the modern French paradigm of transcendent literary greatness. As attested by the monumental *Théâtre* of 1660, committing his collected dramatic works to posterity along with three magisterial treatises on dramatic art and introductory *examens* providing critical commentary on each play, the first unmistakable exponent and beneficiary of the new mode of greatness is the original *grand classique*, Corneille. It is important, however, to grasping Corneille's unprecedented stature and accomplishment that they are not the product of the autonomous act of will and private genius that Corneille liked to imagine and that his subsequent canonical status seems to ratify. They are rather, in the first instance, a correlate of the *form* he practised: Aristotelian mimesis and the illusion of

internal logical necessity prescribed by the Aristotelian norm of self-determining action. Corneille's success in convincing both himself and others of his transcendent genius is in part an artefact of dramatic representation: the fact that, though everywhere present as the offstage arranger whose panoptical mind frames characters' words and actions from the start, the poet is also characterized by his systematic *absence* from the scene as the author of words and actions that appear to be the unrehearsed expression of the characters' immediate responses to the events in which they find themselves embroiled. Further, despite his subsequent identification as the very embodiment of the classical culture he helped inaugurate, Corneille's uniqueness as a dramatic poet is also linked to his status as the antagonist of the prevailing cultural order. Indeed, throughout his career, and for a start in the infanticidal *Médée* of his very first tragedy, Corneille foregrounds an unbroken series of operatically powerful women in whom he portrays not only deviants from contemporary taste and morals but creative embodiments of his own poetic art. Far from confirming the fundamentally anti-feminine thrust of an ostensibly dualist notion of authorship, Corneille identifies his gifts with what his more high-minded contemporaries regarded as the very symbol of embodiment as such: the passionate women whose irregular subjectivities threatened the normative rational ego of Cartesian metaphysics.

Chapter 4, 'Seeing Is Believing: Image and *Imaginaire* in Molière's *Sganarelle*,' moves discussion from the realm of high tragedy epitomized by the self-consciously great Corneille to the largely inadvertent mode of greatness achieved in Moliéresque comedy. The initial focus is the miniature portrait the romantic heroine of an early Molière farce preserves in token of her absent love. Fainting under the strain of her father's efforts to marry her to another man, the heroine loses the portrait, which falls into the hands of Sganarelle's wife. This change of hands occasions jealous suspicions on Sganarelle's part, whose conscious basis ironically lies in the classical theory of images. According to the *Logique de Port-Royal*, a primer designed to clear up philosophical debates by subjecting them to expressly Cartesian modes of logical analysis, portraits (like words) derive their meaning from their 'originals' in that (like words and the 'ideas' or mental images words excite) their essential function is to *stand* for those originals in the mode of visual representation. To possess a portrait thus declares some sort of attachment to the person it portrays. But as Molière's audience readily understands, the true ground of Sganarelle's suspicions is jealousy itself: theory

merely ratifies the selfish conclusion to which emotion blindly leaps. The comic fallout of Sganarelle's misreading of his wife's intentions thereby demonstrates that what people see in images (now in the form of portraits, now in that of the ideas words excite) is less what the technologies of visual representation show them than what overmastering passion leads them to *believe*. In exposing the portrait to the material logic of comic theatre, the miniature's circulation overturns the system of classical semiotics Descartes's disciples enlist to dispel the idolatrous errors Molière deploys to farcical effect.

Molière's materialist critique of classical semiotics sets the stage for the critique of mind itself at work in Pascalian apologetics. In chapter 5, 'The Ghost in the Machine: Reason, Faith, and Experience in Pascalian Apologetics,' the Jansenist apologist applies Descartes's mathematized mechanics to the mind the cogito presents as mechanism's protagonist. In the second Provincial Letter, Pascal propounds the parable of an emblematic traveller prevented from returning to his celestial home by a mortal wound (original sin) inflicted by robbers on the road. The parable refutes the neo-Pelagian theory of will sustaining the Jesuit doctrine of grace by showing how the traveller's happy return is only granted once he acknowledges his powerlessness and appeals for divine mercy. The problem is that, to persuade us, Pascal hints that God's mercy hinges on the freely formulated *choice* the traveller is led to make by what the parable terms the 'experiment' of his helplessness. But this is the view the parable challenges since it implies an autonomy Pascal's Augustinian doctrine of will precludes.

The point, however, is not simply that Pascal's rhetoric refutes his theology. Seconded by comparable arguments mustered in the Wager section of the fragmentary 'discours de la machine' in the *Pensées*, the parable portrays mind itself as a machine. In one sense, Pascal's model here is *la pascaline*, the mechanical computer he invented to ease the complex mathematical labours incident to his father's duties as a tax gatherer – a task not unlike the one the Wager's interlocutor is called on to undertake in calculating the odds of betting for or against God. Yet there is this crucial difference: the mental machine the interlocutor deploys is inhabited by a *second* machine in the form of *amour-propre*, the idolatrous love of self that characterizes fallen human nature. In presenting his calculator to the world, Pascal explains that it manages to perform what we take to be the distinctively mental work of mathematical calculation by eliminating the sources of error in human attention, which flags, and in human intention, which wants things as a reflex of the interests

that actuate it. The goal indeed is to eliminate mind itself conceived as a limited capacity for concentrated thought overrun by a limitless power of distracting imagination and desire. But this is just how Pascal's apologetics work. In the dialogue that frames our parable, if the speaker's interlocutors are convinced it is because, unlike other potential auditors (a Jesuit, say, or a libertine), they already believe what the parable only seems to teach. Similarly, as Bernard Williams shows, the logical basis for belief the Wager supplies stems not only from sacramentalist faith in the powers of conversion inherent to the psycho-physical routines of liturgical observance; it arises above all from an antecedent fear of eternal hell-fire.<sup>15</sup> The Wager convinces only insofar as craven 'attrition' does the work for it, miming the acts of true penitent 'contrition' the sacrament of confession requires. We never in fact *choose* belief; God *grants* it through an act of unconditioned grace. Our only hope accordingly lies in the willing suspension of our rational faculties, allowing the paradoxes that besiege the mind to shut it down on faith's behalf.

Pascal's Turing-like antimentalism raises a final curtain on the literally apocalyptic experience of language explored in chapter 6, '*Des mots sans fin*: The End(s) of History in Boileau's Satire XII, "Sur l'Équivoque."' Composed in 1705–7, when the classical culture of which Boileau was the pre-eminent spokesman yielded to the 'modern' age of his literary archenemy Bernard le Bovier, sieur de Fontenelle, 'Sur l'Équivoque' is the twelfth and last of Boileau's short verse satires. One reason for writing it, recommended by Boileau's engagement on the classical side of the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns, is just to make twelve, the number of completion and closure consecrated by the twelve books of Virgil's *Aeneid*. But a deeper reason is to bring an end to history itself, blocking the advance of Fontenellian modernity once and for all. The problem is that history *has* no end; nor does Boileau succeed in making an end even within the confines of his own poem. Driven by a nameless 'demon' whose moral character (Socratic daimon, messenger of truth, or minion of Satan, father of lies?) is itself strikingly equivocal, what begins as an attack on the 'insipid' figure of off-colour punning in vogue in Boileau's youth turns into a history of humanity from the primal Fall to the present. And what makes history the irresistible progress of error and change Boileau tries to stop is *l'équivoque* conceived not merely as a figure of speech but as sectarian acts of interpretive equivocation (those Boileau identifies with the Arian heresy, the Reformation, Jesuit casuists) licensed by the irredeemably equivocal nature of language as such.



All of which is symbolized in the word *équivoque* itself, a term whose equivocal status surfaces in the difficulty period lexicographers had in determining its 'proper' gender. Satire XII begins with a conceit in which *l'équivoque* is apostrophized as the 'bizarre hermaphrodite' of the French language, thereby linking problems of gender in every sense to the shape-shifting ambiguities to which equivocation subjects the classical ideal of clear and distinct expression. If, as Boileau wittily yet fatefully notes in the poem's opening lines, the question of the word's gender proves so difficult, it is because his contemporaries had a hard time telling the difference between *l'équivoque* construed as a deliberate figure of speech and *l'équivoque* conceived as pure semantic accident, a condition over which we exert no real control. But can we in fact tell the difference between what is a figure of speech and what is not? The satire's own figural reworking of human history as a drama whose ultimate author (or 'subject') is the Devil himself demonstrates that we cannot. In the process, Boileau's final satire not only defeats the ends it sets itself but enacts the inevitable catastrophe of the classical culture it defends.

As this rapid survey of the issues engaged in the following book suggests, the dualist picture of mind exerted a far weaker hold on the contemporary imagination than we are accustomed to suppose. The remarkable thing is indeed the variety of lights to which the mind was exposed and the degree to which those lights were coloured by acute awareness of the complex forms of embodiment that define historical persons. In saying this I do not mean that dualism is a myth or that it had no influence on the ways in which French classical culture conceived human identities. The point, simply, is that it exercised nothing like the hegemony Foucault, for one, would lead us to believe. While dualism is no myth, a uniform subscription to the Cartesian picture of self we call the 'modern subject' is; nor can we properly grasp the character of seventeenth-century French culture until we acknowledge this fact. The question then is why this has proved so hard to see. What features both of the period itself and of conventional scholarly wisdom encourage us to assign the Cartesian model a centrality it did not in fact possess?

A first reason for overrating Descartes's contribution is simply the degree to which he got things right. As noted earlier, dualism's philosophical as well as historical significance consists in its status as a strategic or, in the Kantian phrase, regulative ideal rather than as a positive doctrine, something aimed at and hoped for whether literally believed in or not. The doctrine is to this extent the echo of a deed, the change in position and attitude required to think not only about the world we inhabit and

what it takes to grasp the forces that shape it but also, as a means to that end, about how thought itself operates and the ways in which we might enhance its grip on reality. What is at stake is the mental distance thinking demands as a condition of possibility: the capacity to suspend both our normal engagement in the world and the beliefs we spontaneously frame about it in order to subject them to critical scrutiny.<sup>16</sup>

This purely functional detachment from our own perceptions and beliefs, and thus from the natural objects and forces that engender them, explains why, in the seventeenth century itself, even an unstinting monist like Spinoza concedes an innate power of reflection thanks to which our ideas are never wholly reducible to the material conditions they 'express' as an effect expresses its cause or a 'mode' the substance of which it is the deterministic 'affection.'<sup>17</sup> But it also highlights a paradox underlying the oppositional tradition in which ritual deconstruction of the Cartesian order of thought figures so prominently. The gesture Foucault, Lacan, or the Roland Barthes of *Sur Racine* perform in subjecting conventional wisdom (the infamous 'doxa') to systematic critique is by its very nature dualistic even (if not especially) when it targets dualism itself. To think *about* dualism and, a fortiori, to think about the role dualist doctrine plays in conditioning both how and what we think is to strike a dualist posture as a natural reflex of critical thought. The phenomenologist Drew Leder makes the point in describing classical dualism less as an error than as a 'motivated misreading.'<sup>18</sup> Descartes's mistake lies not so much in his analysis of what actually happens when we think as in yielding to the temptation to hypostasize, turning a natural function into a fixed substance. Something like what Descartes describes as mind does in fact exist as a matter of direct experience. It is just that, as Hobbes objected from the first, mind is a property of the *thing* that thinks rather than a separate *kind* of thing in its own right, the *res cogitans* whose nature is somehow coterminous with abstract thought itself (2:600–2; AT 7:171–3). Or again, in Spinoza's terms, mind is 'an idea *of* the body' in a simultaneously accusative and genitive sense: an idea we form about the body that belongs to, and thus expresses, the body itself; an idea, then, the body forms of its own identity and the internal and external forces that determine its shifting states and modes.<sup>19</sup> If it proves so hard to rid ourselves of the Cartesian model of mind, it is in part because it contains just enough truth to make outright dismissal impossible.

But there are other, less reputable factors at work. First and foremost among these is the traditional periodization of French culture, an

entrenched historical scheme even such otherwise sceptical commentators as Foucault, Lacan, or Barthes embrace without question. We have to deal here with a case of the mode of 'mythic' discourse Barthes himself describes as 'tautology,' the assertion that something is so *because it is so*.<sup>20</sup> As the story is habitually told, the French seventeenth century simply *is* the 'classical age,' defined as such by the self-conscious purity of its language, by the rule-governed rigour of the poetic procedures laid down in Boileau's theory of genres or in the notorious neo-Aristotelian doctrine of the unities, and by a pervasive faith in reason's unqualified power of objective discernment whose canonical authority just *is* Descartes.

As noted earlier, the most enterprising students of the period are perfectly aware of everything in the historical record that refuses to fit. Foucault chronicles the deep-seated fear of anarchic unreason that motivated the 'grand renfermement,' the wave of punitive incarcerations by which the new rationalist state set out to eliminate those deviant social elements (mad people, spendthrifts, beggars, prostitutes, vagrants) that threatened the social order – an order, however, that circularly constituted their deviancy as part of its own self-justification.<sup>21</sup> In a similar spirit, Lacan analyses the chiasmic opposition between the 'perspective subject' he takes to be the normative protagonist of classical experience and the indigestible 'other' whose resistant 'gaze' rises up to meet it as the latent content of the visible world to which the subject gives representational form. The 'other' thereby lends its weight to the 'alienating armor of identity,' the conscious persona the subject dons in order to defend himself against creeping recognition of his own fundamentally imaginary character.<sup>22</sup> Barthes, meanwhile, challenges the hagiographic myth of Racine's unprecedented insight into the ostensibly universal laws of the human heart by probing the malevolent idiosyncrasy of *homo racinianus*, the historically because ethnographically unique amalgam of erotic violence and incurable paranoia that characterized the specifically Racinian contribution to classical psychology.<sup>23</sup>

And then there is what we have schooled ourselves to think of as the paradoxical persistence of the entity Francis Barker melodramatically terms 'the tremulous private body' itself, the marginalized appendage whose systematic 'subjection' has become an article of faith even though its disordering symptoms are acknowledged to be everywhere – in the gender trouble indexed by literary women like Madeleine de Scudéry, cross-dressers like the abbé de Choisy, or pornographic novels like *L'École des filles*; in the machinery of disease, desire, and death besetting

classical medicine, morality, and etiquette alike; in the demoralizing dissolution to which early modern anatomical science consigns our physical frames; or in the unnerving spectacle of the labouring masses wandering the backstreets of major cities or the lost byways of the countryside.<sup>24</sup> The problem is that, far from interpreting such things as grounds for challenging the traditional picture of the classical era, we tend to read them back into it as evidence of an all-powerful period ‘unconscious.’ Rather than reveal the inadequacy of the traditional model, the accumulated counter-evidence reinstates it in the inverted mode of Freudian neurosis, as the ‘repressed’ whose uncanny ‘return’ confirms the authority of the very repressions it calls in doubt.

The tenacity of the Cartesian model also owes much of its plausibility to still another, related factor, a pervasive fascination with Ludovican absolutism.<sup>25</sup> Ever since the publication of Voltaire’s history of the period in 1751, our conception of the French seventeenth century has been dominated by a seemingly incorrigible teleological illusion: the tendency, shared by intellectual left and right alike, to interpret the era as a whole in the retrospective light of its presumed apogee in the absolutist culture dictated at the court of Louis XIV. As a defence against a return of the horrors of the civil wars of the preceding century and the political chaos attending the Frondes of 1648–52, Louis declared the at once monarchic and monocular paradigm of the state Poussin propounds as both the formal and the ethical idea on which his *Judgment of Solomon* is based. There was to be henceforth one king, one faith, and one nation symbolized by the body of the sovereign and by the royal exercise of rational justice that preserved the integrity of the monarch’s public character by suppressing the empirical person whose private interests would otherwise have threatened the dissolution of king and kingdom alike.<sup>26</sup> The result was not only the absolutist form of the state (‘L’État, c’est moi’) but the model of *grandeur* that state monolithically embodied: the *grandeur* indeed of *Louis le grand* himself, the heroic figure whose ceaseless praise Boileau’s *Art poétique* identifies as the true theme of national verse.<sup>27</sup> Louis thus became a mirror for the *grands classiques*, the canonically great national poets who, in gracing Louis’s reign, determined the pattern of both authorial greatness and the inscrutable (yet still somehow unfailingly rational) genius that animated it.

The trouble with this picture is, once again, a failure to deal with the actual evidence. The point here is not merely that the moment of high classicism associated with Louis’s personal reign was remarkably short-lived, extending little further than from the Sun King’s seizure of

power in 1661 to the period of moral and political as well as intellectual stagnation that set in with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. The point is also that high classicism was the conscious product of the socio-cultural forces it sought to contain, invisible as it seemed to have made them during the quarter century of its heyday. In its very triumph it knew itself to be grounded on, and therefore undermined by, the unruly diversity, the acts of resistance and defiance, protest and delay, epitomized in the political sphere by the Frondes and, in the aesthetic, by a century-long series of what DeJean has styled 'culture wars' of which her own example, the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns touched off by Charles Perrault's *Siècle de Louis le Grand* in 1687, was neither the loudest nor the last.<sup>28</sup>

To be sure, dating from the publication of Jean Chapelain's *Sentiments de L'Académie Française* in 1637, deciding the controversy surrounding Corneille's conspicuously neo-feudal and so signally anti-monarchic *Le Cid* in favour of his right-minded rival, Georges de Scudéry, the state exerted a degree of censorship and control unparalleled in French history. It is equally true that, despite the recent revival of interest in the *libertins* or Christian Jouhaud's remarkable resurrection of the *mazarinades* of the Fronde era, the French seventeenth century produced nothing like the outpouring of publicly radical speech characterizing the revolutionary decades between the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642 and the Stuart Restoration of 1660.<sup>29</sup> The French seventeenth century nonetheless remained an era of ceaseless cultural combat, pitting Cartesians against Thomists, *précieux* against classicists, *esprits forts* against *honnêtes gens*, *bons français* against *politiques*, clerics against dramatists, Jansenists against Jesuits, *anciens* against *modernes* – combat the more acrimonious for displacing the deeper historical conflicts the period failed squarely to face up to or resolve. Even the clearest and most authoritative exemplars of the high classical order were shaped by the conflicts we allege they suppressed. Nor was this the result of the purely unconscious process the model of Freudian repression would suggest. Subversive ideas rarely received direct expression: where they did not take the carefully equivocal forms of irony and parable, as in Pascal's *Pensées* or the fables of Jean de La Fontaine, they were chiefly reserved for denunciations of the criminal designs imputed to one's enemies – the procedure adopted in Boileau's feud with the Jesuits or in Molière's six-year running battle with the devout party at court. Yet the live possibility of subversion was on everyone's mind just the same, defining the overt horizon against which all of the period's cultural activity must be measured.<sup>30</sup>

Still another factor in scholarly readiness to assign Descartes a leading role is the degree to which, for all his critical detachment, he remains representative of the wider culture he is presumed to have redirected. But if Descartes can in fact serve as a paradigm for his age, he owes this status less to his historical novelty than to his historical embeddedness as a symptomatic product of the culture to which he belonged. Even leaving aside his well-documented philosophical debts to Augustine, Anselm, the neo-Stoics, and scholasticism, many of the most distinctive elements of his thought were as plausibly borrowed from his contemporaries as authoritatively modelled for them.

Consider, for instance, an article of Cartesian doctrine Taylor particularly decries as promoting the demoralized estrangement from the world he takes to characterize the modern self: the voluntarist assertion of not merely the freedom but the at once intellectual and ethical supremacy of the will.<sup>31</sup> In the fourth meditation, on 'true and false,' Descartes attempts to determine the sources of the errors that plague human reasoning even when conducted with method of the sort he recommends. The analysis reaches a crux when he discovers that the most powerful mental faculty, the one endowed with the greatest range and freedom of action, is not a faculty of the understanding – the imagination, say, or memory, or even reason itself – but rather the will. Will indeed so far outweighs all other mental faculties as to be identified as that one in which humanity most clearly recognizes its proximity to the Creator whose active 'concourse' is finally seen to preserve us from the errors to which mere humanity otherwise leads. It is the will itself 'that chiefly teaches me I bear the image and likeness of God' (2:461; AT 7:57). Will then rather than reason is the spring of the godlike autonomy that enables us to aspire to a condition superior to that of the automata that characterize the purely physical world over and against which our minds stand in conspicuous (if specious) contrast. This fact convinces Descartes that error is caused less by flawed reasoning than by the freely formulated choice we make in assenting to ideas that lack the requisite clarity and distinctness. Error springs from a failure to contain the will within the limits of the understanding, limits to which will is as such 'indifferent,' with the result that 'it easily goes astray, choosing bad for good or falsehood for truth' (2:463; AT 7:58).

In extending will's domain to cover judgments of true and false as well as the moral or practical choices we make, Descartes lent it surprising scope – a point to which both Hobbes (2:623–5; AT 7:190–2) and Gas-sendi (2:752–5; AT 7:314–17) drew attention. However, the privilege

thereby accorded it was hardly unprecedented. On the contrary, Descartes shared the notion not only, as Taylor himself notes in passing, with the heroic portrait of human freedom exhibited on the stage of Cornelian tragedy but with the Molinist doctrine of grace to which Descartes and Corneille were alike exposed as a part of the Jesuit schooling both received.<sup>32</sup> And he also shared it with the 'decisionist' moment in the theory of royal absolutism: the idea that what both makes and demands a king is the voluntary exercise of the autonomous power of unilateral decision required by the states of emergency to which political life unpredictably succumbs.<sup>33</sup> All of this helps explain the otherwise inexplicable historical irony in the fact that, as radical as Cartesian rationalism may initially have seemed, by the end of the century, it had come to serve as a bulwark against the still more radical consequences the monist Spinoza drew from it. Thus, in Antoine Arnauld, Pierre Nicole, Nicolas Malebranche, and even the fiercely conservative Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, what contemporary observers had suspected of amounting to a secularizing assault on revealed religion and the social order religion helped support had become the last line of defence between traditional society and the modern world Descartes is said to have ushered in.<sup>34</sup>

But perhaps the most intractable reason for ongoing belief in the paradigmatic authority of Descartes's picture of the sovereign rational ego is philosophical prejudice. The Cartesian 'invention of the mind' owes much of its spell-binding prestige to the notion that it solved the great sceptical crisis, the notorious *crise pyrrhonienne*, whose canonical French exponent is Michel de Montaigne. Seen in this light, the sceptical challenge to traditional knowledge, faith, and ideals Montaigne voiced marked the epoch-making yet finally transitory occasion for the dualist *remise en ordre* his successor undertook. By subjecting Montaigne's amiably unsystematic insights to painstaking analysis of the sort demanded of a mathematician engaged in a piece of sustained geometric reasoning, Descartes gave doubt the 'methodic' form that converted it into an instrument of the search for truth it appeared to derail. The result was of course the cogito conceived as uncovering the self-certifying autonomy the mind achieves just insofar as it exerts its rational powers of critical discernment. It is true that the Cartesian portrait of reason, and thus of mind, created epistemological dilemmas of its own, in particular those associated with the new 'veil of ideas' scepticism generated by its solipsistic insistence on the simultaneously logical and psychological priority of inner acts of rational consciousness.<sup>35</sup> After all, if the only objects of immediate knowledge are the thoughts,

volitions, images, and sensations that form the raw ideational content of our own minds, on what basis can we draw inferences about the outer world of physical things that content brings to our attention? Descartes is nevertheless seen to have put Pyrrhonism in its place by making it a theme for professional philosophical study. In doing so, he paved the way for the rational certainties the new classical culture championed in large measure at Montaigne's expense.

However, because the conventional picture espouses Descartes's own estimate of his historical significance, it mistakes the tenor of the difficulties Montaigne posed and so the testimony of the *cogito* itself. It is taken for granted, for instance, that the issues Montaigne joined, most notably in the 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond,' were essentially epistemological, bearing on the nature, grounds, and scope of human knowledge.<sup>36</sup> This in turn yields the standard reading of Montaigne's famous motto, 'Que sais-je?' Philosophers have formed the habit of taking the question literally: Montaigne really wants to know what he knows, and so *how* he knows and to what extent such knowledge can be defended against sceptical doubts like those Sebond propounds. The answers to the problems Montaigne raised concerning what the 'Apologie' portrays as the incorrigible fallibility, mutability, and relativity of human knowledge were thus technical, requiring the rational discipline Descartes set out to supply. The resulting method is accordingly construed less as a specific way of going about the business of philosophy than as a general definition of what that business is, namely, epistemology itself conceived as the kind of foundational enquiry into the origins, character, and limits of human knowledge that constitutes the modern professional norm from Descartes down through Kant to our own day.<sup>37</sup>

But the problems Montaigne raises are not in fact epistemological; they are ethical. Nor is the question couched in his motto to be taken literally, with an eye to determining *what* I know and how I might extend it without falling into the errors sceptics highlight. The question is rhetorical, 'What do *I* know?' It is not properly a question at all given that, as the 'Apologie' tirelessly demonstrates, in the foundational sense Descartes wants, I do not know anything whatever. The issue is then this: within the limits of what I can ever truly claim to know not only about the world but even about myself since, on closer acquaintance, I turn out to be as great a mystery as the origins and fate of the universe I inhabit, what sort of *life* should I lead? More specifically, what kind of life is best designed to make me a well-adjusted human being worthy of the existence an inscrutable providence has granted me?



A first point is that to assign Montaigne an epistemological program is an anachronism: in portraying the mind as a ‘mirror of nature,’ thereby defining at once its characteristic mode of participation in the world and its peculiar instrumentality as a source of cognition, Descartes invented epistemology as well. But this first point underscores a second: Montaigne’s epistemological interests are a means to an end whose basis is not knowledge but *wisdom* and, if not happiness, at any rate a colloquially rather than professionally philosophical acceptance of the life I find myself called on to live.<sup>38</sup> Projected against this background, the questions Descartes asks are not only misplaced but jejune – a point Pascal makes in deriding the founder of modern philosophy as the ‘Don Quixote of nature,’ vainly tilting at windmills while all the real problems lie elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> The result, however, is not only the fideism the ‘Apologie’ appears to endorse, a position to which Montaigne seems to have been largely drawn by filial piety, as a debt paid to the beloved father for whom he had translated Sebond to begin with.<sup>40</sup> It is also the defiantly Epicurean flavour of Montaigne’s final contribution to the sceptical canon, the last essay in the book, ‘De l’expérience.’

The essay opens in a confidently declarative mood: ‘There is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge.’<sup>41</sup> We are initially invited to contemplate a self-congratulatory commonplace: what most essentially defines the human species is that desire than which no other is ‘more natural’ to it, the desire for knowledge. The thought seems to propose an ennobling picture of our kind. If indeed our most natural desire is the desire for knowledge, this grants us a *higher* nature than the notions of both nature and desire appear to license. While we do have other, lower, and in this sense more obviously natural desires about which, in the continuation, Montaigne writes at length, they are all finally subordinate to our thirst for knowledge itself just insofar as no other is more natural.

It is important, however, that the syntax of this opening sentence supports a second reading that complicates the first.<sup>42</sup> While no desire is *more* natural than the desire for knowledge, this does not necessarily mean the others are *less* so. On the contrary, in saying that no desire is more natural than the desire for knowledge, Montaigne emphasizes just how *natural* it is, and thus how thoroughly it belongs to the family of more recognizably natural appetites of which it is a member. The pursuit of knowledge turns out indeed to be a natural function modelled on the same pattern as those lower, animal functions the essay goes on to explore in mouth-watering detail: eating, sleeping, copulating, even passing

water, this last looming especially large owing to Montaigne's notorious susceptibility to kidney stones. However inherently noble it may please us to imagine the pursuit of knowledge to be, it too is a natural drive set on the same ontological footing as the desire for food, sleep, sex, or the blessed release of a good piss. And to what end, besides, do we pursue knowledge in the various forms Montaigne examines, as law, medicine, culinary science, or the *ars amoris*, if not in the service of the desires we ordinarily deem less noble because more natural?

The essay's opening sentence lays a trap calculated to ensnare us in the state of natural embodiment from which it appears to exempt us. It thereby announces the ironic intent with which, having declared our natural commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, Montaigne proceeds to frame the essay's theme, which is of course not knowledge itself but *experience*. Given that no desire is more natural than the desire for knowledge, it is only natural that we should try, assay, or test (*essayer*) 'every means apt to bring us to it.' The question then is, which means is best? Though he leaves it unspoken, Montaigne now invokes a second high-minded commonplace: the best and most worthy because least carnal means to truth is the one Descartes elects, namely, reason.

That Montaigne should leave the commonplace unspoken is crucial to the argument he mounts. If reason's superiority to experience and, what is more, if the grounds for that superiority go unsaid, it is because, from the standpoint he initially adopts, they go without saying. Montaigne ventriloquizes here, tacitly voicing the central presumption governing the philosophical analysis of experience from antiquity to his own day.<sup>43</sup> In line with the root meaning the Greek *empeiria* shares with the Latin *experientia* from which Montaigne's term derives, the tradition Aristotle inaugurates is notably respectful of the kind of empirical trial or test experience makes possible, and thus of the practical expertise or wisdom (*phronesis*) tests of this sort confer. Plato's attachment to the transcendent 'forms' or 'ideas' of which earthly things are mere copies or simulacra prompts invincible mistrust of the lowly 'appearances' that define what he regards as the incorrigibly narrow and deceptive content of our ordinary transactions with reality. By contrast, Aristotle acknowledges the positive contribution experience makes at least in those fields (law, medicine, history, poetry, physics) that deal with matters of empirical as well as theoretical fact. This yields a maxim, sometimes attributed to Aristotle himself but more probably coined in medicine or law, that enjoyed a certain vogue when Montaigne sat down to write: *experientia rerum magistra*, 'experience is the teacher of [all] things.'<sup>44</sup>

However, even Aristotle insists on the limited scope of experience precisely insofar as *true* knowledge as opposed to mere habit, prejudice, or opinion depends on grasping less things themselves than the reasons behind them, the causes and formal essences of which things are the contingent ‘accidents’ or expressions. The humblest ‘empiric,’ a mid-wife, say, or quack, will know by experience more about the natural course of the illnesses that afflict the human body and the remedies likely to palliate or cure them than the best trained physician who lacks that experience. Nevertheless, once he acquires the experience he lacks, the latter will necessarily surpass his empirical counterpart just as, in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, the person who understands the theory of moral conduct will be better and happier than one whose wisdom is of the purely prudential kind that comes from direct acquaintance with practical affairs.<sup>45</sup> Whence the need expressed throughout the tradition Montaigne impersonates at this stage in the essay for the return to ‘first principles’ of which, for all their novelty, Descartes’s ‘meditations on first philosophy’ were a late variant.

Against all this, Montaigne contrives to suggest that the traditional view mistakes the nature of experience by representing it as an external quantity we simply acquire, something we can therefore hold at arm’s length as being logically separable from the rational powers we bring to bear on it. But experience is not an external acquisition; it is rather the living element in which we move, the condition in which our corporeal natures immerse us as the basis of life itself. One of the characteristic ingredients of this condition is moreover the set of assumptions we make about it and the way in which, by colouring how we see the world, these assumptions determine our experience as well. This relates to what, in a passage we will take up in a moment, Montaigne identifies as properly ‘divine’ in the ‘divine Plato’ of the philosophical dialogues: the consciousness evinced by the form of the dialogues as such, as by that of the myths that consistently mediate the dialogues’ exhibition of truth. For Plato as for Montaigne, insofar as it means anything to us at all, the question of truth is a function of our *interest* in it, and thus of the embodied concerns, beliefs, and motives that set us talking in the first place. This in turn highlights the prejudicial form in which Montaigne states the problem of means. By indicating that the choice between reason and experience should be put to some sort of empirical test (‘*nous essayons tout les moyens qui y peuvent mener*’), Montaigne presupposes the principle at issue. The same idea informs the equally circular presumption expressed in the tacit form he gives the commonplace

he challenges. By leaving the commonplace unspoken, underscoring how thoroughly it goes without saying, he shows how far the notion of reason's superiority is already at work, conditioning discussion from the start.

And yet, despite the difficulties with which the principle turns out to be fraught, Montaigne seems to take it for granted that, all things being equal, reason is best; and what makes it best is its presumed autonomy as a higher faculty that rises above the contingent sprawl of corporeal experience in order to subject it to its ordering rule. The theme of experience is accordingly introduced as a fallback, a makeshift required if things go wrong: 'When reason fails us, we turn to experience [...], which is a feebler and less worthy means; but truth is so great a thing that we should scorn no instrument capable of leading us to it' (3:275). But it is just here that Montaigne's irony becomes unmistakable. For if there is anything we know, and know moreover as a matter of plain experience, it is that reason does fail; and it fails because it shares the same ungovernable multiplicity as experience itself.

That this is so is attested in the first place by something else that reason and experience have in common: the fact that, as instruments of knowledge, both seek the sort of 'resemblances' by means of which *the many* of everyday life may be subjected to the rule of *the one* with which knowledge is customarily identified. In the case of reason, unity is achieved by applying the a priori principle of *the law* expressed in the universal forms, kinds, and essences in which individuals are presumed to participate and by which they are presumed to be defined. In the case of experience, we deploy the empirical principle of *example*, looking for precedents and analogies by which what we have learned from the past, stored now in the natural mode of personal memory, now in the artificial memory collected in books, can be used to map the uncharted emergencies of the present with a view to guiding future acts and choices. The fact remains, however, that, as a matter of pure experience, nothing can ever be reduced to unity in either of these ways because nothing is ever the same, least of all reason itself:

Reason has so many forms that we do not know which one to lay hold on; experience has no fewer. The consequence we want to draw from the likeness [*resemblance*] of events is unsound, the more so since events are always unlike [*dissemblables*]: there is no quality so universal in the image of things this presents as diversity and variety. The most expressive example of similarity the Greeks, the Latins, and we ourselves employ is that of eggs. Men