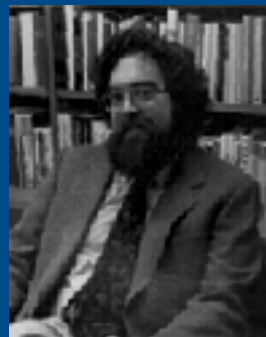


DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER OCCASIONAL PAPERS • 22

TRADITIONS OF CONVERSION  
DESCARTES AND HIS DEMON

ANTHONY      GRAFTON



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# Traditions of Conversion



THE DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES was established at the University of California at Berkeley in 1987 in order to promote interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. Endowed by Doreen B. Townsend, the Center awards fellowships to advanced graduate students and untenured faculty on the Berkeley campus, and supports interdisciplinary working groups, lectures, and team-taught graduate seminars. It also sponsors symposia and conferences which strengthen research and teaching in the humanities, arts, and related social science fields. The Center is directed by Randolph Starn, Professor of History and Italian Studies. Christina M. Gillis has been Associate Director of the Townsend Center since 1988.

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TRADITIONS OF CONVERSION was one of several important events scheduled by the Townsend Center in celebration of Anthony Grafton's residency as Una's Lecturer in the Humanities for Fall 1999. During his visit to Berkeley, Grafton planned two lectures on Conversion in Early Modern Europe: "Conversion and Astrology: Theory, Experience, and Cosmology" and "Conversion and Autobiography: Pattern, Experience, and Salvation." This occasional paper, titled "Traditions of Conversion: Descartes and his Demon," is based on the second lecture. Una's Lectures in the Humanities, endowed in the memory of Una Smith Ross, Berkeley class of 1911, are administered by the Townsend Center for the Humanities.

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## Preface

To say that Anthony Grafton's interests range from the history of the Western classical tradition to the history of science and scholarship and to the history of books and readers only begins to suggest the Renaissance scholar he is. Besides ancient and modern learning, the model Renaissance scholar's job description included the ability to teach and to delight—*docere et delectare* in an old formula—that Grafton has to spare. Consider what would seem to be a hard case: his magnum opus on the later Renaissance humanist scholar Joseph Scaliger. The two weighty volumes are scholarly in spades. But neither Scaliger's old nor Grafton's new erudition is what Higher Critics patrolling for Gradgrinds and Dryasdusts might imagine. The heady mix of history, art history, anthropology, geography, classical studies, religious studies, etc. looks like a menu for an interdisciplinary feast. The issues at stake are as big as they come: how to compare cultures across time; how to determine the credibility of traces and traditions from the past—all this with the pace of the polyphonic music Scaliger would have heard.

Here are some easier cases from a bibliography that at last count includes seven volumes. Grafton's *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* has his wit—wit as humor but also as insight and invention—from the title on. Forgery comes first as the first-born “criminal sibling” of criticism. It plays jokes and cheats but also arises from serious wishes to invoke divine or distantly historical authority; it is the source and rationale for the call for authenticity. Consummate fakers such as the fifteenth-century scholar monk who passed off a gloriously forged history turn out to be largely responsible for codifying the rules for authenticating

texts—it takes one to know one. *The Footnote: a Curious History* shows the big picture and ethical purpose that Grafton conjures from knowing small things. The footnote, that lowly carbuncle of scholarship, becomes a guide to the uses and abuses of history: a credible, if less expensive, rival to the laboratories of the scientists as a knowledge producer and checker, and a bulwark of research and accountability against the Big Lie. To which I add a footnote: the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Times*, and *New York Times* sounded quite astonished in acknowledging that “a deeply learned scholar” could also be “a sprightly writer capable of communicating his enthusiasm to anyone willing to listen.”

This occasional paper will give readers a taste of the virtuoso learning, thoughtful engagement, and generous humanity that Anthony Grafton shared with us unstintingly during his week’s residency as Una’s Lecturer in the Humanities in the Fall of 1999. It is based on the second of his two Una’s lectures on the theme that he and his colleagues have been investigating at the Davis Center for Historical Research at Princeton University: conversion from one set of beliefs, ideas, and practices of a religious or a non-religious kind to another, often radically different set. The topic was in keeping with the Townsend Center’s programs for 1999-2000 on the relationship between Knowledge and Belief. The conversion of the philosopher René Descartes from what he portrayed as doubtful beliefs to supposedly certain knowledge is one of the great conversion stories in the annals of Western culture. It is often held up, for better or for worse, as a decisive turning point for a modern understanding of the self and the world. But what if the story turns out to be a traditional conversion tale, complete with demons and sweats of the soul? As usual, Anthony Grafton challenges us to look with eyebrows raised at the tales we tell about how Western philosophy and science came to be modern.

—Randolph Starn  
Director, Townsend Center for the Humanities  
Marian E. Koshland Distinguished Professor in the Humanities, 1996–2000

# Traditions of Conversion

## Descartes and his Demon

Anthony Grafton

### 1. Conversion and Vocation

Looking back in satisfaction from the end of a long and productive life, Athanasius Kircher could identify many points at which providence had reached down to shape the path he followed. In his adventurous boyhood, God had saved him from drowning as he swam too near a mill race; later on, a divine hand protected him from racing horses, armed brigands and Protestant soldiers bent on lynching him. In his more studious youth, God had given him the reputation of a great mathematician. One night in 1631, Kircher lay peacefully snoring in his order's college at Würzburg. He slept the sleep of the just, not only because he had found his special aptitude, but even more because the Holy Roman Empire had reached an uneasy state of truce. The Emperor had conquered his Protestant enemies; no one, the Jesuit later recalled, could even imagine that heresy would revive. Suddenly a bright light filled the room. Waking, he leapt out of bed and ran to the window. He saw the open square before the college full of armed men and horses. Running from room to room, he found that everyone else was still deeply asleep, and decided that he must have been dreaming. So he hurried to the window again. There he saw the same terrifying vision. But when he finally woke someone to serve as a witness, it had vanished. In the next few days, Kircher became prey to fear and depression. He ran about, as he later recalled, "like a fanatic," predicting



disaster. The others made fun of him—until the Swedes invaded. Suddenly, the prophet was treated with honor in his own country.<sup>1</sup>

Kircher usually appears as a figure in more placid cultural landscapes. He was one of the most erudite men in Europe's great age of polymaths. His skills at mathematics and natural philosophy won him a European reputation—as well as at least one accusation of practicing magic. His all-embracing historical and philological interests expressed themselves in works of textual exegesis as unbelievably long and learned as they were varied in subject matter, works which shed light on everything from the route followed by Noah's ark during and after the Flood to the achievements of the Nestorian church in ancient China. Kircher discovered the historical relation between the ancient Egyptian language and Coptic, collected giants' bones, deciphered hieroglyphs, explored volcanoes and experimented with magnets. As a scholar he adopted one of the characteristic styles of his erudite and cosmopolitan age: that of the polymathic dinosaurs who made the world into their own Pedantic Park. They wrote more than any of us now has time to read, and read more than we can now imagine. The hot pursuit of learning was their passion, one that sometimes induced them to lower the political and confessional boundaries that normally separated them from their enemies—as Kircher did when he invited Protestant scholars like John Evelyn to inspect the ancient inscriptions and shin-bones of giants stored in his celebrated museum in the Collegio Romano. To the modern onlooker, Kircher's career seems a splendid case in point of that thirst for knowledge in all its forms which led some of the literati of his day to take such a passionate interest in schemes for creating universal languages, combinatoric systems and universal libraries.<sup>2</sup>

In Kircher's view, however, the diversity of his pursuits was only apparent: in fact, his life had been propelled by God along a clear trajectory towards a single goal. Not only had divine providence reached down and inspired him with prophetic knowledge; it had also given him a scholarly vocation. In 1628, during his scholasticate at Mainz, Kircher was sent to the library of the Jesuit house to look for a book. He later recalled:

While I went through the books one by one, chance or providence led me to hit upon a book, in which all the Roman

obelisks that Pope Sixtus V had set up in the city were elegantly represented with their hieroglyphical figures. Immediately fascinated, I tried to work out what sort of figures those were, for I thought that the sculptor had put them there arbitrarily. But the text informed me that those figures were monuments of ancient Egyptian wisdom, inscribed since time immemorial on these surviving obelisks at Rome, and that no one had given an explanation of them, since the knowledge of them had been lost. I was possessed by longing, as a hidden instinct drove me to see if I could apply myself to knowledge of this sort. And from that time to this, I have never abandoned my intention of arriving at them. For I thought in the following way: the characters survive, the genuine Egyptian ones. Therefore their meanings must also be hidden somewhere even now, scattered in the innumeral works of the ancient authors. If they are not to be found in the Latin and Greek writers, perhaps they are in the exotic books of the Oriental writers. From that time to this, I began to examine all the texts of those authors, in the hope that I could restore the whole body of the Egyptian religion, by collecting the fragments of their learning that were scattered everywhere.<sup>3</sup>

Like Gerschom Scholem in the years around 1920, so Kircher in the years around 1620 found himself committed, to his own surprise, to a scholarly work of redemption: he would spend his life collecting and repairing the broken fragments of a lost tradition.<sup>4</sup> Like Scholem, Kircher succeeded marvelously at this task. In his later years in Rome, he became the reigning expert on hieroglyphs anywhere in the world, not only the author of a series of weighty books on the subject, but also the scholarly adviser on those most dizzyingly scenographic of seventeenth-century urban projects, Bernini's sculptural ensembles for the Piazza Navona and Santa Maria sopra Minerva. Kircher composed Latin inscriptions for these great architectural and sculptural sites. In them he made clear that the Egyptians had cultivated an essentially monotheistic theology and a profound natural philosophy, from both of which Christians could still learn much.<sup>5</sup>

When Kircher made this case, he implicitly called central beliefs and ritual practices of his own church into question. Though obelisks and hieroglyphs had always formed a prominent feature of Rome's cyclopean landscape, the popes who first began to move and re-erect these Egyptian monuments saw them as frightening remnants of a deeply pagan order. Sixtus V, who had the Vatican Obelisk transported to the position it now occupies in front of the Basilica of Saint Peter's, also had it ceremonially exorcised by a priest. He aspersed it with holy water and drove out the evil spirits that inhabited it with a variant of the usual formula: "*Exorcizote, creatura lapidis . . .*" Sixtus set a cross on its summit to indicate that Christ had vanquished the Egyptian demons that had once inhabited its shaft.<sup>6</sup>

Sixtus did the same to the four other obelisks that he raised in strategic places like the Lateran, where they served as focal points, visible from a long distance, for the processional life of the holy city. Before these products of Egyptian natural magic could become the dramatic punctuation marks that transformed the experience of reading Roman and Christian public space, they had to be formally converted, like recalcitrant living creatures, to their new religion.<sup>7</sup> Kircher, by contrast, treated the obelisks and their inscriptions as remnants of a pagan wisdom that had much in common with Christianity. He held, and showed, that they did not need to be transformed in order to serve as central parts of the Roman architectural and ceremonial order in a Christian city.

Kircher, in other words, argued that the obelisks and the inscriptions they bore, which explicated the secrets of God and nature, did not represent the alien, impure forms of wisdom which biblical metaphors about the Egyptians called to mind. Rather, they belonged to the same tradition of divinely revealed wisdom as the Hebrew and Christian scriptures: indeed, they formed its oldest, and perhaps its most profound, part. Kircher's enterprise adumbrates Gershom Scholem's effort to reconfigure the Jewish tradition, by emphasizing the central place of magical beliefs and practices which previous scholars had rejected as evil and irrational.

Yet the early modern German Jesuit naturally differed in fundamental ways from the modern German Jew. In retrospect, as Kircher retraced his story, he saw his dedication to the obelisks as the result of a providential intervention in his life, one as direct and clear as the one that inspired his prophecy of invasion. What

seemed at the time perhaps a chance occurrence—his discovery of a book about obelisks—his later experiences showed to be the result of a divine plan. When Kircher examined Roman obelisks that were lying down, with one face concealed, he could guess exactly what figures would be found on the side not visible to him. When he studied the broken obelisk later set up in the Piazza Navona, he found himself able to fill in its gaps, supplying by conjecture figures carved on fragments of it that had passed into the hands of private collectors, when those greedy antiquaries would not show him their treasures. Again and again “the light of divine grace”—as well as Kircher’s “skill, acquired over a space of many years”—saved him from the machinations of his enemies.<sup>8</sup> Kircher, in other words, literally divined both the form and sense of these inscriptions before he saw them. And he could do so because God guided him. Like Augustine, he knew that any particular encounter with a text could be meaningless. But his own encounter with Herwart von Hohenburg’s *Thesaurus hieroglyphicus*, like Augustine’s reading of the life of Antony in the garden, had been charged with meaning. For Scholem, the task of restoring unity to the broken fragments of a tradition fell not to a divinely anointed prophet, but to someone without traditional faith—a modern scholar, living in the modern world, who could no longer cherish the beliefs that had once animated those whose texts he studied. Kircher, by contrast, did not represent himself as simply adopting a scholarly vocation, but as being converted to it, by direct divine intervention. The choice of an intellectual career thus became endowed with the same high drama, moral weight, and potential risks as Augustine’s conversion to the true religion. As Augustine had his Donatist critics, who questioned what they saw as his easy acceptance of the coexistence of good and bad Christians in the church, so Kircher had his philological ones, who questioned his easy assimilation of all fragments of ancient tradition to one great, more or less Christian whole. And like Augustine, Kircher defended himself volubly and ably.

Kircher’s account, like other spiritual autobiographies, imposed a retrospective order on events that he had experienced very differently at the time of their occurrence. It also included a number of exaggerations and a few whopping lies. Kircher, who represented himself as a kind of super-archaeologist, able to imagine in detail the stones that he could not see, in fact rarely bothered to inspect the obelisks in his own city of Rome, but drew his illustrations of them from a

book published in Germany, errors and all. What is clear, however, is that Augustine's narrative of conversion—a narrative of a radical shift in allegiance and understanding of the world—gave Kircher the template for his account of his own archaeologist's process. Conversion formed one of his most vital intellectual and stylistic resources. It inspired him, moreover, to develop and propagate, in books and sculptures, theories at variance with the orthodoxy he, as a Jesuit, was pledged to defend and make others believe in, as well as to record his experiences in order to edify the young. A Jesuit's autobiography, his tale of conversion, surprisingly became the story of a voyage out—to something like the foundation of a new religion.

## 2. Autobiography and its Discontents: Genre Trouble

*1 January 1404.* I know that in this wretched life our sins expose us to many tribulations of soul and passions of the body, that without God's grace and mercy which strengthens our weakness, enlightens our mind and supports our will, we would perish daily. I also see that since my birth forty years ago, I have given little heed to God's commandments. Distrusting my own power to reform, but hoping to advance by degrees along the path of virtue, I resolve from this day forward to refrain from going to the shop or conducting business on solemn Church holidays, or from permitting others to work for me or seek temporal gain on such days. Whenever I make exceptions in cases of extreme necessity, I promise, on the following day, to distribute alms of one gold florin to God's poor. I have written this down so I may remember my promise and be ashamed if I should chance to break it.

Also, in memory of the passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ who freed and saved us by His merits, that He may, by His grace and mercy, preserve us from guilty passions, I resolve from this very day and in perpetuity to keep Friday as a day of total chastity—with Friday I include the following night—when I must abstain

from the enjoyment of all carnal pleasures. God give me grace to keep my promise, yet if I should break it through forgetfulness, I engage to give twenty *soldi* to the poor for each time, and to say twenty Paternosters and Avemarias.<sup>9</sup>

This irresistible confession by the Florentine merchant and historian Goro Dati raises most of the right questions about this complex, even baffling subject. What, it makes us ask, was a conversion in early modern Europe? What was an autobiography? What relation, if any, did the spiritual experience which the term “conversion” seems to denote have to the texts that claimed to describe it?

These questions, unfortunately, are much easier to raise than to answer. Conversion, in the first place, ranks with the slipperiest of human experiences, the most difficult to identify or to describe—and certainly to evaluate. The meaning of the term itself has changed radically over time: Augustine, as Karl Morrison has recently pointed out, normally applied it not to the process of searching and suffering that a soul had to undergo before it found rest in God—the story, that is, told in his own *Confessions*—but to God’s conversion, his turning outwards, towards the individual’s soul.<sup>10</sup>

Even in its normal sense, moreover, conversion can take many forms, as A. D. Nock showed in his classic study of the subject, itself inspired by William James. It could refer to a straightforward, non-violent process of “adhesion,” enlistment in a new religion, as happened in ancient cities that received new gods. Or it could be applied to a more complex, difficult and protracted process, a breaking of old ties, a cutting loose from one web of social and political and kinship connections, usually in order to attach oneself to another. It could describe a mass phenomenon: the decision, voluntary or compelled, by which a group adopts a new liturgy, a new calendar, a new discipline and a new god. Or it could evoke the trajectory traced by a single person, jaggedly propelled back and forth by good and evil impulses like the ball in a cosmic pinball machine.<sup>11</sup>

In the Christian tradition, conversion has taken any number of forms. Some convert outwards, following a course normally described as a movement from darkness into light, as Paul did when he went from Judaism to Christianity. Others convert inwards, experiencing a change normally represented as a rise in

spiritual temperature, one that involves passing from a lukewarm to a burning commitment to one's own faith, as many Florentines of a generation after Dati's did when they torched their vanities at Savonarola's urging. One can describe conversion as instantaneous or protracted, easy or difficult, painless or torturous. One can praise it as self-discovery of the highest order or dismiss it as self-hatred. And one must never forget that conversion, in most cases, is not a clearly defined hundred-yard run from a well-marked starting-block to a clear goal, but an uncertain motion towards a state that is changed by the one who adopts it.

Yet even once we have set out all these possible classifications for it, Dati's experience flutters away from the lepidopterist's net and killing bottle. Evidently he moved—or hoped to move—back, not out, to a deeper commitment to the Christian faith and discipline into which he was born. But what moved him to do so, the extent of the distance he traversed, and the inward content, if any, of his reregulation of his outward content remain unclear. This problem, moreover, is typical. A few early modern Europeans found graphic ways to describe the actual feel and texture of conversion. Luther effectively deployed the vocabulary of “scruples” to describe his own condition of stark terror before his discovery of grace. But Thomas Platter, later the publisher of Calvin's *Institutes*, found it harder to identify the springs of his radical break with the old church. While working as a janitor in the Zürich cathedral during his school days, he had run out of wood for the stove. Seeing a statue of St. John, he seized it and hurled it into the fire—a story clearly suggesting that he had arrived at a radical, but painless, rejection of the old forms of devotion. Yet Platter admitted that he still prayed regularly to the saints until he heard a sermon by Ulrich Zwingli, which gave him the feeling of being pulled out of his seat, brain first. When did Platter—or Augustine—actually convert? Opinions differ, legitimately.

If conversion is never easy to describe with precision past conversion—the form historians normally try to deal with—is even harder to seize. It survives only as recorded, after all, in biographical or autobiographical texts. And these pose enormous analytical problems in their own right. Though we often speak freely of early modern autobiographies, the term was not widely used until the early 19th century. The now traditional outline history of the genre moves lightly and easily across the centuries from Marcus Aurelius to Augustine to Abelard and

beyond, until the genre reaches perfection and full self-awareness with Goethe. But the texts corralled by such sweeping analyses lack the internal unity, the intertextual coherence, of those that belong to clearly defined genres like epic or pastoral. The autobiographical tradition is really an artifact of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Wilhelm Dilthey and his disciple Georg Misch, hoping to trace the history of human consciousness, decided that autobiography could play a central role in it.<sup>12</sup>

Those historians who have concerned themselves most systematically with such documents in recent times have emphasized the diversity of the forms that “life-writing” could take from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Autobiography, in the words of James Amelang, “was a practice before it was a program.”<sup>14</sup> Men and women who wrote their own lives did so in radically diverse forms: diaries aimed at their family circles and meant to be held under lock and key, letters directed to their children, remarks dictated to their pupils, pleas directed to their confessors, notes composed for their own use, and formal Latin treatises, drafted and polished for formal publication. They drew on a rich heritage of examples from the past, which they not only imitated, but also resisted. Intertextual relationships ran the gamut from incestuous to patricidal. When Girolamo Cardano, for example, set about writing his last and most formal autobiography, he seized upon the work of Marcus Aurelius, recently translated into Latin, as a model of how not to write one’s life. Marcus, as he saw, had written in order to make himself a better man, eliminating any details that did not help attain that end. Cardano, by contrast, wrote to describe all of his faults, from his silly walk to his obsessive pursuit of fame.<sup>15</sup>

In Dati’s case, the wording of his text suggests that the passage of time inspired him to change his religious state: reaching the age of forty, seen as old in his time, and arriving at the first day of the Christian, if not the Florentine civil year, apparently led him to repent. Dati, like so many of his contemporaries, took a serious interest in the calendar, which he saw as more than an abstract classificatory system. In his history of Florence, he wrote with passionate enthusiasm about the 24th of June, the Feast of St. John’s, and the joy that it evoked in all Florentines. It is entirely possible, then, that the other end of the ceremonial year inspired him with very different feelings. But his work as a whole



took the normal Florentine form of a collection of dated notes on everything from business to the births of children (and the deaths of wives) to trouble with the servants. The calendrical inspiration might merely reflect the literary form he chose to use.

If autobiographies are not free expressions of personality, but varied applications of stiff, pre-existing templates drawn from high and low, literary and practical traditions, there is some case for arguing that no conversion experienced in premodern times can ever be accessible to us except as a representation. We can identify the existing resources mobilized in a given case. But we cannot hope to penetrate behind it to some putatively deeper reality of vision and emotion—especially as any given autobiographical text will also pose problems of comprehension and evaluation.

Even if we can only hope to identify the tools used to trace a spiritual experience in a given text, however, the effort seems worth making—if not with the aim of uncovering “how he really changed his life,” at least in the hope of identifying the intellectual resources that early modern individuals mobilized to portray and defend their spiritual decisions. After all, students of fields as diverse as literary history, philosophy and administration have argued in recent years, following and updating Burckhardt, that early modern Europe played a crucial role in the development of a modern self, a self with clear boundaries, a consciousness of its independence from others and a sense of its own interiority. Sensitive recent scholarship has taught us much about the ways that individual Catholics used the language of Christian conversion to particular ends, not always those desired by the authorities who tried to guide them.<sup>16</sup> Kircher’s example has already suggested that one characteristic form of modern intellectual life, scholarship as vocation, was formed in the capacious, flexible crucible of conversion. It may prove, paradoxically, that the tools forged to create Catholic converts could support more than one form of conversion, even one of those most characteristic of the modern world: conversion to a new intellectual position.

### 3. The philosopher in the stove

Let us attend, then, to one of the most famous scenes of conversion in the history of early modern Europe: the one that took place in Germany, somewhere near the Rhine, on the night of the 10th to 11th of November, 1619, and found its most famous record in a manifesto of the New Philosophy. René Descartes, finding himself shut up in winter quarters with Imperial soldiers whose conversation did not interest him, “spent the whole day shut up alone in a stove-heated room,” plunged into a systematic consideration, as he put it in his *Discourse on Method*, “of his own thoughts.” In one sense, Descartes admitted, his life up to that point had already involved a conversion: the shift from one set of beliefs to another. He had been brought up “in one of the most celebrated schools in Europe,” the Jesuit college of La Flèche, founded by Henri IV and designed to produce good Catholic lawyers and officers. He had “learned everything that the others were learning there”: in other words, the basic encyclopedia that included the humanistic studies of grammar, rhetoric and moral philosophy and the more technical disciplines of mathematics and natural philosophy. And he had come to esteem “the strength and beauty” of eloquence, the “entrancing delicacy and sweetness” of poetry, and the subtlety of mathematics. But he had also come to feel that these studies had only limited value. Learning the ancient languages and reading the works of the ancients, for example, had made him cosmopolitan, showing him that “everything contrary to our ways” was not “absurd and irrational.” But he had also realized that he had no way of telling which of the ancient histories were true. As important, he had decided that he could learn the same lessons that history taught from traveling, from “reading the book of the world,” and that he could do so without becoming an antiquary, as ignorant of the customs of his own time as he was steeped in those of the past. He had come to see that: the philosophies of the ancients, though they exalted the virtues, failed to define them; theology rested on an exaggerated faith in human reason, which was incapable of reaching heaven; and mathematics, though rigorous, seemed oddly sterile, since no system had been built on its foundations.

Accordingly, as soon as Descartes reached the age when he could “pass from under the control of [his] instructors,” he abandoned formal study and turned

to travel and introspection. He served at courts and in armies and mingled with varied individuals and groups, in order to see what results they had arrived at by applying their common sense to practical problems—a process in which he had more faith than he did in the abstract reasoning of a scholar in his study. In the end, he decided not to accept any belief that he had not arrived at by his own independent reasoning. After thinking matters through in the intense concentration made possible by the “stove-heated room,” he knew his vocation: to reject everything he did not know evidently, to divide up every problem into as many parts as necessary, and to build a new philosophy from the foundations, using “the long chains of perfectly simple and easy reasonings by means of which geometers are accustomed to carry out their most difficult demonstrations.” Descartes found that he was thinking—and knew that he existed. And he went on to become the first Cartesian and to assert the existence of the *moy*, the hard, individual, irreducible self.<sup>17</sup>

Modern readers of the first chapters of the Discourse have traditionally seen Descartes’ account of his development as an autobiography of a particular kind. They have argued that Descartes used the language of secular essayists and moralists like Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Charron to describe the intellectual labyrinth in which he found himself before he arrived at his new method. Descartes derived from them both much of the language he deployed and the dramatic description he offered of the condition of human thought in the years around 1600. Long before Descartes, Montaigne had subjected the reigning philosophies of his time—above all the morality of the Stoics—to what he called “trials,” the form that became the new genre of the Essay. Like Descartes, Montaigne had insisted that existing philosophies had reached an impasse to which only a form of skepticism could do justice. He could know only his own self directly, and had devoted large sectors of his work—for example, his great last essay “On Experience”—to describing the flow of his own existence, day by day and kidney stone by kidney stone. Unlike Descartes, to be sure, Montaigne had not been able to construct a positive philosophy, a new system to replace the old ones that his critical intellect demolished. But he evidently provided the positive source for Descartes’ self-portrait as the embodiment of disembodied critical

intellect, the mind not troubled by or caught up in the illusions normal in his epoch, willing to subject itself, at least provisionally, to the norms of society.

In the seventeenth century, however, others read the published record of Descartes' life very differently. In particular, many traditional intellectuals—men who felt more sympathy for Kircher's style of polyglot erudition than for Descartes' austere definition of the rigorous knowledge that alone was worth having—saw the Cartesians as the members of something like a sect, blind followers of a leader who had engaged in something more like self-torment than reasoning.<sup>18</sup> The erudite Anglican clergyman Meric Casaubon was no enthusiast for all traditional forms of learning: in 1659 he published the diaries of John Dee's dealings with spirits, which did much to sink the natural magic of the Renaissance into terminal discredit.<sup>19</sup> But he firmly believed that anyone who hoped to pursue knowledge should do so through civil conversation and reading, in great libraries and centers of learning like the collection of the Cotton family. He lampooned Descartes' autobiography as the story of a vainglorious man who had locked himself in an isolation ward in order to dramatize an enterprise that was really nothing but “vanitie, futilitie, nugacitie”:

What a mysterie doth he made of his *Ego sum: ego Cogito*, to attaine to the excellencie whereof, a man must first strip himselfe of all that he hath ever knowne, or beleaved. He must renounce to his naturall reason, & to his senses: nothing by caves and solitudes will serve the turne, for such deepe meditation, such profound matter: rare inventions to raise the expectation of the credulous, & in the end to send them away pure Quacks, or arrand Quakers.<sup>20</sup>

Casaubon compared the author of the *Discourse* not to Montaigne and Charron, but to the religious enthusiasts he loathed: “the man seemes to me to take the same course with his disciples, as many Jesuited Puritans do with theirs.” Such Puritans deliberately cast their followers down “to the lowest pitt of despaire,” before raising them up again by teaching them a new theology and rationale for

Christian life. This left them cheered up but also in “a great dependencie.” Similarly, Descartes, “after he hath obliged his disciples, to forgett & forgoe all former precognitions & progresses of eyther senses or sciences; then he thinks he has them sure; they must adheare to him tooth & nayle, or acknowledge theselves to have been fooled.”<sup>21</sup>

In his work *Of Credulity and Incredulity*, Casaubon traced these methods to their source. Descartes resembled the Puritans, who taught that “there is no true Conversion, but through the horrors of a sad kind of desperation, as antecedent to it, or always concomitant,” and developed a method of systematic prayer and exhortation to reduce their disciples into a receptive state.<sup>22</sup> But the Jesuits—or some of them—were also “said to use some such thing, to get themselves some confidants.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, Casaubon found these tactics typical of Counter-Reformation Christianity. Reading a Catholic tract which accused the Church of England of lacking “seriousness,” he countered this charge by insisting that the Catholic Church was too serious—so much so that it committed emotional violence on those it proselytised. Augustine, he noted, marked the “fourth degree” of conversion “to consist in a kind of mourning, proceeding from the first degree, a godly fear.”

But their way is a shorter way: first desperation, or somewhat very near to it: then an absolute confidence, grounded upon it. Neither will I deny, that it may happen so, to some, sometimes, who become true converts. But, that to be the only way, is an invention of their own, that I think hath more of policy in it, in the first inventors, at least, and chief abettors, than of ignorance; not to be reconciled, I am sure, with the example of the thief upon the cross.<sup>24</sup>

Casaubon suggested that the Puritans might have learned their tactics from the Jesuits, and that Descartes had something in common with the Puritans. What he did not point out was that Descartes had actually gone to school with the Jesuits. In fact, it seems likely that Descartes’ conversion to his new method, like Kircher’s conversion to the religion of hieroglyphs, was in part made possible by methods

for managing and transforming the self that he had learned, with the humanities, at La Flèche.

#### 4. The Documents in the Case: Descartes the Dreamer

In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes emphasized the purely intellectual nature of his conversion, insisting that he “was not troubled by any cares or passions” and that both his experience in the “stove-heated room” and the consequences he drew from it were purely intellectual. But in one of several sheets of notes that Descartes kept, headed “*Olympica*,” he gave a very different account. In this intimate journal written in Latin—a standard development of the humanistic notebook, that magnificent tool for ordering all the texts in the world and making the world into a text—he made clear that as he prepared his first public appearance on the theater of the world, he knew that he might have to conceal and mislead: “just as comedians are counseled not to let shame appear on their foreheads, and so put on a mask: so likewise, now that I am to mount the stage of the world, where I have so far been a spectator, I come forward in a mask.” He recorded that the “foundations of [his] wonderful discovery” lay not in a calm day’s reasoning, but in a dream that he had had in November 1619, about a poem by the late Roman writer Ausonius, which discussed the question “What road in life shall I follow?” And he insisted that he had been perfectly justified in drawing inspiration from a verse that had come to him in a dream: “It might seem strange that opinions of weight are found in the works of poets rather than philosophers. The reason is that poets write through enthusiasm and imagination; there are in us seeds of knowledge, as [of fire] in a flint; philosophers extract them by way of reason, but poets strike them out by imagination, and then they shine more bright.” The whole series of his later discoveries unfolded from this dream.<sup>25</sup>

In the remainder of this text, which Descartes never finished, he told in detail what had happened to him in the stove-heated room. His state was not, he wrote in his Latin account, one of calm but of violent agitation. Exhausted, he fell into “a sort of enthusiasm,” dreaming three dreams in one night. In the first, frightened by some phantoms, he walked towards the left, since he felt weak on his right side. Ashamed at his awkwardness and pushed bodily by a sort of whirl-

wind, he tried to reach a nearby college. There he encountered, among others, someone who called his name and told him that if he would go and find M. N, he would be given something. Descartes imagined that the gift would be a melon from a foreign country. Though the wind made it impossible for him to make progress, he saw others standing without difficulty. Terrified by this incongruity, Descartes woke in great pain, which made him fear that an evil demon was persecuting him. Turning on his right side—since he had slept and dreamed on the left—he prayed for protection, slept again, and dreamed of a terrifying thunderclap, only to wake and find the room full of sparks. Deciding that this was not an evil portent, but a form of illumination, he fell back to sleep. In a third dream, he was delighted when he found a dictionary and then an anthology of Latin poets—one which contained, among other poems by Ausonius, the one on choosing a way of life, and which he discussed in some detail with a man who questioned him before disappearing.

While still asleep, Descartes decided that this series of experiences was a “song” or “vision”—that is, in the Latin of traditional oneiromancy, a form of prophetically inspired dream. He began to interpret it, and continued even after he awoke. He took the dictionary as representing the whole corpus of the sciences, the *Corpus poetarum* first as the union of philosophy and wisdom and then as offering to open the truths of all the sciences. He took the third dream as marking his future path, the two former ones as describing his past—when he had not sought the proper form of solitude, represented by the melon, and had been tormented by an evil genius, represented by the wind. He understood his pain as representing his own conscience, repenting of his past life, while the thunderclap stood for the spirit of truth descending. The whole series of dreams, he decided, had been a supernatural revelation. In gratitude, Descartes promised to go on pilgrimage if he could to the house of the Virgin in Loreto.<sup>26</sup>

Through much of the twentieth century, historians of philosophy did their best to explain these dreams away by taking them, for example, as consciously composed allegories.<sup>27</sup> But more recent scholarship has scraped the hagiographical whitewash away and revealed the foreign texture and form of Descartes’ experiences. Alice Browne, John Cole and Sophie Jama have subjected Descartes’ dreams to magnificently wide-ranging examination, and in his intellectual biography of

Descartes Stephen Gaukroger has given them a substantial place, though not a central role.<sup>28</sup> These scholars have shown that as Descartes dreamed he referred to, and was affected by, a vast range of identifiable beliefs and practices. Some of these he would have known as a child: for example, that St. Martin's Eve, the harvest festival on which he had his dreams, was normally a time for getting drunk and celebrating fertility. Others, like the interpretative techniques he applied to his dreams, were practices that he had formally studied. Browne, an expert student of ancient and Renaissance theories of dream interpretation, has shown how traditional Descartes' terminology and tactics were.

Jama, for her part, has traced the connection between Descartes' dreams (and his reading of them) and his experience as a pupil in the Jesuit college of La Flèche. There, like the other collégiens, he went on retreat with a Jesuit spiritual director. Under the Jesuit's guidance, he carried out the *Spiritual Exercises* laid down by Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, on the basis of his own experience. That is to say, Descartes underwent a long series of experiences, divided into weeks, and many of them based on the precise, meticulously detailed imagination of scenes, from Christ's crucifixion to Hell itself. He took in all the details and considered their meaning, ridding himself of his besetting sins and cultivating his virtues. Finally, after long preparation, he had—as the *Exercises'* terminology put it—“elected” the way of life that God had in mind for him. In the course of his retreats, evidently, Descartes mastered and internalized the Jesuits' technology of self-scrutiny, a craft created by Ignatius, who drew on a wide range of later medieval and Renaissance precedents and techniques as he converted his first associates in Paris. When Descartes locked himself up, stripped all superfluous concerns from his consciousness, and scrutinized both his own life to date and the meaning of his dreams, detail by detail, trying to pull out and capture every atom of meaning, he clearly adapted the techniques he had learned while on retreat, and applied them to their normal end of finding a vocation.<sup>29</sup>

Yet Descartes' experience—and his own understanding of it—also clearly deviated from the normal practices of the Jesuits. He allowed himself to be guided by dreams rather than by meditations carried out while awake. He served as his own spiritual director—a task normally carried out only by Jesuits. And he made the course of his life turn not on a systematic, staged inquiry into God's plan for



him, but on the aleatory method of dream interpretation. Only the divinely guaranteed truth of his experience—not the tried protocols of the order—ensured that the path he took was the right one, not a detour staged by his evil genius or demon.

In presenting his situation in this way, Descartes enacted a conversion. It was not the stately, austere, considered decision that a pupil of the Jesuits was supposed to make, but a wild, passionate gamble. His experiences resemble those prescribed in the *Spiritual Exercises* less closely than those recorded in Ignatius' own autobiography, which the founder of the Jesuits dictated to young followers near the end of his life. Ignatius, like Descartes, made his life-determining decisions aleatory. He let the hand of God steer him. Hearing a Muslim deride the Christian doctrine of the immaculate conception, the former soldier was not certain whether to follow the infidel and beat him or go on his way to a spiritual victory. He allowed his horse to choose which path to follow—and thus involved the divine hand in his decision making. And he experienced, as Descartes did, numerous visions, some of which he interpreted as diabolic, others, like his experience of the divine presence as a bright, round object, as divine. Like Ignatius' account, Descartes' represents a divinely inspired but highly individual experience of conversion to a vocation.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that Descartes laid so much weight on revelatory dreams reveals much, both about his debt to the Jesuits for teaching him particular technologies of self-scrutiny and about the formidable independence with which he used them. The *Spiritual Exercises*, as we have seen, recommended meditation, not dreaming. Ignatius' own account of his dreams was not published until long after Descartes' death, for fear of inspiring unsanctioned efforts at emulation. But Jesuits talked and wrote a great deal about dreams in Descartes' time. For the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw a number of dreaming prophets—mostly, but not entirely, women—proffer their revelations to kings, ministers and prelates.<sup>31</sup> And Jesuits were regularly called upon to advise on how to handle these people, who saw their sleeping states as direct conduits of divine counsel. For dreams could come—as Descartes knew—from the devil as well as from God. And Jesuits knew the devil's ways better than anyone. Their deftness at exorcising devils in public, in

fact, provided one of their most effective forms of propaganda in the France of Descartes' youth.<sup>32</sup>

José de Acosta, the author of a brilliantly iconoclastic *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, served as Assessor in 1578 at the trial of Francisco de la Cruz. This “learned Divine and Professor (or Doctor) of Divinity” attached himself to Maria Pizarro, a woman who received divine revelations in “trances and raptures, which carried her quite besides her self.” He claimed that he would do miracles, that he had spoken with God himself, that he was holier than any of the angels. And despite five years of imprisonment during which even his breviary was confiscated, he cited scriptural passages in support of his views, “so many and so long, that his very memory caused great admiration”—though his explications of the passages inspired only ridicule and pity. Led out to be executed, he looked up to the heavens, expecting fire from above to consume the court and the spectators: “But in very deed,” Acosta noted with satisfaction, “no such fire came from above; but a flame came from below, which seized upon this pretended King, and Pope, and Redeemer, and new Law-giver, and quickly did reduce him into ashes.”<sup>33</sup> So much for those who set too much store by false or diabolic visions.

Martin Del Rio, the Spanish Jesuit who wrote a standard handbook of demonology, retold this story and told a number of others about bad dreams and dreamers. He recalled, with some nostalgia, how in his happy days in Belgium he and the great philologist Justus Lipsius had discussed the case of an old woman who claimed that a divine spirit appeared to her in her dreams, in the form of a vague, bright sphere, the precise outlines of which she could not see. This spirit both foretold future events—like the death of the viceroy, Requesens—and forced her to reveal them in public. Del Rio admitted that opinions about this visionary had varied.<sup>34</sup> But he also pointed out that diabolic visions were especially likely to come to women of low social position, like this prophetess. More generally, he argued that excess interest in dreams usually had dire consequences. Some dreams, of course, were purely natural, caused by environmental influences on the sleeper's body: they were neither meaningful nor worrying. Some were genuinely prophetic. Del Rio conceded that the recipients of truly divine dreams were

normally also instilled with absolute confidence in the truth of their revelations—very likely one of Descartes’ criteria for accepting the validity of his own dreams. But he also insisted that only experts, priests experienced in the difficult craft of “discretion of spirits,” as laid down by older authorities like Jean Gerson, could really decide if a dream was divine or diabolic. And he suggested that in cases of doubt, “it will be safest if you distance yourself from it, and despise it, as something diabolic.”<sup>35</sup>

It seems clear that Descartes learned in the Jesuit world he inhabited while young to take dreams seriously. He acted like a good Jesuit when he examined the “causes and circumstances” of his dreams, tested the feelings that they inspired in him, and decided which supernatural being had sent them to him. But he rejected the cautious, sober protocols that were meant to govern the Jesuits’ practice of dream interpretation even as he accepted and applied their normal methods.

Descartes did not insert any account of his dreams—or even the mood in which he dreamt them—into his *Discourse*, and generations of his philosophical readers have taken his effort to create a base line of interiority, an irreducible thinking self that could construct a world, as purely philosophical. This view, which inspired young mathematicians and philosophers for centuries to choose Descartes’ vocation as their own, still surfaces in Charles Taylor’s brilliantly teleological reconstruction in the *Sources of the Self*. Descartes’ dreams are told, and retold, as a philosopher’s primal scene—like Wittgenstein’s encounter with Piero Sraffa on a train, or Nelson Goodman’s famous double positive. But it is rare for historians of philosophy to see the Olympica as part of Descartes’ comprehensive effort at autobiography, or his dream experience as central to the philosophy he founded. What did Descartes intend by separating his account into two parts?

## 5. The Name of the Rose: What is an Autobiography?

A fuller understanding of the range of autobiographical practice in early modern Europe may clarify what Descartes was about when he composed these very different accounts, one nearly contemporary and one retrospective, of his life, and

preserved them both. Modern writers characteristically see autobiography as a single, coherent effort—the writing of a single, fixed text. But in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, those who converted most radically—as Ignatius and Descartes did—often wrote multiple accounts of their experiences, ranging from formal, relatively austere documents destined for publication to multiple, less formal, more vivid records, meant to be preserved by friends and used by biographers. The spiritual directors of Spanish saints, recently studied by Jodi Bilinkoff, regularly collected and used similar documents, always editing and adapting them, often in radical ways, and sometimes rewriting them entirely.<sup>36</sup>

Personal records of experiences of the divine were meant to be preserved and used; the Bollandists, the Jesuit specialists in hagiography who compiled the *Acta Sanctorum*, became masters at collecting and evaluating them.<sup>37</sup> Adrien Baillet, who included Descartes' account of his dreams—literally translated into French, in his biography of the philosopher—also published a four-volume set of lives of the saints, in Latin, into which he intercalated numerous similar documents. Even before publication these might circulate widely among the friends and acquaintances of the person in question. Descartes both crafted an economical, sharply pointed account of his life as a preface to several of his works, and recorded the same decisive moment, in a very different, more emotional, pious and traditional way, in pages destined for his own eyes and for the eyes of his friends. He wrote his autobiography in two complementary modes and at two different times. In doing so he made clear not how trivial his dreams seemed, but how seriously he took them and how much he wished them to figure in future accounts of his life—just as Blaise Pascal, in most respects a radically different figure, did when he preserved his personal record of his “*nuit de feu*.”<sup>38</sup>

## 6. Descartes the convert

Descartes the dreamer found little comprehension from his first readers. Committed though he was, after all, to the significance of his dreams, he certainly recognized that they did not fit the rest of his philosophy very well. This may explain what he meant when he said that he would have to wear a mask in order to

come forward onto the public stage. Later in life he would make clear that he saw men in their early twenties as still immature, and liable to attacks of enthusiasm—a remark that makes his distance from his early self quite clear. Cartesians, as well as the many non-Cartesian admirers of his mathematical proficiency who engaged in debate with him, were often embarrassed by the existence of the *Olympica*. Even Baillet was too critical a hagiographer to take Descartes' dreams very seriously. A disciple of the Bollandists, he assured the reader of his *Lives of the Saints* that “I report dreams and visions when nothing in them is contrary to the gravity of history.” He had no trouble dismissing the account of the “simple” priest de Bosco, who dreamed in 1511 that the Old Testament heroine Susanna and Daniel, her rescuer, appeared to him. They told him that her bones were buried in the church of St. Servin in Toulouse—where they appeared in due course, accompanied by a nicely aged written attestation of their identity, and were, again in due course, reinterred with splendid rituals, reenacted every year.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, he admitted that Descartes' visions revealed him to be an “enthusiast.” The historian, he slyly suggested, might be tempted to suspect the philosopher of having had a bit too much to drink on St. Martin's Eve—though he also admitted that Descartes insisted on his own sobriety, and that it was a “*Génie*,” not wine, that had set his brain on fire.<sup>41</sup> Yet Baillet showed more sympathy than Constantijn Huyghens, who remarked that even pious Catholics would find Descartes' description of his dreams “a great weakness,” or Leibniz, who agreed.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps Meric Casaubon, that diligent collector of traditions and sharply observant critic of intellectual fashions, was more insightful than the philosophers. He insisted on the continuity between the Jesuits' technologies of self-mastery and Descartes' philosophical conversion. Evidence that Casaubon could not have had access to confirms this ingenious conjecture. Descartes was clearly inspired by his reading of his dreams not only to embark on a particular kind of career, and to defy all opposition, but also, many years later, to portray his own life as a model—a secular saint's life pivoting on a philosopher's conversion—in the teeth of his own insistence that no one should emulate historical examples, since the sources that described them exaggerated and overpraised their subjects. As Casaubon suggested, the new philosophical sect that Descartes created probably owed much

of its ideological force and unity to the technologies of conversion that he ingeniously secularized and applied to systems of ideas. In the world of learned practice, conversion—and the now unfamiliar forms of autobiography that recorded it—played a vital role, offering a new way of representing the path to method and knowledge. Though its origins were soon forgotten, this model survived until relatively recent times, when metaphors of the market replaced metaphors of conversion, in the intellectual as in other spheres. It remains to be seen if the new language can yield accounts of conversion as attractive and durable as the old one did.<sup>43</sup>

## Endnotes

1. A. Kircher, “*Vita . . . a semetipso scripta*,” Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS 13752, 18-19. On this text and its roots in Jesuit practice see esp. H. Louthan, “Popular Piety and the Autobiography of Athanasius Kircher, SJ,” *Catholicism and Austrian Culture*, ed R. Robertson and J. Benniston (Edinburg, 1999), 3-15.
2. See e.g. T. Leinkauf, *Mundus combinatus* (Berlin, 1993); P. Findlen, *Possessing Nature* (Berkeley, 1994).
3. Kircher, “Vita,” 17-18.
4. Cf. G. Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem* (Frankfurt, 1977).
5. See esp. E. Iversen, *Obelisks in Exile, I: The Obelisks of Rome* (Copenhagen, 1968).
6. See esp. *Ordo dedicationis obelisci quem S.D.N. Sixtus V Pont. Max. in Foro Vaticano ad limina apostolorum erexit, et benedictionis item crucis* (Rome, 1586).
7. T. Magnuson, *Rome in the Age of Bernini, I* (Stockholm, 1982), 16-25.
8. Kircher, “Vita,” 28-35.
9. *Two Memoirs of Renaissance Florence*, tr. J. Martines, ed. G. Brucker (New York, Evanston and London, 1967), 124.
10. K. Morrison, *Conversion and Text* (Charlottesville, 1992).
11. A.D. Nock, *Conversion* (Oxford, 1933); for a more recent survey see Oxford Classical Dictionary, 3rd ed., s.v. Conversion, by P. Rousseau.
12. For fine studies in this vein see K.J. Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual* (Chicago, 1978); J. Sturrock, *The Language of Autobiography* (Cambridge, 1993).

13. See the studies collected in *Ego-Dokumente*, ed. W. Schulze (Berlin, 1996); H.R. Velten, *Das selbst geschriebene Leben* (Heidelberg, 1995).
14. J. Amelang, *The Fall of Icarus* (Stanford, 1998).
15. A. Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1999).
16. See e.g. A. Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, 1990).
17. Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode; Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. F. Alquié (Paris, 1988), I, 570-591.
18. See the learned and sensitive account of M. Heyd, "Be Sober and Reasonable" (Leiden, 1995), esp. ch. 3-4.
19. See the splendid account in M. Casaubon, *Generall Learning*, ed. R. Serjeantson (Cambridge and Tempe, 1999), to which I am much indebted.
20. *Ibid.*, 153.
21. *Ibid.*, 153-154.
22. Cf. N. Pettit, *The Heart Prepared* (New Haven and London, 1966).
23. M. Casaubon, *Of Credulity and Incredulity* (London, 1670), 151, quoted by Serjeantson, 153-154 n. 169.
24. Casaubon, *Of Credulity*, 153.
25. R. Descartes, *Oeuvres*, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris, 1967), X, 217-219.
26. Descartes' Latin text does not survive; I follow the French paraphrase in A. Baillet, *La vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes* (Paris, 1691; repr. New York and London, 1987), Bk. II, chap. 1; I, 81-86.
27. E.g., H. Gouhier, *Les première pensées de Descartes* (Paris, 1958).
28. A. Browne, "Descartes' Dreams," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 40 (1977), 256-273; J. Cole, *The Olympian Dreams and Youthful Rebellion of René Descartes* (Urbana and Chicago, 1992); S. Jama, *La nuit de songes de René Descartes* (Paris, 1998); S. Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford, 1995), 104-111. Gaukroger shows in detail that Descartes would have a number of intellectual experiences and personal encounters before formulating what became his definitive "method," and reads the dreams as the account of a breakdown, and Descartes' account of his recovery as the way he "rationalized his recovery in terms of a great discovery" (111).

29. See the excellent recent treatment of the Spiritual Exercises in J. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1993). Another body of literature that fascinated Descartes at this point—and that contained some elaborate accounts of dreams and conversions—was the body of Rosicrucian texts that appeared at exactly this time. But as Gaukroger points out, there is no proof that Descartes read the text that offers the closest parallels, Rudolphus Stauroporus' *Raptus philosophicus* of 1619 (108); by contrast, it is certain that Descartes knew the Jesuits' techniques of meditation and dream interpretation.
30. See *The Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola*, ed. J.F. O'Callaghan, ed. J.C. Olin (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco and London, 1974); original in *Fontes narrativi de S. Ignatio de Loyola*, 4 vols. (Rome, 1943-65), I, 354-507.
31. See e.g. R. Kagan, *Lucrecia's Dreams* (Berkeley, 1990).
32. D.P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits* (Philadelphia, 1981).
33. J. de Acosta, *De temporibus novissimis libri quatuor* (Rome, 1590), 54-56, quoted by M. Del Rio, *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex* (Cologne, 1679), 534-536; translated by M. Casaubon, *A Treatise concerning Enthusiasme* (London, 1656; repr. Gainesville, 1970), 102-106.
34. Del Rio, 636-637.
35. *Ibid.*, 635.
36. J. Bilinkoff, "Confessors, Penitents, and the Construction of Identities in Early Modern Avila," *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800): Essays in Honor of Natalie Zemon Davis*, ed. B. Diefendorf and C. Hesse (Ann Arbor, 1993), 83-100.
37. K. Hausberger, "Das kritische hagiographische Werk der Bollandisten," *Historische Kritik in der Theologie*, ed. G. Schwaiger (Göttingen, 1980), 210-244.
38. On this point see the excellent treatment by Browne.
39. A. Baillet, *Les vies des Saints*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1701-1703), I, iv-v.
40. *Ibid.* IV, pt. ii, 30.
41. Baillet, *Vie de Des-Cartes*, I, 85.
42. Quoted by Jama, 9-10.
43. Warm thanks to Michael Heyd for his critique of an earlier draft of this essay.





## Audience Comments

**Audience Comment:** It seems to me that part of what's so difficult about conversion, especially the conversion narratives in this period—but also what makes conversion so resourceful for narrative—is the difficulty of representing conversion itself. You inevitably get an account of something that stands for conversion or stands in place of it, some exterior moment or external sign, but the conversion itself as an experience seems always to be somewhat ungraspable. A hunch here is that part of the difficulty might have to do with the status of the will in the moment or process of conversion. That is difficult because, on the one hand, it is not clear what role the will should have in this experience because if it a peripheral or emphatic role, then it might be sensed that it is not an authentic conversion—it didn't come to you freely enough. On the other hand, it is difficult because the role of the place of the will is still sort of unsettled in thinking in general and so there is a difficulty in finding ways to figure it. I guess my question is whether you have any comment on that possibility.

**Anthony Grafton:** I think that is a very helpful comment. One of the things I've been struck by in reading these sixteenth and seventeenth century autobiographies is their effort to develop an affective terminology of a very precise type rather than an Augustinian analysis of the struggle of the will. There are of course Augustinian analyses—Petrarch's and the ascent of Mont Ventoux and Luther's and many others—but what is most striking not only in Catholic but in some of the Puritan literature is the effort really to develop a profound and precise

affective terminology which tries to use moisture, for example, as a measuring tool—that's a very standard one in Catholic autobiography. I tried at one point to develop, in homage to art historian Michael Baxandall, a sort of period sense of terms and I absolutely didn't get anywhere at all. It was not possible. But I think you're right, the will is extremely difficult to deal with philosophically in a system like Descartes', and he really does try to avoid that danger.

**Audience Comment:** Just a short factual question on that university web site of autobiographies. You mentioned that they were in the third person and I was wondering how you know they are autobiographies and not biographies.

**Anthony Grafton:** We have documents. The gentleman who did them collected these from the faculty, and they were written in the third person. I guess if Caesar did it, a professor can do it. But they do seem quite certainly to be autobiographical. In a few cases they were autobiographical texts by people who had already died.

**Audience Comment:** One thing that's interesting about Descartes is the way that *Discourse on Method* is almost the program for conversion itself—for future people to convert themselves. It seems like, at least in Protestantism in the later seventeenth century, there is a development of a technology of self-conversion that gets fairly sophisticated in Pietist literature, a whole literature of procedure, a mechanistic procedure that you need to go through in order to accept a conversion. I wonder whether that kind of textualization of conversion is self-conscious, a reflection on what it means to convert or how you can produce a conversion, almost as an act of will—which would be one way to get at the issue of where the will stands in this.

**Anthony Grafton:** And then you get into the very complicated debate of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries over the question of grace and whether you can actually prepare the heart in any constructive way, or prepare the will in any constructive way, for the receipt of grace. There is a very large and difficult Protestant literature on that, though even in the Calvinist world you do get lots of

these people who believe it is possible to do that to some extent. Then you get in the eighteenth century those techniques that were applied to secular and scholarly and philosophical biographies, first by theologians, a sacralizing of enterprises which are not themselves strictly religious.

**Audience Comment:** This came to my mind as you were talking: I was thinking of Julian of Norwich, the cloud of unknowing, various contemplatives who have no doubt about what the conversion experience is, and who simply recite their own techniques for what they are, but don't employ the rational logical thinking that would hold the techniques methodically. But they don't question at all what a conversion is.

**Anthony Grafton:** Right. Once you have reached that state, as Meister Eckhardt says, the will of God is acting through you as light through glass. So you then become extremely efficient and you can clean hospitals and organize institutions better than anybody else. [laughter] That's another rich terminology, but as my old teacher Eric Cochrane used to say, the thing about mystics is that their experience is outside time and space, the dimensions to which historians are confined, so there is not much you can do with them. [laughter]

**Audience Comment:** But wouldn't you say that Descartes was trying to bring it into more of a historical context?

**Anthony Grafton:** I think he found himself having an experience—not a mystical experience but a very powerful experience which he interpreted as a moment of divine revelation. It seems to me that he would not have seen this as a mystical experience and would have been very clear on that because he had had Jesuit spiritual counseling. The spiritual exercises involved experiences which are connected to those of mystics but they are not aimed at producing that but rather are aimed at getting you through to the choice of a way of life. So I think he's actually quite good; he wakes up and thinks—we don't have the Latin version, which is really irritating, we have the French translation—Descartes wakes up and thinks, this is a *songe*. The trouble is there are many different kinds of *songes*, so if

we had the Latin term it might be a little more precise. But he certainly wakes up and starts applying these skills to himself.

**Audience Comment:** I am wondering what the relationship is between the conversion of tonight and the conversions you talked about in your earlier lecture, whether you think the subjects would see them in similar terms or whether that's you as a historian trying to impose a certain kind of symmetry on those experiences.

**Anthony Grafton:** I think you could have asked them if there was a connection and they wouldn't have looked at me as if I were a lunatic. There are in the ancient philosophical tradition comparable ways for talking, for example, about repentance and turning to a particular kind of religion and repentance and turning to a different kind of philosophy. *Metanoia* can be used for both, and in Seneca and others you do get a treatment of change of philosophical view which looks very much like conversion and certainly is read by Christians as being a kind of account of conversion. So I think it is not totally unreasonable but I'll admit that my interest was attracted to the two because we were trying at Princeton to look at different kinds of change. The point being, we looked at each other in our department, and none of us ever change our minds. We have department meetings over every conceivable issue: tenure, appointments, graduate fellowships. We deploy our best persuasive resources and nobody ever changes an inch. [laughter] It therefore seemed reasonable to conduct historical research into the interesting question of how it happens that anybody ever changes their mind. [laughter] But seriously I do think that just because intellectual conversion and religious conversion could move in similar ways, be represented by similar tools, that it is not wholly unreasonable to bring them together. That is a fair question.

**Audience Comment:** You have presented the will of texts and conversions seen through texts, or represented by people through texts. Is it also possible to see how people who could not read were converted? Is it possible to see how they converted?

**Anthony Grafton:** Yes. You can take the temperature of conversion and see the rapidity with which it happens. There's a great case at Regensburg early in the Reformation, a famous case. The Jews are expelled, the synagogue is destroyed, a church is built with a wonder-working image of the Virgin, there is miraculous health for the church, and it becomes a great south German pilgrimage site. Something like 112,000 pilgrim's badges were sold in the first year after the wonder-working image went up: 1521. By 1525 the image had been torn down by the same inhabitants who had put it up and the church is a Protestant church. There you have a pretty rapid case of desacralization, which must really be seen to reflect a very rapid change in feeling about that object and the religious practices connected with it, and what they meant. But as soon as you try to get beyond that I think, here I am going to refer to greater authority, you always find you have some person connected with written culture standing between you and the people who have the experience. Like the Glover who wrote the twelve articles which were adopted by many of the German peasant bands. The Glover was a literate artisan who could cite the Bible and other things. We simply don't get beyond that. It doesn't mean there weren't real worlds of emotional personal experience there—I can't find myself able to deny that. But it is very difficult. And as you know, priests even find it very difficult to talk about the temperature of their flock in a precise way.

Hailed by one critic as “historian extraordinaire,” ANTHONY GRAFTON is the author or editor of eleven books, including a major two-volume study of Renaissance humanist Joseph Scaliger . His intellectual interests range from the history of the classical tradition, particularly during the Renaissance, to the history of science and scholarship, to the history of books and readers. His works include *The Footnote: A Curious History* (1997), and *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (1990).

Currently the Dodge Professor of History at Princeton, Grafton studied classics, history and history of science at the University of Chicago and University College London. He joined the Princeton faculty in 1975. His many honors include the Behrman Prize for Achievement in the Humanities at Princeton; a visiting professorship at the École Normale Supérieure, Paris; and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. He has delivered the J.H. Gray Lectures at Cambridge; the E.A. Lowe Lectures in Paleography and Kindred Subjects at Oxford; the Rothschild Lecture in the History of Science at Harvard, and the Meyer Schapiro Lectures at Columbia University. He served as Warburg Professor in Hamburg, Germany in 1998-99. Professor Grafton’s most recent work, *Cardano’s Cosmos: The Worlds and Work of a Renaissance Astrologer*, is forthcoming from Harvard University Press.





