

Groundwork for the Confessional Structure of Descartes' *Meditations*

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It has been suggested that Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* begins as an epistemological confession.¹ Indeed, the tone of the project or, as some would have it, its "mood"² is quite radically set by the voice of a meditating subject who seems to be disclosing intimate circumstances. It is precisely this confessional aspect, simultaneously communicating a history of interiority and showing the meditator himself as having a life that runs alongside the present meditative retreat, that gives the project of the *Meditations* its astoundingly personal character. The aim of this essay is to examine the particularity of this confessional space. To set the contours of this examination, I will first address the structure of traditional confession, establishing the terms of comparison against which Descartes' own confession in the *Meditations* will be contrasted. To do so, the first step will be to address crucial aspects of what can arguably be considered the paradigm of written confession within the Latin tradition: Augustine's *Confessions*. Discussing Augustine will be essential for tracing what will here be called the 'logic of confession' as it pours into extrabiblical sources and mutates, in constant tension between oral and written confession, into the genre of the spiritual manual. Much in the same way as Descartes' *Meditations*, the spiritual manual is a text that has been written with the intention of being exercised. An analysis of

¹ Dmitri Nikulin, *On Dialogue* (Langham, M. D.: Lexington Books, 2006), 130.

² Catherine Wilson, *Descartes' Meditations: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10.

the logic of confession will prove to be crucial when attempting to understand Descartes' own confessional structure, for it will shed light on the reflexivity involved in confessional discourse. This article will then turn to the various modifications that writing imprints at the core of an originally oral practice, to finally examine Descartes' own written confession.

I. The Logic of Confession

It would take more space than is appropriate here to trace the Judaic roots of the practice of confession as they permeate the whole Pentateuch, clearly back to the book of *Leviticus*.³ Even a full examination of the practice of confession in Christianity oversteps the boundaries of this article. For our purposes, which are in no way historically exhaustive but rather structurally logical, it will be necessary to focus on the tradition that Augustine himself was drawing from, inquiring into the interrelation between the two verbs employed in the *New Testament* to signify the activity of confession.⁴

There are two Greek verbs used in the *New Testament*, rendered into English as “to confess:” *homologeô*,⁵ generally employed to signal a “confession of faith,” and *exomologeô*,⁶ generally used as a “confession of sins.” The proximity between

³ See *Lev* 5:5: “And it shall be, when he shall be guilty in one of these things, that he shall *confess* that he hath sinned in that thing” (emphasis mine). All quotations from Scripture in English come from the King James Version.

⁴ All Latin and Greek etymologies using both the Lewis and Short and LSJ lexicons were consulted online at:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?redirect=true&lang=la>

⁵ For the passages where *homologeô* is used see: *Mat* 7:23, *Mat* 10:32 (2x), *Mat* 14:7, *Luk* 12:8 (2x), *Jhn* 1:20 (2x) *Jhn* 9:22, *Jhn* 12:42, *Act* 7:17, *Act* 23:8, *Act* 24:14, *Rom* 10:9, *Rom* 10:10, *1Ti* 6:13, *Heb* 11:13, *Heb* 13:15, *1Jo* 1:9, *1Jo* 2:23, *1Jo* 4:3, *1Jo* 4:15, *2Jo* 1:7, *Rev* 3:5.

⁶ For *exomologeô* see: *Mat* 3:6, *Mat* 11:25, *Mar* 1:5, *Luk* 10:21, *Luk* 22:6, *Act* 19:18, *Rom* 14:11, *Rom* 15:9, *Phl* 2:11, *Jam* 5:16.

these two verbs is linguistically evident, for it is manifest that *exomologeô* consists of the verb *homologeô* plus the prefix *ex*. Found in twenty six verses throughout the *New Testament*, *homologeô* literally means “to say the same,” for which reason among its meanings one also finds “to agree,” “to acknowledge” and “to promise.”

Although still present in the meaning of confession as *exomologeô* (found only in ten *New Testament* verses), this latter verb carries with it the important connotation of also meaning “to praise.”⁷ Thus one finds *exomologeô* being used either with an accusative direct object in the sense of confessing sins: “And [they] were baptized in the Jordan, confessing their sins” (*exomologoumenoi tas hamartias—Matt 3:6*); with a dative indirect object in the sense of praise: “I thank/ praise thee...” (*Exomologoumai soi—Matt 11:25, Luk 10:21*); or by itself in the sense of consenting: “He consented/promised (*exômologêsen*) and watched for an opportunity” (*Luk 22:6*). What interests us here is that, even though a certain constancy might be said to exist within the four gospels in the use of *homologeô* as a “confession of faith” and *exomologeô* as a “confession of sins,” already by the time of the writing of the first Johannine epistle, *homologeô* is also being used in the sense of a “confession of sins.”⁸

About three hundred years later, by the time Augustine is writing his *Confessions*, contemporaneous with Jerome’s translation of the *Vulgata Latina*, a semantic unification has already occurred: not only has the meaning of both *exomologeô* and *homologeô*

⁷ This captures in Greek the spirit of the Hebrew verb *Le-hodot*, both “to thank” and “to confess.”

⁸ *1Jhn 1:9*: “If we confess our sins. . .” (*ean homologômen tas hamartias hêmôn*).

collapsed into the Latin verb *confiteor*,⁹ but even the various meanings of *exomologeô* as “to confess” and “to praise” (with the sole exception of *Luk 22:6*, where Jerome translates *exomologeô* as *spondeo*) are rendered by Jerome with the same Latin verb.¹⁰

It is not surprising that this phenomenon eventually took place, for such linguistic interchangeability is ultimately based on the conceptual proximity of the two branches of confession, for a confession of sins (*exomologeô*) does not occur without an implicit confession of faith in a normative standard to which the confessant aspires and in relation to which she has fallen short. In turn, the explicit belief in the existence of this standard is what is actually verbalized in the case of a confession of faith (*homologeô*).

Both branches of confession can also be said to touch on the notion of witnessing or *martureô*, for both types of confession demand the bearing of a witness in front of self and possibly in front of another, either against oneself or, as it were, for the faith. And even though it is not accurate to assert that all testimonies are confessional, for our purposes here we will consider all confessions pertaining to the tradition of Latin *confessio* to be testimonial. In the case, for instance, of a confession of faith (*homologeô*), the confessant bears witness of her faith in front of God and possibly in front of another who simultaneously witnesses such a bearing of witness. It is in this dynamic that we encounter the first instance of confessional reflexivity as it relates to witnessing: the other who witnesses a confession immediately, and inevitably, becomes a witness of the bearing of witness.

Its history of martyrs aside (the word “martyr” actually deriving from the Greek for “witness”—*martus*), in Christianity

⁹The only place where Jerome does not translate *homologeô* as *confiteor* is *Matt 14:7* where, in the sense of “to promise,” he uses the phrasing: *cum iuramento pollicitus est*.

¹⁰ See summarily in the *Vulgata Latina*: *Matt 3:6*, *11:25*, and *1Jhn 1:9*.

there are two paradigmatic instances of the witness. As a couple of passages already cited clearly state,¹¹ the foremost witness is Christ, who in the book of *Revelation*, for instance, is described precisely as “the faithful witness” (*ho martus ho pistos—Rev 1:5*). It is not necessary to examine this topic in more detail here but rather to exhibit the second paradigmatic instance of the witness: that of John the Baptist, who in the opening verses of the Gospel of John is described precisely as one who came “to bear witness of the light” (*marturêsê peri tou phôtos—Jhn 1:7*).

It is worthwhile to note how the notion of the witness and the two notions of confession relate to the figure of John the Baptist, for it is concerning him that the first use of *exomologeô* occurs in the *New Testament*.¹² The other branch of confession (*homologeô*) is also clearly associated with his figure in the following context: while the people confess their sins to the Baptist (*exomologeô*), John the Baptist himself confesses in front of the people that he is not the Christ: “And he confessed (*hômologêsen*) and denied not (*êrnêsato*); but confessed (*hômologêsen*), I am not the Christ” (*Jhn 1:20*). Both in this passage and in the verse succeeding the aforementioned *Matt 10:32*, the verb *homologeô* is explicitly, almost rhetorically, opposed to the verb *arneomai* (“to deny,” “refuse” or “negate”), clearly establishing the positivity implied in the activity of confession as *homologeô*.

Taking a step towards the general analysis of confession, I would like to conceptualize the stance represented by John the Baptist so as to summarize what is philosophically at stake in the tradition that Latin *confessio* inherits. As has been mentioned, the Baptist’s primordial witness of light is found in the first verses of the Gospel of John: “There was a man sent from God, whose name *was*

¹¹ See, for example, *Mat 10:32*.

¹² See *Mat 3:6*.

John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the light, that all *men* through him might believe" (*Jhn* 1: 6-7). The claim could thus be made that the Baptist's witness epitomizes a link between the two stances of confession and its relationship to light, for every confession that places itself within this tradition will have to involve a personal witness of the determinations of light. This means that every confession entailing a witness will demand both a positive affirmation of what light is and a negative determination of what light is not. Descartes' case will clearly follow this same pattern, as light in the *Meditations* will be crucially determined as natural light or *lumen naturalis*.

It is not coincidental that two of the closest, most probable antecedents of Augustine's *Confessions*, Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165 CE) and Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 200-258 CE), articulate the confession of their own conversions using the metaphor of light. As told in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, right before his own conversion Justin Martyr had an encounter with a respectable old man who tells him: "Above all, beseech God to open to you the gates of light."¹³ Right after this encounter, Justin experiences his own conversion, which he describes using another image of light: "But my spirit was immediately set on fire. . . . I discovered that his was the only useful philosophy."¹⁴

Cyprian of Carthage, on the other hand, in his epistle *Ad Donatus*, describes his state before and after conversion as a "lying in darkness and gloomy night, wavering hither and thither, tossed about on the foam of this boastful age, and uncertain of my wandering steps, knowing nothing of my real life, and remote from

¹³ Justin Martyr, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1977), 160.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

truth and light. . . . But after that a light from above, serene and pure, had been infused (*lumen infundit*) into my reconciled heart.”¹⁵

This same structure repeats itself in Augustine who, after hearing a “boy’s voice or a girl’s voice” that tells him to open the Scriptures and read, describes his own conversion as follows: “For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away.”¹⁶

Relevant to our discussion concerning interiority is how light, also determined as *logos* in the figure of Christ, creates a necessary link between witnessing and interiority, for the *logos* also abides within.¹⁷ This logical abiding brings to the fore the second reflexive instance of confessional practice: whoever confesses bears witness of the inner abiding of the primordial witness, that is, of the *logos*. This is a strong point made in the first Johannine epistle: “He that believeth . . . hath the witness in himself” (*echei tēn marturian en heautōi—1Jhn 5:10*).

We therefore take it to be the case that in *confessio* there is much more at stake than just an understanding of illumination as a “disclosure of the self.”¹⁸ What is confessed is also a personal experience of the determinations of light, and in traditional *confessio* such light is necessarily linked to the notion of the inner, determined both as *logos* and as witness. Closing the full circle of

¹⁵ Cyprian, *Epistle 1: To Donatus*, 3-4, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol.5, edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: W. M. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 275-80.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, X.VIII.29. All quotations from the *Confessions* are cited according to the standard book, chapter, paragraph numbering and are quoted from: Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006).

¹⁷ See *Jhn 17:23*: “I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one.”

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth* (Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. 1), ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New York Press, 1997), 243.

witnessing, we may say that the witness involved in *confessio* consists in multiple reflexive layers. By definition, the witness bears witness of the *logos'* witness. Let us keep this in mind when analyzing the reflexivity that Descartes appropriates in his own confessional dynamic.

II. *Confession, Oral and Written*

As has been said, the reason behind our interest in Augustine's *Confessions* has to do with the paradigmatic place it occupies in the evolution of the confessional practice into a written one. The intention here is not to problematize the psychological aspects entailed in the authorship of written confession, but rather to depict the communicative structure of a text that, understood as a sacrifice for Augustine,¹⁹ is supposed to capture the essence of a practice that was originally oral.²⁰

By turning to Augustine's famous passage in *The City of God*, X.5-6, which deals precisely with the notion of sacrifice, a better picture will emerge concerning how writing might fit into the equation of confession. Augustine states: "A[n external] sacrifice, therefore, is the visible sacrament or sacred sign of an invisible sacrifice."²¹ Augustine defines the sacrifice as a sign because of its capacity to render visible another sacrifice that essentially occurs within the believer: "the sacrifice of a contrite heart."²²

¹⁹ See Augustine, *Confessions*, IV.I.1; V.I.1; VIII.I.1; IX.I.1; XI.II.3; XII.XXIV.33.

²⁰ For a radical stance on the immanent orality of confession, see Nikulin: "For this reason, confession can only be oral. As such it can only be imitated in the written, which, however, is a narcissistic betrayal of its orality" (Nikulin, *On Dialogue*, 130).

²¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 2000), 308.

²² *Ibid.*

The relation between sacrifice and visibility provides the analytical tools necessary to understand how confession as a sacrifice may have gradually required the visibility that only writing could bestow. In what regards writing and visibility, a well-known passage of the *Vita Antonii* by Athanasius describes how Antony, Augustine's contemporary, recommended the written notation of actions and thoughts to his fellow monks:

“Let this observation be a safeguard against sinning (*asphaleian tou mê hamartanein*): let us each note and write down our actions and impulses of the soul as if we were about to report them to each other (*hôs mellontes allêlois apangellein*); and you may rest assured that from utter shame of becoming known we shall stop sinning and entertaining sinful thoughts altogether. Who, having sinned, would not choose to lie, hoping to escape detection? Just as we would not give ourselves to lust within sight of each other, so if we were to write down our thoughts as if telling them to each other (*eav hôs apangellontes allêlois tous logismous graphômen*), we shall so much the more guard ourselves against foul thoughts for shame of being known. Now, then, let the written account stand for the eyes of our fellow ascetics, so that blushing at writing the same as if we were actually seen, we may never ponder evil. Molding ourselves in this way, we shall be able to bring our body into subjection, to please the Lord and to trample under foot the machinations of the Enemy.”²³

The passage leaves no doubt that Antony is not referring to a proper written confession, for his self-examination is very similar to the Stoic practices of daily meditation described by Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, among others, which include both the writing and reading of right and wrong actions and thoughts. What calls for attention, nevertheless, is the way in which Antony relates writing to the gaze. As Michel Foucault puts it when analyzing this same text, writing “offers what one has done or thought to a possible gaze . . . what others are to the ascetic, the notebook is to the recluse.”²⁴

²³ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980), 73 [translation modified]. Greek text is available at: <http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu>.

²⁴ Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, 207-208.

Insightful as Foucault's remarks are, Antony's conceptions seem to demand a more detailed elaboration. It is not that the notebook totally replaces the other in the ascetic community, but rather that the notebook or writing is the locus of a powerful fiction that includes the other, for Antony's prescription centers around an "as if." Antony does not prescribe that the monk actually writes to submit his writings to possible readers, but that he writes "as if" others were reading what is being written. It is enough to immerse writing within this "as if" for it to have actual implications on the monk's behavior. The effects of fiction on the monk's inner states are therefore real, and this real effect produced by fiction is something one must have in mind when turning to Descartes' own fictions, such as the fictional *mise en scène* of the meditator's retreat and (beyond the scope of this essay, having addressed the issue elsewhere²⁵) the fiction of dreams and the evil genius.

Aside from its effectuality, Antony's fiction also serves an important role in terms of temporality, especially in what concerns the present. Because writing manifestly pretends to make the self visible to the other, but not to the other only as reader, but to the other as reader at the time of writing, writing is an essential tool in achieving the intensification of the present as is highlighted by the present participles employed by Athanasius in the original Greek: *mellontes apangellein* or "about to report" and, especially, *hôs apangellontes* or "as if reporting." It is the possibility of writing "as if" being simultaneously read by another, that is, it is the coincidence between the time of writing and the time of reading that stirs up the emotions which, within the monastic community, help transform the self by means of restraining the monk from sinning.

²⁵ Juan Carlos Donado, "Chiasms in Meditation or Toward the Notion of Cartesian Fiction," *Telos* 162 (Spring 2013): 113-30.

It is also crucial to keep in mind the employment of writing as a “safeguard” or *asphaleia*. The Greek word *asphaleia* literally means a “security against stumbling or falling,” in a way that can be applied to a city or state. In the context of written confession, writing would be serving the role of making the self visible to itself and to the other as reader. At the same time, nevertheless, writing provides the possibility of stabilizing confessed utterances, reminiscent of *asphaleia*’s literal architectural meaning, in such a way that confessional receptivity is radically transformed.

Returning to the relation between visibility and sacrifice, Augustine reinforces his arguments in *The City of God*, X.5-6 by bringing up the *Epistle to the Hebrews*: “But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (*Hbr* 13: 16). It is not difficult to see the connection between *communicatio* as sacrifice in Augustine’s quote from *Hebrews* and confession as possibly the most intimate of all communications.²⁶ But what does the intimacy of confession consist in? To answer such question, a return to the closeness between the two branches of confession will be necessary, for it is here that a possible interpretation of confessional intimacy could be attempted in temporal terms.

We find the need to supplement definitions of confession such as Michel Foucault’s “to declare aloud and intelligibly the truth of oneself”²⁷ with an understanding of the temporal aspects of the self-truth that is confessed. Apprehended within the dynamic of *exomologeô* and *homologeô*, confessional truth will be essentially linked both to the past (in the sense of a confession of sins) and to the present (in the sense of a confession of faith). As a primordial

²⁶ “The other is most intimately met in confession” (Nikulin, *On Dialogue*, 128).

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Lisa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 173.

break which has its important nuances, confession is linked to the past in terms of a history that the subject herself rejects. But this rejection, or what the confession of sins has of rejection, cannot occur unless the subject has gone through the essential transformative experience of conversion or *epistrophê*. This literal “turning” or “twisting” marks the subjective split between a “was” and an “is.” Simultaneous with a confession of her past, therefore, the subject confesses her conversion. It is in this communication of the phenomenon of conversion that the subject reveals her present.

Completing the full temporality involved in the tradition of Latin *confessio*, the future of the converted subject will also come to the scene as a future reality in which the confessant professes belief. It is the presence of both past, present and future—this temporal wholeness—that makes confession utterly intimate.

From the perspective of narrating such a personal history, conversion is also responsible for granting subjective access to the meaning of an autobiographical narrative that would otherwise be disjointed or nonsensical. One could consequently articulate the phenomenon of conversion in terms of discovering a teleology previously hidden from the subject. Once the subject has converted, this teleology is made manifest as presently involving the subject herself. This discovery and acknowledgement of teleology is an important aspect of what makes confession partake of the essence of praise or *laudatio* (confession as *exomologeô*), implying that the subject that has experienced such teleology will, in the act of an autobiographical confession, recount the steps that have led her to such a discovery.

It is clear that for Augustine writing has an important place within the structure of confessional testimony. Here, one could go into the influence of Paul's writings in the course of Augustine's conversion and, as Pierre Courcelle well makes the point, consider

Paul as the subject of the first known Christian autobiography, recounted in *Acts* 22: 6-16 and 26: 4-18.²⁸ Even though Augustine, as Paul, hears a voice in the famous garden scene in Milan (the famous *tolle, lege* of *Confessions* VIII.XII.29), the great difference between both is that the voice Augustine hears bids him to read. When confessing his conversion in writing, therefore, Augustine is writing about hearing a voice that leads him to reading.

Although the most relevant, Augustine's is not the only case where reading and conversion go hand in hand in the *Confessions*. Moreover, in her outstanding *Augustine's Confessions: Communicative Purpose and Audience*, Annemaré Kotzé devotes an important portion of her analysis to arguing that, of the six conversions narrated in *Book VIII* of the *Confessions*, all of them have to do (including Antony's) either with reading or hearing:

"Victorinus converted through reading . . . but also through talking to Simplicianus. Of Ponticianus' colleagues . . . we learn that one needs nothing more than reading a conversion story (that of the monk Antony in this instance) to come to an immediate conversion. . . . All we learn about Antony's conversion at this stage is that it is brought about by hearing Scripture. . . . Alypius' conversion is presented, like that of the second agent at Trier, with very little detail, except for the information that the final catalyst is the reading of Scripture. . . . Antony had heard a reading from Scripture and applied what he read to his own life."²⁹

It has already been emphasized that both *exomologê* and *homologê* coincide in the fact that they are structured around the externalization of a personal witness by means of verbalization. Both significations, therefore, involve an intersubjective space in which a once personal witness is made public through the speaking voice. If written confession is not to lose any of its sacrificial value (and for Augustine it does not), writing must be able to capture the

²⁸ Pierre Courcelle, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1963), 119.

²⁹ Annemaré Kotzé, *Augustine's Confessions: Communicative Purpose and Audience* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004), 174, 175, 177.

total truth value of the confessional dynamic. But what happens to the structure of confessional receptivity when put into writing?

The writing of confession radically alters the structure of confessional reception, especially in what concerns the place of the other as its recipient. The circulation of oral confession was certainly restricted, circumscribed by the spatio-temporal limits of an oral transmission intended for a chosen audience either of trusted spiritual brethren or of authoritative elders.³⁰ The act of confession itself had a performative immediacy, which meant that once performed, confession came to silence.

All this, of course, changes considerably once confession is put into writing. For once, the place of the other as recipient of confession bursts open in a way reminiscent of Plato's discussion of writing in the *Phaedrus*: henceforth, confession roams the earth passing from one reader to another and everyone, even those who have "no business with understanding,"³¹ have access to the written confession. This unthematized subtext of the universal receptivity of written confession is behind Augustine's attempt to restore the exclusivity of his audience as his *Confessions* turn towards the present in *Book X*. Augustine puts it rather symbolically, stating that his present confession is intended for "the mind of my brethren . . . not the mind of strangers nor the children of strangers, whose mouth has spoken vanity, and whose right hand is the right hand of iniquity."³²

³⁰ In the 4th Century monastic context of Basil of Cesarea, for instance, "the only criterion put forward by Basil is that sins ought to be confessed in the presence of those who are able to help the sinner." See Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, "Penitence in Late Antique Monastic Literature," in *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, eds. Jan Assmann and Guy G. Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 183.

³¹ Plato, *Phaedrus* 275e.

³² Augustine, *Confessions* X.IV.5.

As has been emphasized already, one of the most problematic issues of a written confession—an issue to which Augustine himself returns time and time again—is that of the reader as interlocutor. Augustine acknowledges that his own confessional interlocution reaches the reader in order to “stir up the heart.”³³ This stirring of the heart has much to do with a production in the reader of mimesis. That means, using the technical terms of classical rhetoric, that written confession is essentially a protreptic or *logos protreptikos*.³⁴ As a protreptic, therefore, the state which written confession aspires to produce is precisely that of conversion.

Having addressed what might be called the protreptic mimesis latent in confessional discourse, that is, the latent attempt to generate in the reader the volitional state of conversion, a better perspective arises from which to grasp how confessional practices pour into the genre of the spiritual manual. Taking St Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* as a paradigm of such genre, a hugely popular text during Descartes’ lifetime³⁵ and one that even permeates Jesuit education today, we will briefly articulate what might now seem a foreseeable connection: intersubjective mimesis between director and exercitant has now become the center of the genre of the spiritual manual, for in the manual’s mimetic

³³ Augustine, *Confessions* X.III.4.

³⁴ “The unity of the protreptic genre could be provided, then, by the recurring situation of trying to produce a certain volitional or cognitive state in the hearer at the moment of decision about a way-of-life”—Mark D. Jordan, “Ancient Philosophic Protreptic and the Problem of Persuasive Genres,” *Rhetorica* 4.4 (1986): 331.

³⁵ As James Hill states: “But in the seventeenth century, when Descartes was writing, the most influential meditational writer was St Ignatius of Loyola. Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit movement, wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* which were promulgated in the Jesuit schools and churches. Descartes, who studied at the Jesuit college of La Flèche would have known them well. In fact, while at La Flèche, he would have gone on retreats in which students retired to the countryside to practice the devotional exercises that Loyola recommended” [“Meditating with Descartes,” *Richmond Journal of Philosophy* 12 (2006), 1].

experience lies its use. In a way that radically transcends the realm of theoretical speculation, in the spiritual manual the notion of order relates to that of use through the effects that are to be produced on the reader or user who undergoes the exercises prescribed. The order of the exercises, therefore, has to do with the wellbeing of whom we could call the patient, from the undergoing or *pathos* involved in the concept of the exercitant.

III. The Confessional in the Meditations: Already now some years ago . . .

By turning now to the confessional operations exhibited in the first lines of *Meditation I*, our focus will center on Descartes' notion of admission:

"Already now some years ago, I noticed how many a large number of falsehoods I had admitted for truths in my first years, and the highly doubtful nature of whatever I had afterwards built upon them, and that everything in life was to be fundamentally overturned and, once and for all, begun from its very first foundations, were something firm and lasting ever desired to be established in the sciences. But the work seemed immense and I waited for an age so mature that none more apt to grasp the discipline would ensue. And for that reason, having hesitated so long, I would hereafter be guilty if the remaining time for action were consumed in deliberating. Therefore, having now opportunely rid the mind of all cares and provided myself with a secure leisure, I withdraw alone, in earnest at last and unrestrictedly, to apply myself to this general overturning of my opinions."³⁶

³⁶ *Animadverti jam ante aliquot annos quàm multa, ineunte aetate, falsa pro veris admiserim, & quàm dubia sint quaecunque istis postea superextruxi, ac proinde funditus omnia semel in vitâ esse evertenda, atque a primis fundamentis denuo inchoandum, si quid aliquando firmum & mansurum cupiam in scientiis stabilire; sed ingens opus esse videbatur, eamque aetatem expectabam, quae foret tam matura, ut capessendis disciplinis aptior nulla sequeretur. Quare tamdiu cunctatus sum ut deinceps essem in culpâ, si quod temporis superest ad agendum, deliberando consumerem. Opportune igitur hodie mentem curis omnibus exsolvi, securum mihi otium procuravi, solus secedo, seriò tandem & libere generali huic mearum opinionum eversioni vacabo (AT VII, 17-18). All quotations from the *Meditations* are cited according to the standard Adam-Tannery edition (AT) and consist in my own translations from the original Latin*

It is in gestures like the one under scrutiny that the complexity of the *Meditations'* relation to tradition most truthfully shines forth. It is not an overstatement to depict the initial confessional gesture of the *Meditations* in a reflexive way: not only does Descartes admit, but he admits he has admitted. For our purposes here, this is as important a philosophical move as one can expect from Descartes at such an early stage. Even if the first employment of the notion of admission has clearer confessional resonances (as in Descartes confesses he has admitted), his admission of past admissions (as in Descartes admits he has accepted) will also be inextricably intertwined with a confession about each and every past acceptance; for the initial confessional act designates all past admissions as having been determined by falsity accepted in place of truth.

A connection can already be intuited with the reflexivity of traditional *confessio*, which has been described above in terms of the witness of the witness, but is here appropriated as the conceptual reflexivity of the admission of admission. Such appropriation occurs through the crucial employment of the notion of interiority, due to the fact that the reflexive dynamic of admission necessitates and implies an essential connection to the subject's inside.

That every confession demands an admission is something that can be reasonably argued, making such a case even in linguistic terms. For instance, in the Latin lexicon that has served as the basis for the present etymological inquiries, Lewis and Short list definition C. 2. of the verb *credo* ("to believe") precisely as "to admit as true." Such terminology can be easily applied to the definition of *homologeô* (or a confession of faith) to affirm that, as a profession of

editions of 1641 and 1642. The Latin text is therefore provided to justify the renditions.

belief, a confession of faith is essentially an act of "admitting as true." One could also draw a line between admission and witnessing by the same means: if conversion is the act that constitutes the witness and no conversion is devoid of a profession of belief, then no witnessing is devoid of an admission of truth.

What mostly spurs interest here, however, is the way in which Descartes carefully operates on the subject's inner landscape by employing a concept close to the traditional confessional dynamic yet liable to being constructed so as to affect the interiority of a universal subject. What one observes early in the *Meditations*, therefore, is the purgative movement from inner to outer of what Descartes calls falsehoods or *falsum*, and the subsequent movement from outer to inner of what he calls truth or *verum*, which will be played out after discovering the Cogito from *Meditation III* onwards. These admissions will rely heavily on the discovery of clarity and distinctness, along with certain determinations of natural light, that will become the keys (as it were) that warrant the subjective opening of the inner to admit truth and truth only.

But as one reads the second line of *Meditation I*, a double movement of admission related to confessional reflexivity has already taken place. It is a double opening, for in the *Meditations'* first sentence the subject's interiority is opening to past inner openings. This double opening can be understood in terms of the relation of confession to time. The first opening of admission or *'I admit* relates to the present condition of the meditating subject—a present that will complete itself in its presentation, as Descartes gives form to the literary character who is actually retreating to meditate. This present is essentially understood as the vantage point in time where the subject has experienced a radical subjective split. Admission's first opening, therefore, signals the experience of conversion, an experience that has occurred "already now some

years ago,” the full articulation whereof has taken time, and demands a mature age, to be properly addressed.

Cartesian conversion as described in the *Meditations* consists in a particular realization or *animadvertire* of the dynamic of admissional interiorization. The Latin *animadverto* is a contracted form of two terms: *anima adverto*, literally: “to direct the mind,” “to steer the soul” or “to turn attention to.”³⁷ What these etymological examinations highlight is the conceptual proximity between the conversion presented by Descartes and the cases exhibited above. In the cases of Augustine, Justin Martyr, and Cyprian of Carthage, conversion is described as a sudden infusion of light in the heart. The analogy to be pondered, therefore, is that of the Cartesian *adverto* as in *animadverto* and the Augustinian and Cyprianic *infundo*, which literally means “to shed, pour out or diffuse.”

The discussion can be framed along the following lines: by what means has Cartesian conversion occurred? At the beginning of *Meditation I*, of course, we find the meditating subject certain, at least, of something: that falsity has been admitted for truth. There is no doubt about the need to engage in meditation and to replace old, shaky foundations with stable truths. And as Descartes himself will state in *Meditation III*: “Whatever is shown to me by natural light . . . can in no way be dubious.”³⁸ Is one in a position to draw the proportionately inverse conclusion and say that what cannot be dubious must have been necessarily shown by natural light? If so, the state of conversion presented by the motion of *animadverto*, its indubitability, cannot be understood but as having been produced by the determination of light Descartes calls natural light or *lumen*

³⁷ *Adverto* is composed of the preposition *ad* and the verb *verto* (*to turn*), a verb that is close to the one Descartes will immediately use to describe the general overturning of his opinions (*evertio*).

³⁸ *Nam quaecumque lumine naturali mihi ostenduntur . . . nullo modo dubia esse possunt* (AT VII, 38).

naturalis. The urgency and certainty of having to engage in meditation cannot be understood otherwise.

To understand *animadverto* as closely related to, or even structured around, the notion of *lumen naturalis* would dramatically shorten the distance between Descartes' mental or animic direction and Augustine's and Cyprian's luminic infusion. It also serves to illustrate how the personal determinations of light are effected within the meditating subject's confessional dynamic, only to complete and complexify themselves as the metaphysical aspects of such luminic determinations are brought forth, especially in the middle *Meditations*.

And yet an important difference remains: while Descartes speaks of a direction of the mind or soul that discovers past movements of admission, Augustine and Cyprian speak of an infusion of light that dissipates darkness in the heart. Let us recall that within the tradition of Latin *confessio*, aside from belief, the heart is conceived as capable of thoughts and arguments (or *dialogismos*). If we are to take Descartes' intention in the *Letter to the Sorbonne* of addressing the infidel seriously—and we are—there can be no primordial appeal in the first *Meditation* to the fideistic aspect of the heart. This already delimits the notion of confession in the *Meditations*, for a confession of faith or *homologeô* cannot properly coexist with the first moment of the project. By the same token, it also delimits the way in which confession is presented in the *Meditations*, namely, in a highly conceptual manner.

One can take such limits to denote what is really at stake for Descartes in the notion of reading. Just as one must interpret Augustine's silence in *Book III* of his *Confessions* as showing in writing the limits that, if transgressed, whether due to ethical or

aesthetic parameters, would hinder his own confessional project,³⁹ the lack of a detailed, individual confession in *Meditation I* can be interpreted as intending not to hinder the search for universality. This is why the *pathos* of Descartes' confession has to do with the experience of a general crisis of conversion, if thus we may call it, a crisis that leaves the space open for the reader to imagine its dramatic intensity. A detailed confession of the crisis could very well restrict the capacity of the reader to occupy the space of the author and thus undergo the path of meditation.

But does this imply that the *Meditations* are finished with *homologeô*? Not necessarily. What happens with *homologeô* can be seen as a classic example of the decentering Descartes is obligated to perform as he tailors the genre of the *Meditations*, for the reader will have to wait until the third *Meditation*, where God is discovered and posited as an archetype that formally contains all the objective reality present in the idea of an infinite being, for the meditating subject to engage in a contemplative silence that is reminiscent of classic mystical experiences. Descartes' explicit use of the Latin verb *adorare* ("to adore") in *Meditation III* communicates such an experience: "To intuit, to admire, and to adore the beauty of his immense light as much as the gaze of my darkened mind will be capable of bearing it."⁴⁰

With his contemplative silence, Descartes restores the praise or *laudatio* that constituted the other meaning of *exomologeô*. Consequently, the tone of narration dramatically changes by *Meditation V*, becoming somewhat more engaged in certain

³⁹ Augustine merely states: "For I dared so far one day within the walls of Your church and during the very celebration of Your mysteries to desire and carry out an act worthy of the fruits of death" (*Confessions* III.III.5). We do not know, and can only imagine, what Augustine was confessing. We do know, nevertheless, regardless of the lack of details, that Augustine is confessing.

⁴⁰ *Immensi hujus luminis pulchritudinem, quantum caligantis ingenii mei acies ferre poterit, intueri, admirari, adorare* (AT VII, 52).

discovered facts, such as that God cannot be a deceiver. A decentered *homologê* can also be interpreted in what follows:

“For how could I understand that I doubt or desire, that is, that I lacked something and was not completely perfect, if there were not in me an idea of a more perfect being in comparison to which I recognized my own defects?”⁴¹

If all recognition of lacks and defects springs from comparing myself to a perfect being, the idea whereof is in me, then such comparison can also shed light on the urgency to engage in meditation, for such urgency could be springing from a direct realization, stemming from the comparison between subjective imperfection and divine perfection, about the need to meditate. To link the idea of God and *lumen naturalis* would not be complicated, for the *idea Dei* will contain everything that is clear and distinct and everything that is clear and distinct is revealed by natural light, but this requires an analysis that grapples directly with Cartesian metaphysics, a large topic in itself. At this juncture, nevertheless, what can be said is that the need for subjective perfectability in the *Meditations* is grounded in the retroactive effectivity of this comparison (one could even call it “synderesis,” using André Baillet’s term).⁴² One could also assert that if the confessional aspect of the *Meditations* is *sui generis*, it is because Descartes imprints a radical transformation on *homologê* consisting of the retroactive operation of both *lumen naturalis* and the idea of God, the latter eventually ‘demonstrated’ to be a rationally justified existing substance and possible object of belief.

⁴¹ *Quâ enim ratione intelligerem me dubitare, me cupere, hoc est, aliquid mihi deesse, & me non esse omnino perfectum, si nulla idea entis perfectioris in me esset, ex cujus comparatione defectus meos agnoscerem* (AT VII, 45-46).

⁴² In the *Olympiques*, Baillet uses the term “synderesis” when describing Descartes’ interpretation of his famous second dream of 1619. He explains it as a retroactive “remorse of conscience concerning the sins he [Descartes] could have committed during the course of his life up to now” (AT X, 217-19).

The radical transformation of *homologê* in the *Meditations* also pertains to the temporality of confession. The first opening of admission has been related to the vantage point of the present. The second opening will be related to the past but, before going into such topic, it is necessary to address the future as it has been conceived within the temporal fullness involved in confession. Here lies an important mutation in what has to do with confessional temporality, for, after acknowledging the urgent need to meditate, Descartes will place the subject on a negative ground by means of radical doubt, where meditation will advance towards the future as truth is gradually being discovered. This discovery of truth is *also* fictional in the sense that it operates as an “as if.” The author (who is both meditator and character) will place himself at the very beginning of the meditative journey, “as if” he had not discovered the truths to be discovered, but rather supposing or feigning (the strict Latin in mind is *fin*go, also “to form”) that he ignores what is in store.

This topic is crucial when analyzing how the *Meditations* function as a manual, for it is in this fictional “as if” that both reader and author begin to meditate with each other, the author replacing the spiritual director of traditional Ignatian exercises. Martial Gueroult states: “The *Meditations* is not, in effect, mere dry geometry, but the initiation of one soul by another soul acting as its guide.”⁴³ This guidance, nevertheless, happens in very determinate ways: first, it is exclusively achieved through reading. Second, even though the meditating subject’s retreat might still be thought as echoing the anchoritic tradition, the meditator retreats only to produce a text.

⁴³Martial Gueroult, *Descartes’ Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons I: The Soul and God*, trans. Roger Ariew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 9.

In what regards the meditating subject as anchorite, Descartes cannot appeal to intersubjectivity like Loyola does, writing in his *Introductory Observations* to the *Spiritual Exercises* that these are directed both for the “one who is to give” and “for the exercitant.”⁴⁴ The one who is to give is literally she who administers a dose; she who is responsible for adapting the spiritual exercises to the condition of the patient. Descartes removes this possibility from the *Meditations* and their dimension as a manual, for the meditating subject's anchoretic retreat puts her in a position where her relation to natural light will account for both agency and passivity, both for seeing what natural light makes manifest and for directing the mind towards natural light's manifestations.

This temporary anchoretic removal of intersubjectivity also removes a possibility that Loyola grants to the spiritual director: the possibility of methodological variations. Descartes must prescribe no variations in method, lest the order of reasons is broken and the way to truth inevitably lost. The book thus replaces the spiritual father and it does so by necessarily appealing to *lumen naturalis*, a universal component present in every rational subject, which will warrant the reader finding her own way in meditation.

This fits rather smoothly with the fact that the meditating subject is precisely an author. Focusing on a very different set of circumstances, Giorgio Agamben highlights the relationship between author and witness in the following way: “*Auctor* signifies the witness insofar as his testimony always presupposes something—a fact, a thing or a word—that preexists him and whose reality and force must be validated or certified.”⁴⁵ In the case of the spiritual manual, what the author validates or certifies is the final

⁴⁴ Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 1.

⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 149-50.

spiritual outcome to which the spiritual exercises are meant to lead. The authority of the author, therefore, consists in having once occupied the place of the patient. The validity of her witness is certified by the fact that the author has occupied the place that the reader is meant to occupy, but has overcome the patient's position to validate it as author.

If one may redouble the language of conversion, the author's situation revolves around two conversions, or one conversion that has two faces: the first concerns truth, the second concerns narration. The first conversion involves the personal determinations of light; the other is a conversion from patient to witness or author. It is clear that both moments are crucially important in order for this structure to complete itself: without the previous passivity of the patient, the authority of the author cannot be validated and the experience or undergoing will amount to nothing.

It is worth mentioning that a deep tension surfaces when pondering the expression, in the *Meditations'* very first paragraph, that marks the urgency of engaging in meditation: *in culpa*. It is this *in culpa* that has been rendered above as *guilty* so as to not soften its tone, which allows no procrastination. If Descartes wants to fully bracket ethics, as he states in the corrections demanded to Mersenne concerning the *Synopsis*,⁴⁶ there would have to exist an affect that goes hand in hand with the notion of an epistemological confession: that of epistemological *culpa* or guilt. If someone like Agamben, for

⁴⁶ Letter to Mersenne on March 18, 1641: "The first correction is in the *Synopsis* of the fourth *Meditation*. After the words: *as to render intelligible what follows*, I would ask you to add this: [*But here, however, it should be remarked that in no way have I dealt with sin or the error committed in pursuing good and evil, but with that which occurs in distinguishing truth from falsehood. Nor are matters regarded pertaining faith or the conduct of life, but rather speculative truths in as much as they are known solely by means of natural light.*], and enclose the words between these signs [], so it can be seen they have been added" (AT III, 334).

instance, is correct in affirming that “responsibility is [so] closely intertwined with the concept of *culpa* that, in a broad sense, indicates the imputability of damage,”⁴⁷ then something like *epistemological responsibility* must also be at hand. But if we allow, with Agamben again, the impossibility “that there could be guilt with respect to oneself,”⁴⁸ then both epistemological guilt and responsibility must be related to otherness and, in particular, to the other in the *Meditations* as the other has been determined here: the other as reader.

But not circumscribing responsibility and *culpa* necessarily to otherness would involve both reader and author, for this *culpa* is being brought to visibility by means of writing and is inscribed in writing. This connection between author and reader is particularly manifest in the way Descartes uses various techniques to preserve and, using the terminology coined when analyzing Antony, intensify the coincidence between the time of writing and that of reading. This article will conclude by briefly examining how the temporal coincidence between writing and reading will be crafted, at least on one level, by establishing the contours of the meditator's retreat.

Descartes begins the *Meditations'* self-narrative by extensively using a past tense that conveys the tone of self-examination that belongs to a meditating subject in the process of observing his own personal history. Up until the “I withdraw alone” or *solus secedo*, Descartes' narration seems to perfectly fit the traditional confessional structure where the past is examined under the prism of conversion, which has led the subject to his own present meditation. Once the “I withdraw alone” comes to the scene, however, the temporality of narration shifts to the present indicative. It is remarkable that this indicative shift literally

⁴⁷ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

indicates the moment when the meditating subject's retreat is introduced. Descartes' placement of the temporal change intensifies the present in the guise of the literary character's movement. By choosing this precise juncture to shift verbal tenses, the meditating subject's anchoretic retreat is literally redoubled or *presented in present*. And this is no coincidence. Rather, it actually reveals (*to reveal* being one of the meanings of the Latin *indicare*) the intentions of the author who, by placing the shift to the present at the moment when the subject retreats, magnetically steers the reader towards the present of such retreat.

Initially presented as an abstract concept, the subject's retreat will soon involve certain essential activities. Therefore, when Descartes shifts towards the *present presentation* of the retreat, he is also *presenting in present* all the activities that make up the exercise of meditation. Not unimportantly, one of these activities is writing. The present time of writing, therefore, will unfold as having been included within the present retreat of the meditating subject, a retreat that the reader is supposed to mimetically reproduce.

Aside from the infusion of movement that the verbal shift produces, the mimetical relation between author and reader can now rely on a clear and distinct image:

"But although the senses perhaps sometimes deceive us about certain minute and remote things, there are still many other things that simply cannot be put into doubt, although they are derived from the senses themselves. As, for example, that *I am now here*, sitting by the fire, clothed in a winter robe, holding this paper in my hands, and similar things. By means of what reasoning can it be denied that these same hands or this whole body are truly mine? Unless I were, perhaps, to compare myself to certain madmen, I know not which, whose brains are so injured by the obstinate vapours of black bile that they constantly assert either they are kings when they are paupers, or dressed in purple when they are naked, or that they have an earthenware head, or that they are wholly pumpkins or made of glass."⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *Sed forte, quamvis interdum sensus circa minuta quaedam et remotiora nos fallant, pleraque tamen alia sunt de quibus dubitari plane non potest, quamvis*

Much more could be said concerning the meditator's image coinciding with the encounter with madness. The emphasis here, however, is on the fact that both the shift in the temporality of narration and the image of the meditating subject allow Descartes to literarily actualize one of the latent possibilities of confessional discourse: protreptic mimesis. These subjective operations, however, require the literary construction of the retreat in which they take place.

ab iisdem hauriantur: ut jam me hîc esse, foco assidere, hyemali togâ esse indutum, chartam istam manibus contrectare, et similia. Manus vero has ipsas, totumque hoc corpus meum esse, quâ ratione posset negari? nisi me forte comparem nescio quibus insanis, quorum cerebella tam contumax vapor ex atrâ bile labefactat, ut constanter asseverent vel se esse reges, cùm sunt pauperrimi, vel purpurâ indutos, cùm sunt nudi, vel caput habere fictile, vel se totos esse cucurbitas, vel ex vitro conflatas (AT VII, 19; emphasis mine).