

WRITING PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAYS: PRACTICING CITIZENSHIP IN THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS¹

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Received: 29 July 2020

Accepted: 9 September 2020

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to illustrate, by means of a detailed teaching plan of Descartes' *Meditations*, how a genuine invitation of young students (11th grade) to be part of an ongoing philosophical conversation is possible. The educational goal is to practice involvement in the philosophical concerns of the thinkers we read, actually to experience the unrest that fuels their written work. The didactic proposed is geared towards fulfilling this goal. It rests on several principles, chief among which are a) paying close attention to the text in its full literary richness, b) learning through writing in response to carefully devised prompts, c) teaching that represents the personal journey of the teacher; and d) engaging students in collaborative learning. Many of the practices described are inspired by the methods developed in the Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) in Bard College.

Keywords: Descartes, Plato, Belief, Doubt, Fear, Will

Prologue: Reading Philosophy

Two thirds of the way into *Theaetetus*, Socrates shifts the focus of discussion from defining knowledge to understanding the notion of false judgment (Plato 1973: 187c8-d9):

Socrates: Well now, I wonder if it's still worth raising once again, a point about judgment.

Theaetetus: What point do you mean?

Socrates: It's rather bothering me now, and it often has before, so that I've got into great difficulties, by myself and with others. I can't say what, exactly, this experience is with us, and how it comes into being in us.

Theaetetus: What experience?

¹ I am happy to thank Miha Andrič, Marc Foglia and Jonas Pfister for organizing a Zoom meeting on philosophical essays during the 2020 e-IPO. The discussions in that encounter encouraged me to explore my thoughts on the matter by writing this essay. I am lucky to teach in a wonderful school. I am deeply grateful to my colleagues – especially Edna Ruppin, Liora Harari Amedi, Valerie Zakovitch and Yael Justus Segal – for their friendship and intellectual support, and to my students for their love of philosophy. I am equally grateful to Bard's Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) and especially to its director Erica Kaufman, for developing their innovative teaching practices and for their inspiring workshops. I thank Lucy Aitchison and Dalia Draï for reading a draft of this essay and commenting on matters of style and content. I am also grateful to the two anonymous referees for their attentive reading and constructive comments. Finally, I thank the Edelstein Center at The Hebrew University for granting me a fellowship that enabled me to devote the needed time for writing this essay.

Socrates: Judging something false. I'm still in two minds, now, as to whether we should let it pass, or investigate it in a different way from the one we took a short while ago. Delightful! A turning point? Not at all. Socrates does not even consider to "let it pass" and return to the supposed main issue of defining knowledge. Not now, when he finally reached the true crux of the matter.²

Socrates is "bothered", immersed in "great difficulties". It is now the reader's task to inquire into the source of these difficulties, actually to experience with Socrates his philosophical unrest. Defending this normative demand, being both a philosophical and an educational duty, is the main burden of this essay. In other words, a philosophical text prompts the reader to embark on her own exploration, but she should respect it by trying to be concerned with, even bothered by, the author's concern. The text is not just a trigger for the reader to dwell in her own philosophical habitat. Through the text, the reader converses with the author and broadens her accustomed philosophical landscape.

1. Introduction

In this issue, Marc Foglia's paper "What is an essay? Thoughts on the essay as the form of philosophical expression at the International Philosophy Olympiad (IPO)" sets a starting point in the discussion regarding the role of essay writing in teaching philosophy. I follow his lead in several respects:

- Focusing on the productive integration of essay writing in philosophy teaching (mainly in high school).
- Taking IPO methods and criteria³ as setting values that need exploration and clarification. This means looking at a specific type of philosophical essay, the type that invites the writer to respond to a quotation.
- Viewing essay writing as a relatively open form of writing, less rigid, that is, than the academic paper or an exam answer, but still "conditioned by a tradition".⁴
- Regarding the question concerning the appropriate attitude of the writer towards the quotation as our first issue.

In IPO regulations the response to this last issue is phrased as a demand that the essay should be "relevant" to the quotation, but Foglia invites us to explore the exact nature of this highly vague term.⁵ In what follows I propose a way to understand the term.

I want to illustrate the teaching practice that emerges from my understanding of the term "relevant". It is a long illustration, the main bulk of this essay, representing, I estimate, at least six double sessions, ninety minutes each, in class. I am not documenting my own teaching,

² As McDowell remarks in his note to that passage: "the discussion of false judgment is in fact highly relevant to the dialogue's main concern" (Plato 1973: 194).

³ For IPO criteria of essay evaluation, see in this issue Foglia 2020: 132.

⁴ "In the context of IPOs and the practice of essay writing, it is very likely that the less we are aware of a particular tradition, the more we are conditioned by it." (Foglia 2020: 131).

⁵ "Is the quotation only a pretext, the real starting point of the essay being the question formulated by the student? Another ambiguity arises: Is the true starting point of the essay the question, or is it a thesis that the student formulates in response to the question and submits for examination in the argument?" (Foglia 2020: 133).

though the practices described, and the contents discussed are drawn from my actual classes, in high-school and university. I attempt here to integrate them into a coherent teaching module devoted to the study of Descartes' *Meditations*.

The methods employed in this module are inspired by the practices I have learned in several week-long workshops led by associates of the Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) at Bard College. The basic drive of IWT is to “enrich learning in all disciplines with programs which focus on the role of writing in teaching and learning.”⁶ The teaching plan detailed below is my enthusiastic application to teaching philosophy of the methods I have acquired and the enriching experiences I have enjoyed in these workshops. In several places below I mention the practices by their IWT names and refer to a book of essays that introduces these practices and their rationale (Vilardi and Chang 2009). These references are only reminders, they do not reflect my full indebtedness to the way in which IWT transformed my teaching.

2. Teaching Descartes' Meditations

The teaching module I am about to describe is part of an Epistemology course for 11th grade students. It is an elective course, so I assume that they are highly motivated and prepared for hard work. Prior to this study unit, the class learned some basic philosophical logic and several Platonic dialogues. I chose to describe the flow of the class as a set of instructions to teachers.⁷

The students arrive to the first class after reading at home the first meditation. The reading instructions are minimal. The main requests are, to research a little bit on the historical and personal context of the book and its author, and to note the autobiographical nature of the text and reflect on its credibility. Start the first meeting by reading aloud the final paragraph of the first meditation.

Like a prisoner who dreams that he is free, starts to suspect that it is merely a dream, and wants to go on dreaming rather than waking up, so I am content to slide back into my old opinions; I fear being shaken out of them because I am afraid that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to struggle not in the light but in the imprisoning darkness of the problems I have raised. (Descartes 1996: 15)⁸

In the first stage, read the paragraph aloud. Then you may be a bit playful: ask one student to read it as if it is an indifferent analysis in a professional academic conference. Ask another

⁶ For more information see: Bard College Institute for Writing & Thinking, accessed 23 July 2020 <http://writingandthinking.org>.

⁷ A caveat should be added here. The didactic offered is highly time consuming, at least six ninety minutes sessions devoted to Descartes' *Meditations*. This led one of the referees of this paper to suggest that the study plan may “suit a special course for undergraduate university students better than average high school students.” I agree that high school curricular constraints may prevent such a prolonged and attentive reading of a single text. But this is a drawback of the type of curriculum that focuses on “covering the material” at the expense of meaningful philosophical engagement with it. In all other respects (students' involvement, playfulness, scaffolding the difficulties encountered in the process) I believe that the didactic suits high school students.

⁸ I am working with translations. The attentive reading I suggest, including the employment of subtle linguistic and literary sensitivities, is best done with the original text. My own limitations (I don't read Latin) as well as the students' preclude this.

student to read it as an emotional monologue in a drama.⁹ During that second reading invite the students to underline an emotion or a state of mind that attracts their attention. At this stage prompt them to write several lines in which they explain their attraction. Specifically, ask them to relate to these emotions in a personal and associative way. When they finish their writing, read aloud the paragraph, and ask the students to interfere in your reading when you reach their chosen term and read aloud their reaction to the term they underlined. By the end of this stage, the class will be filled with personal and emotional reactions to the text in its fullness not only in its thin philosophical content. Let me give an example:

Upon reaching the words “being shaken out” a student interrupts and reads: “being shaken out makes me feel like a fruit that falls from a tree that is shaken. Who is shaking the tree? Am I going to rot, alone on the ground?” We do not react but continue till the next interruption.¹⁰

Next, prompt the students to write several lines regarding the state of mind that Descartes shares with us. The prompt needs explanation. The students are asked to describe the state of mind (say: he is afraid) and its object (say: of freedom). This is followed by two other prompts. First, “do you believe the author”, and second, “why”. Now invite the students to share their reactions to the prompts and initiate class discussion. After the end of the discussion ask the students to write an opening paragraph of an essay that reacts to the quote from Descartes.

The aim of the exercise is to encourage attentive conversation with the text. By attentive, I mean opening up to the full range of the author’s act of communication. I want the students to immerse themselves in a conversation: “What is he (Descartes) trying to say to me, what is the reaction he is trying to elicit?” To immerse oneself in a conversation does not mean to surrender to all its maneuvers. One can object, resent, doubt, oscillate, be swayed, and so on, but it all starts with listening.

One might object that the purpose of philosophical education should be to train the student to be attentive to the content of the text, the thesis that it advances, the arguments it uses, and not to be sidetracked by the marginal emotive, stylistic, evocative, uses of language. The wonderful language of Descartes, his inviting and personal way of writing, only decorate the real thing. The suggested exercise distracts the student from her true object of attention.

My first reaction to this objection is philosophical. The assumption that language, any language, can be transparent; that content can be expressed in a way that is free from imagery, metaphor, analogy, conventions of presentation, and the like, was severely undermined by the philosophy of the previous century. I shall not attempt to document all the philosophical work that established this line of thought. Within analytical philosophy, whose history was dominated by the idea of an ideal language, the critique was launched by leading figures such as Wittgenstein, Austin, Quine, Sellars, Davidson, Goodman, Kuhn, and Hesse. The doubts about the possibility of transparent language were voiced even regarding mathematical and scientific language. In “softer” domains of discourse, such as metaphysics, politics, and ethics, this repudiation of ideal language was even more dramatic. Though I share this philosophical response and believe it has crucial implications for the didactics of philosophy, it is not the main line of argument I pursue here.

⁹ In IWT this practice is called “text rendering”.

¹⁰ This practice is another type of “text rendering”.

Even if we grant that in reading philosophical texts we should focus our attention on the philosophical content and neglect the style of presentation, our entry point is the text in all its richness. There are no shortcuts. Let us go back to Descartes. The most we can do, if we try a content-focused reading of the passage, is the rather thin statement that doubting old opinions is not a one-time effort and it has a high psychological price. But why is that? Why is the struggle not over once you understand that your old opinions are vulnerable to doubt? Surely, if the skeptical work was done properly, there is no need for continuous sustenance. This passage discloses a drama in which the intellect is not the only character. But how can we uncover the characters in the drama without paying attention to their traits, their virtues, and vices?

So, what is the object of Descartes' fear? The first, immediate answer is that he is afraid of waking up, mainly because waking up is followed by hard labor and struggle. In opposition, the dream represents tranquility, peaceful sleep. We have then the opposition between periods of sleep and periods of being awake as an opposition between peace and struggle. He wants to go on dreaming because he prefers passivity (as in "sliding") over activity (as in "hard labor"). A tension lurks: our narrator prefers the vice of idleness over the virtue of industriousness.

But can we simply say that Descartes is afraid of hard work? Such a conclusion contradicts the imagery of the passage. In the first stage, suspicions are raised regarding the peaceful dream of the old opinions; namely, the supposed freedom is cast into doubt. But if he wakes up and goes out of the prison, what awaits him? "Hard labour [...] in the imprisoning darkness of the problems I have raised." Note the imagery: darkness vs. light, imprisonment vs. freedom, dreaming vs. awakening. Descartes is willing to struggle in the light. The fear is not of hard work *per se*. It is the horror of leaving a peaceful prison never to return, for the sake of entering the darkness of another life imprisonment with the bonus of hard labor. In other words, Descartes' fears that the supposed light of knowledge is itself an unattainable illusion.

If we follow this interpretive track, a natural sequel will be that Descartes' fears are spurred by his doubts regarding the efficacy of the skeptical method. But why is it so frightening? In the classroom this can be a crucial question to ask in our joint attempt to share Descartes' *own* concerns, the sources of *his* unrest. And if he is worried about a life of constant struggle to no avail, then we should understand why seeking truth is such a struggle – to wit: not just hard work but struggle.

At this stage offer the class to juxtapose Descartes' state of mind by the end of the first meditation with that of Plato's prisoner forced out of the cave. There is a deep philosophical dialogue between the texts, but here again, I suggest starting with the imageries. Prompt the students to list common images that serve both philosophers. Socrates describes the process of forcing a prisoner out of the cave and habituating him to turn his eyes to the sun. The first stage is difficult:

Socrates: Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like. When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he'd be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he'd seen before. What do you think he'd

say, if we told him that what he'd seen before was inconsequential, but that now – because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned toward things that are more – he sees more correctly? Or, to put it another way, if we pointed to each of the things passing by, asked him what each of them is, and compelled him to answer, don't you think he'd be at a loss and that he'd believe that the things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being shown? (Plato 1992: 515c-d)

Invite the students to write on the imagery used here by Plato and to identify similar patterns present in the first meditation. We may note here several conspicuous resemblances: movement from darkness to light, from imprisonment to freedom, the suffering in the new situation, and the longing for the old way. But we should also note a glaring difference. Descartes writes: "I am content to slide back into my old opinions" whereas Plato writes that "he'd be at a loss and that he'd believe that the things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being shown". Descartes is drawn back to his old opinions by the appeal of comfort, almost seduced by the prospect of the calm and undisturbed existence of his customary beliefs. Plato's prisoner still believes in the truth of his earlier sights. He opts for the old beliefs because he is not – yet! – able "to see the things whose shadows he'd seen before". In Descartes' plot, we witness an inner struggle. The narrating subject himself suspects that his felt freedom is only a dreamt illusion. Out of his own drive for true freedom, he embarks into an awakening journey, and then something – again, within him – holds him back. In Plato's plot, an external agent exerts force on the unknowing prisoner, as the task itself – looking at the sun – involves a phase of blindness. There is no inner struggle. Without the external force, he would have remained loyal to his old beliefs. But once this process of forced habituation reaches its conclusion the drama ends.

Socrates: Finally, I suppose, he'd be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or some alien place, but the sun itself, in its own place, and be able to study it.

Glaucon: Necessarily so.

Socrates: And at this point he would infer and conclude that the sun provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he used to see.

Glaucon: It's clear that would be his next step.

Socrates: What about when he reminds himself of his first dwelling place, his fellow prisoners, and what passed for wisdom there? Don't you think that he'd count himself happy for the change and pity the others?

Glaucon: Certainly.

Socrates: And if there had been any honors, praises, or prizes among them for the one who was sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by and who best remembered which usually came earlier, which later, and which simultaneously, and who could thus best divine the future, do you think that our man would desire these rewards or envy those among the prisoners who were honored and held power? Instead, wouldn't he feel, with Homer, that he'd much prefer to "work the earth as a serf to another, one without possessions," and go through any sufferings, rather than share their opinions and live as

they do?

Glaucon: I suppose he would rather suffer anything than live like that.

(Plato 1992: 516b-e)

The prose is clear: nothing lures the prisoner back to prison. The riches of the old ways were turned off completely, they can no longer tempt him. His soul is one. His state of mind is completely stable. There is nothing in him that can provoke unrest. Descartes emulates Plato's rich imagery, inviting us to walk again in the path from darkness to light, from servitude to freedom; but he adds an antagonist that was not present in the first allegory. We will come back to this drama later in the essay, but I think that now the class is ready to return to our question regarding Descartes: What is the source of his fears?

The answer we have already reached is that Descartes is afraid that the supposed light of knowledge is itself an unattainable illusion. We also wondered why is it that the journey towards truth is portrayed as a struggle. After noticing the difference between Plato and Descartes, we may infer that in the latter's understanding the struggle is not just the companion of a single transitory phase. The pursuit of knowledge involves an ongoing struggle against an internal demon that draws the inquiring subject back to his dubitable opinions. At this stage of our reading, we have just finished the first meditation; the students are left to do some guesswork. We may play the game and leave the search for the villain within us to a later stage in our reading of the book – to the fourth meditation. Meanwhile, we can prompt the students to probe again the question of fear from a different angle.

It is quite usual to point at Descartes' search for a stable anchor on which we may rely, so that we shall not drift in the sea of opinions. Descartes claims that without such solid foundation knowledge is impossible. The reference to Archimedes in the second meditation strengthens this line. In our paragraph it is possible to understand "being shaken out" of our old opinions as a variation on the same theme. The old opinions form a solid structure, reliance on which does provide stability and may serve us well in daily life. So, it may indeed be a reasonable answer to the question regarding the source of Descartes' fear: he is not sure that the skeptical method will lead him to find a new anchor and he fears the prospects of unstable life.¹¹

Though it is a reasonable interpretation, it invites a two-headed arrogant dismissal of Descartes' worries. "He is looking for an assurance that we today know is unattainable" coupled with "we have grown out of those fears, we have matured. Today we can live without such an assurance". The first head scorns Descartes for not accepting our contemporary embrace of our fallibility, thus leaping over the rationalist/empiricist debate before it even started. In terms of historical interpretation, it represents the vice of whiggish anachronism that treats Descartes as an embryonic stage in modern philosophical and scientific maturation. The second head psychologizes his philosophical quest. My starting point stresses our role to initiate our students into the world of philosophical conversations. To converse with a philosophical text involves a

¹¹ Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce 1877) offers an evolutionary explanation for this type of quest to stabilize our knowledge. William James (James 1986) expressed a similar aversion towards an undecided state of mind.

search after the authors' concerns and making them, at least temporarily, a source of unrest to us as readers. I do not want my students to enter the role of therapists. You should not research into Descartes' fears in order to prove that they are not grounded in a real reason to worry. On the contrary, you read him in order to broaden your understanding of the real philosophical concerns that gave rise to such fears.

We are back with the fear and the troubling question: What is so threatening in a world in which our quest for knowledge is always accompanied by doubt, not as a methodical tool but as an enduring companion of an everlasting task? Let us look at the progress of science to improve our understanding of Descartes' worries. He was, we should remember, a philosopher/scientist. In our times, as Weber reminded us one hundred years ago, "science is chained to the course of progress" and in principle "this progress goes on *ad infinitum*" (Weber 1948: 137-8). But, as Weber points out so profoundly, this is not necessarily a reason for celebration. The law of progress determines that "[e]very scientific 'fulfilment' raises new 'questions'; it *asks* to be 'surpassed' and outdated. Whoever wishes to serve science has to resign himself to this fact [...]. For, after all, it is not self-evident that something subordinate to such a law is sensible and meaningful in itself" (Weber 1948: 138). Weber describes a situation quite similar to Descartes' nightmare, in which scientific research is in fact conducted within the "imprisoning darkness of the problems" that were raised in the first meditation. If we try to think of such a situation as a source of philosophical worry, we may recognize, with Weber, that devotion to such an endless endeavor may become a meaningless Sisyphean struggle.

We still have a long way to go in our attempt to understand the philosophical sources of Descartes' fears; but it seems that we went far enough in the illustration of the non-therapeutic attempt to decipher philosophical concerns that are embedded in the texts we read with our students. I mean that by now, our students may themselves be bothered by the concerns we have formulated. We may remind them that they ask often, what is the point of philosophy if we go back to questions that were formulated thousands of years ago. Is there a philosophy teacher that did not hear students voicing such a challenge? And their question stems out from a worry quite like the Cartesian one: are we going through all this hard work just to stay in the darkness of chronic doubts and disagreements.¹² Given Weber's sharp diagnosis of the nature of scientific research, chaining philosophy "to the course of progress", in the way certain philosophical naturalists recommend, cannot alleviate *this* worry.

We can now return to the search of the villain in Descartes' internal drama. What is the power within us that makes the struggle for truth so hard? What is the source of error? We may present the class with this issue after several sessions in which the second and third meditations are read and discussed. By now they are ready to read Descartes' response to this troubling question:

So, the power of willing that God has given me, being extremely broad in its scope and also perfect of its kind, is not the cause of my mistakes. Nor is my power of understanding

¹² There is an interesting bifurcation between science and philosophy at this point. In science we have ample historical evidence that shows that even a firm scientific consensus will be "surpassed and outdated". In philosophy the research never yields a communal agreement. In both cases the lack of stability generates discontent.

to blame: God gave it to me, so there can be no error in its activities; when I understand something, I undoubtedly understand it correctly. Well, then, where do my mistakes come from? Their source is the fact that *my will has a wider scope than my intellect has*, so that I am free to form beliefs on topics that I don't understand. Instead of behaving as I ought to, namely by restricting my will to the territory that my understanding covers, that is, suspending judgment when I am not intellectually in control, I let my will run loose, applying it to matters that I don't understand. In such cases there is nothing to stop the will from veering this way or that, so it easily turns away from what is true and good. That is the source of my error and sin. (Descartes 1996: 41)

There is so much to do with this paragraph. Here is one option: break the class into several groups and ask them to draw a map divided into territories of knowledge.¹³ The landscape should be drawn with close attention to details: perceptual valley, scientific plain, mathematical path, the sea of self-knowledge, and God's mountain. Of course, let the students invent their own geography. Why not add moral and political judgments and aesthetic valuations to our map, even though they are not mentioned by Descartes? After the groups finish the playful map-drawing we may compare the different maps. Now let us start the game. In the stage prior to the skeptical challenge, the stage of the "old opinions", who controls the terrain? Is it a legitimate occupation? Ask the students to answer the question of legitimacy using Descartes' terminology. Now what happens by the end of the first meditation? The previous sovereign, the unrestricted will, is dethroned. Who is the agent that conducted the coup? Did it seize power? Not really. Refer the students to the imperative to restrict our judgment, to suspend "judgment when I am not intellectually in control". One power was dethroned, but by the end of the first meditation, there is no replacement. We are left with unsecured territory open to attack from various forces. Prompt the students to answer again the question regarding the source of Descartes' fears. I think, now we may reach an answer that reflects Descartes' fear. In the first meditation, the intellectual faculty of understanding drove away the unwarranted judgements of the will from their customary strongholds, not by replacing them with stable affirmations backed by our understanding, but by setting the rules of reason – *the method* – to which the struggle must conform.¹⁴ But at this stage, there is no guarantee that the faculty of understanding, the intellect, is strong enough; that there is a "territory that my understanding

¹³ This is a version of the general IWT practice "Writing from Images".

¹⁴ Here I agree with Jan Forsman that deciding to doubt (suspend belief) is not "an easy act of the will" (Forsman 2017: 51). In the first meditation Descartes provides the will with the reasons needed to doubt. I partly disagree with Forsman about the possible endurance of the state of suspension of judgment. He claims that as "Descartes describes the suspension to be arduous and difficult, it suggests that we should read him as being completely serious about the general suspension of judgment. Based on this, the use of the method is not a purely hypothetical mind game. Descartes truly means that we should suspend judgment on all of our opinions and beliefs, as difficult as this may be. Suspension of judgment is therefore meant to be psychologically real and genuine" (Forsman 2017: 56). Yes, Descartes is absolutely serious about the duty to suspend judgment when lacking conclusive evidence. And yes, it is difficult to contain our previous habits to judge on matters that are not secured by reason. But if reason dictates complete skepticism, then it condemns us to a futile struggle in "the imprisoning darkness of the problems I have raised". If so, we may have reason enough to sway our will back to the old opinions. I do not want to press the point. I am not a Descartes scholar and Forsman's interpretation is very convincing. The didactic path that I offer in this paper can reasonably lead to his conclusions, and if they are arrived at in class by one of the students they will be welcomed most happily.

covers”. And if this is the case, is the intellect strong enough to block the will from taking over again?

There is no doubt that Descartes depicts an internal drama. By now it is also clear that the two contending forces are the intellect and the will. Equipped with this understanding we go back to the struggle between the two main forces on the map and to our paragraph at the end of the first meditation. Ask the students to write what happened, given their present knowledge, in this battle between the two faculties. Then prompt them in a more focused way: did any of the battling forces lose territory in the first meditation? Did any side gain control over a certain piece of land? After writing on the two prompts ask them to share whatever part of their written materials they wish to present and discuss the variety of answers in class. Say the discussion leads to the understanding that though the will lost its unwarranted strongholds the intellect did not seize control over the vacant territories. We are left with doubts, in “no-man’s-land”. If so, what was the intellect’s achievement in the first meditation?

Given the explanation of error in the fourth meditation, it seems that in the first meditation the faculty of understanding succeeded to restrain the will; provided it with reasons to confine its judgments only to the proper fields, yet to be discovered by reason. Does this mean that Descartes *understood* and *affirmed* by the end of the first meditation that his “will has a wider scope than [his] intellect has”? Well, it seems that not yet, as this is part of self-knowledge that was only conquered by reason in the second meditation. Does he *understand* and *affirm* the duty to restrain judgment? No doubt that he feels the burden of the duty to restrain his judgments, that is, to *behave* as he ought, but is this an achievement of his understanding? His intellect gave reasons that tempered the appetite of his will, but was the truth of the matter secured?

We are now in deep waters indeed. It is a great opportunity to explain in class the distinctions between reasons to believe and reasons to act, between intellectual reasoning and practical reasoning, between judging a belief to be true or false, and accepting or rejecting a duty. And most importantly, between the Platonic non-voluntarist conception of believing and Descartes’ version of the voluntarist conception. If time allows and the class is willing and capable, we can turn to a crucial controversy between Plato and Descartes. Remind the students of Socrates’ denial of the possibility of weakness of the will, as “[N]o man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil. To prefer evil to good is not in human nature” (Plato 1956: 358c-d). Contrast this with the closing paragraph of the first meditation as expressing a genuine fear from the potency of the will to lead us to error: to *sin*.

We can now come back with our class to the Cartesian struggle. Ask the students if they should add to their map of the terrain of knowledge a special place for method. Then ask those who answered in the affirmative to write what they think happened to this location during the first meditation. Ask those who thought that there is no such place in the terrain, to explain what the achievement of reason was in that meditation.

We have two camps in class, those that take the rules of method to be part of the surface geography of knowledge and those who see them as having a different role, say that of a guiding norm. We have two rival interpretations. Which provides a better explanation of Descartes’ fears? Prompt the students to formulate a proposition that may be regarded as a constraint on

the interpretation of Descartes’ *Meditations*. Give them an example: the proposition that “the *Meditations* is a text that documents a progression in Descartes’ understanding”. As a progression assumes that latter understandings are not at Descartes’ disposal at earlier stages, we can say that a demand that an interpretation of a fragment in the book must be sensitive to its place in the progression is implied in the proposition. In this sense, the interpreter cannot use Descartes’ understanding in latter fragments when she constructs Descartes’ consideration in the earlier one. This is what I mean by “constraint”.

To manage this interpretive exploration, I recommend using the method of “dialectical notebook”.¹⁵ This is an in-class written task in small groups that ensures active participation of all students. Given the fact that the discussion is very demanding, combining understanding of both content and method, a group effort may be helpful. The process itself is quite simple. Divide the class into groups of three students, provide *each student* with an A3 paper with four columns (see below).

Writer	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Writer
Write a proposition that you consider a constraint. Explain why and support with textual evidence. End with an interpretive demand that is raised by your constraint.	Do you accept the writer’s constraint? If not, explain and support with textual evidence. If yes, add another textual support.	Do you accept the writer’s constraint? If not, explain and support with textual evidence. If yes, add another interpretive demand.	Sum up the discussion and reformulate the constraint you offered (or explain why it should be discarded).
Answer:	Answer:	Answer:	Answer:

Tab 1. Dialectical Notebook: Constraints on the Interpretation of Descartes’ *Meditations*

Have the students sit in triangles and instruct them as follows: each one responds to the question in the first column titled “Writer”. After ten minutes, each participant gives her sheet to the student sitting on her right and they all respond to the question posed in the second column titled “Respondent 1”. After another ten minutes, each participant hands over the sheet to the student on her right and the three answer the question in the third column titled “Respondent 2”. In the final stage, each student gets from the student on her left the sheet she has initiated and devotes the last ten minutes to respond to the question in the fourth column, titled again “Writer”. Completing the task takes forty minutes. It is hard work; they should have a break. When they return ask each threesome to compile an agreed-upon set of constraints and to record dissenting voices. With this at hand, we resume full-class discussion on the interpretation of the

¹⁵ This is another effective practice in IWT arsenal. For an extensive discussion on a variety of uses of the method, see Ranny Bledsoe 2009.

Meditations. It will take quite a while and it is important to devote to it all the time that it needs. The students worked hard, and they earned the privilege to conduct a true philosophical discussion. They may enjoy the justified feeling that their opinion has weight and that it counts.

We do not know in advance what the list of constraints arrived at will include. Although I believe that, as teachers, we determine the procedure, not the results, I do feel that in this final discussion a certain philosophical insight must appear. If it does not grow out of the students' work, I recommend summoning it. Descartes writes in the paragraph from the fourth meditation that "When I understand something, I undoubtedly understand it correctly". Now his idea of methodical doubt presupposes that a person may entertain a certain content (say, a perceptual content) and judge it to be true, even though upon examination the judgment may be incorrect. It follows, from the perspective of the fourth meditation, that I could not have understood the content I entertained. The issue is crucial. For Descartes, believing is a two-stage affair: entertaining a content is not believing. To reach belief this first stage must be followed by judgement. But Descartes must give some account of the cognitive nature of entertaining a content, lest the old opinions of the past be reduced to mere mumbling; thus nullifying distinction between Cartesian epistemology on the one hand and Plato's or Spinoza's conceptions¹⁶ on the other. The Cartesian drama, in other words, presupposes some liaisons between the intellect and the will. In the first meditation the intellect provides reasons for the will to suspend judgment. The will listens to the voice of reason, but it is not robbed from all its power. All this happens while the contents of the old opinions are still entertained, awaiting verdict. When the subject reaches understanding, grasping clear and distinct ideas, suspense ends. The judgment becomes part of the understanding.

Here then is a reformulation of the interpretive dilemma: Does Descartes, by the end of the first meditation, understand the rules of method or did he commit himself to them by a voluntary willful act? I noted the importance of this question in the history of philosophy, but I think that we must acknowledge the crucial religious weight of this moment. Seen from the perspective of the fourth meditation, overcoming error is equivalent to overcoming sin. Did Descartes reach an understanding of method that rendered him immune to sin or does the end of the first meditation represent a moment in which a voluntary leap of faith was for him the only path to salvation?¹⁷

¹⁶ The Platonic conception is represented nicely in the query about the very possibility of having false opinions in the section of the *Theaetetus* I presented in the Prologue. For Spinoza, see for example his discussion on the inability to entertain falsities in section 54 of his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*: "For in our own case, knowing as I do that I exist, my existence or non-existence cannot be a matter of fiction for me; nor again can I engage in the fiction of an elephant that can pass through the eye of a needle; nor knowing the nature of God, can his existence or non-existence be a matter of fiction for me" (Spinoza 1992: 245).

¹⁷ Accepting the second horn of the dilemma leads to an interpretation that sheds light on William James' debate with Descartes. James' thesis is iconoclastic: "Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, 'do not decide, but leave the question open,' is itself a passional decision, – just like deciding yes or no, – and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth" (James 1986: 11). The icon, I think, is Descartes', and on the interpretation here suggested the polarity rests on a deep agreement. They share the idea that faith must rely on an act of the will. The *timing* of the "passional decision" is the junction in which their ways part: For Descartes it is the grand single decision to embrace method, for James it is the recurring act of will that is called for whenever a person is confronted with "a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds". In contemporary terms this is the debate between foundationalism and naturalism in epistemology.

This discussion leads us back to the division of the class into two camps before we entered our dialectical notebook: one takes method to be part of knowledge proper and the second takes it as a form of guiding norm. Return to that debate and open a discussion: did the exploration done in the dialectical notebook change allegiances? If so, why? If there still are clear camps in the class, ask each camp to provide a written explanation that uses textual anchors on which to ground it. It should be a joint effort in interpretive argumentation that responds to the demands of the interpretive constraints. Specifically, both sides must directly address the question: wherein lies the power that still operates on Descartes, tempting him back to his old opinions?

After this long journey, leave time for the class to process it. Start this session by revealing the pedagogical and philosophical considerations that informed the study module. Emphasize the element of choice: you chose the text, the Platonic comparison, the method, the entry point, and the philosophical focus. There are alternatives, this is neither the only nor the single best way to study the *Meditations*. Stress that your choices embedded the text within a specific philosophical conversation and identified its *systematic* core. In this sense you invited them to join a philosophical journey on a path that you carved. The method enabled them to find their own way. This is not an apology, putting texts on the table and leading the students with instructions and questions is the teacher's role. But as they have read the whole book, ask them to write a list of themes that were left out in the learning process that you have led. This is a hard question; best divide the class into groups of three so that they can help each other. Next, invite them to think together of other entry points to Descartes' text and invite them to share their insights in a group discussion.

In the second part of the session prompt them to reflect on the process they have gone through in the past weeks. In what ways was it different from other classes you take? Did you feel the joy of slow discovery or would you prefer a more thematic option, in which the theses and the arguments of the text are summarized by the teacher? Did you lose track at a certain point, and if so, why? Did the work on the more literary elements of the philosophical texts – imageries, metaphors, etc. – advance your understanding or did it made you lose track? Have a short discussion in which the students share their reflections. As this is a crucial phase in which a community of learning is consolidated, share with them your own experience as well.¹⁸

This ends the series of meetings devoted to Descartes' *Meditations*. To wrap it up, ask the students to write a personal essay. Give them two options: either respond to the final paragraph of the first meditation or choose another paragraph in the texts and converse with it. Emphasize that this is not an exercise in summarizing the class proceedings but an explorative task that may lead them along a variety of paths. Empower them to take their own stance, to use the familiarity they have gained with the text to conduct an informed discussion with Descartes. Remind them that you are inviting them to participate in a conversation, that this is exactly what you tried to do in constructing the study module. You chose your focus and went with it. Choosing a way necessarily implies neglecting others. Advise them to forget the false ideal of comprehensive coverage of the text and promise them that your assessment is never guided by a search for completeness. Encourage them to occupy the driver's seat and to lead their readers

¹⁸ This is an invitation to think and write about the learning process. In IWT terms this is "process writing". For an elaboration, see Guy 2009.

from beginning to end; to make their own point. It may end with a critical approach that challenges Descartes' coherence or it may help integrating the fragments of his thought into a coherent whole. Be that as it may, the close attention we give to the details of Descartes' text ensures that the educational ideal of conversing respectfully with past philosophers is met.

3. Morals to be Drawn

- a. Philosophy teaching should be text-based and historically minded. One cannot really converse with past thinkers and become part of the philosophical tradition without encountering original texts. Furthermore, collecting select passages written by past masters in order to give the students "the feel" of philosophical texts misses the point. To converse with someone, you need to hear her through, immerse yourself in her train of thought. Obviously, we cannot ask the students to read the complete writings of Plato, but to read a dialogue from beginning to end is a reasonable task. One of the results of this moral is that our philosophical curriculum will be less comprehensive. I am not sure that this is a real shortcoming.
- b. Our reading of texts should attend first to the concerns of the author, only then to the students' concerns. To study philosophy is to broaden one's concerns not to remain in their confines.
- c. Hence it is important to engage the students in philosophical discussions that are not in their immediate concerns; meaning, not to concentrate solely on the easier path to their hearts through ethics and political philosophy.
- d. Essay writing is the culmination of a process and the central method of assessment. It enables the student to participate in the conversation, not just to be a silent listener.
- e. Though the culmination is a personal challenge, the way to it is necessarily communal. The practices described in this paper are geared towards the construction of a community of letters.
- f. The essay should be a personal journey that is grounded in a sincere effort to take part in an ongoing philosophical conversation. Hence, our methods of assessment should reward sincerity. How? This is an issue for a separate paper that will analyze the criterion of "originality".
- g. The teaching methods should represent the personal journey of the teacher. The path described here is the one I have chosen. It contains a choice regarding the heart of the matter and therefore there are glaring omissions. Making this fact transparent to the students is a crucial element in their philosophical initiation. In making it transparent, the teacher expresses her own devotion to the philosophical enterprise. Such an expression must be sincere. If it is not, philosophy teaching immediately joins the dreadful hidden curriculum that is the lion's share of our schooling: that teaching (learning) it is separated from doing

it.¹⁹ But if it is sincere, it becomes clear to the students that the teacher invites them to a republic of letters, the very same republic of which she herself is an enthusiastic citizen.²⁰

- h. The alleged clash between text-based and thematic-minded teaching should be abandoned. The module described in this essay is clearly text-based. Still, it is the core of a course in epistemology. It reflects the choice of a focal theme in the teaching of this philosophical subject matter. The theme, in short, is to problematize the idea of entertaining content as a cognitive stage that precedes the act of affirming judgment and is independent of it. The teacher's choice of texts and prompts creates the needed thematic coherence without bombarding the students with text-book banalities.

4. Summary by Example – Application to Essay Assessment

One of the quotes in the 2020 e-IPO was:

“It will be necessary to [...] awaken the experience of the world such as it appears to us insofar as we are in the world through our bodies, and insofar as we perceive the world with our bodies. But by re-establishing contact with the body and with the world in this way, we will also rediscover our-selves”.²¹

A student versed in the methods of close reading that were introduced in this essay will try, before analyzing the content, to sense the author's mood. Here is one way: There is an experience that went dormant (it needs awakening). The author laments a loss and urges his readers to re-establish and re-discover that past. The sense of loss is connected to an act or a process that separated a unity, as the need is to re-establish a contact that was severed.

Now the student may look at the imagery. The experience needs *awakening* so that a certain perceptual-bodily *appearance* will again occupy center-stage. Does the imagery ring a bell, does it resonate familiar philosophical language? Clearly it does, even for a beginner. The philosopher ascends from *Appearance* to *reality* as in Plato's cave, discrediting sense perception as a vehicle to truth. The self is passive when it lends itself to the deliverances of the senses and becomes free by overcoming them. It is *awakened* to its true nature by attending

¹⁹ The damaging separation between teaching and research trickles down to the schools from the universities, in which the distinction is clearly hierarchical. You would often hear professors complain that “my teaching load hinders my ability to do good research”; whereas the converse – “my research load hinders my ability to teach properly” sounds almost like a grammatical mistake in *Academo-language*.

²⁰ All through the essay I stressed not only the teacher's choice of themes but also the optionality of methods, using expressions like “here I recommend” or “one option is”. This led one of the reviewers of the paper to wonder “which signposts/methods/prompts described are necessary for this didactic to work properly”. My response is twofold. First, the choice of specific methods must remain in the teacher's hand if we want to respect the principle that “the teaching methods should represent the personal journey of the teacher”. Second, the methods suggested can work only if the teacher shares the morals listed in this section. Of which I should stress a) close attention to the text in its full literary richness, b) learning through writing in response to prompts and c) engaging students in collaborative learning. So, I cannot answer the challenge directly by pointing to specific methods that are necessary for the didactic to work. The best I can do is to suggest this vague characterization of the frame of mind the teacher needs to adopt. Thus, for instance, I cannot say that the prompt to underline the expressions of Descartes' emotional states of mind in the closing paragraph of the first meditation is essential; but I can say that reading this paragraph without prompting the students to pay attention to the emotional language Descartes chooses to use, will nullify the effects of the didactic I lay out.

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945/2014, p. 213. Translated by Donald A. Landes.

to *reason*, free from bodily imprisonment. Descartes' way to his true self, the *cogito*, turns away from the body altogether.

If the student's first task is to be relevant to the author's concerns, the focus on the "literary" elements of the quote led her well. Merleau-Ponty calls for a radical revision of the philosophical tradition that banishes the body from our conception of knowledge and the self. Now she can write her own essay that takes part in *this* conversation. This is not the only relevant conversation. But a response to this quote that will not attend to the author's sense of loss that was brought about by the philosophical tradition, and to his urgent call to re-instate what was lost, does not fully meet the "relevance" criterion.

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How to cite this article

Prudovsky, Gad (2020): Writing Philosophical Essays: Practicing Citizenship in the Republic of Letters, *Journal of Didactics of Philosophy* 4(3), 137–152. DOI: 10.46586/JDPh.2020.9586.