THE PERFORMANCE OF ANALYSIS:
HABIT AND CONVERSION IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH THOUGHT

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
AND THE COMMITTEE ON GRADUATE STUDIES
OF STANFORD UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Kathryn Elizabeth Hume
August 2012
© 2012 by Kathryn Elizabeth Hume. All Rights Reserved.
Re-distributed by Stanford University under license with the author.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 United States License.
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/us/

This dissertation is online at: http://purl.stanford.edu/yk435qd0073
I certify that I have read this dissertation and that, in my opinion, it is fully adequate in scope and quality as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Roland Greene, Primary Adviser

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that, in my opinion, it is fully adequate in scope and quality as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Johannes Gumbrecht, Co-Adviser

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that, in my opinion, it is fully adequate in scope and quality as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dan Edelstein

Approved for the Stanford University Committee on Graduate Studies.

Patricia J. Gumport, Vice Provost Graduate Education

This signature page was generated electronically upon submission of this dissertation in electronic format. An original signed hard copy of the signature page is on file in University Archives.
Acknowledgements

Naturally, many people contributed to the development of this work. Some penetrate my awareness with particular intensity.

Roland Greene has been an extraordinary mentor during this process. He patiently entertained my flitting ideas at the beginning of the project. He kindly aided me to find the confidence to compose the first drafts. He paid scrupulous attention to details of grammar and style. He helped me learn to trust my intuitions to develop my intellectual autonomy.

Sepp Gumbrecht has been as much an intellectual mentor as a personal mentor. Combining attention, awareness, and care, he discerned when to pressure me to write and when to encourage me to walk away and reflect. He didn’t give me any canned, methodological advice; he grasped what would be best for me and consciously tailored his actions to help me develop my talents and overcome my weaknesses.

Dan Edelstein’s sharp, creative intelligence helped me define a topic of which I could be proud. He predicted potential foibles long before I was able to admit them. He was always supportive when I needed his advice and helped establish my confidence as a scholar.

Reviel Netz, Keith Baker, and George Smith were consistent interlocutors throughout the process. My parents, William and Patricia Hume, gave support and love. Atticus Bergman helped me formulate my ideas about performance; he was an integral interlocutor for chapter four. Guillaume Trojanowski gave crucial, crisp advice to help me understand the method of analysis; our discussions contributed to shaping chapter one. The participants in Stanford’s Workshop in Poetics helped me consolidate chapter three and the participants in Stanford’s MEMS workshop gave help on an early draft of chapter four. Harris Feinsod, David Marno, Frederick Blumberg, Noreen Khawaja, Biliana Kassabova, and Melanie Conroy read various chapter drafts; thankfully, they were my toughest critics.

Countless other friends and mentors have been present throughout, shaping the ideas and emotions refracted in this work. I am grateful to all.
# Table of Contents

Introduction..............................................................................................................1-21

Chapter 1
Turning Analysis into Performance: Habit as Form in Descartes’s Philosophy.........22-64

Chapter 2
After the Wager: the Animal Nature of Religious Conversion………………………65-109

Chapter 3
How Does Art Transform Us? The Performance of Analysis in Seventeenth-century Drama and Aesthetics…………………………………………………………..110-143

Chapter 4
Persona is Personality: The Performance of Analysis and the Social Ethic of *Honnêteté*..................................................................................................144-180

Epilogue
A Detour Through Eighteenth-Century Empiricism.........................................181-187

Works Cited..............................................................................................................188-193
“Assume a virtue if you have it not. That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat Of habits evil, is angel yet in this, That to the use of actions fair and good He likewise gives a frock or livery That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight, And that shall lend a kind of easiness To the next abstinence, the next more easy; For use almost can change the stamp of nature, And either lodge the devil or throw him out With wondrous potency.”

*Hamlet*, act III. Right after Claudius’s failed attempt to pray, Hamlet urges Gertrude to stifle her vice by acting as if she were virtuous. The juxtaposition between these two scenes establishes a dichotomy. The gap separating how Claudius feels and how he acts compromises his prayer; but according to Hamlet, habit can close a similar gap separating how Gertrude feels and how she acts, to make her authentically virtuous.

To a 21st-century reader, Claudius’s failure makes more sense than Hamlet’s plea. We tend to think that, when actions are performed authentically, internal states of being like feelings or belief precede and determine them. If an action does not reflect the actor’s genuine internal state of mind, it’s considered either alienated or hypocritical. But such a paradigm is dualist. It assumes a separation between an internal self that thinks, feels, and wills, and an external self that manifests or refracts these thoughts, feelings, and volitions. According to Paul Cefalu, however, Hamlet is more a behavioralist than a dualist, that is, the young prince does not think internal mental states precede external actions. Freed from dualist assumptions, Hamlet’s actions make more sense. As Cefalu argues, it is not the sanctity of the church that urges Hamlet to defer his revenge, but “his
inability to imagine Claudius’s mental state and inner convictions without inferring those mental contents from the conventionalized act of prayer.”¹ His directive to Gertrude follows the same logic. Surprising though it seems to us, Hamlet does not care if Gertrude does not internally feel the virtues he wants her to don like a frock because to him, “personal identity and subjective states are identical with customary behavioral dispositions.”² Still, this equation between behavior and mental states does not occur instantaneously. The solution to the equation is habit.³

Although, with the exception of behaviorists like Gilbert Ryle or B.F. Skinner, most philosophers theorize external actions as the consequence of internal mental states, popular culture demonstrates that in practice we often function more like Hamlet’s behaviorists. Evidence? Consider the adage “fake it till you make it.” We’ve all been in situations where we deliberately pretend we already are someone we want to become. The mechanism of transformation can vary: it may be that we come to internalize others’ appreciation of us; it may be that we simply develop new habits. What’s crucial here is that “fake it till you make it” helps model the advice Hamlet gives to Gertrude. The prince does not consider Gertrude’s virtue or vice to be an absolute, internal quality that one is either born with or that must be developed through spiritual means (like prayer or spiritual exercises). Rather, he accepts that her desires are currently vicious, but believes that if she chooses to act as if she were virtuous, the habit of doing so will eventually transform her internal thoughts and feelings to match her external actions. He wants her

¹ Cefalu (2000), 420.
² Ibid, 400.
³ Cefalu goes so far as to claim that Hamlet’s true obsession in the play is “his theological understanding of habit,” 405.
to fake it till she makes it. For Hamlet, habit transforms what starts as a vapid, hypothesized state into a complete, actualized reality.

Shakespeare did not invent this model for self-transformation. His passage is brilliant not because it is original but because it imbues a cultural commonplace with dramatic poignancy. Indeed, in a period of vast cultural change, authors who devoted their life’s work to instilling a novel paradigms of thought were forced to address a preliminary question: how does effective conversion take place? Consider, for example, the vicious debates that took place for decades between the proponents of Galileo’s new science and the more conservative members of the Catholic Church, or those that took place between the harbingers of Baconian empirical method and the more conservative Aristotelian logicians. When a thinker introduces a new paradigm that challenges modes of thoughts that have existed for centuries, society does not just go to sleep one evening understanding the world in a certain manner and waking up the next day with an entirely reconstructed its ontology. The process takes time, for the individual as for society at large. In my dissertation, I argue that thinkers across seventeenth-century discursive contexts considered habit and repetitive action to be a crucial component to engineering an effective process of conversion. They understood, therefore, that conversions are not instantaneous epiphanies but sustained efforts. By conversion, I refer to many processes of transformation, spanning from the acceptance of a novel epistemological paradigm, the adoption of a mode of etiquette, or the participation in a religion. How, therefore, did seventeenth-century thinkers conceptualize the role habit plays in engineering a long-term process of self-transformation?
My answer is that seventeenth-century thinkers recurrently envision habit very much like Hamlet in his directive to his mother. They propose a model in which an actor should start by acting as if he or she has already achieved a desired quality or state and should repeat actions affiliated with this state until hypothesis becomes reality.

My dissertation analyzes instances of this model for conversion, which I call *The Performance of Analysis*, across discursive contexts. As its name indicates, the model as two aspects: *performance* and *analysis*. *Performance* refers to the role of repetition and habit in the model under consideration. My understanding of the term *performance* differs slightly from contemporary theories of performativity. It is akin to performativity insofar as there are certain phrases in the seventeenth-century texts under examination that function more like Austin’s “performative utterances” than like proposition statements. I argue, for example, that Descartes’s *Ego sum, ego existo* is a mantra intended for daily repetition that eventually instills a certain experience of axiomatic knowledge. But with performance I don’t always mean language that does instead of describes. Rather, I refer to a type of knowledge that is only arrived at through repetitive action. *Performance*, here, refers to the actions that are required to generate the knowledge. In contrast, one might think of a type of knowledge that can be assimilated in one sitting, something like memorizing dates in a history book or even following the development of a narrative. The type of knowledge examined in this work can only be accessed through some type of corporeal action. This stipulation of action requires that one sometimes interpret the texts in question as heuristic scripts to jog the performance of a sequence of actions. The content of the texts themselves, therefore, does not yield any
knowledge until having been acted out. It is this stipulation that prompts me to choose the word performance.

In the seventeenth century, the performances that result in knowledge and transformation are habit [habitude] and repetition. The first eight definitions of habit given in the Oxford English Dictionary suggest external appearance: habit is “fashion, mode, or dress” or “external deportment, constitution, or appearance.” Definition nine, in contrast, suggests that habitual external action can modify internal disposition: “A settled disposition or tendency to act in a certain way, esp. one acquired by frequent repetition of the same act until it becomes almost or quite involuntary…” It is precisely the idea that repetition can transform one’s internal disposition that I consider key in the seventeenth-century context. The 1694 Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française, for example, defines habit as a “coustume, accoustumance, disposition interieure acquise par plusieurs actes reïterez” (custom, familiarization, internal disposition acquired through many iterated actions). Now, alarms may be sounding for anyone familiar with early-modern French rationalism. The period is systematically considered to be devotedly dualist, upholding a stark separation between mind and body. The standard assumption is that Descartes and his followers considered all knowledge to be implanted in us as pre-programmed structures that precede experience. In contrast, as my dissertation argues that experiences accumulated through repeated corporeal performances lie at the foundation of

---

4 Matthew Jones also highlights habit’s power to transform one’s disposition intérieure as important to understanding Descartes’s Géométrie: Jones (2006), 32.
epistemological, religious, and social programs in seventeenth-century thought, it joins the tradition that challenges any strictly dualist approach.\(^5\)

The second word in the model is *analysis*. In this work, the word analysis refers neither to the standard intellectual method of breaking up a compound subject into its constituent parts (as suggested by its etymology in the Greek compound *ana-* “up, throughout” and *lysis, “a loosening”), nor to the Kantian procedure of rendering a truth claim using purely nominal relations (as the word is understood by most practicing philosophers), nor to the branch of pure mathematics that studies theories of differentiation, integration, and infinite series (as the word is understood by contemporary mathematicians). Rather, it refers to analysis as grasped by ancient and early modern mathematicians (e.g. Diophantus, la Vieta, or Descartes), who used the term to denote a problem solving technique also known as “resolution.” As Descartes articulates, in the mathematical context, analysis is a method whereby

\[\text{…voulant résoudre quelque problème, on doit d’abord le considerer comme déjà fait, et donner des noms à toutes les lignes qui semblent necessaries pour le construire, aussi bien à celles qui sont inconnues qu’aux autres. Puis, sans considerer aucune difference entre ces lignes connues et inconnues, on doit}\]

---

parcourir la difficulté selon l’ordre qui montre le plus naturellement de tous en quelle sorte elle dépendent mutuellement les unes des autres…

…wishing to solve a problem, one should first consider it as already finished, and give names to all the lines that seem necessary to construct it, to those that are unknown as to those that are known. Then, without considering any difference between the known and unknown lines, one should undertake the difficulty according to the order that arises the most naturally in order to discern how each depends on the other…\(^6\)

We would simply call this an algebraic equation, with the “unknowns” as the x or y variables, and the “knowns” being givens that we can insert into the equation to eventually determine the value of the unknowns. Given that we are taught how to work with such equations as children, we must work to appreciate the startling ontological suppositions that render such a problem-solving technique possible in the first place. Note that Descartes’s problem solver must start by making an ontological leap to assume that a sought object—which might not even exist!—were already constructed. And then, upon this imaginary object, one is to suspend all conceptual distinction between quantities that are known and quantities that are unknown. Each step along the way requires fusion between various degrees of abstraction. Somehow, however, manipulating the various parts in this abstract collection yields a final response that is both tangible and concrete.

My dissertation’s primary insight is to connect the importance of mathematical analysis in seventeenth-century French thought with the period’s understanding of how

\(^6\) Descartes (2008), 3.
habit can be used to engineer epistemological, spiritual, and social conversion. Indeed, the combination of *performance* and *analysis* yields the following five-part model:

1. An actor starts by making a rational choice to actualize a particular, discrete outcome, a transformation or conversion. The process therefore has a pre-history that motivates the desire to instantiate a specific change. Given that the actor knows where he wants to go, the performance is not directionless or organic. It is not the *clinamen*, a model of evolution and development based upon random aberration impossible to predict and foresee. Rather, the performance begins with a proleptic decision that shapes how things will be.

2. In its initial state, the desired outcome is ontologically hollow. It is an imaginary *as if* that stands in tension with the current state of affairs. In the domain of mathematics, Descartes starts by assuming that the figure he will later construct were actually already constructed, even though he cannot even be sure that such a construction is possible. The performative examples include a subtlety absent from the mathematics. In the case of *Hamlet*, the prince bids Gertrude to assume a virtue towards which she is not internally disposed. The virtues themselves, of course, are anything but ontologically hollow; what’s hollow is Gertrude’s individual participation in a more robust ontological category. As I’ll examine in chapter two, the same logic holds for Pascal’s model for religious conversion because he calls his doubting libertine to imitate ritual actions that are themselves robustly established by practicing Catholics.

3. Next comes continuous repetition or iteration of an action conjuring this discrete, imagined state. In another act of prolepsis and psychological alienation, one must
imagine the actions and behaviors of someone who already is what one wants to become. And then one must imitate these actions, projecting oneself into a future space and suspending any internal resistance that harkens back to what was is, has been, or was.

4. This takes time. Each discrete mimetic action and instance of performance is near powerless by itself, given the ontological gap between what one currently is and what one wants to become. The as if gulf renders the discrete action alienated. But the accumulated effects of repetition eventually penetrate the depths of the actor’s internal psychology. Conversions engineered through the performance of analysis, therefore, are not instantaneous epiphanies but long-term processes. The processes may begin with a momentary decision, but this decision is only the first step towards genuine change.

5. The final product is the eventual collapse of the distinction between the as if desired state and the actual state, the moment when the actor achieves what he or she first sought. Here there is another subtle distinction between the mathematical and the performative domains. In mathematics, the procedures of analysis do not alter sought object in any way. What one assumes at the beginning is exactly what one achieves at the end. In performance, on the other hand, it seems logical that one must track a moving target, where the vision of what one desires to become undergoes subtle adaptations and modifications during the long process of becoming. Each chapter will explore how seventeenth-century thinkers reckon with such subtleties.
The work explores the valences of the performance of analysis in multiple seventeenth-century discursive contexts, including mathematics, philosophy, theater, aesthetics, and compendia of moral maxims. My corpus spans from 1619 to 1678, beginning with Descartes’s 1619 Regulae ad directionem ingenii and ending with the fifth edition of La Rochefoucauld’s Maximes. I analyze and account for the differences in anthropological approach that separate Jesuit thinkers like Descartes and Rotrou (writing in the first half of the century) from Jansenist thinkers like Pascal and La Rochefoucauld (writing in the second half of the century). Still, both periods struggle with an anthropology that has, at the very least, dualist undertones. The struggle shapes how they conceive habit in way that is unique in the history of European thought. To highlight this specificity, the work concludes with an epilogue adumbrating the radical shift in the conceptualization of habit that occurs during the rise of 18th-century empiricism.

This is a work of intellectual history approached with literary techniques. My primary purpose is to explain the role of habit in the work of Descartes, Pascal, Rotrou, and La Rochefoucauld. The question that grounds my analysis is “what did seventeenth-century authors think they were thinking?”, not, as anyone working in the hermeneutic tradition established by Dilthey, “what can we, with retrospective knowledge, reveal the seventeenth-century authors were thinking without knowing it?” My approach is therefore to gather many supporting materials to reconstruct the problems and questions with which my primary figures wrestled. Consequently, while I focus on these four pivotal figures, I include a host of supporting material from France and beyond. For indeed, this is a project that deals with Jesuit and Jansenist thought, and these communication networks of both religious groups spanned beyond France through the
rest of Europe. Descartes was educated in an international Jesuit school and spent most of his career in Holland; Rotrou was in dialogue with a theatrical tradition established in Spain by Lope de Vega; La Rochefoucauld’s *Maximes* participate in a tradition of courtly literature on manners that was in tight dialogue with Baldassare Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* and Balthasar Gracian’s *Oráculo Manual*. Everyone in the period made frequent reference to classical authors like Seneca, Cicero, and Augustine. I therefore incorporate comparisons between the French material and Spanish, Italian, English, and Latin material both to support philological exegesis and to provide examples of alternative points of view to sharpen appreciation of the particularities of works composed in the French context.

Bridging analysis across multiple discourses requires a set of assumptions that differ from strict philology. When a work of literature makes intertextual reference or allusion to a previous work, the evidence for affiliation is clear. As I show in chapter three, for example, Rotrou’s *Le véritable vie de Saint Genest* includes a series of verbatim quotations from Cellot’s *Sanctus Adrianus*. What’s interesting in such case of literary influence, therefore, is how the second author engages with his source material to say something new. As it turns out, Rotrou incorporates Cellot’s source material into a play-within-a-play structure that has formal affinities with Descartes’s multi-layered *Géométrie*. Such a formal affiliation seems more tenuous. To draw the comparison, my methodology is to analyze how both texts, Descartes’s *Géométrie* and Rotrou’s *Saint Genest*, incorporate their source materials. The comparison is therefore not direct, but relational: Descartes is to Euclid as Rotrou is to Cellot. This then enables a conclusion
that both perform similar operations on source material that indexes a conceptual similarity, the performance of analysis.

Still, such a formal relation is just type of comparison present in this work. The basic strategy is to gain novel insight into a series of canonical texts by examining them through the lens of the a priori model of the performance of analysis. I have chosen to focus on my four primary figures because they fit the model in question. I do not, therefore, go so far as to claim that the performance of analysis ubiquitously determines seventeenth-century thought because I do not provide enough examples to make such a claim. Although this is a work of intellectual history insofar as it details with the structure of ideas in a certain epoch—and not primarily with literary sources—it is a work of literary criticism in its techniques (close reading) and standards for evidence (unlike other works of history, it does not give exhaustive descriptions of facts or work with niche archival materials). As a work of literary criticism, it provides close readings of passages from a select corpus of texts to illustrate a unity heretofore undiscovered.

Given its interdisciplinary scope, this work is in dialogue with authors from various disciplines. One primary interlocutor is historian Matthew Jones. His work The Good Life in the Scientific Revolution shows how the mathematical techniques of Descartes, Pascal, and Leibniz influenced their ethical programs. I draw much evidence from Jones’s work, but push the analysis in a new direction with my focus on habit and my literary—and not strictly historical—approach to the thinkers in question. Other historians that my work emulates include Anthony Grafton, Jacob Soll, and Lisa Jardine, who all reconstruct a set of intellectual problems in the Renaissance and early-modern era. From literature, my work is primarily in dialogue with Larry Norman’s recent work,
The Shock of the Ancients: Literature & History in Early Modern France. Norman’s claims about the relationship between Cartesian geometric thought and late-century aesthetics differ greatly from my own. Like many scholars before him, he affiliates l’esprit géométrique with ordered plots and sequenced methodology. The performance of analysis invites literary scholars to consider an entirely novel affiliation between Cartesianism and literary form.

Although my focus is historical, moreover, I grapple with questions of interest to many kinds of readers. For the historian of philosophy: Why does Descartes change the phrasing of the cogito, ergo sum to ego sum, ego existo in the Meditationes (1641)? What is the real epistemological work that the dictum is meant to achieve? What is the significance of habit in Pascal’s Pensées? For the historian of literature: why did seventeenth-century aesthetic theorists think that theater could change us? What is the relationship between Jesuit programs for conversion and theatrical practice in the decade of the 1640’s? How are La Rochefoucauld’s Maximes like and unlike the compendia of ancient maxims that constituted the Florilegia so popular in the period? For the thinker of modernity: whereas religion and science are typically separated according to how they approach truth-making procedures, can we re-conceptualize the distinction as one lodged in different types of behavior and performance? For the narratologist: how can texts represent long-term processes governed by repetition and habit? What are their properties? How do these properties differ according to genre (eg: the narrative, the play, the maxim). For the general reader: is conversion an instantaneous epiphany or a long-term process? What steps can we take to realize our dreams, and become the people we

---

7 A classical example would be René Bray’s La formation de la doctrine classique.
want to become? What is the relationship between momentary choices and long-term actions? How can we transform a decision into a lifestyle? Are axioms hard-wired into our brain or dependent upon our past experience?

My argument that a single structure of thought is present across discourses during one period in history might encourage a reader to anticipate a New Historicism methodology. Although some aspects of my methodology are indeed inspired by New Historicism, my approach does not entirely align with New Historicism assumptions. I do espouse the New Historicism tenet that texts, ideas, and acts of expression are always embedded in a network of period-specific material practices. I do not espouse the Foucauldian principle that a particular episteme ubiquitously determines the intellectual output of a period. Although my work emphasizes similarities between what we consider to be estranged domains of society (e.g. geometry and salon culture), I do not begin with the assumption that such similarities can or should exist. On the contrary, one goal of my work is to begin with the common a priori structure of the performance of analysis so as better to articulate the formal and conceptual differences separating multiple discourses’ realization of a single concept. Each chapter in my dissertation articulates how discursive rules and conventions modify one single, cognitive structure. My assumptions are therefore almost opposite from Foucault’s. Foucault shows how a cognitive episteme determines expression; I show how conventions of expression determine a cognitive episteme.

Next, although brief cultural descriptions situate and support my investigations, my inquiry is essentially one of intellectual history. I seek to describe how this period considered habit’s relationship to knowledge. My inquiry, therefore, is not Marxist in
orientation, as I do not take the further step to deconstruct the seventeenth-century conception of habit as a product of culture and sociology. Still, I do not believe that these ideas just magically appeared out of the void. Rather, they germinated out of social encounters (salon culture) and educational institutions (primarily the Jesuit schools and the Jansenist reaction) that shaped certain techniques, methods, and beliefs that were then manifest across discourses in the period.

Although I am not Marxist, I am also not philosophical (in the analytic tradition). I do not attempt evaluate the logical accuracy of past ideas or to discern what elements of a past paradigm are worth saving. Instead, I aim to understand what thinkers in this period of time thought they were thinking without including any judgment about the validity of their arguments. By taking the time to reconstruct their arguments using their own source texts and their own terms, I aim to dispel inherited prejudices and stereotypes of what characterized this period. One example is the assumption of strict dualism. Another example is the assumption that this was an age dominated by what mathematicians in the period called the “synthetic” style of mathematical proof. A synthetic proof starts with the “first causes”, axioms, or definitions and proves more complex and compound propositions and theorems. The paradigmatic example of the synthetic style is Euclid’s *Elements*. Euclid was certainly an important part of seventeenth-century pedagogy and philosophical style. Hobbes’s *Leviathan* or Spinoza’s *Ethics* are two examples of rationalism’s obsession with certainty fostered through the *more geometrico*. But most of the key developments in mathematics in the period, including those by Descartes and Newton, were generated through analysis, not synthesis. Pascal’s claim at the opening of *De l’esprit géométrique* that there is so much recent
literature devoted to analysis that he can just skip over the description of the technique tests to its pervasiveness. Taking the time to reconstruct just what these thinkers thought they were doing, therefore, will open new ground and a fresh takes on the literature and philosophy of the period.

The work composes four chapters and an epilogue.

Chapter one analyzes two of Descartes’s works, the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* (1619) and the *Meditationes* (1641), to articulate the epistemological significance of habit and repetitive action in Cartesian philosophy. The chapter make two primary claims.

First, according to Jones, one tenet of Cartesian philosophy is that real knowledge only exists as an “easy conceptual act with undivided attention.” For Descartes, therefore, long chains of propositions chains must be compressed into a single flash of insight as clear as the *cogito* to count as viable knowledge. As best explained in the *Regulae*, repetition and habit are the mechanisms for achieving such compression. One must repetitively scan proofs until the logical connections are so ingrained that the entire chain of reasoning can be truncated into a single insight.

Second, I argue that in lieu of providing a rigorous, formal definition for the “clear and distinct impressions” that form the foundation of his philosophical system, Descartes presents the act of the *cogito*, formulated as *ego sum, ego existo* in the *Meditationes*. Using evidence from his correspondence with Mersenne, I argue that the *ego sum, ego existo* is a mantra that must be repeated every day until the intuitive insight becomes so ingrained that it seems “clear and distinct.” The first-person mantra is, in my

---

8 Jones (2006), 63.
reading, an example of the performance of analysis. It is a proleptic cue for a habitual regime of action that induces a first-person experience of axiomatic knowledge.

Chapter two provides a systematic overview of Pascal’s appraisal of habit in the Pensées. For Pascal, I claim, habit is tightly linked with human corporeality. On the one hand, it indexes our propensity for error and our fallenness, as it is the psychological mechanism that leads us to fetishize kingly power and to make faulty generalizations upon particular experiences. Nonetheless, admitting our unavoidable propensity to make mistakes and understanding what causes these mistakes are both integral goals of Pascal’s philosophy. After having completed the work to understand how habits can degrade us, we have the capacity to mobilize habit for the good. It is with such deliberate awareness that Pascal later incorporates the performance of analysis as a technology for engineering religious conversion. In a novel reading of Pascal’s wager, I focus on what occurs after the doubting libertine has accepted the wager’s probabilistic logic. Indeed, even if the libertine accepts that it makes pragmatic sense to act as if God existed, he still doesn’t have any immediate feeling of belief. To level this emotional block, Pascal advises the libertine to repetitively perform Catholic rituals to ensconce belief. It is because we are both spiritual and corporeal that habit assists conversion: for, as mechanism, the body responds best to a mechanistic series of repeated actions. I close the chapter by contrasting the function of the performance of analysis in Descartes’s epistemological conversion and in Pascal’s religious conversion. With this contrast I aspire to suggest a new avenue for conceptualizing the distinction between science and religion in terms of performance.
Chapter three analyzes *the performance of analysis* in mid-century plays and aesthetic criticism. The first part of the chapter addresses plays; the second half of the chapter addresses aesthetic criticism.

The plays in question are Rotrou’s *Le véritable Saint Genest* (1644) and Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670). Rotrou depicts repetition as the mechanism driving the pagan Genesius’s on-stage conversion to Catholicism. The conversion entails a series of formal consequences. First, Genesius’s conversion dovetails with Rotrou’s own act of conversion as an author, because Genesius converts only when he stops citing his lines—lines that Rotrou takes from his source material—and starts to improvise—and Rotrou has to invent original material. Second, as typical for the Baroque, this paradoxical identification-as-transformation matches the collapse of the play-within-a-play structure.

Molière’s *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* provides an example where *the performance of analysis* fails. Monsieur Jourdain, the play’s hero, attempts to become an aristocrat by acting as if he already were. As everyone else around him sees him for who he is, however, no matter how hard he try, he cannot realize his desired conversion. At the end of the play, however, a conversion does indeed occur, but only because everyone else deliberately stages a play that matches his internal constitution. He doesn’t convert; the others convert for him.

As regards aesthetic criticism, I analyze the importance of habit in discussions about theater’s capacity to have an ethical impact upon spectators. My central texts are Nicole’s *Traité de la Comédie* (1667) and Molière’s *Lettre sur la comédie de l’imposteur* (1667). As a pessimistic Jansenist, Nicole believed that theater was morally harmful to naive spectators. He did not think that a single trip to the theater would cause significant
moral damage, but that continual attendance habituated spectators to the dubious moral landscape of tragic heroes and heroines. Molière repurposes Nicole’s arguments and terms to reach the opposite conclusion. For him, theater exerts a positive moral effect upon spectators because it can impress a searing sensation of ridicule and disdain for immoral characters that translates into distrust of similar people in real life. In both instances, of interest is the dichotomy between a momentary *impression* and the long-term change realized through habituation.

Finally, chapter four traces the potential and the limits of the performance of *analysis* in the salon culture of the late seventeenth century. In this chapter the key texts are le Chevalier de Méré’s *Conversations* (1671) and La Rochefoucauld’s *Maximes* (1678). Salon culture was governed by an ethical code known as *honnêteté* (gentlemanliness). *Honnêteté* is anything but direct honesty: as an ethical code intended to facilitate sociability and ease, it rejects any immediate expression of the self as person to favor a muted expression of the self as persona. To gain acceptance into the group, one must adopt one of the established personae to render one’s speech and manners familiar and acceptable. *The performance of analysis* therefore hones a persona. One starts by adopting artifice, acting as if one were already the persona one seeks to become. If the character fits, the rest of the group treats the actor as if he or she were indeed that persona. The actor then has a mirror-like input. By habitually seeing himself or herself in the others’ eyes, he or she eventually internalizes what starts as mere mask and artifice. This transformation, nonetheless, only works when the persona fits (*convient*) the person.

---

To appreciate the rejection of authenticity in the period, consider the character of Alceste in Molière’s *Le Misanthrope*. Being too honest lead to alienation in seventeenth-century society. Philante is the work’s true hero because he is willing to make pragmatic concessions to mild hypocrisy for the sake of happiness.
If one attempts to adopt manners that jar with his or her natural qualities, the result is ridicule, hypocrisy, and dismissal.

Reading the *Maximes* as a handbook for the performance of analysis yields several linguistic consequences. Instead of approaching maxims as propositions about states of affairs, I approach them as memes for social engagement. As evidenced in La Rochefoucauld’s correspondence, salon participants exchanged maxims like gifts or party favors. Inspired by this exchange, I treat the maxims like nuggets of social capital. My assumption is that, in a capital-based system, one seeks to accumulate output from as little input as possible. Translated into formal terms, this inspires a reading of the *Maximes* in which the epigraph, *Nos virtues ne sont, le plus souvent, que des vices déguisés*, is formal generator for the entire text. Automation therefore determines the process of composition. One seeking to enter salon society then employs the maxims as spoken social currency to fashion the persona he or she wishes to achieve.

For years, literary scholarship about the Âge Classique focused on deconstructing Descartes’s pretense to construct an absolute philosophy. Critics like Louis Marin (*La critique du discours*), Jonathan Culler (“Paradox and the Language of Morals in La Rochefoucauld”) and Paul de Man (“Pascal’s allegory of Persuasion”) all performed invaluable work by unraveling the foundations of Cartesian hierarchies to champion the more tenuous contradictions of Pascal’s chiasmi or in La Rochefoucauld’s paradoxes. Although primarily a study of habit and a diagnosis of the performance of analysis, my dissertation has a second aim to reorient our scholarly discussion about the Âge Classique. Enough has been said about representational systems’ fundamental incompleteness, about the necessity of accepting paradox as part of our world. It is time
to tap into a new creativity, to pose new questions, to reread canonical texts to answer what they actually do, not why they fail to say what they claim to say. This work proposes an historical model, *the performance of analysis*, which opens up new avenues of scholarship. I hope it will refresh curiosity in this crucial moment in French intellectual culture.
Turning Analysis into Performance: Habit as Form in Descartes’s Philosophy

Federico Commandino (1509-1575) was an aficionado of Greek mathematics. Having pursued a career in medicine, the Italian Humanist abandoned his practice in the 1550s to devote the last twenty years of his life to editing and composing Latin translations of works by Greek icons including Archimedes, Euclid, and Ptolemy. His final project, completed and published by his pupil Guidobaldo Machese del Monte in Pesaro in 1588, was a Latin translation of books III to VIII of the *Collectio Mathematica*, by Pappus of Alexandria (c.290-c.350).10

Imagine, now, an ambitious young Frenchman educated in law and letters at the well-reputed Jesuit secondary school *La Flèche*, who also decided in his early twenties to abandon his career in law and explore the military, the salons of high society, and, in his spare time, mathematics. While stationed just outside Breda, Holland in 1618, the young René Descartes found a placard setting out a mathematical problem. As the problem was in Dutch, he asked his neighbor to translate. The latter was professor Isaac Beeckman, who immediately liked Descartes and was later astonished to learn that he had solved the posted problem, and shared his interest in the combined study of “Physics and Mathematics in an exact way.”11 Encouraged by his new tutor, Descartes spent more energy honing his mathematical skills, eventually reading Commandino’s translation of Pappus’ *Collectio*. Skeptical of what he would find, given his disdain for the “sterile truths” generated by Euclidean, axiomatic-deductive mathematics, he made a shocking

10 http://www-history.mcs.standrews.ac.uk/~history/Biographies/Commandino.html
discovery upon opening book VII. In a letter addressed to his son Hermodorus, Pappus introduces the method used to solve the collection of problems featured in the book. The method, to Descartes’s surprise, was not axiomatic-deductive synthesis, but its logical opposite, which Pappus calls analysis:

That which is called the Domain of Analysis (...) [is] a special resource that was prepared (...) for those who want to acquire a power in geometry that is capable of solving problems set to them; and it is useful for this alone (...).

Now analysis is the path from what one is seeking, as if it were established, by way of its consequences, to something that is established by synthesis. That is to say, in analysis we assume what is sought as if it has been achieved, and look for the thing from which it follows, and again what comes after that, until by regressing in this way we come upon some one of the things that are already known, or that occupy the rank of a first principle (...).

When Pappus says that analysis is useful only for solving geometrical problems, he means that it is useful to find solutions, but not to present them formally to others; indeed, synthesis, which starts with given axioms and navigates through propositions, was the conventional presentation of solutions that were already found. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle provides evidence that Greek culture used analysis in practical reasoning outside mathematics:

We deliberate not about ends but about means (...) [A doctor, orator, and a statesman] assume the end and consider how and by what means it is to be

---

12 Ibid, 124.
13 Guicciardini (2009), 35. The original Greek is reproduced in full in Hintikka and Remes (1974), 8-10.
attained (…) till they come to the first cause, which in the order of discovery is last. For the person who deliberates seems to investigate and analyze in the way described as though he were analyzing a geometrical construction (…) and what is last in the order of analysis seems to be first in the order of becoming.

It is the ontological implications of analysis that render its practicality so shocking. According to the method, one should not stop to consider whether a desired construction even could exist; one simply assumes that it does and then starts to analyze it until the analysis hits upon something at hand, or given. The “order of becoming,” or synthesis, then gives the construction ontological robustness.

Throughout his oeuvre, Descartes communicates his surprise at having discovered Pappus’s quotation. From early works like the Regulae ad directionem ingenii (1619) to later works like the Meditationes de prima philosophia (1641), he disseminates suspicious comments that the ancient geometers tried to hide the precious method:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regulae</th>
<th>Meditationes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cum igitur huius methodi utilitas sit tanta, ut sine illa litteris operam dare, nociturum esse videatur potius, quam profuturum, facile mihi persuadeo, illam iam ante a maioribus ingenis, vel solius naturae ductu, fuisse aliquo modo perspectam (….) quod experimur in facillimis scientiarum Arithmetica et Geometria: satis enim advertimus veteres Geometras analyti quadrum usos fuisse, quam ad omnium problematum resolutionem extendeant, licet eamdem posteris inviderint.</td>
<td>[Synthesis] sola Geometrae veteres in scriptis suis uti solet, non quod aliam plane ignorant, sed, quantum judico, quia ipsam tanti faciebant ut sibi solis tanquam Arcanum quid reservarent. (Ancient geometers had the custom of only using [synthesis] in their writings; not because they were entirely unaware of analysis, but, in my opinion, because they used it so frequently, that they reserved it for themselves, like an important secret.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

14 Descartes (1907), 10-11.
15 Descartes (1654), 83.
that, without any other guide that nature, the greatest minds have had an idea of it (…. ) Of which we have proof in the easiest sciences, Arithmetic and Geometry: for indeed it suffices to note that the ancient Geometers used an analysis, which they thought extended to resolve all problems, but which they jealously hid from posterity.)\textsuperscript{14}

He considers his algebraic method to be a modern, more powerful adaptation of ancient analysis, as evidenced by the overlap between Pappus’s definition and Descartes’s description of his algebraic problem-solving method:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pappus, \textit{Collectio}</th>
<th>Descartes, \textit{Regulae XVII}</th>
<th>Descartes, \textit{Géométrie}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That is to say, in analysis we assume what is sought as if it has been achieved, and look for the thing from which it follows, and again what comes after that, until by regressing in this way we come upon some one of the things that are already known, or that occupy the rank of a first principle.</td>
<td>Now, as we are concerned here with enveloped questions, where one begins with extremes that are known in order to arrive by following the inverse order to a knowledge of the intermediaries, the entire artifice will be to suppose as known that which is unknown (…. )and we assumed (…) that, within a question, the unknown terms are so dependent on the known terms that they are completely determined by them (…. )\textsuperscript{16}</td>
<td>Therefore, wishing to resolve any problem, one should first consider it as already done (…. )Then, without considering any difference between the known lines, and the unknown lines, one should undertake the difficulty, according to the order that shows itself to be the most natural of all so that they all mutually depend upon each other, until one finds a means to express one quantity in two ways: which is called an equation (…. )\textsuperscript{17}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{16} Descartes (1907), 60.  
\textsuperscript{17} Descartes (1986), 335.
Jaako Hintikka and Unto Remes claim that not only his mathematics, but his “whole philosophical method can be thought of as a kind of generalization from his analytical method in geometry.”

Descartes considered analysis to be superior to synthesis for two main reasons. First, he was impressed by its power and generality: whereas synthesis gave solutions problem by problem, analysis was “la vraye methode pour les trouver toutes” (the true method to find them all). One need master only one technique to solve any problem whatsoever. Second, he found it a more powerful pedagogical tool for encouraging future mathematical discoveries. Because it permitted deductions only upon given axioms, definitions, and previous theorems, classical and early-modern geometers prized synthesis for its logical rigor. Polemically, Descartes thought a student could only learn mathematics by understanding how previous mathematicians discovered proofs, not by memorizing them as they appeared in textbooks: “sed [synthesis] non ut [analysis] satisfacit, ne discere cupientium animos explet, quia modum quo res fuit inventa, non docet” (but [synthesis] doesn’t satisfy those who want to learn like [analysis], because it doesn’t teach the method by which something was discovered.)

Much scholarship, particularly by historians of mathematics and philosophy, has been devoted to reason one. Recently, historian Matthew Jones has pioneered a tradition exploring reason two. I will here build upon Jones’s work by highlighting the narratological consequences of Descartes’s rhetorical practice of analytic discovery.

---

18 Hintikka and Remes (1974), 112.
19 Descartes (1986), 338.
20 Descartes (1654), 83.
In this chapter, I explore how Descartes transformed the formal, mathematical method of analysis into a rhetorical style aimed at encouraging an experience of discovery in the reader. His writings often reference the Jesuit principle, first articulated in Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, that lessons are best learned if one goes through the motions to discover methods and proofs oneself. Descartes considered action to be a powerful pedagogical tool for developing good intellectual habits and facilitating future discovery. His rhetorical adaptation of mathematical analysis, therefore, entails iterative, long-term repetition of crucial experiences of discovery. I call the process the performance of analysis.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I give a systematic overview of the epistemological significance of *habitude* (habit) in Descartes’s work, arguing that habit plays three primary roles:

1. It trains the mind to focus on simple details.
2. It consolidates long, deductive chains of propositions down to instantaneous, clear flashes of insight.
3. It imprints experiences of discovery deeply into the mind.

Then, in parts two and three, I demonstrate how Descartes uses form—not only propositional content—to engage his readers to develop the habits required to actualize his epistemological program. Form has a special franchise when an author aims to engage a reader to carry out actions while reading a text or to pursue a program of iterative meditation. In the *Géométrie* (1637), for example, Descartes engages the reader by using a first-person pronoun that carries out mechanical tasks like drawing, adding, or subtracting. Philosophers are aware that Descartes uses the first person to engage the
reader to follow his arguments, but they assume that his first person functions the same way in every instance. I show, in contrast, that Descartes mobilizes two semantically distinct first-person pronouns in the *Géométrie* to present the various aspects of his argument on different levels. I call these pronouns the *procedural je* and the *authorial je*. Encouraging activity and an experience of discovery, the *procedural je* refers to the reader, who is called to carry out actions along with the text. The *authorial je* then describes the significance of the procedures, often commenting on all that goes deliberately unsaid to encourage the reader’s subsequent practice. Habit, then, inhabits the interstices between these two semantic levels.

In part three, I give a new interpretation of Descartes’s *ego sum, ego existo*, the variation of the *cogito* he presents in the *Meditatione*. I argue that *ego sum, ego existo* is Descartes’s first-person translation of the axiom “quod idem non possit esse simul & non esse” (the same thing cannot simultaneously be and not be). Descartes considers the propositional content of the axiom to be so abstract that it cannot be experienced first hand. In his “analytic” presentation of the argument in the *Meditationes*, therefore, he presents the axiom in the first person in order to reproduce a concrete experience of discovery in the reader. The reader is then called to repeat *ego sum, ego existo* like a *sententia* until habit renders the axiomatic knowledge vivid and natural.

**Using artifice to hone natural potential: Descartes’s transposition of *habitus***

Habit was a complex and crucial notion in Augustine’s philosophy, as evidenced by the variety (*consuetudo, habitus, usus, mos, mores*) and frequency (*consuetudo* occurs

---

22 Descartes, (1654), 86.
more than 950 times) of terms connoting habit that occur in his work. For Augustine, 
*consuetudo* was a negative form of habit associated with man’s fall from grace. The Church Father uses this term to describe “excessive attention to the good things of creation,” a process governed by repetition that cements an initial experience of pleasure into a fixed habit or character trait. The problem is idolatry: excessive attention to creations distracts attention from devotion to God, as Augustine’s God is a transcendent being abstracted from quotidian experience. *Habitus*, in contrast, is not an essential aspect of man afflicted by original sin, but “that thing which is added to someone in such a way that he could just as well not have it.” Such additions could be tangible, like clothing or ornamentation, or abstract, like wisdom or understanding (i.e. the essence of man does not entail his being wise; wisdom is acquired, and certainly transforms the actor through the process of acquisition, but is not essential to his nature). In question seventy-three of his *Eighty-three Different Questions*, Augustine describes Christ’s incarnation as man as an act of donning a *habitus*. Like a cloak, the incarnation changes his external appearance while he wears it, but does not alter his internal and essential nature. Because he affiliates it with Christ, Augustine conceives of *habitus* as positive potential for transformation and *consuetudo* as a negative propensity to perpetuate sin.

Descartes begins the *Regulae* by juxtaposing these two notions of habit inherited from Augustine:

Ea est hominum *consuetudo*, ut, quoties aliquam similitudinem inter duas res agnoscent, de utraque iudicent, etiam in eo in quo sunt diversae, quod de alterutra

---

23 Fitzgerald (1999), 409.
24 Ibid, 409.
verum esse compererunt. Ita scientias, quae totae in animi cognitione consistunt, cum artibus, quae aliquem corporis usum habitumque desiderant, male conferentes, videntesque non omnes artes simul ab eodem homine esse addiscendas, sed illum optimum artificem facilius evadere, qui uniam tantum exercet (...) idem de scientiis etiam crediderunt, illasque pro diversitate obiectorum ab invicem distinguentes singulas seorsim et omnibus aliis omissis quaerendas esse sunt arbitrati. In quo sane decepi sunt.

(Men have a habit, that, each time they discover a resemblance between two things, they attribute a truth that they find in one to the other, even in that which distinguishes them. Thus, making a false comparison between the sciences, which reside entirely in the mind, and the arts, which require a certain exercise and a certain habit of the body, and seeing that not all arts can be learned by the same man, but that he who only exercises one becomes more easily an excellent artist (...) they believe the same thing about the sciences, and, distinguishing them according to their objects, they have judged that one should cultivate each one separately, without thinking of the others. In which they were clearly mistaken.)

Seventeenth-century readers versed in Latin had undoubtedly encountered Augustine. By beginning his work with a reference to consuetudo, therefore, Descartes signals the fusion between natural, epistemological weakness (that the mind draws false analogies) and the structure of the scholastic logic and philosophy that his new set of rules aims to redress. Indeed, as Jean-Luc Marion describes, Eustache de Saint-Paul, Saint Thomas, and Aristotle all structured their philosophies around the notion of a habitus scientiarum,

---

26 Descartes (1907), 3, rule 1.
where *habitus* relates back to the Greek word *hexis* to connote the natural “disposition,” or taking on of form, of each individual thing or object.\(^{27}\) The individual sciences were therefore distinct because their objects of inquiry were distinct. Each domain of objects dictated a given *habitus*, which revealed itself in the style of knowledge most appropriate for understanding its essence. In the *Regulae*, Descartes compares this with the training of the body appropriate for mastering different types of arts: one who excels in cultivating the fields will develop different manual habits from one who excels in playing the lute because the tools and objects essential to the different tasks require different muscular facility.\(^{28}\) Descartes critiques the appropriation of this notion of *habitus* as corporeal disposition into the domain of the sciences because he thinks it inverts the proper relationship between the knower and the known. As Marion puts it, in the medieval schemata of *habitus*, it is “l’essence de chaque chose qui commande la science correspondante, et non l’esprit qui produit une science” (the essence of each thing that commands the corresponding science, and not the mind that produces one science).\(^{29}\) One of Descartes’s primary moves in establishing the unity of all sciences was to decide that all knowledge is determined by the method used by the knower. Philosophy’s primary task, therefore, was to gain precise critical awareness of method so as to streamline its application across various domains of knowledge.

Seemingly contradicting his opening claim, that the arts differ from the sciences because the former mobilizes *usum habitudemque* (use and habit) and the latter consists only in *animi cognitione* (cognition of the mind), Descartes later claims that certain

\(^{27}\) Marion (1975), 27.
\(^{28}\) Descartes (1907), 3, rule 1.
\(^{29}\) Marion (1975), 28.
artisanal work is good training for the mind. Curiously, sewing is Descartes’s art of choice:

Rule 9: (...) Artifices illi, qui in minutibus obseribus exercentur, et oculorum aciem ad singula puncte attente dirigere consueverunt, usu capacitatem acquirunt res quantulumbet exiguas et subtiles perfecte distinguendi; ita etiam illi, qui variis simul obiectis cogitationem nunquam distraheunt, sed ad simplicissima quaeque et facillima consideranda totam semper occupant, fiunt perspicaces.

((...) Those artisans, who are exercised in delicate work, and who are habituated to directing their gaze attentively towards each point, acquire by use the capacity to distinguish the smallest and most subtle things perfectly; in the same way, those who never distract their thoughts at the same time to various objects, but always occupy it completely to considering the simplest and easiest things, become perspicacious.)

While Descartes abandoned that portion *habitus scientiarum* that partitioned knowledge according to form, he repurposed habit as *consuetudo* (“ad singula puncte attente dirigere consueverunt”) to render it an epistemological tool. Aristotelian and scholastic philosophers considered the *habitus* or *hexis* that existed between the essence of an object and the form it took on as an object of knowledge to be necessary and organic. Again, Descartes inverted the relationship between knower and known. For him, the necessary condition for viable knowledge was not a *habitus* that organically fit an object, but a focused state of mind, which he called an *intuitus* (intuition): “per intuitum intelligo (...) mentis purae et attentae tam facilem distinctumque conceptum, ut de eo, quod intelligimus nulla prorsus dubitatio relinquitur” (by intuition I mean (...) a conception of
a pure and attentive mind, which is so clear and distinct, that there is no doubt remaining about that which we understand.\textsuperscript{30} Despite its clarity, this “pure and attentive” state of mind was not natural, but needed to be trained through artifice. For Descartes, the natural propensity of the mind was to wander from thought to thought, not to “attacher continuellement [son] esprit à une même pensée” (continuously focus [one’s] mind on one single thought).\textsuperscript{31} He proposed “reiterated” meditational exercises to develop new perceptual habits that correct our natural propensity to wander between thoughts and, instead, instill fixed attention on minute details. Unlike scholastic \textit{habitus}, therefore, Cartesian exercises and \textit{habitude} develop and “imprint”\textsuperscript{32} an artificial method for processing information founded upon extremely focused states of attention called intuitions.\textsuperscript{33}

Descartes defined intuitions not only by their clarity and distinctness but by their unity and instantaneousness: “tota simul et non successive intelligatur” (the whole thing is understood at once and not successively).\textsuperscript{34} Unity is the condition separating \textit{intuitus} from deduction, knowledge obtained in the form of a successive chain of logically related propositions. In rule three, Descartes declares that intuition and deduction are the only

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 8, rule 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Descartes (1953), 309. The citation is from the end of the fourth meditation.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Chapter two provides a thorough discussion of the period’s understanding of the verb \textit{imprimer}.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Jones (2006), 63, makes a very similar point: “Human beings are not uncertain because they cannot have true knowledge. They simply have not disciplined themselves to have the tightly focused attention necessary to discern those things human beings can in fact perceive clearly, distinctly, and simultaneously. Such things, capable of being known intuitively, are cast among the many ramshackle things humans attempt to cognize using the intellect, imagination, and the senses. Humanity needs practice to discern them and to discover the connections among them (…..) Descartes insisted on practical exercise to escape the impasse.”
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Descartes (1907), 30, rule 11. Marion (1975), 47-53, discusses the relationship between Aristotelian \textit{nous} and Cartesian \textit{intuitus}.
\end{itemize}
two cognitive processes that provide genuine knowledge—versus, for example, knowledge in the form of a *ramassement* (collection) of assembled commonplaces\textsuperscript{35} or historical/empirical knowledge that was only probable and not certain. Still, intuitions trumped deduction for their simplicity and simultaneity; only such instantaneous, vivid insights of thought met Descartes’s ideal for the “tightly focused”\textsuperscript{36} state of attention required to really know something. For that reason, Descartes also elaborated meditative exercises to compress chains of propositions into as-if intuitions. In rule seven, he laments that some deductive chains are so long that they compromise clarity: in a chain linking proposition A to proposition E, a clear understanding of the discrete relationships between A and B, B and C, C and D, D and E, does not necessarily entail a clear understanding of the relationship between A and E because our memories can be simply too weak to remember all the intermediate steps. Descartes’s solution is to “illas continuo quodam imaginationis motu singula intuentis (…) percurr[ere]” (run over them many times with a single movement of the imagination) until he became so habituated to the relationships linking the various propositions that the deductive chain seemed to be a simultaneous intuition. Habit, therefore, not only aids the knower in honing his attention but overcomes the weakness of memory.

For Descartes, redressing a faulty memory is important not only to grasp the certainty of deductive chains of knowledge fully but to retain objects of knowledge once they have been experienced and learned. This is most evident in a letter he sent to Princess Elizabeth in 1645:

\textsuperscript{35} Chapter four gives a brief overview of the history of commonplace collection in the period.
\textsuperscript{36} See footnote 25.
“Il ne peut, ce me semble, y avoir que deux chose qui soient requises pour être toujours disposé à bien juger: l’une est la connaissance de la vérité, et l’autre, l’habitude qui fait qu’on se souvient et qu’on acquiesce à cette connaissance, toutes les fois que l’occasion le requiert (…. ) nous pouvons, par après, être détournés de la croire par de fausse apparences, si ce n’est que, par une longue et fréquente méditation, nous l’avons tellement imprimée en notre esprit, qu’elle soit tournée en habitude.”

(It seems to me that there can only be two things required to be always disposed to judge well: the first is the knowledge of truth, and the other, the habit that makes it that on remembers and has acquired this knowledge, each time that the occasion requires (…. ) we can, afterwards, be distracted from believing it by false appearances, if it isn’t that, by a long and frequent meditation, we have imprinted it to such an extent in our mind, that it turns into a habit.)

Given the effort required to train oneself to think with the “pure and attentive” focus of an intuition, one must repeat single intuitions time and again to render them acquired knowledge. That so much effort is required indexes the artificiality of Cartesian method. The pentes naturelle (natural inclinations) of the mind want to synthesize information using different schemata than those prescribed by Cartesian method. “Frequent meditation” is therefore required to alter conceptual habits in the long term.

How, then, do iterated mental exercises engender cognitive transformation? Descartes sketches an answer in his treatise on emotions, the Passions de l’âme (1649). Although best known as the grandfather of substance dualism, Descartes also believed

---

37 Descartes (1953), 1205-08.
that the soul was located at a specific point in the body near the brain that he called \textit{la glande}. In article 50 of the treatise, he claims that we are all born with “natural” connections linking movements of the \textit{glande} to experiences of thought. For example, if we desire to look at something at a distance, this volition, by nature, launches a communication in the \textit{glande} that then widens the pupils.\footnote{Descartes (1953), 716, art. 44.} But he also says that these innate connections can be modified through habit: “(…) encore que chaque mouvement de la glande semble avoir été joint par la nature à chacune de nos pensées dès le commencement de notre vie, on les peut toutefois joindre à d’autres par habitude” ((…) even though each movement of the \textit{glande} seems to be joined by nature to each of our thoughts from the beginning of our life, one can nonetheless join them to others by means of habit).\footnote{Ibid, 721, art. 50.} To render his new epistemological program successful, Descartes needed a mechanism to forage and consolidate new networks linking sensations to thoughts. Indeed, his method was not natural, but could be naturalized through discipline and training. Habit is such an important psychological and physiological mechanism for Descartes because it provides the means to transform our innate cognitive networks to naturalize his artificial method.

It is difficult to assess the significance of habit in Cartesian philosophy because Descartes makes only sporadic pronouncements about habit’s transformative power. The power he ascribes to habit in the few comments he makes, however, suggests that it plays a keystone role in his entire program. To address this difficulty, I propose to focus on form. Because the topic of the \textit{Géométrie}, for example, is not epistemology but geometry, Descartes does not make explicit pronouncements about habit in this text. But that does
not mean habit is absent from the work; rather, how he articulates statements about geometrical constructions forces the reader to perform procedures and exercises that activate iteration and habit. Comments bookending the *Discours de la méthode* indicate the importance of form in Descartes’s work. He alerts the reader that the *Discours* should be approached like a “fable” that describes his personal method without prescribing it to others. He also requests that the reader “imitate” or reject elements of the method at will because he or she will be better served by doing the groundwork to develop a personal method; such activity, he argues, will serve them more than anything he might say given “l’habitude qu’ils acquerront” (the habit they will acquire) by actively doing the work themselves.\(^{40}\) In the next two sections, I demonstrate how the form of the *Géométrie* and the *Meditationes* supports a philosophical program based upon habit, iteration, and meditation.

**Solving problems by hand: doing instead of proving in the *Géométrie***

“Sometime in late 1631,” narrates Henk Bos, “the Dutch mathematician and philologist Jacob Van Gool (Golius) suggested to Descartes that he should try his new method in solving the problem, mentioned by Pappus, of the locus to three, four, or more lines.”\(^{41}\) The problem consisted in finding the collection of points that lie at an equal distance from a set of given lines (three, four, or more); the method Gool refers to is the method of analysis. By 1632, Descartes found the solution, eventually featuring it as the centerpiece in the first book of the *Géométrie* to show the power of his new method of algebraic analysis to solve the hardest extant problems from the Greek canon. According

\(^{40}\) Descartes (1953), 127, 175.  
\(^{41}\) Bos (2001), 271.
to Alain Herreman and Emily Grosholz, moreover, Descartes realized that Pappus’s problem was more than just a clever means to advertise his method; rather, he conceptualized it as “a sort of machine that produced an extended family of similar problems.”

Le problème de Pappus est en l’occurrence à la fois un problème et un ensemble de problèmes. C’est une sorte d’expression générale de problèmes puisqu’il est à la fois l’expression d’un problème et d’une infinite de problèmes. Descartes dispose ainsi du moyen pour traiter d’une infinité de problèmes à partir de l’énoncé d’un seul.

(Pappus’s problem is in this occurrence at once a problem and a set of problems. It is a kind of general expression of problems because it is at once the expression of a problem and of an infinite number of problems. Descartes thus disposes of a means to treat an infinite number of problems from the statement of one alone.)

Indeed, the solution to Pappus’s problems is a set of points that generate a curve; a change in the initial conditions of the problem—How many lines are given? Where are they positioned? How long are they?—gives a different curve as the result. Because Descartes found a general solution to the problem, he concluded that it could be used to generate (almost) any curve desired. As Grosholz claims, the problem therefore

---

43 Herreman (2010), 47. Original emphasis.
44 It could not, however, generate some more complex curves known as “mechanical” curves. This inability forced Descartes to reclassify which curves could be described as geometrically “certain.” For further discussion, see Bos (2001).
“rationaliz[ed] classical geometry” because it reorganized the subject matter around one, unifying principle.\(^{45}\)

By generalizing Pappus’s problem, Descartes was also able to present the *Géométrie* as a short, heuristic introduction to a larger mathematical program whose realization he left in the hands of the reader. In lieu of closure, the work’s last sentence underscores openness and incompletion: “Et j’espère que nos neveux me sçauront gré, non seulement des choses que jay icy expliquées; mais aussy de celles que jay omises volontairement, affin de leur laisser le plaisir de les inventer” (And I hope that our grandchildren will be grateful, not only for the things that I have explained here; but also for those that I have voluntarily omitted, in order to leave them the pleasure of discovering them).\(^{46}\) As the *Géométrie* is the third and final appendix to the *Discours*, its closing statement harks back to the claim in part six of the *Discours* that his readers will be better served by actively working to discover solutions on their own, instead of passively absorbing them from another. The *Géométrie*, therefore, exhibits not only Descartes’s formal method of analysis, but his rhetorical/pedagogical adaptation of analysis as a tool for encouraging an act of discovery in the reader. The reader’s active engagement, for that matter, did not start after he or she finished reading. Both Ann Blair and Alain Herreman comment that claims in the *Géométrie* only make sense if one employs a particular, active “reading practice” different from the merely passive appraisal of stated claims. As proof, Blair cites a letter Descartes wrote to a friend and fellow mathematician, directing him to “take the trouble to read [*the Géométrie*] with pen

\(^{45}\) Grosholz (1991), 25.

\(^{46}\) Descartes (1986), 432.
in hand, following the calculations” along with the text. What, then, are the formal characteristics of the Géométrie that encourage the reader’s active participation?

Because the Géométrie is a complex text that works on many levels, there are a variety of elements one might argue foster the reader’s engagement. At the level of intertextuality, Descartes includes a long extract from Book VII of Pappus’s Collectio, which stands out because it is in Latin, not French. The extract states the famous problem the ancients left unsolved; the rest of the chapter performs its solution using the new method. Instead of simply stating the problem and its solution, Descartes leads the reader through an intertextual process of discovery, performing the improvement the moderns have made over the ancients. Next, Descartes includes intricate diagrams, most famously an image of the mesolabe, a tool containing multiple straightedges aligned along an axis:

One can construct multiple, related curves using the mesolabe by rotating the straightedges counterclockwise around the pivot at angle YZ. The diagram, therefore, is static, but gestures the motion required to make sense of the image. As Bos argues, the use of this instrument modifying the period’s understanding of geometrical exactness.

---

47 Blair (2004), 429; Herreman (2010), 49.  
How the reader applies the tool to interpret the text is therefore crucial for understanding the work’s propositional content.

One aspect of the work yet to be analyzed is Descartes’s use of pronouns. While we anticipate the articulation of mathematical properties in law-like statements using words like “all” or “every”, the *Géométrie* employs the first person, *je*, more than 100 times and the general qualifiers *tous* and *toutes* only 87 and 71 times, respectively. Sometimes, the *je* accompanies actions that reader is meant to carry out as he or she reads the text. This performative first person, which I call the *procedural je*, dictates the reader’s actions and gives him or her the sense of coming to the discovery by him or herself. On other occasions, the *je* accompanies verbs that give commentary on the text as a whole. This indicative first person, which I call the *authorial je*, explains the mathematical and methodological significance of the actions of the *procedural je* realized through and carried out by the reader. The *Géométrie* therefore employs not one but two semantically separate first-person pronouns that work together to train the reader in the mathematical method of analysis.

I will begin with the *procedural je*. From Euclid, geometry was divided into two parts: proving theorems and solving or constructing problems. Descartes’s *Géométrie* emphasizes the “constructability” of geometric objects, so is more in line with problem solving—that is, establishing the possibility that a certain object or set of objects can be constructed using a permitted set of tools—than it is with theoretical description. In tune with this emphasis on construction, the *procedural je* appears in paragraphs in the *Géométrie* whose first sentence states that the task is to construct a particular object or solution. The *procedural je* then appears in the second or third sentence of the paragraph,
accompanying manual action verbs like *joindre* (join), *tirer* (draw), *adjouster* (add), *commencer* (begin), or cognitive action verbs like *concevoir* (conceive). That is, the *procedural je* solves problems by performing Descartes’ analytic approach to geometry. Here are two examples, including the introductory sentences that announce the task to be performed:

Soit, par exemple, AB l’unité, et qu’il faille multiplier BD par BC, je n’ai qu’à *joindre* les points A et C, puis *tirer* DE parallèle à CA (….)

(Let, for example, AB be the unit and the task be to multiply BD by BD, all I have to do is *join* the points A and C, then *draw* DE parallel to CA (….))

Or quand, pour trouver la construction de quelque problème, on vient à une équation en laquelle la quantité inconnue a trois dimensions… *je commence* par le dernier terme, et *divise* – 64 par – 16, ce qui fait +4 que *j’écris* dans le quotient; puis *je multiplie* (….)

(Therefore when, to find the construction of any problem, one arrives at an equation in which the unknown quantity has three dimensions… *I start* with the last term, and *divide* -64 by -16, which makes 4, which *I write* in the quotient; then *I multiply* (….))

The *procedural je* exploits the ambiguity of indexical language. It refers simultaneously to a textual actor, the implied problem solver, and to the reader, who activates this potential, textual problem solver by constructing the geometrical objects in question. Descartes does not describe the essence of geometrical objects, but replaces description

---

49 Descartes (1986), 1.
50 Ibid, 47-48.
with the reader’s potential activity. Indeed, the procedural je functions like the script of a play whose primary actor is the reader. Language, therefore, does not so much say something—as an indicative proposition says something—but prods a reader to do something. To be clear, this is not like a speech act in which language does rather than says. It is the type of language we find in users guides or manuals, instructing a reader how to perform a task. The final locus of meaning does not reside in what the text says but what the reader does.

Next, the procedural je gives the Géométrie a proleptic temporality. On the one hand, it accompanies present, active, indicative verbs (“I add,” “I multiply”), compound infinites (“I only have to join”) or present participles (“dividing”). Replicating diagrams on a separate piece of paper, constructing problems, or setting up and solving algebraic equations, the reader dilates the reading time with his or her activity. On the other hand, the reader only officially fuses with the procedural je when he or she can comfortably apply the method to solve problems not mentioned in the work. To express this idea, Jones references the Aristotelian difference between “acting justly” and “performing a just act.” In the context of geometry, “performing a geometrical act” is simply solving a problem without really understanding how or why. In contrast, as Jones writes:

Acting geometrically requires that one perform a geometrical act from knowledge of the underlying interconnections and that one choose to do so given the end of creating more intuitive knowledge (…. ) Only by repeating geometrical acts can someone produce the underlying habits necessary for acting geometrically.\(^\text{51}\)

\(^{51}\) Jones (2006), 32.
Iterative application of the method to solve problems outside the text is therefore required for the reader to achieve reference of the procedural je. Although the procedural je is procedural, insofar as the reader must perform its actions as she reads the text, it finally indexes the result of the procedure, the moment when the method has been naturalized as habit. The proleptic temporality compliments Descartes’s application of analysis as a pedagogical tool to generate active, participatory experience.

Descartes never uses the procedural je in proximity with a vocative (vous), freeing the reader to embody it by performing its actions (drawing, multiplying) rather than engaging with it like an interlocutor. In Ann Banfield’s terms, the procedural je is therefore not in the “context of speech or [communication]”, but in the “literary context of represented speech” or “narrative.” Descartes exploits the collapse between the dialogical space of you and I afforded by represented speech or thought in order to encourage the sense of self-invention in the reader. The procedural je must be dissociated from any particular self because it is Descartes’s means to give constructing directions, his translation of what is normally represented in mathematical works as a third person imperative: “let ABC be a particular triangle…”, a step which is called the ekthesis. Unlike a lyric I, which can vouch only for the truthful representation of limited, subjective experience, the procedural je is more a representative “non-person” that aims for objectivity because it refers ubiquitously. Its scope is intended to be as objective as the third-person imperative.

Contrast with the use of the first person in other mathematical works emphasizes the specificity of Descartes’s procedural je. Euclid employs the first person only in
propositions (so not in definitions, common notions [axioms] or postulates\(^52\)), in the form \(\lambda\varepsilon\gamma\omega, \omicron\tau\iota\) [I say that]. As Reviel Netz describes, even though the structure of Euclidean propositions are “not as rigid” as early commentator Proclus “seems to imply,” his geometrical theorems have a “stable kernel” structure.\(^53\) We can consult Book I, Prop. 4 for an example of this kernel structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part of proof</th>
<th>Theoretical Description</th>
<th>I, Prop. 4 (example)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>protasis</td>
<td>(C(x) \rightarrow P(x)) General case of proposition</td>
<td>If in a triangle two angles equal one another, then the sides opposite the equal angles also equal one another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ekthesis</td>
<td>(C(a)) Particular example of given object.</td>
<td>Let ABC be a triangle having the angle ABC equal to the angle ACB.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diorismos</td>
<td>I say that (P(a)) Subjective and proleptic claim of particular result – establishes its provability but not the proof</td>
<td>I say that the side AB also equals the side AC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kataskeue</td>
<td>For… (C(b), \ldots C(n), P(b), \ldots, P(a)) Establishment of immediate proof of (P(a)) from (C(a))</td>
<td>For if…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apodeixis</td>
<td>(C(x) \rightarrow P(x)) validates the immediate relationship between the ekthesis and the diorismos; because nexus is necessary, holds for any (C(x)). One can therefore conclude that the same kataskeue + apodeixis can be repeated for any (x).(^54)</td>
<td>Therefore if in a triangle two angles equal one another, then the sides opposite the equal angles also equal one another.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{52}\) The postulates are announced in indirect discourse, but from an impersonal perspective that is not embodied by a first person. The third-person present perfect imperative that begins the list of postulates is, “let it have been postulated”.

\(^{53}\) Netz (2011), 253.

\(^{54}\) Ibid, 255.
The Euclidean first person, the *diorimos*, is a liaison between the particular constructed figure and the general proposition. As Netz describes,

the *lego hoti*, ‘I say that’, preceding the *diorismos* is ambiguous between asserting the result and anticipating it. It does not just say that something ought to be the case; it also says that it is. On the other hand, the subjectivity of the first person implies that the thing is not yet proved but merely asserted. It affirms an assertion and anticipates a proof of that assertion.⁵⁵

Netz continues to claim that the validity of the final *supersasma*, which makes the transition from the particular case to the general claim, arises not from the proof of the base case, but rather from the implied awareness that the relationship stated between the *ekthesis* and the *diorismos* is necessary for any *x*. Most important for my purposes is that the Euclidean first person is not performative, but plays a set, logical function. It is not to be exchanged with the reader, as its subjectivity merely marks that the necessarily relationship between *C(a)* and *P(a)* is, at this stage, not yet confirmed. Logical glue disguised as a first person, it is not, as Descartes’s *procedural je*, stage directions for constructing and learning new techniques. Unlike Descartes, Euclid does not use a first person that must refer simultaneously to an implied reader, to an implied author or to an actual reader.

Most early modern mathematicians retain the Euclidean first person. La Vieta, Descartes’s predecessor in championing the analytical method,⁶⁶ uses a first person identical to that in Euclid. With one exception, his first person accompanies the verb *Dico*.

---

⁵⁵ Ibid, 256.
and is followed by indirect discourse in an accusative-infinitive construction. As in the *lego* of the *Elements*, the *dico* of the *Isagoge* functions as a *diorismos* to anticipate the provability of a particular property, using a particular operation:

**Proposition I:** An equation is not changed by antithesis (*protasis*)

Let it be given that “A square ‘minus’ D plane” is equal to “G square ‘minus’ B in A. (*ekthesis*) **I say that** (*dico*) “A square ‘plus’ B in A” is equal to “G square ‘plus’ D plane” and that by this transposition under opposite signs of conjunction the equation is not changed. (*diorimos*)

Even if Vieta presents his novel, analytic method that he vaunts is powerful enough to “leave no problem unsolved,” his propositions retain the stylistic, formulaic kernel inherited from Euclid’s *Elements*. As in Euclid, we have a *protasis*, followed by an *ekthesis* + *diorismos*, in which the first person states a property to be affirmed in a particular object. Descartes’s stylistic choice helps communicate that analysis is a methodological procedure to solve problems, not a passive scheme to classify geometric objects.

---

57 Vieta, 7-8, [http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k108865t/f14.image.r=isagoge+viète.langFR](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k108865t/f14.image.r=isagoge+viète.langFR). The fourth time the first person occurs in the plural in a rhetorical question that emphasizes the power of the analytic method “skillfully” to solve “the more famous problems which have hitherto been called irrational”: ecquis verò, cum magnitudines omnes sint lineae, superficies, vel corpora….vel ex angulis latera consequamur?”

58 Translation reproduced in Klein (1992), 342.

59 There are many other examples. Whereas Descartes and Vieta espoused the analytic method for solving geometrical problems and classifying curves, a counter tradition maintaining the synthetic style was still active in the French seventeenth century. One prominent example from this tradition is La Hire’s 1673 *Nouvelle Méthode en géométrie*
The contemporary tradition that informs Descartes’s use of a performative first person is the Loyolan spiritual exercise tradition. Jones argues that the *Géométrie* is like a spiritual exercise. He emphasizes the role Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* played in Jesuit culture at large as a tool to foster “moral reform” through a practice of using the imagination, of “bringing oneself into proper epistemic, emotional and spiritual states through imagining concrete, detailed situations and pondering their implications.” The tradition, then, uses narrative procedures that encourages readers to “imagine concrete, detailed situations” to catalyze the program of self-transformation. One hallmark property is the performative first person, which can refer at once to the author (Loyola), the giver of the meditations, and, most importantly, the exercitant. After a set of introductory directives, Loyola uses the first person as soon as the exercises begin:

General examination of conscience: I **presuppose** that there are three kinds of thoughts in my mind, namely: one which is strictly my own, and arises wholly from my own free will…

First Exercise: In the preparatory prayer I **will beg** God our Lord for grace that all my intentions, actions, and operations may be directed…

First Prelude: This is a mental representation of the place. When the contemplation or meditation is on something visible…the representation will consist in seeing in imagination the material place here the object is that we wish to contemplate. I **said** the material place, for example, the temple, or the mountain

---

*Pour les sections des superficies coniques et cylindriques*. La Hire retains the Euclidean style, consisting of the kernel Euclidean formula with its standard use of the *diorismos*.  

60 Jones (2006), 71.
where Jesus or His Mother is, according to the subject matter of the contemplation.

These are not like Augustinian confessions, in which an author has a conversation with himself, but are explicit directives for another’s self-transformation. Most of the time, Loyola’s first person is exchangeable with the exercitant, bidding him or her to carry out the actions along with the text. On the other hand, the “I said” in the first prelude looks more like Euclid’s *lego*. As Euclid, Loyola uses the first person as a bridge between a general task to be completed (the composition of a place) and its particular manifestation. The clauses that follow “I say” (*dico* in the original Latin) repeat what a general, abstract demand in exemplifying detail to activate the meditating imagination. Unlike in Euclid, however, what the *dico* calls the meditator to imagine does not stand in any necessary relationship to the general task: each exercitant may imagine something different. Given its performativity, Loyola’s *dico*, which refers either to the author, giver or exercitant of the exercises, is a conceptual predecessor to Descartes’s *procedural je*.

Loyola—or at least the inheritance of his ideas in Jesuit culture—is also a likely candidate for Descartes’s rhetorical adaptation of analysis as a tool for encouraging an experience of discovery. In the second introductory observation to the *Spiritual Exercises*, Loyola writes:

Let [the one who explains to another the method and order of meditating] adhere to the points, and add only a short and summary explanation. The reason for this is that when one in meditating takes the solid foundation of facts, and goes over it and reflects on it for himself, he may find something that makes them a little clearer of better understood (…. ) now this produces greater spiritual relish and
fruit than if one in giving the Exercises had explained and developed the meaning at great length. For it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth.”

Descartes’s elaboration of the performance of analysis applies and develops Loyola’s idea that the reader will understand something better by working to discover it on his or her own. For this reason, the *Géométrie* sticks with the bare minimum presentation of problems, vaunting how little it actually has to say in order to communicate the crucial facts with laconic elegance.

It is the *authorial je*, not the *procedural je*, who controls what goes unsaid. The *authorial je* complements the *procedural je* by addressing the reader directly (*vous*), explaining the significance of the procedures. Unlike the *procedural je*, therefore, the *authorial je* is not performative. Most of the time, it comments not on objects and diagrams in the text, but on the text as a whole. The *authorial je* governs intentional and voluntary verbs like “stop,” “like,” “include,” or “can,” which articulate methodological principles:

Au reste ces mesmes racines se peuvent trouver par une infinité d’autres moyens, et j’ay seulement voulu mettre ceux cy, comme fort simples, affin de faire voir qu’on peut construire tous les Problemes de la Geometrie ordinaire, sans faire autre chose que le peu qui est compris dans les quatre figures que j’ay expliquées.

(What is more, the same roots could be found using an infinity of other methods, and I only wanted to include this method, as simple, in order to show that one can
construct all the problems of ordinary geometry without doing anything more than what is contained in the few figures that I have explained.)

Or if it were necessary for me to stop to demonstrate all the theorems of which I make any mention, I would be constrained to write a volume much greater than I desire. But I want to draw your attention, in passing, to the fact that the discovery, of which you here have an example, can serve [to solve] an infinitude of other problems (…)

Justifying the decision to “compress many things into few words,” the authorial je explains how one invention (discovery), the problem solving method of analysis, suffices to solve any geometric problem.

This tells us something about Cartesian mathematics. The text does not present an exhaustive inventory of all methods available for solving the set of problems inherited from classical geometry. It is therefore not organized taxonomically according to types of geometric problems, providing a list of all the available problem-solving methods. Descartes instead presents one problem solving approach, chosen precisely for its generality. He is less concerned with its being the most elegant solution to solve…

---

61 Descartes (1986), 338.
particular problems and more concerned with its power to provide solutions to many kinds of problems, despite their intrinsic differences. Moreover, the work does not exhibit the power of its method directly, but anticipatorily. As we saw above, the reader is expected to go off and apply the method to solve a whole host of problems the authorial je is proud to announce he need not “stop” to demonstrate. Descartes only gives a full solution to a few chosen problems, notably Pappus’s problem, which then generates all the other classes of curves. The silence is a deliberate pedagogical strategy to encourage the reader’s further practice.

The authorial je exhibits narratological properties different from those of the procedural je. The procedural je inhabits the reader’s active space. Describing the text as a whole and not the objects represented within the text, the authorial je is an implied author inhabiting a different temporality. Statements made by the authorial je in the present tense refer to the narrative present inside the text, not the performative present of the reader outside the text. The amount of time it takes the authorial je to say “I will not stop to explain this in more detail…” (337) aligns exactly with the time it takes the reader to read this utterance. In contrast, the amount of time it takes the procedural je to utter “First I draw this line…” is much quicker than the amount of time it takes the reader to perform the task alongside the procedural je and, more important, understand the significance of the procedure. The pronouncements of the authorial je therefore provide brief interludes of reflective respite from the dilated temporality of the procedural je. Finally, the authorial je is paraleptic, not proleptic. It systematically mentions what it will not do: “if I had to stop to show all these theorems, I would be forced to write a work much fatter than I desire”; “I could mention all the other methods to solve this problems,
but I prefer…” This negative space is required to generate the potential promise that the few stated examples generate “infinite other examples”.

Combining the temporalities of the procedural je and the authorial je, the temporality of the Géométrie is anything but the eternal, static present engendered by the style of Euclidean, synthetic geometry. The axioms and definitions that construct the Euclidean world are all articulated in the third-person, present, indicative, not an aoristic present, but a durative present that resists the vicissitudes of time. A complex amalgam, the temporality shifts between proleptic dilation and paraleptic condensation. What the authorial je omits in moments of paralepsis must be filled in by activity of the procedural je, by her iterative application of the method to solve other problems. The text in turn collapses into a virtual space between the author’s paralepsis and the reader’s prolepsis.

The form of the Géométrie therefore exhibits Descartes’s pedagogical belief that one must perform iterative exercises to transform a piece of knowledge into an ingrained habit. But what about the cogito? As the story goes, the immediacy of the dictum cogito, ergo sum makes the house of mirrors of hyperbolic doubt collapse under the weight of indubitable certainty. The conversion that takes place is considered to be an instantaneous epiphany. As a model for conversion, however, epiphany is very different from the slow, transformative power of habit. How, then, can we square Descartes’s belief in the power of habit with the epiphanic model of conversion he presents in the cogito?

The cogito as a sententia for meditation: repetition and epistemological conversion

The answer is simple: the cogito is not an epiphany. The reason for confusion, however, is complex: it is formally difficult to create a compelling narrative depicting a
long-term process of conversion based on iteration and habit. The distillation of a long-term procedure down to a few concise, vivid scenes greatly increases rhetorical power, particularly for a philosopher like Descartes, who based his epistemology upon the clarity of instantaneous intuitions. In this final section, I argue that the *ego sum, ego existo*, the version of the *cogito* Descartes presents in the *Meditationes*, is a *sententia* the reader should utter over and over again to develop and train an intuitive experience of axiomatic knowledge. The *cogito*, I propose, is the first-person, performative representation of axiom “the same thing cannot simultaneously be and not be.” To recap, by “performative,” I mean performative reading, i.e. stage directions for an action the reader carries out along with the text, not performative in the speech act sense where an utterance modifies a state of affairs.

At the end of his objections to Descartes’s *Meditationes*, fellow philosopher Marin Mersenne requested that Descartes rewrite his *Meditationes* in the *more geometrico*, using definitions, axioms and postulates to support propositional conclusions, “ut unico velut intuitu lectoris cujuscunque animum explea[t]” (in order that [he] might fill the mind of any reader all at once, as if in a single intuition). As Peter Dear remarks, it was a “remarkable” event in the sociological history of knowledge that, during much of the seventeenth century, the “sheer textual layout” of an argument as a synthetic proof was important in “winning assent for propositions”: “mathematical demonstration was routinely taken to represent the pinnacle of certain proof, and thus

---

63 Descartes (1654), 67.
commanded the readiest acceptance.”

Descartes agreed, albeit reluctantly, to rewrite his work in the synthetic form. He believed analysis alone was an adequate style to communicate extremely abstract metaphysical ideas. Indeed, as their title indicates, the *Meditationes* claim to demonstrate two things: that God exists, and that there is a real distinction between the body and the soul. In his responses to Mersenne, Descartes notes that the primary difficulty he faces to win assent for his proofs is that it is unnatural to conceive of something without visualizing a physical referent. We are habituated from childhood to think otherwise:

>In rebus Metaphysicis de nulla re magis laboratur quam de primis notionibus clare, & distincte percipiendis; Etsi enim ipsae ex natura sua non minus notae, vel etiam notiores sint quam illae quae a Geometris considerantur, quia tamen iis multa repugnant senssum praejudicia quibus ab inuente aetate assuevimus (…. )

(In Metaphysical matters the principal difficulty is to clearly and distinctly conceive the first notions. For, even though by their nature they are not any less clear, or are even more clear, than those considered by Geometers, they nonetheless offend many of the prejudices of the senses we have acquired sense youth (…. ))

Descartes contrasts the first notions of metaphysics with those of geometry to defend his decision to use the analytic style. He argues that, because intuitions of simple geometric objects are derived from our natural sense experience, it is easy to generate clear intuitions of them, and we need only pay attention to a series of deductive consequences.

---

64 Dear (1995), 45. Consider Hobbes’s decision to structure his *Leviathan* or Spinoza’s decision to structure his *Ethics* as synthetic proofs. Pascal analyzes how synthesis, like analysis, became a general rhetorical style in his treatise *De l’esprit géométrique*.

65 Descartes (1654), 83.
to understand a proof. Synthesis is therefore adequate—though not preferred, as we know from the *Géométrie*—for presenting geometric proofs because the first principles of geometry can be grasped with little attention: “quod a quibuslibet etiam minus attentis fieri potest, modo tantum praecedentium recordentur” (which by whomever, even the least attentive, can occur, as long as they remember the precedents). In contrast, only the most attentive can grasp the extremely abstract, non-referential first principles of metaphysics. Communicating one’s own understanding of principles to another entails yet another level of difficulty. For that reason, Descartes thinks that analysis alone “veram viam ostendit per quam res methodice, & tanquam a priori inventa est” (shows the true means by which a thing was methodically discovered). Transposing his mathematical method into the domain of philosophy, Descartes reinterprets analysis to mean the recreation of a former experience of discover for the reader.

The problem Descartes faces in the *Meditationes*, then, is to generate cognition of inconceivable metaphysical entities attached to no physical referent. One might rephrase this by saying that he needs to prove that God and the soul exist without describing what they look like. In his responses to Mersenne, he claims that the utterance of the phrase *ego sum, ego existo* as contained in the second meditation is the only *viam* (means) in the history of philosophy that succeeds in making claim purely about existence and in doing so, debarring the mind from reference. How?

I agree with Hintikka that Descartes realized that the phrase *ego sum, ego existo* is entangled with the notion of existential inconsistency. Unlike the formulation of the *cogito* as *je pense, donc je suis* in the *Discours*, *ego sum, ego existo* lacks the inferential

---

66 Ibid, 83.
67 Ibid, 69.
connector *dono* (therefore). To address this absolute lack of logical information contained within the phrase itself (what tools can we use to analyze the truth content of the statement “I am”?), Hintikka expands the horizon of analysis to the relationship between the sentence and the person who utters the sentence; that is, he thinks about language in its performative rather than its propositional capacity. The argument is that it would be existentially inconsistent for one person, referring to him- or herself with the pronoun “I,” to state “I do not exist.” He signals the uniqueness of the phrase through contrast:

The sentences “De Gaulle does not exist” and “Descartes does not exist” are not inconsistent or otherwise objectionable any more than the moot sentence “Homer does not exist.” None of them is false for logical reasons alone. What would be (existentially) inconsistent would be the attempt of a certain man (De Gaulle, Descartes, or Homer, respectively) to use one of the sentences to make a statement (….) The inconsistency (absurdity) of an existentially inconsistent statement can in a sense be said to be of *performatory* (performative) character. It depends on an act or “performance,” namely on a certain person’s act of uttering a sentence (…); it does not depend solely on the means used for the purpose, that is, on the sentence which is being uttered.

Descartes’s presentation of the *cogito* in his synthetic rewriting of the *Meditationes* provides evidence in support of Hintikka’s argument. Here, Descartes completely abandons the first person, rewriting the *cogito* as a formula for existential inconsistency: “Quod idem non possit esse simul & non esse” (that the same thing cannot simultaneously exist and not exist). Or again in the *Principia*: “repugnat enim, ut

---

68 Hintikka (1962), 16-17.
69 Ibid, 15. Original emphasis.
putemus id quod cogitat, eo ipso tempore quo cogitat, non existere” (it indeed offends, when we think that that which thinks, at the same time that it is thinking, does not exist).

In the *Meditationes*, Descartes presents the *intuitus* (intuition) of existential inconsistency as *ego sum, ego existo* because the first-person experience is the analytic—as opposed to synthetic—presentation of the claim; analytic, because it replicates for the reader Descartes’s vivid, personal discovery about the nature of existential judgments.

Descartes employs narratological devices to facilitate his reader’s replication of his discovery. The narrative mode of the *Meditationes* is what Dorrit Cohn classifies as the “evocative present,” “the narrative present in the first person context”:

(...)[in this mode] the present tense functions not as a “true” but as a metaphorical tense (....) as one grammarian puts it, ‘the speaker, as it were, forgets all about time and recalls what he is recounting as vividly as if it were before his eyes. This “evocative” present…though it must logically refer to a past experience, momentarily creates an illusory (“as if”) coincidence of two time-levels, literally “evoking” the narrated moment at the moment of narration.\(^70\)

The “narrative present” of the *Meditationes* can be appreciated in contrast to the “dissonant self-narration” of the *Discours*. The entire content of *Meditationes* is compressed into part four of the *Discours*, where Descartes situates them in both space (Holland) and time (*il y a justement huit ans* [“exactly eight years ago”]). In the *Discours*, Descartes presents the *cogito* as a retrospective narrator, not a self in the process of experience. In the *Meditationes*, in contrast, Descartes “forgets about time and recalls” the thoughts as if both he and the reader were in the process of experiencing them. He

uses verbs in the present and future and deictic adverbs to provide vividness and immediacy. Here are a few examples:

Opportune igitur *hodie* metem curis omnibus exsolvi (…. ) serio tandem & libere generali huic mearum opinionum eversioni *vacabo*.

(It is therefore timely *today*, as I freed my mind from all cares (…. ) that I will seriously and voluntarily *free* my mind from all my old opinions.) (meditation 1)

In tantas dubitationes *hesterna* meditacione *conjectus sum*, ut nequeam amplius earum *oblivisci*, nec *videam* tamen qua ratione solvendae sint

(I was thrown into such doubts during yesterday’s meditation, that I will never be able to totally forget them, and still I cannot see by which rational they are to be resolved.) (meditation 2)

**Claudam nunc** oculos, aures *obturabo*, *vocabo* omnes sensus (…. )

(Now I will *close* my eyes, *cover* my ears, *evacuate* all my senses (…. ))

(meditation 3)

The deictic nature of the adverbs and verbs that scaffold the *Meditationes* invite the reader to act out the arguments along with the text. Descartes employs “evocative present,” I suggest, to encourage the performative interpretation of the utterance *ego sum*, *ego existo*. As he explained to Mersenne, his text is written only for those who are willing to devote a *singularem attentionem* (undivided attention) to his arguments.  

---

71 Descartes (1654), 84.
While many adverbs in the *Meditationes* index a punctual present that elides the narrator’s actions and the reader’s actions, others index a durative present proper to habit and repetition.  

72 Examples of durative adverbs include:

Denique statuendum sit hoc pronuntiatum, *Ego sum, ego existo, quoties* a me profertur, vel mente concipitur, necessario esse verum.

(And in the end it’s necessary to remark that this pronouncement, *I am, I exist*, is true, **each time** it is put forth by me, or conceived in my mind.) (meditation 2)

Ita me **his diebus assuefeci** in mente a sensibus abducenda, tamque accurate animadverti perpauca esse quae de rebus corporeis vere percipientur (…. )

(I **have become so habituated** these past couple of days to detaching my mind from my senses, and I’ve paid such accurate attention to how few corporal matters we know with certainty (…. )) (mediation 4)

These traces of repetition and habit suggest that the reader is supposed to do more with the text than simply act out the arguments along with the narrator. Indeed, as their title suggests, the *Meditationes* are not a text whose argument one absorbs in a single sitting, but a heuristic guidebook for a sustained program of meditation that eventually results in cognitive transformation. Descartes stresses this in his response to Mersenne. Following his claim (which I cited on page 31), that he has found the first viable means to detach the mind from the senses, he says that the argument is not to be understood immediately, but repeated until it instills new habits:

---

72 Cohn contrasts the sentences “I pick up my pen” and “I always write with a pen” as examples of the punctual versus durative present, respectively.
sed quae talis est ut non sit satis ipsam semel perspexisse, diu terenda est & repetenda, ut totius vitae consuetude res intellectuales cum corporeis confundendi contraria paucorum faltem direum consuetudine easdem distinguendi delatur.

(but it is such that it is not enough to have seen it once, but one should examine it for a long time and repeat it, until the lifelong habit of confusing intellectual things with corporeal things can be erased by a contrary habit to distinguish them, which is acquired through exercises that last a few days.)

As in article fifty in the *Les passions de l’âme*, Descartes suggests in this passage that repetition and habit can modify the customary relationship between the senses and the mind. The *cogito*, then, is a *sententia* to prepare the reader for the later arguments about the existence of God. As “the paradigm form of *intuitus,*” it gives the reader practice in thinking without reference.

In the *postulata* of his synthetic rewriting of the *Meditationes*, moreover, Descartes replaces the deictic adverbs of the analytic version into directives for sustained meditation:

> Peto primo ut lectores advertant quam debiles sint rationes ob quas sensibus suis hactenus crediderunt (...) Idque tam diu & tam saepe apud se revoltant, ut tandem consuetudinem acquirant non amplius ipsis nimi um fidendi (….)

(First, I ask that the readers notice how weak the reasons are on account of which they have up to this point trusted their senses (...) and that they return to this for such a long time and so often that in the end they acquire the habit of no longer trusting their senses (….)

---

73 Descartes (1654), 69.
Secundo, ut considerent mentem proprium (…) nec prius illam considerare disistant, quam ipsam clare percipiendi (….)
(Second, that they consider their own mind (…) and don’t stop considering it, until they perceive it clearly (….))

Quinto, ut diu, multumque in natura Entis Summe perfecti contemplanda immorentur.
(Fifth, that for a long time and frequently they contemplate the nature of the sovereign perfect Being.)

According to Dear, “Mersenne’s role as an ‘objector’ to the Meditationes was in large measure one of mediator and communicator. His concern (…) was to facilitate debate over important issues rather than to challenge the validity of Descartes’s arguments.” Responding to Mersenne’s objections therefore gave Descartes paratextual means to specify the reading protocol required to make the meditations work. The real work of the text lies outside its propositional content in the reader’s iterative activity. The deictic adverbs in the analytic presentation are a device to replicate the experience of analytic discovery in the reader, the durative adverbs a device to condense the reader’s sustained activity. The mix of punctual and durative adverbs results from the tension between the rhetoric of analysis, the textual presentation of an act of discovery, and the performance of analysis, the long-term practice that actualizes the conversion.

Conclusion

75 Descartes (1654), 87.
76 Dear (1995), 44.
It is the business of the literary scholar to be keenly aware of the way narrative devices and techniques transform real-life experience. It is the business of the philosopher to be keenly critical of the logical coherency of propositions and arguments. Countless philosophers have demonstrated the logical fallacies in Descartes’s *Meditationes*, famously highlighting circularity or category mistakes in the proof of the existence of God. Few have made to effort to consider how form informs these arguments. We have seen, however, how adamantly Descartes defended the analytic presentation in his responses to Mersenne, and how different the *Meditationes* look in the synthetic form. What we call form is therefore not incidental to Descartes’s purposes, but is crucial to his argument. Descartes believed that metaphysics was too abstract to be understood as a list of proposition; only performance could make these abstractions accessible to the limited human mind. Descartes’s use of the first person is without a doubt unique to the history of philosophy. Considering the monolithic importance he holds to theories of modern subjectivity, it is imperative that we take the time to analyze the narratological properties of his first-person pronouns before we draw hasty conclusions about his legacy to modern subjectivity.

This chapter reconsiders age-old assumptions about both Cartesian philosophy and the philosophical topics it treats. Descartes does not espouse epiphany, but thinks of conversion as a long-term process governed by iteration and habit. Although he considers the soul to be a substance separate form the body, he still thinks that we can carry out corporeal actions that modify the way we use patterns to make sense of the world. His geometric spirit is not Euclidean, but a concerted attempt to replace Euclidean synthesis with procedure-driven analysis. It is by paying careful attention to the form of
Descartes’s texts that one can redress common misconceptions about his philosophy: the *procedural je* in the *Géométrie* and the tension between punctual and durative adverbs in the *Meditationes* are precipitates of a deep-seated belief in our power to transform ourselves through performance and habit. The rest of the book makes the case that the performance of analysis is a lost legacy of Cartesian thought that shaped the seventeenth century.
After the Wager: the Animal Nature of Religious Conversion

Intellectual historians consider Pascal’s wager to be a milestone in the development of European religious thought because it is the first probabilistic argument for belief in God. Unlike contemporaries Descartes or Malebranche, who were busy concocting alternative deductive proofs for God’s existence, Pascal firmly believed that the human mind was constitutionally incapable of comprehending God’s existence. Because we cannot concretely imagine an infinite quantity, or even worse, an infinite indivisible entity, we can never fully comprehend the divine. As Pascal was a savvy mathematician, however, he knew that our incapacity to imagine and comprehend infinite entities concretely does not preclude our ability to make certain statements about their properties. For example, we might not be able to visualize each individual increment of an asymptotic function like \( y = \frac{1}{x} \) that expounds to infinity as \( x \) approaches zero, but we can state with certainty that this convergence does occur and that the function will not suddenly behave in a different way as the value of \( x \) decreases towards zero. Pascal made this fundamental distinction between the certain and the comprehensible the foundation of his rational theology, motivated to find an absolutely certain argument for belief in God that had absolutely nothing to do with comprehending the nature of God’s existence. And then he hit upon an ingenious idea. Having devoted some energy to combinatorial logic to advise friends like the Chevalier de Méré in their gambling strategies, he decided to rephrase the central question of belief: he didn’t ask for proof that God exists, but for proof that it would be in our favor to bet that He did. The result is the famous wager, in which Pascal convinces an atheist libertine why reason dictates to believe in God because
the potential of infinite bliss trumps the certainty of finite pleasure. Pascal therefore transforms ontology into a game of rational choice.

Discussions about Pascal’s wager and its significance in intellectual history normally stop there. This holds in particular for philosophical analyses from the analytic tradition: scholars like Ian Watt, James Wetzel, or Craig Duncan devote their energy to evaluating the logical viability of Pascal’s argument, asking whether his claims are right or wrong according to their methods of evaluation. But the probabilistic logic is only half the story. Although the wager convinces the atheist libertine that it is rational to bet on God’s existence, it does not suffice to convert him to belief because it does nothing to help him deeply and immediately feel God’s existence, to help him know God in his heart rather than his mind. Anyone who skims the Pensées picks up on the importance of le coeur as a faculty of judgment fundamentally different from the mind and fundamentally more important in matters of faith. So how does Pascal approach the libertine’s challenge? That is, what arguments or methods does he provide for transforming the heart now that he has convinced the mind?

He mobilizes the performance of analysis. The second portion of his argument, often overlooked by scholars, does not mark a breakthrough in intellectual history but a firm rooting in the style of thought that dominated his age. He writes:

Vous voulez aller à la foi et vous n’en savez pas le chemin (…. ) Ce sont gens qui savent ce chemin que vous voudriez suivre…suivez la manière par où ils ont commencé. C’est en faisant tout comme s’ils croyaient, en prenant de l’eau

---

77 See Hacking (2007), Wetzel (1993), and Duncan (2003). Admittedly, Hacking’s approach is much more historical than the other two.
bénite, en faisant dire des messes, etc. Naturellement même cela vous fera croire et vous abêtira.

[You want to achieve faith and you don’t know the path (…. ) You should follow those who know the path…follow the method where they began. It is by acting as if they believed, by taking holy water, by going to mass, etc. Naturally this will make you believe and will animalize you.] (397)\textsuperscript{78}

The use of the word “animalize” has elicited much scholarly discussion.\textsuperscript{79} I side with Etienne Gilson’s interpretation, which argues that Pascal understands the animal in a Cartesian fashion, i.e. as a machine. “Animalization”, therefore, intones the process of treating oneself like a machine, or repeating a series of actions to modify our mechanistic—or corporeal—side.

But does it make sense for Pascal, a rigid Jansenist seeking pure faith, to reduce belief to mechanistic repetition? In order to answer this question, we must step back and examine how Pascal conceptualizes habit as a transformative force in the rest of the Pensées.

In this chapter, I systematically analyze Pascal’s writings about habit in the Pensées, concluding that Pascal assigns to habit four primary functions:

1. Fetishization of worldly power

2. Local cultural specificity and, as corollary, the fallacy of induction raising particular custom to universal law

\textsuperscript{78} Pascal (2000), p. 680-681. The 2000 Pléaide edition of Pascal’s complete works uses a numbering system adhering as close as possible to the original collection of pensées. From here on, I will only include an in-text citation with the number of the pensée in parentheses.

\textsuperscript{79} For a complete overview on the literature on the subject, see Gilson (1932).
3. Differentiation between two epistemological approaches to negotiating complexity

4. A sustained program to engineer a conversion to faith (the performance of analysis)

My analysis yields a dual conclusion. On the one hand, our ineluctable susceptibility to habit and custom indexes our corporeal and fallen nature. Habit reinforces the radical disjunction between man and God. On the other hand, properly understand, habit can be channeled to realize our goals. Most importantly, properly channeled habit is our primary access to faith.

This chapter situates analysis of passages about habit (habitude) alongside analysis of passages about custom (coutume). The words are close enough in meaning to justify comparison, but they are not identical. In 17th-century French, habit had somatic overtones. Richelet, Furetière and the Académie all include a medical/physical definition for habit as a “temperament du corps” (Furetière). Pascal, in turn, uses the word habitude, not coutume, in his description of the role of the body in religious conversion. Custom, in contrast, refers to an entire “lifestyle” (Furetière) or to the mores, gestures, and discourse of a people (l’Académie). Habits can be individual exercises; customs entail social engagement and interactions. Indeed, the secondary definitions for custom in all dictionaries deem customs social norms or laws that start as voluntary and gradually become necessary. For this reason, Pascal uses the word coutume to refer to the local practices of peoples. In spite of these differences, properly grasping how Pascal’s take on custom dovetails with his theory of the limits of knowledge refines appreciation of how he thinks habit can engineer spiritual conversion.
The Emperor’s Customary Clothes: How Habit Supports Worldly Power

In an age bookended by Jean Bodin’s *Six livres de la république* (1576) and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet’s *Politique tirée de l’écriture sainte* (1709), both rigorous theories defending absolute monarchy, Pascal’s judgment of kingly power in the *Pensées* stands out as particularly bold. One way to account for his defiance would be to examine his social affiliation with Port-Royal. The abbey assembled aristocrats who were dismayed by the recent events of la Fronde and sought to establish pockets of resistance to counter the centralist tendencies launched during Mazarin’s tenure. The series of vindictive essays Pascal composed against the Jesuits that held sway in Louis XIV’s court index his resentment against the burgeoning structures of power.

Still, there is evidence throughout the *Pensées* that Pascal’s critique of kingship serves not only political but also epistemological goals. One of the most ironic critiques he leverages against kingship in the *Pensées* is that a king’s greatest happiness resides in his being constantly distracted by his suite of followers:

> Et c’est...le plus grand sujet de félicité de la condition des rois, de ce qu’on essaie sans cesse à les divertir et à leur procurer toutes sortes de plaisirs. Le roi est environné de gens qui ne pensent qu’à divertir le roi et à l’empêcher de penser à lui. Car il est malheureux tout roi qu’il est s’il y pense.

[And the greatest source of happiness of the condition of kings is that we continuously try to distract them and procure for them all sorts of pleasures. The king is surrounded by people who only think about distracting the king and stopping him from thinking about himself. For he is miserable, king though he may be, if he thinks about himself.] (126)
According to Pascal, a king may be powerful but he can never be majestic. Pascal considers *grandeur* to be the highest quality man towards which man can aspire. It is our quality of soulfulness that marks us as rational creatures participating in an economy of charity that emphasizes our divine over our animalistic nature. The primary condition for achieving *grandeur* is self-awareness, or reflective acceptance of one’s mortality and fragility:

*L’homme n’est qu’un roseau, le plus faible de la nature, mais c’est un roseau pensant…quand l’univers l’écraserait, l’homme serait encore plus noble que ce qui le tue, puisqu’il sait qu’il meurt et l’avantage que l’univers a sur lui. L’univers n’en sait rien.*

Tout notre dignité consiste donc en la pensée…

[Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed…if the universe were to annihilate him, man would be even more noble than that which kills him, since he knows that he is dying and the advantage that the universe has over him. The universe doesn’t know anything.

All our dignity therefore exists in thought…] (186)

La grandeur de l’homme est grande en ce qu’il se connaît miserable; un arbre ne se connaît pas miserable. C’est donc être miserable que de se connaître miserable, mais c’est être grand que de connaître qu’on est miserable.

[Human majesty is great because man knows himself as miserable; a tree doesn’t know it’s miserable. It’s therefore miserable to know oneself as miserable, but it’s majestic to know that one is miserable.] (105)
To achieve majesty, therefore, one must be a philosopher and not a king. One must make a concerted effort to understand and accept human mortality. Distracted by hunting, plays, and flattery, the king never has time to reflect upon and accept the fragility of human existence. Pascal therefore inverts the traditional hierarchies of power to champion a Christian majesty favoring the meek and self-aware.

Pascal goes so far as to reduce royal power to a mirage generated by habit. What people mistake to be the “natural force” of kings is actually just an artificial residue engineered by spectacle. Fragment 23 outlines how habit transforms artificial pomp and circumstance into “natural force”. First, a naïve subject experiences “respect and terror” when he or she encounters the royal retinue. The “force” of sensations overwhelms the subjective imagination, dulling reason’s capacity to see the king as a man like everyone else. Through frequent encounter with the royal retinue, the subject becomes habituated to associating a vision of the king with the experience of respect and terror generated by the attendant spectacle. When the subject then sees the king stripped of “these accompaniments”, the subject will only see what has been habitually “imprinted” upon the mind’s eye, the emotional reflex of “respect and terror,” and will mistakenly attribute the sensation of “respect and terror” to the king himself. Subjects who fear royal force therefore exhibit a lack of critical awareness akin to that of the king. Habituated by spectacle, they are unable to assess matters objectively. Pascal often associates kingship with a lack of objective, critical awareness. Whereas the king distracts himself so as to ignore the paucity of his mortal condition, the subjects transfer the emotional force of

---

80 Although Pascal does not explicitly mention the imagination in fragment 23, he uses the exact same set of images to explain the dangerous power of the imagination in fragment 41.
spectacle onto the person of the king himself. Pascal exposes the entire system of kingship as a mirage instilled by a lack of critical awareness.

**Cultural Relativism and the Limits of Reason**

In its second apparition in the *Pensées*, habit is a force of differentiation and particularization between peoples. Particularization does not mean individuation. Pascal does not describe how one person’s habits define his or her unique character, but how one community’s habits uniformly shape the values and opinions of its members. Although this type of custom facilitates the social cohesion required for a community’s stability, Pascal ultimately regards it more negatively than positively. The problem is that most people never consider their habits in critical perspective. Instead, habit generates a

81 According to Le Guern, article 50 in Descartes’s *Les passions de l’âme* may have inspired Pascal’s take on how habit generates the false illusion of royal force. Descartes writes:

> “les paroles qui excitent des mouvements en la glande, lesquels…ne représentent à l’âme que leur son…[mais] par l’habitude qu’on a acquise en pensant à ce qu’elles signifient…ont coutume de faire concevoir cette signification plutôt que…le son de leurs syllabes…encore que les mouvements [du cerveau] qui représentent à l’âme certains objets, soient naturellement joints avec ceux qui excitent en elle certaines passions, ils peuvent toutefois par habitude en être séparés et joints à d’autres fort différents…”

> [the spoken words that excite movements in the gland, which…only represent their sound to the soul…[but] by the habit that we have acquired by thinking about what they signify…have the custom to make us conceive this signification rather than the sound of their syllables…even though the movements of [the brain] that represent certain objects to the soul are naturally joined with those which excite in the soul certain passions, they can nonetheless by habit be separated and joined to others that are much different…] (Descartes (1953), p. 721)

As Pascal in fragment 23, Descartes names habit as the mechanism that transforms material events (sounds and written figures) into vehicles of signification. Descartes nonetheless views habit’s contribution to the human capacity to signify in a fully positive light. In contrast, by citing signification as a source of royal power, Pascal forces the reader to reevaluate the human tendency to signify.
shortsightedness that makes people mistake what they have always known or done for a normative standard that should apply universally. Practically, the difference in customs causes misunderstandings between peoples that result in war: “Il faut tendre au général, et la pente vers soi est le commencement de tout désordre, en guerre, en police, en économie, dans le corps particulier de l’homme.” [On must tend towards the general, and the slope towards the self is the beginning of all disorder, in war, in government, in economics, in the particular body of man.] (397) Philosophically, the shortsightedness generated by custom is evidence for mankind’s fall from grace. Each community’s particular customs skew understanding of what is general, universal, or absolute. Pascal in turn sets a humble task for philosophy. Philosophy is not god’s grace. It does not have the power to assess and correct our particular prejudices in order to achieve an objective, universal appreciation of phenomena because such understanding is reserved for God. What philosophy can do is make us recognize and accept our limitations. For Pascal, we are great when we reflectively accept that what appears to be universal is actually just relative perspective.

According to Pascal, local habits and customs determine both the professions and the laws that structure communities. He claims that custom determines which careers we value and which we denigrate, emphasizing that there is no absolute standard to value career choice because opinions about what’s important in life change according to context:

La coutume fait les maçons, soldats, couvreurs. ‘C’est un excellent couvreur,’ dit-on, et en parlant des soldats: ‘Ils sont bien fous,’ dit-on, et les autres au contraire: ‘Il n’y a rien de grand que la guerre, le reste des hommes sont des
coquins.’ A force d’ouïr louer en l’enfance ces métiers et mépriser tous les autres, on choisit…

Tant est grande la force de la coutume qui, de ceux que la nature n’a fait qu’hommes, en fait toutes les conditions des hommes.

Car des pays sont tout de maçons, d’autres tout de soldats, etc. Sans doute que la nature n’est pas si uniforme; c’est la coutume qui fait donc cela… (541)

[Custom makes masons, soldiers roofers. ‘He’s an excellent roofer’, they say, and when speaking about soldiers: ‘They are totally crazy’. Others say on the contrary: ‘The only important thing is war, the rest of men are scoundrels.’]

During childhood, by continuously hearing praise for some careers and contempt for all the others, one makes a choice…

So large is the force of custom which, of those whom nature has only made into men, makes all the conditions of men.

Because countries are entirely filled of masons, others filled with soldiers, etc.

There is no doubt that nature is not so uniform; custom therefore does this…]

Again, Pascal portrays habit not as a force of individuation but as a force of local uniformity. Customs unite the individual members of a single community: in one place, everyone is a mason or everyone is a soldier. As every community has different customs, however, the same force that erases natural individual difference generates artificial difference between communities. Pascal in turn criticizes artificial uniformity because it makes men overlook more basic similarities that “naturally” exist between all individuals everywhere.
Better to grasp Pascal’s contempt for professional solidarity, it is important to acknowledge that mid 17\textsuperscript{th}-century society valued the relationship between career and individual identity differently than our contemporary society. A member of Port-Royal and an intimate of le Chevalier de Méré (the greatest theorist of gentlemanly etiquette besides La Rochefoucauld)\textsuperscript{82}, Pascal espoused the social ethic of _honnêteté_ developed in 17\textsuperscript{th}-century salon society. Gentlemanly etiquette favored generality and universality and despised any manifestation of professional identity. Indeed, the purpose of _honnêteté_ was to erase any token of class affiliation so that the rising bourgeoisie could mingle with the declining aristocratic class without offending the latter’s pride or sensibilities.\textsuperscript{83} The whole thing was a big game of social make-believe. As Pascal expounds in fragment 547, “il faut qu’on n’en puisse <dire> ni ‘Il est mathématicien’, ni ‘prédicateur’, ni ‘éloquent’, mais: ‘Il est honnête homme.’ Cette qualité universelle me plaît seule.” [one must be able to say neither ‘he is a mathematician’, nor ‘preacher’, nor ‘eloquent’, but: ‘He is a gentleman.’ This universal quality alone pleases me.] Whereas we communicate who we are by saying what we do or what we work on, participants in 17\textsuperscript{th}-century salons demonstrated that they belonged to a given social class by adopting gestures and patterns of speech recognizable to members of a group. They downplayed individuality and uniqueness to emphasize convention.

\textsuperscript{82} Pascal’s wrote his short essay _De l’esprit géométrique_ in response to a discussion with le chevalier de Méré. As Méré did not understand the principle of infinite divisibility, Pascal devotes part of the essay to explaining the principle to the skeptical and entirely non-geometric minded (though skilled probabilist, given his gambling habit) Méré. The second half of the essay involves a description of the difference between Pascal’s purely formal intelligence and Méré’s more intuitive, social intelligence, which he refers to as _l’esprit géométrique_ and _l’esprit de finesse_.

\textsuperscript{83} Auerbach (1984), 164-167.
Fragment 541 gestures towards the adaptive, existential psychology Pascal develops more fully in fragments 32 and 120. Adaptive, because he does not think we define ourselves by according to individual rational standards, but that we assess how our thoughts will be assessed by others: “chacun prend d’ordinaire ce qu’il a ouï estimer.” [each ordinarily accepts what he has heard others esteem.] (120) Existential, because it is our experiences that determine who we are, not who we are that determines our experiences.

Pascal’s adaptive, existential psychology introduces new complexity into the traditional relationship between habit and virtue inherited from Aristotelian ethics. The novelty can be appreciated through contrast with Scipion Dupleix’s neo-Aristotelian Ethique ou philosophie morale (1610). Dupleix does uphold a certain existentialism because he thinks that it is not virtues that determine actions, but actions that determine virtues:

…ce qui nous est naturel et inné ne change point par aucune coutume ou exercice…la vertu ne nous est point innée, ains s’acquiert par exercice et par la continuation des actions decentes et honnestes…les actions en precedent l’habitude, ce qui est tout manifeste és vertus. Car nul n’est et ne peut estre dit à bon droit ny juste, ny vaillant, ni liberal, ni temperant, qu’il n’ait fait preuve de ces vertus là par plusieurs actions precedentes.

[…] that which is natural and innate in us does not change at all through custom or exercise…virtue is not innate to us, therefore it is acquired through exercise and through the continuation of decent and honest actions…actions precede habit, which is completely manifest in virtues. Because no one is or can be rightly said
to be just, brave, liberal or moderate who has not proved these virtues through many previous actions.]\textsuperscript{84}

For Dupleix, as for Aristotle before him, habit ingrains moral (or vicious) actions and attitudes until they become automatic. Others’ judgment does play a role in the neo-Aristotelian context, but only to confirm the ease with which one exhibits a virtue.\textsuperscript{85} The role of others therefore remains external and is never internalized as part of the process of self-cultivation. For Pascal, in contrast, the opinions of others go so far as to create our virtues and self-perceptions:

O que cela est bien tourné! Que voilà un habile ouvrier! Que ce soldat est hardi!

Voilà la source de nos inclinations et du choix des conditions. Que celui-là boit bien! Que celui-là boit peu! Voilà ce qui fait les gens sobres et ivrognes, soldats, poltrons, etc.

[Oh that has such style! What a talented worker! How bold this solider is! This is the source of our inclinations and the choice of conditions. How well that one drinks! How little that one drinks! This is what makes people sober or drunks, soldiers, cowards, etc.] (32)

Neo-Aristotelian theorists like Dupleix consider action to be a primary force dictating the habits that then solidify into character. Pascal dissipates the purchase of action in an echo chamber constituted by rumor and reputation.

\textsuperscript{84} http://artflx.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.91:3:0.frantext0911. Accessed 03.30.12. Page 93. What is of interest here philosophically, as I believe I will treat in an introductory chapter, is the process of abstraction and generalization: how a single action in a specific domain (cheating at a game of checkers) gains a general status that then becomes a habit or virtue applicable to other domains of action (cheating in a business affair, etc.).

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 94.
This difference in the way Pascal and Dupleix conceptualize habit’s relationship to virtue indexes the shift in theories of subjectivity that took place in the middle of the century. As Paul Bénichou explains in his seminal work, *Morales du grand siècle*, Jesuit thinkers in the first half of the century championed the moral quality of *générosité*, which, according to his account, does not mean generosity as we understand it, but rather a heroic capacity to realize one’s will and desires. The early-century aristocrats valued a heroism based on a deliberate expression of rational self-interest. The Jansenists, in contrast, condemned any immediate expression of self because they saw it as an index of *amour-propre*, or perverted self-interest that detracted from one’s absolute love for God. This climate condemned any natural impulse, complicating the relationship between action and self. Pascal’s take on habit’s convoluted relationship to the cultivation of virtue is therefore symptomatic of Jansenist psychology.

Try as they might, at least ideologically, the gentlemanly caste of the 17th-century did not modify the professional hierarchy that structured the *Ancien Régime*; legislative action to abolish the three *états* (the aristocracy, the priestly class, and the white- and blue-collar workers of society) did not occur until the Revolution. In turn, Pascal’s claim that class-based customs and habits determine professional placement probably did not offend the period’s sensibilities. On the other hand, his stronger claim that local customs determine revered abstractions like Equity, Justice, the Highest Good (*le souverain bien*), and Truth probably offended all but the most pessimistic of his Jansenist colleagues.

Pascal cites legal relativism as further evidence of mankind’s fall from grace. It is not legal relativism *per se* that proves our misery, but the fact that we are too shortsighted
to recognize this relativism. We misunderstand the purpose of laws and mistakenly see them as expressions of universal abstractions:

La coutume ne doit être suivie que parce qu’elle est coutume, et non parce qu’elle soit raisonnable ou juste. Mais le peuple la suit par cette seule raison qu’il la croit juste…Il serait donc bon qu’on obéît aux lois et coutumes parce qu’elles sont lois; qu’il sût qu’il n’y en a aucune vraie et juste à introduire, que nous n’y connaissons rien et qu’ainsi il faut seulement suivre les recues. Par ce moyen on ne les quitterait jamais. (469)

[Custom should not be followed except because it is custom, and not because it is reasonable or just. But the people follows it only because they believe it is just…It would therefore be good if we were to obey laws and customs because they are laws; if we were to know that they have nothing to do with truth and justice, that we know nothing and that we must in turn follow what is accepted.

Thinking so, we’d never abandon them.]

Similar to his take on professional biases, Pascal claims that we transform habits into abstractions, attributing a universal or natural status to structures that are only relative and particular. In politics, however, these false abstractions have graver consequences. Pascal thinks they are the root of both political instability and war. If one country’s laws embody universal Justice, then different laws necessarily corrupt the “natural and universal”.

As Pascal makes explicit in fragment 469 (“Montaigne a tort” [Montaigne is wrong]), his writings on custom and law are in close dialogue with Montaigne’s “Apologie de Raymond Sebond”. A couple of citations illustrate the close inspiration:
Pascal’s choice to cite the “Apologie” situates the *Pensées* in a generic tradition dating back to the *Theologia Naturalis* of Raymond Sebond (Ramon Sibiuda in the original Catalan), written in the early 15th century. As Montaigne articulates, Sebond “entreprend, avec des arguments humains et naturels, d’établir et de démontrer contre les athées tous les articles de la religion chrétienne.” [undertakes, with human and natural arguments, to establish and demonstrate against the atheists all the articles of the Christian religion.]87

The key phrase here is not “demonstrates against the atheists all the articles of the Christian religion”, which Pascal’s text certainly attempts (consider the wager), but rather

---

87 Montaigne (2010), 145.
“with human and natural arguments.” Nonetheless, because Sebond, Montaigne, and Pascal compose their rational apologies within different intellectual climates, they draw different links between reason and faith.

Written during the decadent phase of Scholasticism, the *Theologia Naturalis* broke standard Scholastic conventions separating theology from philosophy. Sebond’s critics believed that religion was based upon faith and inspiration, not rational arguments. Promoting a Humanist optimism like that of Pico della Mirandola, Sebond defiantly proposed that “as man is a connecting link between the natural and the supernatural, it is possible by a study of human nature to arrive at a knowledge of even the most profound mysteries of Faith.” Pushed to its limits, Sebond’s method reduces theology down to anthropology and epistemology: an inquiry into the divine is nothing but an exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of human reason.

Sebond’s participation in the optimism of nascent Humanism is manifest in his belief that reason is a link between the natural and the supernatural.

Although characteristically humanist in what concerns his deep relationship to Classicism, Montaigne did not share the optimism of figures like Pico della Mirandola or Erasmus. His response to Sebond is anything but an apology, not because it upholds that we can only access divine matters through revelation, but because it deconstructs any pretense of rational integrity to conclude that Pyrrhonian skepticism—the total suspension of judgment concerning the certainty of human affairs (ἐπεχωρία)—is the only

---

88 Ibid, 146.
honest philosophical attitude.\textsuperscript{90} Montaigne devotes most of the “Apologie” to denigrating reason and human striving: he denies that man’s rationality places him higher on the great chain of being than the rest of God’s creation;\textsuperscript{91} he cites cultural relativism to prove that our institutions and mores are not universal; he shows how our condition as becoming beings precludes knowledge of God, who is a static, immortal being.\textsuperscript{92} For him, the only thing we know with certainty is our individual experience. This principle precludes comprehension of God because divine nature is essentially disproportionate to human nature, i.e. to our individual experience. Moreover, we tend to draw false generalizations from our local, individual experience, shortsightedly elevating local experience to universal standards. He concludes our need for God’s grace from reason’s incapacity to grasp the complexity of human affairs.\textsuperscript{93} In a hallmark move, he renounces general knowledge to focus on the minute appreciation of particular experience.

\textsuperscript{90} This does not mean that Montaigne unequivocally celebrates Pyrrhonism. On the contrary, he goes so far as to attack “the Pyrrhonists for the hubris of their claim to not knowing anything.” (\url{http://www.waggish.org/2009/montaigne-apology-for-raymond-sebond/}; see David Auerbach’s blog for a supporting quotation). That said, the very method of Montaigne’s \textit{Essais} meets his definition of the Pyrrhonist attitude: he gives no unconditional support or negation for any topic or any subject, but categorically defends the opposite of the reigning status quo.

\textsuperscript{91} The canonical text on the intellectual history of the great chain of being is, of course, Arthur Lovejoy’s \textit{The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea} (1936).

\textsuperscript{92} Passages about man’s vain attempts to be godlike are on 248-49; passages about cultural relativism are on 311-26; passages about becoming versus being are on 343-48.

\textsuperscript{93} The essay’s conclusion reads: “…il est impossible pour l’homme de s’élèver au-dessus de son humanité, car il ne peut voir que par ses yeux, et ne peut saisir que par ses doigts. Il s’élèvera si Dieu lui prête exceptionnellement la main. Il s’élèvera en abandonnant ses propres moyens et en y renonçant, et en se laissant emporter et soulever par les moyens purement célestes.” [It is impossible for man to elevate himself above his humanity, because he can only see with his eyes and only grab with his fingers. He will elevate himself if God exceptionally gives him a hand. He will elevate himself by abandoning his own powers and renouncing them, and by allowing himself to be carried and elevated by purely celestial means.] (347-48)
As his Jansenist outlook disdains individualism as a symptom of human depravity, Pascal starts from a different set of assumptions. Developing the potentials of an individualist humanism, Montaigne incorporated cultural relativism as one layer of a kaleidoscopic argument supporting Pyrrhonian skepticism. As a Jansenist, Pascal uses cultural relativism and our attendant tendency to make false generalizations as proof of the pitfalls of human reason.

A second goal of the *Pensées*, moreover, was to respond to the epistemology Descartes had outlined in his *Meditationes*. Descartes’s triumph over hyperbolic doubt in the act of the *cogito* was one way to overcome the trap of the Pyrrhonian abyss. Pascal doesn’t attempt to use reason to overcome reason’s pitfalls, but limits its scope. True to Jansenist pessimism, he critiques Pyrrhonism because it overstates—not understates—the limits of reason by mistakenly subjecting first principles to rational critique:

…il est aussi inutile et aussi ridicule que la raison demande au coeur des preuves de ses premiers principes pour vouloir y consentir, qu’il serait ridicule que le coeur demandât à la raison un sentiment de toutes les propositions qu’elle démontre pour vouloir les recevoir. (101)

[…it is as pointless and ridiculous for reason to ask the heart to give proof of its first principles in order to accept them, as it would be ridiculous for the heart to ask reason to provide a feeling of all the propositions that it demonstrates in order to receive them.]

94 For a detailed account of Pascal’s critique of Cartesian epistemology, see Marion (1999).
Pascal introduces a companion faculty to reason, *le coeur* [the heart], as the seat of both intuitions and immediate mandates of conscience. His move limits the proper scope of reason even further than Montaigne: reason not only gives no insight into the divine (as in Sebond), it does not even give complete insight into human experience (as in Montaigne). Such a move is standard in the Jansenist backlash against the rational optimism of figures like Corneille and Descartes writing in the first half of the century. Whereas Montaigne worked to temper the over-optimism of the early Humanists, Pascal worked to temper the absolute belief in control and reason of the neo-Stoics.

Pascal only damns reason, however, when it is too self-centered. The fact that we must accept first principles axiomatically does not damn us into skepticism. It merely forces us to reconsider the limits of reason: “cette impuissance ne conclut autrue chose que la faiblesse de notre raison, mais non pas l’incertitude de toutes nos connaissances.” [this impotence only concludes the weakness of our reason, not the uncertainty of all our knowledge] (101) Pascal believes in intuitions because they buttress intellectual systems and, more importantly, grant direct access to God’s love and mercy. Our heart, not our reason, makes us great. So what lesson should we take from cultural relativism? Well, says Pascal, it gives us an opportunity to reflect upon and admit the fact that we err: “la grandeur de l’homme est grande en ce qu’il se connaît miserable.” [the greatness of man is great insofar as he knows himself to be miserable] (105) Whereas Montaigne argues that men are no better than animals, Pascal distinguishes man in his capacity to develop reflexive knowledge. As liable as we are to mistakes and as contradictory as we may be,

---

95 For a complete discussion of the *coeur* in the *Pensées*, see Wood (2009). It appears that the pair *coeur:raison* is Pascal’s translation of the classical pair *noesis:dianoesis*. Wood complicates the distinction by demonstrating the overlap between the *coeur* and the will.
as “roseaux pensants” [thinking reeds], we recover a link to God by humbly and reflectively knowing how and why we err.

**First Principles and Mnemonics: Habit and Epistemology**

To avert the Pyrrhonist abyss, Pascal must face the problem that reason cannot establish its own foundations but requires *a priori* starting material upon which it can operate.\(^96\) Reason is not creative but transformative: it furnishes new insights by deducing propositions and theorems from given definitions and axioms. For Pascal, *le coeur*, not *l’esprit*, provides the input for deductive systems. We experience this unprocessed input as a *sentiment*, a “spontaneous insight that does not result from a chain of progressive reasoning.”\(^98\) Given their spontaneity, we must not overanalyze *mots primitifs* [primitive terms], “les choses claires et entendues de tous les hommes.” [things clear and understood by all men.].\(^99\) These primitive terms are metaphysical staples like

\(^{96}\) Lonning (1980), 56.
\(^{97}\) Consider Kant’s famous question in the *First Critique*: “Are *a priori* synthetic judgments possible?”
\(^{98}\) Wood (2009), 360-61. As Wood elaborates, *sentiments* are not only immediate intuitions but also immediate emotional experiences and experiences of faith. In this section, I will only consider the specific epistemological manifestation of *sentiments* as spontaneous insights or intuitions.
\(^{99}\) Pascal (2000), 158. Pascal’s hostility towards the hyper-analysis of metaphysical terms may be a covert critique of the neo-Aristotelian tendency to give incomprehensible definitions. So Descartes in his *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*: “quis est qui conciperet eamdem rem, cum dicitur illi, *locum esse superficiem corporis ambientis*?...At vero nonne videntur illi verba magica proferre, quae vim habent occultam et supra captum humanii ingenii, qui dicunt *motum*, rem unicuique notissimam, *esse actum entis in potentia, prout est in potentia*? quis enim intelligit haec verba? quis ignorat quid sit motus?” [who is it that would understand the meaning, when it is said to him, *place is the surface of a surrounding body*?...But indeed don’t they seem to provide him with magic words, which have a hidden force and are above the capacity of the human mind, those who say that *motion*, the thing best known to everyone, *is the act of a being in its power,*
“space, time, movement, equality, greater, diminution, all.” They safeguard against what we would call deconstructionist regression, the infinite semantic interdependence of all terms:

“It is evident that the first terms that one would like to define would suppose precedents to serve as their explanation, and that, similarly, the first propositions that one would like to prove would suppose others that preceded them; and therefore it is clear that one would never arrive at the first ones.

Therefore, by pushing the pursuit more and more, one necessarily arrives at primitive terms that one can no longer define…"

As Pierre Force notes, however, convention, not essence, determines the meaning of primitive terms: “[l]a transformation de la coutume en nature s’opère donc de façon identique dans la communauté des hommes et dans les mathématiques.” [the transformation of custom into nature operates therefore in an identical manner in the community of men and in mathematics].

For Pascal, our “natural principles” and primitive terms are not objective, ontological truths but conditional insights fostered by proportionately as it is in its power? Who the hell understands these words? Who doesn’t know what motion is?], Descartes (1907), 41.


perceptual habits. Pascal thinks we have to accept a tacit understanding of meaning only because we share a basic physical make-up that creates a common experience of space and time.

In its third apparition in the *Pensées*, habit is the mechanism that determines our phenomenological intuition of first principles. Pascal allots habit three epistemological roles:

1. Habit conditions our tacit understanding of the primitive terms at the foundation of science and philosophy;
2. Personal habits distinguish people with an *esprit de géométrie* from those with an *esprit de finesse*;
3. Habits are mnemonic aids: through repetition, we develop shorthand for more complex chains of reasoning to help us retain knowledge.

A note to fragment 397, the famous *pari* [wager], provides my primary evidence that Pascal thinks that perceptual habits condition our first principles and intuitions:

La coutume est notre nature. Qui s’accoutume à la foi la croit, ne peut plus ne pas craindre l’enfer, et ne croit autre chose.

Qui s’accoutume à croire que le roi est terrible, etc.

Qui doute donc que notre âme, étant accoutumée à voir nombre, espace, mouvement, croie cela et rien que cela?

[Custom is our nature. He who is accustomed to faith believes, can no longer not fear hell, and doesn’t believe anything else.

He who is accustomed to believe that the king is terrible, etc.]
Who therefore doubts that our soul, being accustomed to see number, space, movement, believes this and nothing but this?] (397)

In fragment 101, Pascal says that the heart provides us immediate knowledge that number, space, and movement exist. In this note, he says that custom determines this immediate, natural knowledge. The heart delivers immediate intuitions because we cannot choose between alternative perceptual habits: we know the world as number, space and movement and there is “nothing but this” that we can know. Given this absence of alternative, phenomenological habits are our necessary nature. The implicit alternative, of course, would be to perceive phenomena like an unembodied soul, like God. But Pascal says that our soul is “thrown” into a body that can’t help but perceive the world in terms of “number, time, and dimensions”: “notre âme est jetée dans le corps, où elle trouve nombre, temps, dimensions; elle raisonne là-dessus et appelle cela nature, nécessité, et ne peut croire autre chose.” [our soul is thrown into our body, where it finds number, time, dimensions; it reasons thereupon and calls this nature, necessity, and cannot believe anything else.] (397)

Unfortunately, to my knowledge, Pascal never explains how perceptual habits become immediate intuitions. He instead leaves us with the rather unsatisfying answer that intuitions are always already there, that our “thrownness” makes it impossible to unearth and recover raw sensation or perfect rational knowledge.\(^{102}\) The absence of explanation has occasioned much commentary about what Pascal means when he says that custom determines intuitions. Per Lønning, for example, argues that custom is the “subjective process” that institutes a “harmonious relation” between the primitive terms

\(^{102}\) In *De l’esprit géométrique* Pascal says that the “true” geometric method, in which all terms would be perfectly defined, does not exist,” Pascal (2000), 155.
and the “réalités qu’ils désignent.” [the realities that they represent].

Lønning’s interpretation suggests philosophical optimism. He thinks that custom is our universal means to attune our subjectivity to the objective reality of the world. Pierre Force offers a more qualified interpretation. Coupling his interpretation with a reading of fragment 100, he thinks Pascal threatens a more irreducible subjectivism. Irreducible subjectivism, because we have no way to be sure that when we say “time” or “space”, we are all thinking the same thing. In fragment 100, Pascal signals the relationship between words and referents is arbitrary: “nous supposons que tous [conçoivent les mots primitifs] de même sorte. Mais nous le supposons bien gratuitement, car nous n’en avons aucune preuve.” [We assume that all conceive of the primitive terms in the same way. But we suppose this gratuitously, for we have no proof].

Indeed, Pascal never specifies whether perceptual habits are individual or universal. He does make it clear, however, that we cannot know with certainty whether we all think the same thing because our intuitions are not innate, but acquired through habit. We can therefore safely conclude with Force that Pascal offers a more radical take on the relationship between words and referents than his contemporaries Descartes, Arnauld, and Nicole.

Pascal’s distinction between the esprit de géométrie and the esprit de finesse suggests further that perceptual habits determine individual rather than universal access to first principles. The two esprit differ because people exercise and develop different habits to negotiate and make sense of complexity: they either ignore sensory complexity

---

103 Lønning (1980), 57.
104 Force (1989), 144-46.
105 In the text, Pascal only states “tous les conçoivent de même sorte” and never defines the referent for the pronoun “les”. I assume mots primitifs from the surrounding fragments.
to instead construct simple, artificial, theoretical explanations from clearly defined and
easy to understand starting points (the *esprit de géométrie*) or they inhabit sensory
complexity, all the while accepting that the starting points grounding explanations are
never clearly understood but merely felt as immediate intuitions (the *esprit de finesse*). I
see difference as akin to Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between the hedgehog and the fox.
Hedgehogs have an *esprit de géométrie*; they view the world through the telescopic lens
of one encompassing principle. Foxes have an *esprit de finesse*; they view the world
through the kaleidoscopic lens of the many principles induced through disparate
experience. In his article “Géométrie, finesse, et premiers principes chez Pascal”, Force
analyzes how the two *esprit* differ. As it turns out, Pascal names habit as the mechanism
behind the differences Force enumerates: ¹⁰⁷

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Force’s breakdown: the two <em>esprit</em> differ because…</th>
<th>Evidence in Fragment 466 that these differences stem from habit¹⁰⁸</th>
<th>My additional commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They don’t work from the same principles.</td>
<td>For [the <em>esprit de géométrie</em>] the principles are palpable, but remote from common usage, with the result that one has trouble turning one’s head in that direction from lack of habit [manque d’habitude]…But in the <em>esprit de finesse</em>, the principles are in common usage and before everyone’s eyes…but they are so slender and of such a grand number that it’s almost impossible that they don’t escape us.</td>
<td>It’s not that people with the <em>esprit de finesse</em> are constitutionally incapable of perceiving the principles of geometry, but that they aren’t habituated to thinking that way. The converse is not exactly true: one must have bonne vue, an intuitive grasp of social complexity, to master the <em>esprit de finesse</em>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹⁰⁸ To conserve space, I here include only my English translations the original French. I bracket the words related to habit in the original French to enforce my point. All quotations from fragment 466.
The principles of the *esprit de géométrie* are artificial and the principles in the *esprit de finesse* are natural.

And those who are sharp [*esprits fins*] would be geometers if they could bend their vision towards the *unaccustomed principles* [*principes inaccoutumés*] of geometry.\(^{109}\)

The principles of the *esprit de géométrie* are few in number, basic and must be fully grasped; the principles of the *esprit de finesse* are infinite, complex and not easily grasped.

...geometers are not sharp [*fins*] because they don’t see what’s in front of them, and being accustomed to the clear and basic principles of geometry [*qu’étant accoutumés aux principes nets et grossiers de géométrie*], and never to reason except once they’ve clearly seen and handled their principles, they lose themselves in the matters of finesse, where principles are not handled so easily.

Thinkers therefore become accustomed to variant truth-making procedures and start to expect that all phenomena can be streamlined into the abstract format provided by axiomatic deduction.

The *esprit de géométrie* requires a gradual, discursive chain of reasoning to generate complete explanations; the *esprit de finesse* grasps complex phenomena instantaneously and in one movement of thought.

And those who are sharp [*esprits fins*]...having been thus accustomed to judge in one glance [*accoutumé à juger d’une seule vue*], are so surprised when one presents them propositions where they don’t understand anything and to approach which one has to pass through definitions, and such sterile principles, that they aren’t accustomed to see in such detail [*qu’ils n’ont point accoutumé de voir ainsi en détail*], that they are put off and disgusted.

For Pascal, therefore, habit is both a phenomenological and a formal-epistemological force. Our corporeality determines universal, phenomenological limitations that we

---

\(^{109}\) An excerpt from a letter Chevalier de Méré wrote to Pascal provides further evidence for the artificial/natural distinction: “Votre nombres ni ce raisonnement artificiel ne font pas connaître ce que les choses sont...” [Your numbers nor your artificial reasoning don’t generate understanding of what things are...]. Pascal also says that the *esprit de finesse* works “tacitement, naturellement, et sans art.” [Tacitly, naturally, and without art.] (466)
mistake for necessary principles; our personality and education determine individual, epistemological tastes regarding our approach to complexity.

Pascal’s claim that the *esprit de géométrie* needs practice to “see” abstract first principles clearly can be traced to Descartes. Responding to Mersenne’s objections to the *Meditationes*, Descartes writes:

…in rebus Metaphysicis de nulla re magis laboratur quam de primis notionibus clare & distincte percipiendis: Etsi enim ipsae ex natura sua non minus notae, vel etiam notiores sint quam illae quae a Geometris considerantur, quia tamen iis multa repugnant sensuum praesudicia quibus ab ineunte aetate assuevimus, non nisi a valde attentis, & mediantibus…

[…]in metaphysical questions the principle difficulty is to perceive the first notions clearly and distinctly: for, even if in their nature they are no less clear, or even more clear than those which are considered by Geometry, nonetheless, because they are contrary to many prejudices of the senses to which we’ve been habituated since youth, they are only grasped strongly by those who are attentive and meditative…

Descartes thinks we can entirely remake perceptual habits, that it is in our power to control psychology. With discipline and sustained attention, we can overcome the “prejudices of the senses to which we’ve been habituated since youth” and instill new perceptual habits grounded on artificial, abstract principles. Neither Pascal nor Descartes consider the *esprit de géométrie* to be an innate, rational capacity; both consider it to be the outcome of sustained effort, a psychology dependent on habituation.) Still, Descartes

---

110 Descartes (1685), 83. My emphasis.
adds a level of abstraction beyond Pascal. Descartes thinks that the first principles of metaphysics are more abstract than the axioms of geometry because we can visualize an axiom like “a whole is greater than a part”, but cannot visualize a principle like “the same thing cannot both exist and not exist simultaneously”. He considers metaphysical principles to be so abstract that even the more geometrico, the “synthetic”, axiomatic-deductive style of presenting an argument, relies too much on the imagination to communicate metaphysics adequately. To help his reader develop strong intuitions of extremely abstract metaphysical notions, he invents a rhetorical style he calls “analysis”. Synthesis tells; analysis shows. Analysis makes the reader perform exercises along with the first-person of the text to induce first hand experience of metaphysical principles. Descartes presents abstract third-person principles as vivid first-person exercises that should be repeated to instill new perceptual habits. Fragment 627 proves that Pascal supports the pedagogical value of Cartesian analysis:

lorsqu’on est accoutumé à se servir de mauvaises raisons pour prouver les effets de la nature, on ne veut plus recevoir les bonnes lorsqu’elles sont découvertes… on se persuade mieux pour l’ordinaire par les raisons qu’on a soi-même trouvées que par celles qui sont venues dans l’esprit des autres.

[when one is accustomed to employing incorrect arguments to prove the effects of nature, one no longer wishes to receive the correct ones when they are discovered…one is ordinarily better persuaded by arguments that one has discovered oneself than by those coming from the mind of others.] (627)

Pascal nonetheless departs from Descartes because, as always, he limits the scope of reason and does not go so far as to grant us the capacity to replace our natural
psychology. In the end, he thinks the natural immediacy of the *esprit de finesse* will always remain superior to the artificial *esprit de géométrie*: “la vraie eloquence se moque de l’éloquence...c’est-à-dire que la morale [de la finesse] se moque de la morale de l’esprit.” [real eloquence laughs at eloquence...that is, the moral of *finesse* laughs at rational morality.] (467)

It is nonetheless important that the difference between the two *esprit* is not essential but varies according to habit because it opens space for the potential fusion between the two, which both Pascal and Descartes set as their epistemological ideal. Force puts it well: the two *esprit* are not two “radically different styles of thought”; the only difference between them is one of “scale”.111 Given our limited capacities, we are forced to choose between clarity or immediacy. Unfortunately, we can’t have both. Only ideal knowledge is both clear and immediate:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ideal Knowledge</th>
<th><em>Esprit de géométrie</em></th>
<th><em>Esprit de finesse</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarity of Principles</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediacy of Complete Thought</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Still, as Force points out, with enough keenness we’d be able to grasp how the *esprit de finesse* and the *esprit de géométrie* are essentially one and the same. In theory, it is possible to “decompose” the tacit operations of the *esprit de finesse* and to recover the principles with which it instantly judges. But only in theory, as Pascal thinks it would be “impossible” to enumerate the numerous and changing principles that govern social interaction.112 Similarly, in theory, as Descartes makes clear in the seventh rule of his *Regulae*, with enough exercise and familiarity, one could compress long deductive series

---

111 Force (2003), 124.
of propositions into instantaneous intuitions. As Matthew Jones argues, the purpose of Descartes’s mathematical spiritual exercises was to “transform demonstrative arguments into intuitions.” But again, only in theory. Habit and exercises can bring us near our goal, but it always remains out of our reach. Pascal therefore maintains that, try as it may, reason will never attain the immediate certainty of the sentiments of the coeur.

Habit solves one final problem related to the esprit de géométrie. As Pascal remarks, having figured out a complex geometric or philosophical argument does not necessarily mean we understand the argument deeply enough to reproduce it at will. Grasping abstract first principles and patiently deducing complex chains of reasoning doesn’t mean these complex proofs stay top of mind. Were this the case, we’d overtax ourselves and be liable to make mistakes. Again following Descartes, Pascal claims that to improve our memory and knowledge retention, we must convert deduced conclusions into habits of thought:

Enfin il faut avoir recours à [la coutume] quand une fois l’esprit a vu où est la vérité, afin de nous abreuver et nous teindre de cette créance qui nous échappe à toute heure; car d’en avoir toujours les preuves présentes c’est trop d’affaire. Il faut acquérir une créance plus facile, qui est celle de l’habitude….qui…incline toutes nos puissances à cette croyance, en sorte que notre âme y tombe naturellement.

[Finally, one must have recourse to [custom] once the mind as seen where the truth is, in order to inundate and taint us with this belief that continuously escapes...]

---

113 Force (2003), 124.
us; because it’s too hard always to have the proofs present. One must obtain an
easier belief, which is that of habit…which…inclines all our powers towards this
belief, so that our soul arrives there naturally.] (671)\textsuperscript{114}

Directly after this quotation, Pascal again mentions the difference in speed between the
slow, cumbersome esprit de géométrie and the instantaneous, agile esprit de finesse. The
meditative effort to transform complex chains of reasoning into immediate intuitions
therefore dovetails with an effort to retain knowledge. The artificial procedures of the
esprit de géométrie must become so ingrained that they “taint” and “inundate” us before
we consider them “natural”.

\textit{Incliner l’automate: Habit and the Conversion to Faith}

Although Pascal presents habit’s autocratic sway over our being as a token of our
misery, he also opens up the potential to use this powerful force for the good. As we’ve
seen, habit and custom both serve and supersede reason. They serve reason by fostering
clear intuitions of abstract principles (part 3); they supersede reason by skewing
objectivity (part 1) and encouraging shortsightedness and inductive fallacies (part 2).
Habit’s power to supersede reason and to influence our most basic emotions and

\textsuperscript{114} Using the word “croire”, Pascal refers here not only to philosophical knowledge but
also to belief in God. I cover this in the next section. Concerning the affiliation to
Descartes, see his letter to Princess Elizabeth of Sweden from September 15, 1645,
reproduced by Le Guern: “…outre la connaissance de la vérité, l’habitude est aussi
requise, pour être toujours disposé à bien juger. Car, d’autant que nous ne pouvons être
continuellement attentifs à même chose, quelque claires et évidentes qu’aient été les
raisons qui nous ont persuadé ci-devant quelque vérité, nous pouvons, par après, être
détournés de la croire par de fausses apparences, si ce n’est que, par une longue et
fréquente méditation, nous l’ayons tellement imprimée en notre esprit, qu’elle soit
tournée en habitude.”
perceptions makes it a better candidate than reason to be the instrument of faith. As Etienne Gilson writes:

…la foi est différente de la preuve; la preuve n’est que l’instrument de la foi, et la foi, qui ne peut venir que de Dieu, est dans le coeur; c’est elle qui “fait dire non scio, mais credo.” Cette croyance, cette foi vers laquelle nous voulons aller…si nous désirons vraiment l’atteindre, [il faut] prendre les chemins qui y conduisent.

Or qu’y a-t-il au monde de plus cru? Ce que l’on croit par coutume. La coutume est ce qui engender les convictions les plus évidentes et les plus satisfaites d’elles-mêmes….les moins troublées de doutes et d’hésitations.

[…faith is different than proof; proof is only the instrument of faith, and faith, which can only come from God, is in the heart; it “makes one not say I know, but I believe.” This belief, this faith towards which we want to go, if we really desire to attain it, we must follow the paths that lead there. Now, what is most believed in the world? That which we believe through custom. It’s custom that generates the most evident and most self-satisfied convictions…the least troubled by doubts and hesitations.]

In the end, God’s arbitrary gift of grace is the only “efficient” and instantaneous means to acquire faith. Like children, “simple” Christians, undistracted by the commerce and temptations of society, believe effortlessly because God “incline leur coeur à croire.” [inclines their hearts to believe.] (360) The social skeptic faces different challenges. Active in society, the lifestyle of the libertine habituates him or her to desire what society values. Pascal therefore knows that, no matter how clearly the wager shows the pragmatic

---

115 Gilson (1932), 272.
advantage of believing in God, his real task is to find a way to overcome the ingrained emotional habits that relentlessly “incline” the libertine’s heart to favor worldly goods over the promise of God: “il faut donc faire croire nos deux pièces, l’esprit par les raisons qu’il suffit d’avoir vues une fois en sa vie, et l’automate par la coutume, et en ne lui permettant pas de s’incliner au contraire.” [it is necessary therefore to make both pieces believe, the mind by the reasons that it suffices to have seen once in one’s life, and the automate by custom, and by not permitting it to incline itself towards the contrary]. (671)

In this final section, I argue that Pascal does not consider religious conversion to be an instantaneous epiphany but a long-term, multi-step process. Step one is quick: one must use clean logic to convince a disbeliever that supposing God exists has pragmatic benefits. Step two is slow: one must develop a regular program of spiritual exercises to transform a disbeliever’s deep emotional proclivities. For Pascal, in turn, repetitive performance in religious ceremonies, sacraments, and anything that one might call a “gesture of faith”116 is the long-term work required to “diminish” the emotional blocks that are the “greatest obstacles” to faith. (397)

Pascal’s wager is a pragmatic argument *avant la lettre*. Scholars agree that the argument differs in style from the majority of rational proofs of God’s existence and the immortality of the soul offered by Pascal’s contemporaries.117 Descartes’s *Meditationes* illustrate the standard tendencies: he devotes books three and five to two alternative

---

116 Blanchet (1919), part 1, 514.
117 Ibid, 494. Along with Descartes, Blanchet mentions Mersenne and Silhon as examples of authors who developed rationalist theology and ontology. Pascal’s argument is nonetheless not novel or *sui generis*, but part of a often overlooked tradition of probabilistic theology including authors like Arnobe, Sebond, and Sirmond. While most scholars focus on the wager to ground analysis of Pascal’s relationship to Sebond’s *Theologia Naturalis*, I focus my analysis on the fragments concerning cultural relativism (part 2).
proofs that God exists, basing his proofs upon definitions of God’s nature. Pascal, in contrast, states flat out that because we differ so radically from God, “nous ne connaissons ni l’existence ni la nature de Dieu.” [we know neither the existence or the nature of God] (397) Pascal therefore thinks that rational proofs of God’s existence are beyond our cognitive reach. In turn, the take away from his argument is not rational certainty that God exists but pragmatic justification that, if we suppose God exists and act as if we believe, we will be infinitely happier than if we suppose the opposite and act as if we don’t. What matters for Pascal is the tangible gain we accrue (ie infinite happiness) when we bet on God existence; the epistemological status of God’s existence remains hypothesis, not proof.

Pascal nonetheless recognizes that, as rigorous as his probabilistic argument may be, it does not suffice to convert a disbeliever. Unlike his contemporaries, who amassed proofs that God exists, Pascal thinks that one solid rational argument is enough to convince the mind. The real obstacle to faith is not dearth of proof but abundance of desire:

Apprenez…que votre impuissance à croire vient de vos passions, puisque la raison vous y porte et que néanmoins vous ne le pouvez. Travaillez donc non pas à vous convaincre par l’augmentation des preuves de Dieu, mais par la diminution de vos passions.

[At least learn that your inability to believe comes from your passions, since reason convinces you and nonetheless you can’t believe. Work, therefore, not to convince yourself through the augmentation of proof of God, but through the diminution of your passions.] (397)
Pascal takes proper precaution with the skeptical libertine that is his addressee. He predicts that, even if momentarily persuaded by the wager, the libertine will regress upon renewed contact with gamblers, boozers and beauties. At this stage in the process, long-ingrained customs and habits overpower the force of reason: “Les preuves ne convainquent que l’esprit, la coutume fait nos preuves les plus fortes et les plus crues.” [Proofs only convince the mind, custom makes the strongest and most deeply believed proofs.] (671) As Pascal elaborates in his short *Ecrit sur la conversion du pécheur* (writing on the conversion of the sinner), having developed trust in the “solidity” the physical world, it is extremely difficult to suddenly devote our “hope” to the promise of the unknowable.\(^\text{118}\)

Pascal’s solution is to fight fire with fire. If old habits ensconce distracting passions, a deliberate program of repetition and ritual can replace them with new ones:

Vous voulez aller à la foi et vous n’en savez pas le chemin…apprenez de ceux (…\(^\text{119}\)) qui ont été liés comme vous et qui parient maintenant tout leur bien…suivez la manière par où ils ont commencé. C’est en faisant tout comme s’ils croyaient, en prenant de l’eau bénite, en faisant dire des messes, etc. Naturellement même cela vous fera croire et vous abêtira.

[You want to make a leap of faith but you don’t know the route…learn from those (…) who were bound like you and who currently bet all their good…follow the manner by which they started. It was by acting as if they believed, receiving holy

\(^{118}\) Pascal (2000), 99.

\(^{119}\) In this ellipsis Pascal incorporates the note about “custom being our nature” that I discussed on page 23.
Contrary to expectation, for Pascal, ritual gestures do not express belief, they induce it. This prolepsis allows for what Yann Robert calls the “conscience d’un écart représentatif” [conscience of a representational gap]\(^{120}\) between the practicing soon-to-be Christian’s external gestures and internal beliefs. In their attempt to explain this representational gap, critiques like Léon Blanchet have defended a kinship between this section of the *Pensées* and the Jesuit *mécanique de l’enthousiasme*, the “confiance exagérée dans l’efficacité psychologique des cérémonies, des sacrements, du culte extérieur, et de tout ce qu’on pourrait appeler les gestes de la foi.” [exaggerated confidence in the psychological efficiency of ceremonies, sacraments, the external cult, an all that one might call gestures of faith.]\(^ {121}\) The Jesuit focus on external actions at the expense of internal belief dovetails with their neo-Stoic tendencies. A primary tenet of Stoic ethics is that one must only seek to control that which lies in one’s power to control. On religious territory, this tenet translated into the distinction between “affective love” and “effective love” for God. As Blanchet describes, “affective love” is a genuine *sentiment de coeur* [a feeling of the heart], charity as a deep-seated manifestation of divine grace. In contrast, “effective love” is a love that only manifests itself externally through virtuous actions or the observation of other precepts of religious law.\(^ {122}\) Applying the Stoic mindset, because we have absolutely no control over God’s allotment of grace,

\(^{120}\) Robert (2008), 15.

\(^{121}\) Blanchet (1919), 513-14. Blanchet argues that the core inspiration for the wager are the last 10 pages of the Jesuit Antoine de Sirmond’s *Démonstration de l’immortalité de l’âme*. The parallels between the two texts are indeed astonishing.

\(^{122}\) Ibid, 511.
we must concede to focus our devotional energy on what we can control: deliberate manifestations of devotion. But Pascal is not a Stoic. His Lettres Provinciales deplore Jesuit leniency to defend a rigorous, “pure” religiosity. As Bernard Howells points out, Blanchet himself “acknowledged the paradox involved in ascribing” to Pascal a Jesuit technology, considering that, a mouthpiece for strict Jansenism, Pascal’s Pensées argued not only against the libertine atheism, but also against the laxity of Jesuit systems of belief.\textsuperscript{123}

In fact, Pascal does not agree with the Jesuits that Catholics are only obligated to show external manifestations of “effective love”. He may deem “effective love” necessary for faith, but he does not deem it sufficient. We must acknowledge that, like Rotrou\textsuperscript{124}, Pascal does not view conversion as an instantaneous epiphany but a sustained process. For Pascal, the “representational gap” between the external manifestations of “effective love” and the internal sentiments of “affective love” only exists during the phase of conversion. Indeed, conversion only occurs when the “representational gap” closes. Pascal’s depiction of his own conversion in the Ecrit sur la conversion du pécheur shows how long he thinks conversion takes. His experience started with an initial insight: “l’âme considère les choses et elle-même d’une façon toute nouvelle” [the soul considers things and itself in a totally new manner]. At first, the insight instilled fear, not comfort. For years, he was psychologically torn between this inspired view of the world and his habitual view of the world. The inspired view held more promise but the habitual view felt more secure. Overwhelmed by confusion, he felt like a lost traveler, aware both that he was lost and that he desired to go home. In the end, he abandoned his search for an

\textsuperscript{123} Howells (1984), 45.
\textsuperscript{124} A reference back to chapter 2.
individual and personal path to faith and simply followed others who already knew the way:

[L’âme] commence à connaître Dieu, et désire d’y arriver; mais comme elle ignore les moyens d’y parvenir, si son désir est sincère et véritable, elle fait la même chose qu’une personne qui désirant arriver en quelque lieu, ayant perdu le chemin, et connaissant son égarement, aurait recours à ceux qui sauraient parfaitement ce chemin…

[[The soul] begins to know God, and desires to reach him; but as it is ignorant of the means to arrive there, if its desire is sincere and true, it does the same thing as a person who, desiring to arrive in some place, having lost his/her way, and recognizing this confusion, would have recourse to those who knew the route perfectly…]^{125}

Pascal insists that the sinner’s desire to convert be “true and sincere”, indexing an authenticity absent from the Jesuit paradigm. Pascal’s sinner is also pained by the confusion. “Effective” manifestations of faith are a desperate attempt to gain internal peace. So while the Jesuit comfortably accepts that he or she can only control “effective love”, the Jansenist, aided by philosophy^{126}, uncomfortably inhabits the gap between “effective” ritual and “affective” faith. Jansenist conversion is not complete until faith deeply penetrates the heart. Closing fragments 360 and 671 with an excerpt from psalm 119, Pascal prays for such affective grace: *Inclina coeur meum, Deus.*

\[^{125}\text{Ibid, 99-102. I emphasize aware that he is lost to remind that, for Pascal, the task of philosophy is to make us reflexively aware of our weaknesses.}\]

\[^{126}\text{See my resume on pages 7-8.}\]
Inclina—incline: Furetière’s 1690 dictionary testifies that, in the period, *incliner* signified an array of emotional tendencies ranging from natural dispositions (eg “This prince *inclines* to clemency” or “This young man *inclines* to debauchery”) to divine grace (eg “Effective grace *inclines* his will to do good”). Pascal uses both meanings of the verb:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As natural disposition</th>
<th>As efficient grace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>…la coutume fait nos preuves les plus fortes et les plus crues. Elle <em>incline</em> l’automate, qui entraîne l’esprit sans qu’il y pense…[la croyance de l’habitude]…<em>incline</em> toutes nos puissances à cette croyance, en sorte que notre âme y tombe naturellement…[….custom makes the strongest and most believed proofs. It <em>inclines</em> the automate, which leads the mind without its thinking…[belief from habit]…<em>incline</em> all our powers towards this belief, so that our soul falls there naturally…] (671)</td>
<td>Ne vous étonnez pas de voir des personnes simples croire sans raisonnement…[Dieu] <em>incline</em> leur cœur à croire. On ne croira jamais, d’une créance utile et de foi, si Dieu <em>n’incline</em> le coeur, et on croira dès qu’il l’<em>inclinera</em>. [Don’t be surprised to see simple people believing without reason…[God] <em>inclines</em> their heart to believe. One will never believe, with a useful and faithful belief, if God does not <em>incline</em> the heart, and one will believe as soon as he <em>inclines</em> it.] (360)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Immune to society’s depravity, “simple” believers don’t even need scripture to know God. Their *disposition intérieure toute sainte* [an internal, entirely saintly disposition] grants them effortless faith. (361) Everyone else must use habit to develop a second nature that mimics the first nature of simple believers, a second nature that *inclines* “all their powers” towards belief. But how does *incliner* as natural (habitual) disposition become *incliner* as efficient grace? In other words, how does habit instill belief?

---


128 He uses the verb to mean efficient grace in fragment 362.

129 Gilson remarks how Pascal scholars Victor Cousin and Léon Brunschvicg emphasize the childlike, pure ideal of Jansenist faith: Gilson (1932), 266-67.
Return to the quotation on pages 33-34 and notice that Pascal’s program of repeated ritual has two goals: to “make you believe” and to “animalize you” [abêtir]. To understand how habit instills belief, rephrase this quotation as: “to make you believe by animalizing you.” The key to unlocking this quotation is to understand “animalize” in its Cartesian sense as “develop automatic tendencies”. Indeed, Pascal insists in fragment 671 that “il ne faut pas se méconnaître, nous sommes automates autant qu’esprit…la coutume incline l’automate, qui entraîne l’esprit sans qu’il y pense.” [we must not mistake who we are, we are automates as much as spirit…custom inclines the automate, which leads the mind without its thinking.] Now, faith is an immediate sentiment that penetrates the heart [coeur], not the mind. We’ve also seen that emotional habits, not rational arguments, are the primary obstacles to faith. Because both the access and the obstacles to faith reside at the level of emotion, persuasion must be directed towards the corporeal rather than the mental side of human nature. Because the body is animal, it is machine. An efficient program persuasion therefore entails treating the body like a machine to engineer a conversion to faith: we must “incline the automate” to mimic how God “inclines” the hearts of believers. In this spirit, Gilson gives an excellent digest of how habit and ritual supplement to the wager:

“Le pari nous a convaincus de la nécessité de croire; nous voulons donc parvenir à la foi. Mais qui veut la fin veut les moyens; or, la foi est une croyance; les croyances les plus fortes sont celles qu’engendre en nous la coutume; la coutume

---

130 Descartes describes animals as automates at the end of part five in the *Discours de la méthode*.

131 I am slightly weary about this sentence because I feel it requires proof that 17th-century dualists thought that emotions were corporeal and not mental. Should I add a footnote citing Descartes’ *Traité des Passions*? Or perhaps some commentary on the theory of the four humors?
engendre les croyances fortes et stables en inclinant l’automate; l’automate, c’est la bête; fixer l’instabilité de la raison sous l’automatisme de la coutume, c’est donc l’assujettir à la bête ou, comme le dit Pascal, s’abêtir.”

[The wager has convinced us of the necessity of belief: we therefore wish to arrive at faith. But he who wants the end wants the means; now, faith is a belief; the strongest beliefs are those habit engenders in us; custom engenders the strongest and most stable beliefs by inclining the automate; the automate is the animal; to fix the instability of reason under the automatism of custom, is therefore to subject reason to the animal, or, as Pascal puts it, to animalize oneself.]\(^{132}\)

Because the body generates emotions like a machine, it naturally responds to the reiterated performance of specific acts. Through iteration, external manifestations of “effective love” generate the “disposition intérieure” required to achieve “affective” grace. \(^{133}\) This mimesis is opposite from the Platonic ontology. For Pascal, internal dispositions do always not precede gestures; gestures can precede internal dispositions. In Platonic terms, the copy precedes the original.

**Conclusion**

In his article about Rotrou’s *Véritable Saint Genest*, Yann Robert shows how most 17\(^{th}\)-century playwrights upheld voyeurism and imagination as vehicles for

\(^{132}\) Ibid, 274.

\(^{133}\) Recall that the definition for *habitude* in the Académie’s 1694 dictionary is a “coustume, accoustumance, disposition intérieure acquise par plusiers actes reîterez.” [custom, acclimatization, internal disposition acquired by many reiterated acts].
conversion.\textsuperscript{134} As I'll further explore in the next chapter, 17\textsuperscript{th}-century France was obsessed with the persuasive power of visualization. Because philosophers in the period generally considered the static and eternal to be the real, they naturally privileged sight as the sense to access knowledge. Many upheld Aristotle’s axiom that “on ne pense pas sans images” [one does not think without images].\textsuperscript{135}

But both Descartes and Pascal are interested in experiences and objects of knowledge that are \textit{de facto} impossible to visualize. Descartes’s \textit{Meditationes} treat axiomatic foundations that are so abstract that they lack any particular embodiment that could be visualized like a triangle. Unable to present a particular visual object to embody the axiom that the same thing cannot both exist and not exist at the same time, Descartes presents the particular experience that is the \textit{cogito}. One cannot imagine the \textit{cogito} like one could imagine a particular instantiation of a tree. Rather, one undergoes an experience that generates an intuitive sensation akin to the abstract knowledge it is intended to represent.

Like the Cartesian \textit{cogito}, the Pascalian act of faith lacks a visual, intentional object.\textsuperscript{136} Given the infinite disproportion between man and God, the imagination is powerless as a vehicle for conversion. God is never a particular referent that the mind can conjure up to get a hold on. An act of faith is, in turn, a different kind of act that an act of thought directed at an intentional object. Because it is a different kind of act, it requires a different tactic for conversion than an overpowering through intense visualization. Facing this obstacle of extreme abstraction like Descartes in his \textit{Meditationes}, Pascal chooses

\textsuperscript{134} Robert (2008), 15.
\textsuperscript{135} Blanchet (1919), 508.
\textsuperscript{136} I use the word “intentional” in its medieval and phenomenological sense, ie “\textit{intendo}”, leaning towards, or the object in the mind towards which a thought is directed.
iterative performance, not visual intensity, as a means to convert the doubting libertine to faith. Just as Descartes uses repetitive performance to instill an intuition of metaphysical first principles, so too does Pascal use repetitive performance to instill an internal, emotional disposition open to God’s grace. As critics making sense of these past texts, we can gain a keener appreciation of what they say and do by approaching them with an eye for their performative qualities as opposed to their propositional rigor.

Considering these works as scripts for habitual performance, moreover, has the added benefit of opening up new avenues for conceptualizing age-old questions. One crucial question that merits further consideration is whether we could rephrase the difference between 17th-century philosophy and religion in performative as opposed to propositional terms. Indeed, philosophy and religion are often distinguished according to standards of evidence (proof versus revelation). I’d like to suggest that we distinguish them according to performative attitude. Consider the example of Descartes versus Pascal. One of Descartes’s fundamental pedagogical beliefs is that arguments we work to find [inventer] on our own are more powerful than arguments we passively receive from others. Individual performance is therefore significant for Descartes because he thinks that one must actively undergo a personal experience of discovery to gain viable knowledge. These discoveries are personal, so can differ between individuals. What counts is that one have an authentic relationship to one’s gestures and acts. Pascal’s sinner does not have this same authentic attitude. The sinner begins in utter confusion. Unable to discover the path to faith on his/her own, he or she must abdicate personal choice and mimic ritual actions established by convention. As everyone performs the same actions, the actions do not differ between individuals; what differs is the attitude
that each individual holds towards the ritual actions. Everyone is alienated in a particular way. Pascal’s sinner, therefore, does not actively seek a personal means to conversion, but passively receive a set of codified gestures established by others. The sinner is actually *supposed* to be alienated from his/her own paths and methods to establish trust in the path established by God. While performance is the crucial technique of persuasion for both Descartes and Pascal, Cartesian performance is authentic and personal and Pascalian performance is alienated and conventional. Do similar distinctions in performative attitude exist in other historical contexts or is this distinction unique to the seventeenth century?
How Does Art Transform Us? The Performance of Analysis in Seventeenth-century Drama and Aesthetics

The performance of analysis entails that an actor begin by voluntarily choosing to cleave a schism between how he or she thinks and feels in the present and how he or she would like to think and feel in the future. This future internal state corresponds to a set of external actions that the actor chooses to perform in the present. Repetition of these actions generates habits that actualize the hypothetical disposition intérieure of the future self in the present self, realizing the conversion.

We’ve seen how Descartes employs the performance of analysis to engineer the epistemological conversion in the cogito and how Pascal employs the paradigm to engineer the spiritual conversion in the pari. We’ve therefore seen applications of the paradigm, but have yet to examine a theory of how it functions or a depiction of an actual step-by-step process of conversion. In his reply to Mersenne, Descartes mentions that the reader must repeat the mantra ego sum, ego existo over a long period of time to internalize its meaning, but he never represents what this process looks like. Similarly, Pascal declares that animalization completes the wager to actualize the conversion to faith, but never describes how the actor evolves within his iterative exercises.

Because the performance of analysis entails voluntary alienation of the self to become another, theater is the best forum for examining how 17th-century thinkers represented and theorized the process of conversion involved in the paradigm. Unlike Diderot, who presented the paradox according to which an actor achieves mastery over the artificial expression of a character’s emotions only if he remains alienated from these emotions, most early modern critics believed that an actor had to identify emotionally
with his character in order be compelling on stage. Nicole writes in his *Traité de la Comédie*:

> Il faut que [les acteurs expriment les passions qu’ils représentent] le plus naturellement et le plus vivement qu’il leur est possible; et ils ne le sauraient faire, s’ils ne les excitent en quelque sorte en eux-mêmes, et si leur âme ne prend tous les plis que l’on voit sur leur visage. Il faut donc que ceux qui représentent une passion d’amour en soient en quelque sorte touchés pendant qu’ils la représentent, et il ne faut pas s’imaginer que l’on puisse effacer de son esprit cette impression qu’on y a excitée volontairement, et qu’elle ne laisse pas en nous une grande disposition à cette même passion qu’on a bien voulu ressentir.

(Actors must express the passions that they portray as naturally and as lively as possible; and they wouldn’t be able to do so, if they didn’t somehow induce them in themselves, and if their soul didn’t uptake all the wrinkles that one sees on their face. Those who portray a feeling of love must somehow be touched by this love while they portray it, and we mustn’t imagine that one could erase from one’s spirit this impression that one voluntarily induced, or that it didn’t leave within us a great disposition towards the same feeling that we wanted to experience.)

Accordingly to Nicole, the voluntary *impressions* of emotional states that the actor induces to identify with his character gradually and inevitably transform into involuntary *dispositions* that modify the actor’s genuine self. The structure of the transformation instantiates the performance of analysis because it entails the voluntary conjuring of an

---

137 Nicole (1998), 36-38.
emotional state that eventually becomes naturalized as an involuntary disposition intérieure.

Dramatic identification sounds compelling in theory, but has odd results when put into practice. For, what would happen if an actor really did psychologically merge with his character, if the gap separating the real world from the fictional world collapsed during the performance of a play? A number of baroque plays probed precisely this question, in particular a series based upon Lope de Vega’s Lo fingido verdadero (1608), which was popular in the 1640s. The plays all depict the conversion of Saint Genesius, a pagan actor who converted to Catholicism while portraying a Catholic martyr on stage. Composed by Jesuits, the Genesius plays merge Jesuit theories of effective grace with aesthetic theories of dramatic identification, distorting the boundaries between fiction and reality. They illustrate the ambiguities attendant in the process of shifting between the two ontologies—the hollow beginning and the substantial ending—that compose the performance of analysis.

This chapter studies manifestations of the performance of analysis in seventeenth-century theater and aesthetic criticism. My analysis nonetheless explores a more general question: how does theater, considered as mimetic performance (for the actor) and observed fictional world (for the spectator), transform us?

The first half of the chapter analyzes how aesthetic criticism in the period conceptualized the moral repercussions of spectatorship. I begin with Nicole’s Traité de la Comédie (1667). Of relevance for my project is Nicole’s belief that theater is

---

138 The other famous Genesius play, which I will not discuss, is Nicolas Desfontaines’s L’illustre comédien ou le martyre de Saint Genest (1645).
139 See chapter 2 for a complete discussion of the difference between effective and affective grace.
dangerous because it habituates the spectators to nourish the passions felt by the characters represented on stage. For Nicole, Christians are obliged to spend their time practicing exercises that stifle our natural desires; tragedies plant impressions, strong emotional imprints, upon the mind and heart that germinate in the unconscious before they become manifest moral depravity. Molière counters Nicole’s arguments in his *Lettre sur la comédie de l'imposteur* (1667) by putting the same term *impression* to different use. For him, theater—especially comedy—is salutary because it generates a strong, immediate sense of ridicule towards nefarious characters. These impressions then modify moral conduct when one encounters similar characters in real life. What starts as a discrete reaction against a fictional character, therefore, translates into a long-term, genuine moral conversion.

Thinkers in the period, however, believed that an actor’s ability to excite strong impressions in spectators initially depended upon his or her being able to excite these same impressions in him/herself. In other words, a good actor became his or her character. The second half of the chapter analyzes plays that dramatize this process. I begin by discussing Rotrou’s *Le véritable Saint Genest* (1646), the most formally complex of the Genesius plays. I argue that Rotrou conceptualizes Genesius’s conversion as a result of habitual, performative iteration in the form of the performance of analysis. I also examine the epistemological ambiguities that result from the performance of analysis given that the play-within-a-play structure collapses at the moment of conversion. Next, I contrast this example of successful performance of analysis with Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, where the performance fails. This play’s main character, the bourgeois Monsieur Jourdain, tries to act as if he were an aristocrat to ennoble himself. He fails, and
his failure engenders a play-within-a-play structure that differs from the Genesius plays. When Genesius converts, the embedded structure separating fiction from reality collapses; because Monsieur Jourdain cannot convert, his entourage map is forced to map themselves into his distorted reality to resolve the tension in the play. They do so by generating an embedded play towards the end of the work. From this contrast, I conclude that the performance of analysis determines a play’s formal structure.

**Habits creeping up on us: Nicole’s critique of theater as a moral contagion**

The sociological status of theater as an art form changed significantly during the seventeenth century. Jean-Marie Apostolidès holds it as a critical consensus that, in the first half of the century, theater shifted from being a popular celebration, marked by its *farces grossières* (crude farces) and *drames sanglants* (bloody dramas), to being a *divertissement mondain* (aristocratic pastime), marked by ritualistic and mannered recreations of classical mythology.\(^{140}\) Prior to 1629, French theater principally existed in the form of troupes travelling through the provinces; the most famous troupes were lead by Valleran de Conte and Thomas Hardy, respectively known for their humor and over-the-top spectacle.\(^{141}\) In 1629, Louis XIII declared the Parisian *Hôtel de Bourgogne* the official royal theater in Paris. That same year, the Prince of Orange established a rival theater in the Marais, which would later become Corneille’s primary stage. Thanks to the patronage of Richelieu, theater became increasingly politicized as a necessary

---

\(^{140}\) Apostolidès (1985), 40-49.

\(^{141}\) Colette and Schérer (1987), 7-8.
complement to high-society culture, and this rising cultural and political significance of spectacle naturally unleashed critical response. To safeguard a cultural idiom that could preserve the gap between the different orders of society, conservative critics like Jean Chapelain (famous for his essays critiquing Corneille’s *Le Cid*) and Hippolyte-Jules Pilet de la Mesnardière (famous for his Aristotelian *Poétique*), both of whom were affiliated with Richelieu’s newly established *Académie,* codified a set of formal and thematic rules to separate high-brow tragedy from plebeian farce. For their part, ecclesiastic powers saw spectacle as an idolatrous threat to the rising acumen of rhetoric-based Jesuit Humanism. Like the secular pedants, Jesuits in the decade of 1630-1640 published a series of treatises condemning theater because it perverted Christian mores. A crucial example is P. Louis Cellot’s *Orationes* (1641), which culminated in four discourses entitled the *Actio in histriones*; here Cellot signals the worrisome tension that merely histrionic scoundrels are often more than ordained priests spreading the word of God. Although menacing, the conservative reaction was ultimately unable to

---

142 There are two primary interpretations of the political significance of spectacle in the *Age Classique.* The first, espoused by critics like Apostolidès (1985) and Braider (1996), is a story of “monarchic power expressed through dazzle and display” (Ibbett, 3). Apostolidès stresses the Christian ideology of royal sacrifice that aided the political project of generating centralized state power; Braider stresses the Derridian *différance* of 17th-century culture, insofar as authorities avoided facing the sociological changes head-on. The second reframes the discussion away from the thematic of representation and towards the thematic of practice and procedure. Ibbett (2009), for example, compares the formal codes of theater with the legal practices of the *Ancien Regime.*

143 As Katherine Ibbett puts it: “[The] concern with questions of practice and legitimacy extended to the rapidly-professionalizing stage. Whereas the Renaissance stage had been marked by bloody violence and grand spectacle, the officially condoned theater of the seventeenth century saw the development of a more muted style shunning on-stage violence and celebrating a new theatrical decorum,” Ibbett (2009), 3.

144 Fumaroli’s *Héros et Orateurs* is effectively devoted to these debates. Robert (2008) gives a more concise take on the stakes of the debate.

145 Fumaroli (1990), 462-486.
undermine the link between theater and the state: the first series of the debates of the moral legitimacy of the actor culminated in Louis XIII 1641 declaration that defended and supported acting as a profession.\textsuperscript{146}

If Jesuit Humanists worried that theater could compromise their cultural power, the Jansenist affiliates in the generation between 1650-1670 espoused a more rigid anthropology that stood in absolute contradiction with the notion of divertissement. The primary Jansenist treatise condemning theater is Pierre Nicole’s \textit{Traité de la Comédie} (1667). Like his colleagues at Port-Royal, Nicole’s moral philosophy is structured by a radical interpretation of Augustine in which man is characterized by his absolute fallenness and God preselects those who will receive divine grace. In keeping with their focus on human depravity, the Jansenists developed a new psychology centered around \textit{amour-propre} (narcissism) and \textit{orgueil} (pride), the hallmarks of original sin. The task of Jansenist ethics, in turn, was to deconstruct all that society upheld as strength and valor as misconstrued egotism and pride. Nicole understood theater as a cultural activity that encouraged love of self, love of life, and love of the created at the expense of total devotion to God.

Nicole’s principal critique of theater in the \textit{Traité de la Comédie} is that it “accoutume insensiblement l’esprit à regarder la passion d’amour sans horreur” (insensibly accustoms the mind to regard the passion of love without horror).\textsuperscript{147} For Nicole, passionate love is the root of all evils, and the greatest \textit{impression} left by original sin. The problem with love is its naturalness: with \textit{passion}, Nicole does not refer to

\textsuperscript{146} Colette and Schérer (1987), 11. Fumaroli (1990) has a reading of Corneille’s \textit{Illusion comique} as a piece of rhetoric defending acting as a profession. As the play was composed in 1637, it can be read as a dramatic instantiation of the debates in the 1630s.
\textsuperscript{147} Nicole (1998), 38.
perverse sexual proclivities of a few renegade libertines, but the sanctioned, basic *pente naturelle* (natural inclination) we all have to love another. The moralist considers any attraction whatsoever that celebrates the self over God as affiliated with original sin. His understanding of the term *accoutumance* is therefore inflected by the most negative of Augustine’s terms for habit: *consuetudo.* According to Allan Fitzgerald,

Augustine explained the conflict [between good and evil] in terms of acquired habits. It was not an evil outside of the person that led to the tension between good and evil, but personal choices that became habitual, leading to a manifestation of the division between the spirit and the flesh…excessive attention to the good things of creation becomes an obstacle to that which is eternal, and the created comes to be preferred to the creator...Sin is seen as a weakness rather than defiance, but pleasure in the corporeal can become habitual, thus diminishing human freedom or obscuring one’s knowledge of the truth…

Nicole’s appraisal of theater resembles Augustine’s appraisal of *consuetudo* in that the former considers not dramatic content itself to be dangerous, but the way in which the spectators engage with this content. His indifference to content is evidenced by his paradoxical claim that a prude comedy about a “legitimate” marriage is just as corrupting as the incest of the Oedipus cycle. As in Augustine, the problem is that the spectator’s initial choice to attend a play nourishes, *peu à peu* (little by little), “excessive attention to the good things of creation” that eventually becomes involuntary habit and severs the connection to God. Nicole won’t settle for anything less than total devotion: “Dieu ne

---

148 See chapter one, pages 6-7, for a description of habit in Augustine.
149 Fitzgerald (1999), 409-410.
demande proprement des hommes que leur amour; mais aussi il le demande tout entier. Il ne veut point de partage” (The only thing God asks from men is their love; but he also asks that it be whole. He doesn’t want it split).

Given the tenets of *bienséance* that structured neo-classical aesthetics, Nicole’s critique of theater is also an implicit critique of contemporary society. René Bray famously established a difference between what he called the *bienséance interne*, that a character acts according to his nature, e.g. that a represented Aeneas acts like the Aeneas we all know from Virgil, and *bienséance externe*, that the events and characters represented on stage mirror the values, knowledge, and ideology of the spectatorship.\(^{151}\) Nicole references how *bienséance externe* determines the immoral content of drama, given that the content must reflect what spectators already think, believe, and feel:

> Il n’y a rien de plus pernicieux que la morale poétique et Romanesque, parce que ce n’est qu’un amas de fausses opinions…qui ne sont agréables qu’en ce qu’elles flattent les inclinations corrompues…des spectateurs.

(There is nothing more pernicious than poetic and literary morality, because it is nothing but a pile of false opinions…that aren’t pleasing except in that they flatter the corrupt inclinations…of the spectators.)\(^{152}\)

As Thirouin puts it, “it’s the perversion of the audience that determines that of the spectacle.”\(^{153}\) The exigencies of *bienséance externe* make Nicole’s argument slightly circular. For if the public is receptive only to those passions that mirror with their moral character, how much damage can they actually cause? Thirouin’s solution to the puzzle is

---

\(^{151}\) Bray (1963), 215-230. In defining his concepts, Bray references Nicole’s *Traité de la vraie beauté*.

\(^{152}\) Nicole (1998), 68.

\(^{153}\) Thirouin (1997), 130.
to make an analogy to consumer culture. Marketing doesn’t attempt to shock or challenge the public’s sensibilities but rather feeds ideologies that already exist. Still, even if people are shown exactly what they want to see, the process of engagement with these images strengthens and concretizes the existing desires. In the age of Augustinianism, Nicole was applying similar logic to any self-centered passions of the age. Watching a play was feeding a habit, was time spent developing and actualizing an always already present potential.

For Nicole, the fact that the transformative effects of impressions occur insensiblement contributes to theater’s insidiousness. In his discussion of the Traité, Laurent Thirouin points out the distinction between the period’s understanding of an idée and an impression. An idée, he claims, is a “simple mental representation”—what I often refer to as an intentional object of thought—and an impression is an “acting idea”, “the idea that subsists and modifies that with which it comes into contact.”

Whereas ideas are both instantaneous and conscious, impressions are durative and subconscious. Literally, an impression was a letter imprinted on a page or a seal imprinted into wax, an observable change in the constitution of one material left behind from contact with another material. The term was used figuratively to refer to the emotional and cognitive impact of certain experiences: experiences mutated the mind or soul just as a seal mutated the shape of wax. In his Essais on morale, moreover, Nicole often associates impressions with feelings, not thoughts. For example, when we evaluate arguments, our predilections make stronger impressions than objective criteria (I, 10); or when we make a choice, passions make more violent impressions than reasons (I, 10). As regards theater,

155 Richelet, Furetière, and the Académie all give similar definitions.
to cite Thirouin, “le théâtre déborde la représentation” (theater exceeds representation).\textsuperscript{156}

I take this to mean that it is not the referent or the representation that concerns Nicole, but the way in which the discrete events presented on stage subconsciously interact with a spectator’s previous and subsequent experiences. Nicole uses this logic to counter the argument that spectators don’t feel “aucune de ces passions que l’on en appréhende d’ordinaire” (any of the passions that we ordinary fear) while they watch a play. “La parole de Dieu…”, he writes, “et la parole du diable…ont cela de commun qu’elles demeurent souvent longtemps cachées dans le coeur sans produire aucun effet sensible” (The God’s word…and the devil’s word…and have in common that they often remain hidden in the heart for a long time before they produce any noticeable effect).\textsuperscript{157} An encounter with a real-life situation that jogs a memory of a fictional situation on stage will, according to Nicole, reproduce the emotion \textit{imprimé} during the performance. A “long time”\textsuperscript{158} of habituation is required for the subconscious seed planted by the \textit{impression} to germinate into a conscious vice.

Nicole was not alone in believing that the \textit{impressions} a spectator experienced during a play could impact behavior in subsequent, analogous contexts. In his \textit{Lettre sur la comédie de l’Imposteur}, also published in 1667, Molière uses the same logic to defend the moral value of \textit{Tartuffe}. His aim is to convince his reader that \textit{Tartuffe} is a better antidote than religious discipline to protect married women from seduction. He starts by claiming that we although we are by nature rational creatures, our “weakness and laziness” often blind us from recognizing the external manifestations of reasonable

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid, 157.
\textsuperscript{157} Nicole (1998), 48-50.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid, 50.
situations. We are, however, susceptible to recognizing ridicule, the “external and sensible form” of an unreasonable situation or a trait that offends bienséance. Tartuffe’s actions in the play are so ridiculous that they leave a strong impression upon the spectator. Subsequently seduced by a similar scoundrel, she will associate her current experience with the initial impression of ridicule she felt towards Tartuffe. And this repulsion, argues Molière, suffices to thwart any budding passion before it transforms into transgression. Pride assures that the process works. For if a woman carries out the intellectual process of dissociating the current suitor from Tartuffe, her awareness of the potential of ridicule will make her feel that the new suitor is not worthy of her esteem.\textsuperscript{159} Molière therefore cleverly transforms the Jansenist arguments against theater into arguments in its defense.

Despite his claim that being a professional actor is antithetical to being a professed Christian,\textsuperscript{160} Nicole argues that performance is the best way to generate and secure a Christian lifestyle and a disposition intérieure of sincere faith. Although he never states it explicitly, one can interpolate that, for Nicole, total devotion to God is unnatural and requires continuous exertion of discipline and will. In the \textit{Essais de morale}, Nicole recommends “continuous attention” to God’s laws because there is nothing that hides them more than if one “s’abandonner à ses inclinations” (abandon oneself to one’s inclinations).\textsuperscript{161} The same thought appears in the \textit{Traité} when he warns that at a play one abandons one’s consciousness entirely to “external objects” (the events on stage), relaxing the strict, self-aware vigilance chrétienne that is required to still natural

\textsuperscript{159} Molière (2010), 1192-1197.
\textsuperscript{160} Nicole (1998), 36.
\textsuperscript{161} Nicole (1715), 78.
inclinations. Instead of nurturing instinct and natural dispositions, therefore, the vigilant Christian must exert his or her will to recreate a self in line with Christian precepts. How? The performance of analysis. So Nicole in the second book of the *Essais*:

...comme nous ne saurions [savoir si le fond du coeur est dans l’état où Dieu vuet que nous l’ayons], il ne faut pas laisser de regler l’exterieur, parce que la reformation de notre conduite exteriere est un moyen pour parvenir à la reformation interieure de l’âme…Que s’il ne nous est pas possible de ressentir [les mouvemens de foi] vivement, il faut au moins qu’ils soient comme imprimés dans notre exterieur: & par ce moyen il faut esperer que Dieu nous fera la grace de regler nos mouvemens interieurs, comme nous aurons reglé les exterieurs pour l’amour de lui.

(as we cannot [know if the bottom of our heart is in the state where God wants it], we still mustn’t stop regulating our exterior, because the reformation of our external conduct is a means to achieve the internal reformation of the soul…and if it is not possible to feel [movements of faith] strongly, they must at least me impressed upon our exterior; and by this means we must hope that God will give us the grace to regulate our internal movements, as we will have regulated the external out of love for him.)

Part of this regulation of external behavior is the diligent practice of prayers and exercises every morning, signaling how repetition and iteration are again tools for internal conversion. Steeped in Augustinianism, Nicole rejects the idea of a naïve believer for

---

162 Nicole (1998), 42.
163 Nicole (1715), 75-76. What follows is a comparison between Christian discipline and how a “talented Courtier” regulates his gestures in order to please others, but does not have any native emotions towards situations. More on this in the next chapter.
whom love of God is natural. The ideal Christian, therefore, is the ideal actor, the actor who has so mastered his role and his lines that it has come to erase his natural dispositions and recreate a new *disposition intérieure* capable of receiving God’s grace. Nicole doesn’t want anyone to be a spectator. He wants us all to be actors of the divine comedy.

**Habit and Conversion in *Le véritable Saint Genest***

Ironically, one could make the argument that Nicole’s source material for his writings about conversion of the soul in the *Essais de Morale* was a series of Jesuit plays popular during the 1640s. The story of Saint Genesius’s martyrdom flourished during the first half of the seventeenth century. The core narrative appears in P. Rivadeneira’s *Flos Sanctorum* and later in Thierry Ruinart’s 1689 *Acta Martyrum*.\(^{164}\) Per Ruinart’s narrative, Genesius was “the chief in Rome in the art of acting”. One day he was commissioned by the Emperor Diocletian to mock the minority social group of Christians that stood as a mild threat to Roman power by imitating their rituals on stage. Having accepted his charge, Genesius choose to mock a Christian baptism. While in the process of acting, he actually converted to Christianity. Diocletian, outraged, sentenced him to death. Genesius was thus martyred and became the patron saint of actors, converts, and comedians, amidst other professions.

Because they depict Christian martyrs, the Genesius plays highlight some of the tensions in the interminable *querelles* about the moral appropriateness of theater that

---

\(^{164}\) Rotrou (1907), intro. By Thomas Crane, 80.
were so central to French 17th-century aesthetic culture. Indeed, to prove its viability as a promoter of moral rectitude, tragedy had to be more than a vehicle for classical education; it had to communicate a Christian message. But direct depiction of Christian characters was a delicate matter. In his preface to *Polyeucte*, his own play about a Christian martyr, Corneille lays out the stakes. He says that there are two types of spectators: those for whom the appearance of one historical element suffices to make an entire play seem real, and those, “mieux avertis de notre artifice” (more aware of our artifice), who are so skeptical of fictions that a slight slip in verisimilitude makes them reject the entire play as a creation of the author’s imagination. Corneille thinks both are problematic when it comes to religious content. The naïve spectators will think that invented characters are saints, and the critical spectators will deny sanctity to the historical saints. The aesthetic attitude required for the plays to function was one that appreciated the mix between reality and fiction characteristic of the 17th-century stage. The Genesius plays illustrate the spectator’s susceptibility to be confused at the moment when Genesius converts. At first, the internal spectators mistake Genesius for doing an excellent job pretending:

Dioclétian

Voyez avec quel art Genest sais aujourd’hui
Passer de la figure aux sentiments d’autrui.

Valérie

---

165 There is much literature devoted to the *querelle* concerning the moral appropriateness of theater as well as that concerning the *Anciens* versus the *Modernes*. Selected discussions include Marc Fumaroli’s monograph *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*; René Bray’s *La formation de la doctrine classique*; and Larry Norman’s *The Shock of the Ancients: Literature & History in Early Modern France*.

166 Corneille (1980), 425.
Pour tromper l’auditeur, abuser l’acteur même
De son métier, sans doute, est l’adresse supreme.

(Diocletian)

Watch with what art Genest knows
How to pass from the figure to the feelings of another.

Valérie

To trick the spectator, fooling the actor himself
Is without a doubt the supreme skill of the profession.\textsuperscript{167}

In treating the ambiguities between the real and the fictive, therefore, \textit{Saint Genest} addresses salient aesthetic issues of the 1640s.

The play’s structure indexes the sociological changes at work with the changing status of theater in French culture. Although most of this activity revolved around the \textit{Hôtel de Bourgogne} and the \textit{Hôtel de Marais} in Paris, the character of provincial theater also changed throughout the century. “Increasingly dissatisfied with the encroachments of absolutism and centralization” that characterized Richelieu’s agenda, France’s provincial nobility eventually rebelled in two civil wars collectively known as \textit{La Fronde}, which took place from 1648-1653.\textsuperscript{168} Prior to the outset of war, however, the provincial nobility enlisted more subtle tactics of cultural and ideological resistance. As Louis XIII and his court stipulated formal conventions to further their political goals, the nobles countered by inscribing theater into their native setting. In the mid-century, travelling theater troupes no longer staged slapstick comedy for the agricultural populace. Instead, provincial nobles constructed private theaters within their own homes, considering

\textsuperscript{167} Rotrou (1988), 75. Act IV, scene 5, line 1261-1264. Genesius has just converted to, declaring that it is no longer his character who is speaking, but he himself. Flustered, his fellow actors remark that his lines are not in the script. Diocletian and Valérie’s lines follow.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibbett (2009), 4.
spectacle to be a “necessary compliment” of any party or ceremony because it was a token of wealth and magnificence.\textsuperscript{169} Staging procedures adapted to meet these new demands. One result was the genre known as the \textit{comédie au château}, plays that depict an embedded play being staged in an aristocrat’s home to celebrate some special occasion. As we’ll see in section two, \textit{Saint Genest} is a \textit{comédie au château} in which the Emperor Diocletian hires Genest’s troupe in celebration of his daughter’s marriage. Although first staged at the \textit{Hôtel de Bourgogne}, the play portrays the emperor Diocletian—presumably a stand-in for the monarch—in a rather critical light. “Diocletian’s certainty,” writes Katherine Ibbett, “that his status would be secured by the display of his sovereign power over the body of [Genesius] is shown to be naïve, and he learns that the question of managing spectacle is more complicated than it first appears.”\textsuperscript{170} Given the tight fusion between the theater and the state, a playwright’s self-reflexive exposure of his own techniques for generating illusion always dovetailed with a commentary on monarchical power.

When assessing the work’s relationship to philosophical culture in the period, scholarship often assumes that visualization dominates seventeenth-century epistemology. The assumption then influences how they interpret the play. For example, both Forestier and Vuillemin explain metatheatricality in \textit{Saint Genest} as a formal device to represent the Baroque notion of the \textit{teatrum mundi}, i.e. where we are all actors in a play watched by God.\textsuperscript{171} The \textit{teatrum mundi} has affiliations with classical interpretations

\textsuperscript{169} Vuillemin (1994), 99. According to Forestier, Thomas Kyd’s \textit{The Spanish Tragedy} (1582-92) is the earliest extant European example of an embedded play.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibbett (2009), 33-34.
\textsuperscript{171} Forestier (1981), 21-36, 71. Forestier claims that medieval theater was not conceptualized in such a way as to make an embedded play possible. Like paintings,
of Cartesian subjectivity because both stipulate that in order to know something, one must envision it completely before mind’s eye. Just as the ego cogitans observes objects from a distanced vantage point, so too does God watch us from a distanced viewpoint. The spectator watching spectators within a play is therefore a formal device that embodies the period’s belief of God’s relationship to human affairs. In *Saint Genest*, Rotrou strengthens this identification between God and spectator by depicting the confusion and cruelty that results when Diocletian realizes that Genesius has actually converted. The confusion severs the identification between the real spectator and the represented spectator, and encourages the link between the spectator and an absent God. Diocletian’s participation in the embedded play, moreover, compromises his power: to maintain the analogy to God established by the teatr um mundi, he must never be implicated in the events on stage.

Next, one could reconstruct an intellectual history in which Genesius’s conversion is engineered through the power of objective visualization. Indeed, many thinkers in the period favored visualization as a rhetorical tool to generate strong impressions. To affect the spectator, an actor first had to conjure up impressions—both images and sensations—that would transform him or herself. So Scudery:

Medieval plays juxtaposed various anachronistic moments in human history to represent a timeless, true and sacred reality. The concept of *a temps dramatique*, pushed to its limits with Classicism’s maniacal obsession with the 24-hour rule, was an invention of the Renaissance. This circumscription of spectacle into a narrative that took place in human time was a prerequisite to the further circumscription of an embedded play within a frame play. Forestier cites 1628 as the first instance of a play-within-a-play on the French stage.
Il faut s’il est possible, que [les acteurs] se métamorphosent, aux personages qu’ils représentent: et qu’ils s’en impriment toutes les passions, pour les imprimer aux autres; qu’ils se trompent les premiers, pour tromper le spectateur ensuite.

(If possible, actors must metamorphose themselves into the characters that they will depict: and that they imprint all the passions, in order to imprint them onto others; that they first fool themselves, in order to then fool the spectator.)

The notion that an actor should identify emotionally with his or her character to be convincing to an audience closely resembles Quintilian’s notion of evidentia (in Greek, energeia). Stephen Gaukroger and Mathew Jones both uphold the importance of evidentia in 17th-century intellectual culture. Evidence that evidentia inspired 17th-century theories of dramatic impression lies in the fact that the Ratio Studiorum, steeped in Roman rhetoric, was the core of the Jesuit curriculum. Just like theories of impression, Quintilian’s evidentia entails both a link between thinking and visualization and the idea that in order to persuade another, one must first persuade oneself. Here, Gaukroger explains the link between thinking and visualization:

[The imagination] works with images that enable the mind to think, ‘and for this reason, unless one perceived things one would not learn or understand anything, and when one contemplates one must at the same time contemplate an image (phantasma)…’ The Roman rhetorical tradition was especially concerned with such images, and above all with the question of what features or qualities they must have if they are to be employed effectively in convincing an audience…

---

172 Ibid, 5.
Here Quintillian writes about self-persuasion:

If we wish to give our words the appearance of sincerity, we must assimilate ourselves to the emotions of those who are genuinely so affected, and our eloquence must spring from the same feeling that we desire to produce in the mind of the judge...Accordingly, the first essential is that those feelings should prevail with us that we wish to prevail with the judge, and that we should be moved ourselves before we attempt to move others.\textsuperscript{175}

The subjective engagement required to attain knowledge in the paradigm of the \textit{teatrum mundi} differs from that of \textit{evidentia} because the first requires detached observation and the second requires emotional identification. Still, both paradigms suppose a visual, intentional object as the foundation of knowledge.

Robert nonetheless argues that visualization and self-reflexive \textit{impression} are not the vehicles Rotrou chooses to depict Genesius’s fusion with his character, but rather the “puissance performative de l’imitation” (the performative power of imitation).\textsuperscript{176} I agree with Robert, and will augment his analysis by situating it as an instance of the larger cultural framework of the performance of analysis.

Indeed, Rotrou devotes the second act to a depiction of Genesius reciting his lines in preparation for the evening’s performance. Unlike Lope de Vega, who depicts his Genesius entangling his troupe in real-life experiences in order to heighten their emotional identification, Rotrou depicts a Genesius who merely recites his lines. Performative repetition, not identification, is the key to entering into character. Evidence for this lies in the literal repetition of lines in the script:

\textsuperscript{175} Quintilian, \textit{Institutio Oratoria}, VI. ii. 27-9, Reproduced in Gaukroger (1995), 123.
\textsuperscript{176} Robert (2008), 16.
Genest

Laisse à de lâches coeurs verser d’indignes larmes,
Tendre aux tyrans les mains et mettre bas les armes;
Toi, tends la gorge au fer, vois-
en couler ton sang,
Et meurs sans t’ébranler, debout, et dans ton rang.

*Il répète encore ces quartre dernier vers.*

Laisse à de lâches coeurs verser d’indignes larmes,
Tendre aux tyrans les mains et mettre bas les armes;
Toi, tends la gorge au fer, vois-
en couler ton sang,
Et meurs sans t’ébranler, debout, et dans ton rang.

(Leave it to cowardly hearts to shed undignified tears,
extend their hands to tyrants and put down their arms;
You, raise your throat to the sword, watch the blood flow,
And die without shaking, head up, and in your rang.) (341-8)

…

J’ai vu, Ciel, tu le sais par le nombre des âmes
Que j’osai t’envoyer par des chemins de flammes
Dessus les grils ardents et dedans les taureaux
Chanter les condamnées et trembler les bourreaux

*Il répète ces quartre vers.*

J’ai vu, Ciel, tu le sais par le nombre des âmes
Que j’osai t’envoyer par des chemins de flammes
Dessus les grils ardents et dedans les taureaux
Chanter les condamnées et trembler les bourreaux

[I saw, Heaven, you know by the number of souls
that I dared to send to you on the paths of flames
under the burning grills and in the bulls
the condemned who sung and the hangmen who trembled.) (393-400)

Right after this second repetition, Genest “dreams a bit and no longer looks at his role”.

At this point, he starts to feel the first effects of his eventual conversion:

Dieux, prenez contre moi ma défense et la vôtre;
D’effet comme de nom je me treuve être un autre;
Je feins moins Adrian que je ne le deveins
Et prends avec son nom des sentiments chrétiens.
Je sais, pour l’éprouver, que par un long étude
L’art de nous transformer passé en habitude,
Mais il semble qu’ici des vérités sans fard
Passent et l’habitude et la force de l’art...

(Gods, bring your defenses against me and yourself; Effectively as in name I find myself being another; I’m feigning to be Adrian less than I’m becoming him And take with his name real Christian feelings. I know, having lived it, that through long study The art of transforming oneself becomes a habit But it seems, here, that truths without a mask Go beyond both habit and the force of art…) (401-7)

If Genesius comes to identify with his character, to genuine experience “Christian feelings,” it is not by conjuring analogous emotions that pertain to his own past experience, but by simply repeating his lines. Still, the transformation at hand supersedes the typical force of habit. Iterative performance merely opens up the possibility for divine grace to complete Genesius’s conversion. At this point in the play, Genesius rejects divine intervention and remains in a state of cognitive dissonance between himself and his character, Adrianus: “il s’agit d’imiter, et non de devenir” (this is about imitating, not becoming). (420) Genesius therefore does not engage his imagination actually to internally alienate himself emotionally and become his character. It suffices for him to act as if he believed like the Christian, Adrianus, he will portray.

As every instance of the performance of analysis, Genesius’s conversion begins with voluntary, iterative performance (Genesius reciting his lines over and over again) and ends with an involuntary modification of the disposition intérieure. At the moment when he finally does convert, he displaces agency from himself to a divine angel who directs his actions and fuels his emotions:

Dedans cette action, où le Ciel s’intéresse Un Ange tient la pièce, un Ange me radresse … depuis que le soin d’un esprit angélique Me conduit, me radresse, et m’apprend ma réplique
J’a corrigé mon rôle…

[In this action, where Heaven is involved
An angel controls the work, an angel rectifies me
…
…since the care of an angelic spirit
directs me, rectifies me, and teaches me my response
I’ve corrected my role…] (1299-1309)

Rotrou also syncopates Genesius’s awareness of his conversion with the internal spectators’ awareness of his conversion. At first, the spectators interpret his acting according to the theories of impression, conceptualizing what they observe on stage as an instance of the actor identifying with his character’s emotions:

Dioclétian

Voyez avec quel art Genest sait aujourd’hui
Passer de la figure aux sentiments d’autrui.
…
Valérie

Sa feinte passerait pour la vérité même.

Plancien

Certes, ou ce spectacle est une vérité
Ou jamais rien de faux ne fut mieux imité.

(Diocletian

Watch with what art Genesius manages, today,
To pass from the figure to the feelings of another.

Valérie

His ruse would pass for the truth itself.

Plancien

It’s true, either this spectacle is a truth
Or no falsehood was ever so well imitated.) (1261-1287)
The emperor Diocletian finally loses his patience at the “disorder” taking place on stage, insulted that an actor would dare present such a ramshackle work of art in his “presence.”\textsuperscript{177} (1319-20) Given that aesthetics in the period considered verisimilitude, a tight, causal narrative sequence of credible events, to be a hallmark of fictionality, it makes sense that it is disorder that cues Diocletian to recognize that he is no longer a distanced observer but an involved participant. Ironically, for the internal spectators, the authenticity of Genesius’s emotional state is just another mark of good fiction. In an anti-Cartesian move, disorder, not order, marks truth.

The collapse of the embedded play into the frame play is a necessary formal consequence of the performance of analysis. There are numerous plays-within-a-play in the history of drama, but very few examples where the embedded play ends by collapsing into the frame play. One might consider, for example, Hamlet’s mousetrap, which, by revealing Claudius’s guilt, certainly interacts with reality, but is not mistaken for reality. Similarly, although Pridament mistakes the final tragedy Corneille’s \textit{L’illusion comique} to be an actual event in his son’s life, the embedded plays never actually fuse with the action of the frame play. The very ontology of the performance of analysis, however, stipulates such a formal structure. The actor seeking to convert must begin by inhabiting an as-if space that would be formally depicted as an embedded play. Habitual action within this embedded space of pretense, according to the model, eventually results in fusion of the hypothetical with the real, that is, with the embedded play’s collapse into the frame play.

\textsuperscript{177}
Finally, this formal structure of ontological collapse has unique consequences for Rotrou’s poetics. The 17th-century is the age of classicism, of the repetition and reuse of stories inherited from Antiquity. Poetics in the period was not about creation but recycling: authors anticipated common knowledge of the stories of the plays, and were tasked to present stories everyone knew by heart in an ingenious way. That *Saint Genest* includes an embedded play gives Rotrou the capacity to dramatize and exploit common procedures of imitation. Indeed, many of the lines in the play are literally copied from Rotrou’s source text, Cellot’s *Sanctus Adrianus*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rotrou’s <em>Le véritable Saint Genest</em> (335-348)</th>
<th>Cellot’s <em>Sanctus Adrianus</em> (Ne délibère plus, Adrian, il est temps)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ne délibère plus, Adrian, il est temps</td>
<td>Adriane, jacta est alea: athletam Dei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De suivre avec ardeur ces fameux combattants;</td>
<td>Profiteris auctoratus et forti voves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Si la gloire te plaît, l’occasion est belle;</td>
<td>Servire domino: macte, vinciri imminet,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La querelle du Ciel à ce combat t’appelle;</td>
<td>Uri, necari: gravius et si quid jubet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La torture, le fer et la flame t’attend;</td>
<td>Orci lanista, pectus addictum offeres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offre à leurs cruautés un coeur ferme et constant;</td>
<td>Aliis locatas tendere ad populum manus,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laisse à de lâches coeurs verser d’indignes larmes,</td>
<td>Submittere arma, pollicis mitem licet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tendre aux tyrans les mains et mettre bas les armes;</td>
<td>Statum rogare; te decet jugulum dare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toi, tends la gorge au fer, voisin couler ton sang,</td>
<td>Totumque ferrum recipere, et stantem mori.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Et meurs sans t’ébranler, debout, et dans ton rang.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Il répète encore ces quartre dernier vers.*

Laisse à de lâches coeurs verser d’indignes larmes, Tendre aux tyrans les mains et mettre bas les armes; Toi, tends la gorge au fer, voisin couler ton sang, Et meurs sans t’ébranler, debout, et dans ton rang.

Ironically, the moment when Genesius converts to really become his character is precisely the moment when he stops reciting his lines and begins to improvise:

Marcelle

Il ne dit pas un mot du couplet qui lui reste.

---

Rotrou (1907), 365. For a complete list of Rotrou’s translated citations from Cellot’s *Saint Adrianus*, see Crane’s second appendix.
Sergeste

Comment, se préparant avecque tant de soin…

Lentule, *regardant derrière la tapisserie*

Holà, qui tient la pièce?

Genest

Il n’en est plus besoin…
Dieu m’apprend sur-le-champ ce que je vous recite;
Et vous m’entendez mal, si dans cette action
Mon rôle passe encor pour une fiction.

(Marcelle

He’s not saying a word from his couplets.

Sergeste

How, preparing himself with so much care…

Lentule, *looking behind the curtain*

Whoa, who’s controlling the play?

Genesius

There’s no more need…
God is teaching me in the moment what I recite to you;
And you understand me poorly, if in this action
My role still passes as fiction.) (1296-1318)

The identity between Genesius and his character is actualized through difference, not repetition. This has two consequences for Rotrou’s poetics. First, even though he literally repeats 104 lines from Cellot’s *Saint Adrianus*, by placing them on a different ontological level, he transforms their significance. Locally it is the same play, but contextually it is a different play. Rotrou repeats his source text until the force mechanical iteration generates something radically new. Second, it is precisely the disorder of Genesius’s
conversion—his departure from his scripted role—that instigates Rotrou to invent fresh material as a poet. The new identity Genesius fosters through his conversion therefore dovetails with Rotrou’s creative identity as a poet.

**When performance fails: a new take on the ridiculous Monsieur Jourdain**

Rotrou’s *comédie au château* refracted how, under Richlieu’s patronage, the sociological status of theater evolved during the first half of the century. Still, playwrights in this period had to defend their art as a rhetorical mode suited to prude aristocratic mores. Both Corneille\(^\text{179}\) and Rotrou therefore used metatheatricality to defend the epistemological and moral value of spectacle, their Baroque “deployment of spectacle,” to quote Roland Greene, always “both a mode of presentation—an environment of sensations—and a statement about what that mode represents.”\(^\text{180}\) By 1670, the year Molière first staged his *Bourgeois gentilhomme*, theater was a fully-integrated commonplace of court society under Louis XIV. Molière, therefore, was not tasked with having to create and justify a place for spectacle in aristocratic culture. He could assume that the king and his court were the *juges suprêmes* of every spectacle\(^\text{181}\), that every fictional imitation of courtly mores was also implicit commentary on the real-life imitations of *honnêteté* practiced by the middling aristocrats or rising *roturiers* populating court society. This sociological shift suggests that the metatheatrical structure in *le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* should have different epistemological significance than it does in *Saint Genest*.

\(^\text{179}\) For a reading of Corneille’s *Illusion comique* as a piece of rhetoric in defense of theater, see Fumaroli (1990).

\(^\text{180}\) Greene (2009), 150.

\(^\text{181}\) Molière (2010), 1448.
As concerns the history of dramatic form, *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* is a *comédie-ballet*. Molière invented the genre of the *comédie-ballet* together with his longtime collaborator Jean-Baptiste in 1661, when they jointly composed *Les Fâcheux*. A precursor to opera, the genre treats quotidian matters as opposed to tragic myths. As standard with classical comedies, marriage is often the central theme. The open lavishness of spectacle native to the genre of the *comédie-ballet* corroborates the shift in the status of spectacle that occurred during the reign of Louis XIV. That the ballet’s purpose was to provide a source of refined pleasure was accepted as fact. As I will argue throughout this section, the socio-political questions Molière uses spectacle to solve in *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* are of a different sort.

Louis XIV commissioned Molière and Lully to compose *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* to commemorate the 1669 visit of a Turkish diplomat. The commission was vague: “composer une pièce de théâtre où l’on pût faire entrer quelque chose des habillements et des manières des Turcs” (to compose a work of theater including something of the clothing and manners of the Turks). For his part, Lully desired to expand upon the commission and to achieve something like a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a *Ballet des Nations* mingling multiple stylistic traditions from the various European nations. Molière, in turn, had to find a way to incorporate Lully’s ambition into the framework of a classical comedy ending with a successful marriage. His solution is to depict an ambitious bourgeois, Monsieur Jourdain, who thwarts his daughter’s marriage with an honnête, bourgeois suitor, Cléonte, in the hopes of marrying her to an aristocrat. He incorporates the spectacle à la turque as a gag Cléonte’s crafty servant concocts to trick

---

182 Molière (2010), 1439.
Monsieur Jourdain into believing that Cléonte is a Turkish prince seeking his daughter’s hand in marriage. Molière therefore repurposes the lavishness of Turkish traditions into a critique of his French contemporaries: with so many bourgeois mimicking aristocratic manners to gain rank in court society, why not present a bourgeois who is such an avid social climber that he’ll bypass French nobility in the hopes of becoming an Ottoman dignitary?

The performance of analysis is a useful model for interpreting Monsieur Jourdain’s behavior in the play because the character is wholly absorbed by the external appearance of nobility, not its organic, intrinsic worth. Indeed, Monsieur Jourdain is an emblematic caricature of the class of bourgeois roturiers eager to exploit novel the social mobility that accompanied the transition from decadent feudal nobility into the incipient capitalist, centralized monarchy during the reign of both Louis XIII and Louis XIV. The immense popularity of manuals for courtly etiquette, from Nicolas Faret’s *L’honnête homme ou l’art de plaire à la cour* (1630) to Antonine de Courtin’s *Nouveau traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnêtes gens* (1671), testifies to the magnitude of bourgeois using capital to buy titles of nobility.\(^{183}\) Crucial, here, is that these manuals are all technical (from *techne*). They present mechanic rules for how one should act without providing theoretical explanation for why such actions exist or what personal qualities they are designed to represent. Like Catholic ritual in Pascal, they are codified gestures that signal affiliation to a certain social group. As such, a social-climbing bourgeois could adopt and apply the gestures as if he or she were actually an aristocrat in order to gain entrance and eventual acceptance into aristocratic milieux.

\(^{183}\) I reserve thorough discussion of the handbooks for gentlemanly etiquette that were popular in the second half of the century for the next chapter.
In *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, Molière parodies the superficiality of technical etiquette by highlighting Monsieur Jourdain’s total lack of genuine curiosity in the barrage of aristocratic hobbies he adopts to mimic *Gens de Qualité* (people of quality, i.e. nobles). Jourdain goes so far as to set his desire to be like the *Gens de Qualité* as his sole maxim:

Maître à danser: [La musique et la danse] ouvrent l’esprit d’un Homme aux belles choses.

Monsieur Jourdain: Est-ce que les Gnes de Qualité apprennent aussi la Musique?

Maître de Musique: Oui, Monsieur

Monsieur Jourdain: Je l’apprendrai donc…

(Dancing tutor: [Music and dance] open the human spirit to beautiful things.

Monsieur Jourdain: Do *Gens de Qualité* also learn music?

Music tutor: Yes, sir.

Monsieur Jourdain: Then I’ll learn it…)\(^\text{184}\)

Variations of this dialogue occur regarding his holding a concert at his home once per week and his placing the ornamental flowers at the bottom, as opposed to the top, of his trousers.\(^\text{185}\) Complementary to his desire to adopt noble habits is Monsieur Jourdain’s obsession to be perceived as a nobleman by others:

Ah les Menuets sont ma Danse, et je veux que vous me les voyiez danser.

(Ah, minuets are my dance, and I want you to see me dance them.)

\(^{184}\) Ibid, 269.

\(^{185}\) Ibid, 274, 285.
Suivez-moi, que j’aïlle un peu montrer mon Habit par la Ville; et surtout, ayez soin tous deux marcher immédiatement sur mes pas, afin qu’on voie bien que vous êtes à moi.

(Follow me, as I’d like to go out a bit to show my new outfit around the city; and especially, both of you take care to walk immediately behind me so that everyone can see that you’re mine.)\textsuperscript{186}

Jourdain believes wholeheartedly that mere appearance suffices to convert one’s social status from bourgeois to aristocrat. In a move of absolute self-recreation and conversion, he refuses to acknowledge his humble origins and upholds that if he assumes the habits—both mores and clothing—of an aristocrat, and is recognized as such by others, he has officially become an aristocrat. In his own mind, therefore, Jourdain’s efforts are a successful example of the performance of analysis: he begins by acting as if he already were a Gens de Qualité until others’ recognition of his social status convinces him that he has actually become one.

His success, unfortunately, is all in his mind. The humor in Le bourgeois gentilhomme derives from the fact that Monsieur Jourdain’s behavior, when considered by others, embodies a failed performance of analysis. First, hard as Jourdain may try to assimilate aristocratic tastes, his genuine predilections remain populist. For example, he rejects a pastoral aria that was stylish during the period as *un peu lugubre* (a little gloomy) in favor of a ditty about a maiden Janneton\textsuperscript{187}. Authentic cultural appreciation and profound savoir-faire, implies Molière, are inalienable indexes of social status, which remain immune to the mechanisms of performance. Second, he lacks the finesse to adapt

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid, 274, 287.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid, 269.
the rules of courtly etiquette to the happenstance of context. Attempting to greet Dorimène, a marquise courted by the scoundrel Dorante in his own home, with a three-step bow, he finds himself too close to her at the end of the second step and, incognizant of his faux-pas, requests that she move back a bit so he can complete his greeting as rules require. Finally, we’ve seen how repetition is the key to successful performance of analysis in the works of Descartes, Pascal, and Rotrou. Iteration attenuates the voluntary effort required at the beginning of the process and naturalizes the hypothetical state. In Le bourgeois gentilhomme, iteration fails to engender this naturalizing effect. Right after his lesson with the quack philosopher who settles on teaching the phonetics of French vowels, Monsieur Jourdain repeats lines extracted from his lesson to his servant Nicole and his wife. The women, however, are emblems of domestic, bourgeois bon sens. Both reject Jourdain’s lessons as utter galimatias (gibberish). Whereas Rotrou imubes performative repetition with the power of convert, Molière ridicules it as powerless when taken out of context.

Just as Genesius’s successful performance determined the work’s collapsing metatheatrical structure, so too does Monsieur Jourdain’s failed performance determine a structure that concludes with an embedded play. Saint Genest is a tragedy, its outcome predetermined by both the legend of Saint Genesius and Cellot’s source text. In order genuinely to become the character Adrianus, Genesius had to relive his fate in reality, not onstage. As the script ordains, he had to die a Christian martyr. Rotrou emphasizes this in

188 Ibid, 313.  
189 Forestier comments that Monsieur Jourdain’s philosophy lesson parodies the Discours physique de la parole (1668), a work by Géraud de Cordemoy in the tradition of Cartesian Occasionalism. The author applies the Cartesian method of starting with simple constituents to the point of ridicule.  
190 Ibid, 292.
the play’s final verse: “D’une feinte, en mourant, faire une vérité” (by dying, to turn a fiction into a truth).\textsuperscript{191} Le bourgeois gentilhomme, in contrast, is a comedy, its outcome prescribed by the generic rule to end in a happy marriage. The obstacle to the marriage that Molière establishes in the play is Monsieur Jourdain’s obstinate desire to marry his daughter to a gentilhomme. Molière’s tool to resolve the conflict is fiction, a play-within-a-play. Covielle, the fiancé’s attendant, invents a ruse to make the rest of the plays characters enter the as-if world of Monsieur Jourdain’s imagination. Cléonte plays the role of a Turkish prince seeking Lucile’s (the daughter) hand in marriage; Covielle plays an ambassador and translator; even the marquis Dorante and Dorimène corroborate the fiction; the only character who remains absent is Madame Jourdain, who, as the emblem of rational bon sens is too attached to quotidian reality to support the fiction. As Jourdain lacks subjective judgment and gages reality through the opinions of others, when Covielle pronounces him Mamamouchi (a faux Turkish dignitary), he immediately believes it. And believing that he’s marrying his daughter to a Turkish prince, he consents to the marriage between Lucile and Cléonte. Monsieur Jourdain’s performance never converts him into an aristocrat; his entourage converts themselves to inhabit his imaginary world. Le bourgeois gentilhomme, therefore, presents a reverse ontology to the standard performance of analysis: the model is not that a hypothetical becomes an actual, but that a hypothetical, stifled in its attempt to become an actual, issues a more inclusive hypothetical.

And it’s Molière who has the last word. As we’ve seen throughout the chapter, both the formal practices and theoretical accounts of seventeenth-century drama testified

\textsuperscript{191} Rotrou (1988), 103. Verse 1750.
to theater’s rapid adoption as a royal and aristocratic pastime. Limiting our perspective to the ridiculous character of Monsieur Jourdain, we might conclude that Molière’s *Bourgeois gentilhomme* falls cleanly into this history, insofar as it defends good taste as a mark of a noble elite. But Molière’s message isn’t that simple. Throughout the play, he hints that, uncouth as he may be, it is nonetheless *le bon bourgeois* Monsieur Jourdain—not the aristocrats—who has become the true patron of the arts in late seventeenth-century French society. In the opening scene of the play, Molière has the music tutor convince the dance tutor that, although it is frustrating that Monsieur Jourdain cannot appreciate the fineness of their craft, “il…paie bien; et c’est de quoi maintenant nos Arts ont plus besoin, que de toute autre chose” (he pays well; and that’s what the arts currently need the most, more than anything else.). Similarly, although Jourdain’s ambition makes him an easy target for the greedy aristocrat Dorante, it is nonetheless Jourdain who supports Dorante’s livelihood. Whereas the royal purse funded the mid-century *masques*, the grand *Ballet de Nations* that closes the play is made possible by the ambitions of a rising bourgeois. Certainly, no class transition takes place in *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, given that Monsieur Jourdain remains bourgeois, even though he envisions himself as a Turkish dignitary. His money nonetheless makes the entertainment for the scorning aristocrats possible. Molière’s work implies that the aristocratic belief of social superiority might rest on an illusion as intricate as Monsieur Jourdain’s; only the disabused critic, able to discern and depict this subtle dynamic, is the true master of his age.

---

192 Molière (2010), 266.
Towards the end of 1662, the duke François de la Rochefoucauld sent a letter to his close friend Madame de Sablé. In lieu of polite inquiry into the addressee’s wellbeing, the letter starts with a list of eight defiant sentences (maxims) that unstitch the moral fabric of society: “on se console souvent d’être malheureux en effet par un certain plaisir qu’on trouve à le paraître” (We often console ourselves for our genuine unhappiness by a certain pleasure we take in seeming to be so).\textsuperscript{193} His list of recently composed maxims complete, he then requests that, in return, Mme de Sablé invite him to dinner and serve him carrot soup, a mutton and beef ragout (like the one they recently ate with M. le commandeur de Souvré), a green sauce, and some other dish, be it capon with prune sauce, or something that she judges worthy of her exquisite taste.\textsuperscript{194} That La Rochefoucauld overlooks any opening formalities indexes his intimacy with Mme de Sablé: this is not the hesitant voice of an arrivé like Monsieur Jourdain, attempting to flatter the powerful salonnière by tactfully disposing conventional phrases. No, this is the haughty and playful voice of an intimate, insouciant about offending the marquise’s sensibilities. The nature of the social bond the maxims generate between the duke and the marquise is therefore more nuanced than one of mere politeness. The maxims exceed conventional flattery because they communicate that both la Rochefoucauld and Sablé are so secure in their social status that they have the luxury to critique the social pretense that fostered their initial bond. The transaction, then, is the performative establishment of elite exclusivity. La Rochefoucauld, of course, is too clever to leave things there. He

\textsuperscript{193} Rochefoucauld (1967), 548.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid, 549.
sharpens his awareness of the transactional nature of the maxims by reducing them to an abstract commodity of exchange: as “on ne fait rien pour rien” (one doesn’t do anything for nothing), he bids the marquise invite him to dinner, again an index of their intimacy, in exchange for his having both sent her the new maxims and tickled her narcissism by deeming her their most worthy critic. To read the letter’s content literally, therefore, would be an interpretive mistake. La Rochefoucauld’s maxims are anything but tools to demystify the hypocrisy underlying social interactions. They are transactional tokens that reinforce the nucleus of the clique.

Molière’s character Monsieur Jourdain is a natural target for the critiques La Rochefoucauld articulates in his maxims. As I showed in the last chapter, Monsieur Jourdain is ridiculous because he fails in his attempt to apply the rules of etiquette to transform himself into a personne de qualité. He therefore illustrates the gap between être and paraître, between essence and appearance, unearthed by la Rochefoucauld in many of his maxims. It is nonetheless doubtful that la Rochefoucauld would have devoted such obsessive creative energy—he constantly revised the maxims, publishing five different editions between 1665 and 1678—to critiquing bourgeois arrivés as manifestly ridiculous as Monsieur Jourdain. Indeed, Molière’s critique of bourgeois ambition is so poignant because it puts pressure on the actual practices that governed salon culture in the seventeenth century. Inspired by Castiglione’s extremely popular Book of the Courtier (1528), the genre of manuals for courtly etiquette flourished across seventeenth-century Europe. Canonical examples include Nicolas Faret’s L’honneste homme ou l’art

---

195 George Bull (1967), 17, describes the immediate success of Castiglione’s work in Italy as throughout Europe, citing Ben Jonson’s use of the work for a scene in Every Man out of his Humour as evidence for its popularity in Elizabethan England.
de plaire à la cour (1630) and Baltasar Gracián’s Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia (1647). Whereas Faret’s work is a straightforward handbook for social interactions, Gracián’s work is a harbinger for the more critical tradition of biting sentences that marked the evolution of the tradition in the second half of the century. Key examples here include Jacques Esprit’s La fausseté des vertus humaines (1678) and, naturally, La Rochefoucauld’s Maximes suivies des Réflexions diverses (1678). As the rules for engagement were already articulated and absorbed, they had, for those secure in their social status, lost the urgency of function. As such, they were ripe to enter into a decadent phase of aestheticization.

I am not the first to see the maxims as crystalline precipitates of a culture of disillusionment and pessimism. Jean Starobinski and Liane Ansmann both cite the demoralizing experience of La Fronde and the radical ideology of Jansenism as causes of aristocratic pessimism in the second half of the century. Denouncing “worldly values, power, and grandeur as inauthentic”, Jansenism was “perfectly attuned to the moral and psychological interests of a society [salon society] with its constant leanings towards introspection.”196 The standard conclusion such introspection drew was that society is void of authentic values, that it is a mere “game of strategy” that requires “the player to assume a rôle which he conceives and acts out with regard to other players, who are likewise rational actors playing their roles.”197 The rules of worldly conduct were therefore entirely separate from the laws linking man to God; like Gracián’s Oráculo, the Maximes was a treatise that described only how man must act in his fallen state. The deeper psychological affinity linking salons circles to Jansenist circles, however, was

196 Craveri (2005), 99, 105.
197 Lewis (1968), 138.
their need to embody a lifestyle that betokened their superiority over the rest of society: 
“[w]hether expressed through the exaltation of human nature or its mortification, the same need to stand out or to present a challenge must have driven, as Jean Lafond writes, ‘a not inconsiderable part of the aristocracy to feel in moral harmony with an extremism beyond the reach of ordinary people.’”

Marc Fumaroli identifies this same extreme elitism in the terse, “attic”—as opposed to florid, “Ciceronian”—language favored by both Saint-Cyran and Mme de Sablé. In the name of a return to natural simplicity, stripped of the pagan impurities of superfluous ornamentation, Jansenists like Saint-Cyran honed an idiom that was only accessible to the most erudite members of the noblesse de Robe.

Both the Jansenists and the salon précieuses rejected what they considered to be the moral laxity of Jesuit/royal society. Port-Royal’s critique of Jesuit casuistry, of which the classic example is Pascal’s Lettres provinciales (1656-57), dovetailed with the salon culture’s development of an alternative terrain in which man could realize an aesthetic perfection that included and entailed critical self-awareness. Starobinski describes salon ethics as being founded on “moral substitutes,” hollow and aesthetic projections of authentic virtues that govern the social stage:

A la condition de créer les airs et les manières qui s’harmonisent, l’homme peut accepter sa nature; inversement, à la condition de ne pas oublier sa nature, l’on peut s’inventer soi-même, élaborer une personnalité seconde…l’homme doit tout ensemble s’accepter tel qu’il est et se créer conformément à une exigence de perfection. La perfection est désormais accessible; puisque renonçant à

198 Craveri (2005), 105.
199 Fumaroli (2002), 641.
l'impossible tâche de perfectionner nos sentiments et de nos passions, nous affinons seulement la qualité du rapport expressif qui les unit à leurs manifestations.

(On the condition of creating airs and manners that harmonize with each other, man can accept his nature; inversely, on the condition of not forgetting his nature, one can invent oneself, elaborate a second personality…man must at once accept himself as he is and create himself to conform to an ideal of perfection. Perfection is, from now on, accessible; because renouncing the impossible task of perfecting our feelings and passions, we only refine the quality of the expressive link that unites them to their manifestations.)

An etiquette based upon Starobinski’s “substitutive morals” requires a cognitive displacement germane to those of Pascal’s doubting libertine and Rotrou’s Genesius: the actors in this society who have reached the point of disillusionment are aware of the fact that their external actions are alienated from their internal thoughts and feelings. In the hopes of securing peaceful commerce and promoting pleasure, they subordinate their individual drives and inclinations to perfect an external mask accepted by the group. I consider this social posturing to be the final manifestation of the performance of analysis in seventeenth-century French culture.

This chapter begins with an overview of honnêteté, the idealized ethical code that governed seventeenth-century French salon culture. Referencing passages from Chevalier de Méré’s *Discours* and La Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims* and *Réflexions*, I highlight five central aspects of honnêteté:

---

200 Starobinski (1966), 221.
1. “It can only be learned or taught through practice or a process of initiation.”

2. Fashioning itself as rational and cosmopolitan, it favors the universal over the particular.

3. It is an entirely transactional ethics intended to facilitate social interaction, or commerce.

4. It requires that group members don social masks—fixed personae—which should enhance their natural character according to the rules of bienséance.

5. It prizes an appearance of ease and naturalness, even with the awareness that all members are voluntary accepting a rule-governed code.

Dispersed throughout my description of the principal tenets of honnêteté are synthetic claims regarding how the ethic reflects and refracts the performance of analysis. Most important, I show how honnêteté places restrictions upon performance absent from the paradigm’s instantiations in Descartes and Pascal. Desirous to convert to Catholicism, Pascal’s doubting libertine was forced to perform set of codified, ritual actions practiced by all believers independent of their individual qualities and eccentricities. The theorists of honnêteté, on the other hand, often repeat that individuals in the social sphere are not able to fashion themselves into anyone they wish; they must discern which social persona most adequately fits their individual inclinations, humors, and talents.

Next, I provide a novel reading of La Rochefoucauld’s Maximes as a collection of tokens granting access to and success within salon society. The compressed style of the maxims, I argue, indexes their status as quotations that can be memorized and disposed as witty rejoinders in conversation in order to signal inclusion within the group. The maxims

---

201 Craveri (2009), 2.
are therefore best understood as performative, not denotative, language. Moreover, the structure of the maxims indexes the shift in the site of authority that took place in the period. Although they look like collected commonplaces, the maxims establish authority by debunking, not confirming, standard doxa. Finally, I argue that the demystifying X is nothing but Y is the prized structure in the Maximes because it both trains the faculty of judgment required to keep the clique intact and threatens—though always as play—to expose the holes in the performance of analysis that serves as society’s foundation.

The performance of analysis and honnêteté

Honnêteté is one of those slippery terms like taste or style that are impossible to define concretely because their meaning is embedded in a period-specific, semantic nexus. One meaning we can immediately disregard is our understanding of honest as “frank” or “unadulterated”. Seventeenth-century society did not tolerate the unadulterated expression of individual opinion or instinct, as illustrated by Alceste’s alienation in Molière’s Le misanthrope. The honnête homme in the play is the socially savvy Philinte, not the overly rigid Alceste. Indeed, honnêteté might best be translated as “gentlemanliness” or “propriety.” Its etymological roots in the Latin honos and honestas adumbrate its use in seventeenth-century discourse. Honos is the Latin word for honor, ambition, or military glory, the traditional masculine, heroic values embodied by Corneille’s heroes, which reflect the neo-Stoic optimism of the first half of the century. Honestas, in contrast, is “honor received from others, repute, or reputation,” with the corresponding adverb honeste meaning “becomingly, decently, or properly.”202 Honos is

---

202 Definitions from Lewis’s Elementary Latin Dictionary.
a more direct and embodied form of glory focused on action; *honestas* is an indirect and disembodied from of glory generated through the opinion of others. As implied in the adverb *honeste*, it has greater semantic affiliation with the Latin notion of *decorum*, an elegant seemliness meeting social conventions. In the dictionaries of the age, such as the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie*, *honnête* is always coupled with words like *civil*, *courtois*, or *poli*. *Politesse*, as Starobinski argues, is a figurative application of the literal action of *polir* (polishing). So Starobinski:

> Par l’association de l’image “littérale” du *luisant* et du lisse avec l’idée de perfection, le geste manuel de la *polissure...*établit, au niveau figuré, l’équivalence de *polir* et de *civiliser*. Civiliser, ce serait, parmi les hommes comme parmi les objets, abolir toutes les aspérités et les inégalités “grossières,” effacer toute rudesse, supprimer tout ce qui pourrait donner lieu au frottement, faire en sorte que les contacts soient glissants et doux.

(By association of the “literal” image of *shiny* and smooth with the idea of perfection, the manual gesture of polishing...establishes, at the figurative level, the equivalence of *polir* and *civiliser*. To civilize, would be, amidst men as amidst objects, to abolish all the bumps and “tacky” inequalities, to erase all crudeness, to eliminate everything that could generate friction, to make it so that contact is smooth and soft.)

As the skillful execution of *politesse*, *honnêteté* aims to erase individual difference and generate frictionless contact between various members of a group. Finally, as Craveri deduces from the *Académie’s* definition for *politesse* as a “way of living, acting, and

---

203 Starobinski (1989), 27.
speaking acquired through usage in society,” honnêteté cannot be reduced to a “mere collection of precepts” but had to be learned through continuous practice in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{204} “Il me semble,” writes Méré, “que cette parfaite honnêteté demande que l’on se communique à la vie, et que même l’on s’y enonce…” (It seems to me that this perfect honnêteté requires that one communicates with life, and even that one throws oneself in…).\textsuperscript{205} For this reason, theorists like Méré also rejected scholastic pedantry as useless in contrast to the ability to be a witty conversant:

...la plupart des gens regardent la science, c’est estre sçavant que d’avoir beaucoup de lecture...mais de dire de bonnes choses sur tout ce qui se presente, et de les dire agreablement, tous ceux qui les ecoutent s’en trouvent mieux; l’esprit ne peut aller plus loin, et c’est le chef-d’oeuvre de l’intelligence.
(Most people look at science, and think being savant is having read a lot...but to say something good about anything that presents itself, and to say it agreeably, everyone who is listening learns something; the mind cannot go further, and it’s the chef-d’oeuvre of the intelligence.)\textsuperscript{206}

Because honnêteté is a capacity to perform in society, it is a style of knowledge that cannot be acquired through study and logical rigor, but only through action, practice, and performance.\textsuperscript{207}

\textsuperscript{204} Craveri (2009), 2.
\textsuperscript{205} Méré (1930), III, 79.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid, II, 119.
\textsuperscript{207} There is vast secondary literature exploring the relationship between the structure of gentlemanly society and the shift in truth-making procedures in both the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. Matthew Jones (2006), 9, note 35, gives a list of references on the subject.
The neutralization of individual difference achieved through *politesse* dovetails with an ideology of universalism and generality, the second hallmark of *honnêteté*. Jean-Pierre Dens thinks that *urbanitas*, a civilized cosmopolitanism that makes one at home anywhere in the world, better captures the spirit of *honnêteté* than *honestas*.\(^{208}\) Indeed, Méré claims that the capacity an *honnête homme* has to discern individual merit without the external signs of local convention and custom indicates his keen faculty of judgment and rationality:

un honnête homme de grande vûê est si peu sujet aux préventions, que si un Indien d’un rare merite venoit à la Cour de France, et qu’il se pût expliquer, il ne perdroit pas auprès de lui le moindre de ses avantages; car sitôt que la verité se montre, un esprit raisonnable se plaît à la reconnoître, et sans balancer.

(an *honnête homme* of great insight is so little subjected to prejudices, that if an Indian of rare merit came to the French Court, and he was able to explain himself, he wouldn’t lose the least of his advantages; because as soon as truth reveals itself, a rational spirit is pleased to recognize it, and without hesitation.\(^{209}\))

The capacity to both recognize individual merit across national borders and be able to adapt oneself to match an interlocutor’s tastes and interests—“de connoître ce qui sied le mieux en toute rencontre” (to know what is most appropriate in any encounter)—entails an ideal of knowledge that favors breadth over depth, a dilettante’s ease with various topics of conversation. Here Pascal praises the generalist ideal of knowledge practiced in society:

\(^{208}\) Dens (1981), 12. Starobinski (1989), 21-22, also mentions the word *urbanitas*, in contrast to *rusticitas*, in his discussion of civilization and *honnêteté*.

\(^{209}\) Méré (1930), III, 73.
Knowing something about everything is a prerequisite to being a good conversation partner so that one can avoid the natural inclination to speak about personal matters preoccupying one’s time. The key to polite conversation, as both Méré and La Rochefoucauld, is to give interlocutors what they want to hear.²¹¹

The ideology of universalism and cosmopolitanism is nonetheless a discursive strategy to veil the fact that salons brought together people from different social castes. In my discussion about Pascal’s distaste for professionalism in chapter two,²¹² I cited *pensée* 547, in which he characterizes an *honnête homme* as a man without any qualities except for that *qualité universelle* (universal quality) that distinguishes him as a gentleman. Erich Auerbach explains this distaste for individual or professional indices as the consequence of the application of the term *honnête homme* “to a larger and larger section of society.” He continues:

²¹⁰ *Pensée* 195, Lafuma; 37, Brunschvicg.
²¹¹ Méré (1930), 88 and La Rochefoucauld (1967), 192. Both authors are against speaking about oneself or using oneself as an example.
²¹² See pages 73-75.
Indeed, the concept of honnêteté had nothing to do with class or economic position. Anyone could become an honnête personne who was willing and able to cultivate his inner and outer person in accordance with the spirit of the times. The product was a man cleansed of all particular qualities, no longer a member of a class, a profession, a religion, but precisely an honnête homme.\(^{213}\)

The homogenizing conventions of politesse and honnêteté therefore create a space of pretense in which everyone who accepts the group’s rules and is accepted by the group attains equality. All nonetheless tacitly understand that this equality remains pretense: it is an as-if equality generated by the performance of honnêteté that never actualizes any profound social change. Returning to Le bourgeois gentilhomme, Cléonte, the bourgeois fiancé, deems himself worthy to be an honnête homme precisely because he accepts his position as a bourgeois: “Je trouve que toute imposture est indigne d’un honnête homme, et qu’il y a de la lâcheté à déguiser ce que le Ciel nous a fait naître” (I find that any imposture is unworthy of an honnête homme, and that it’s cowardice to disguise how Heaven made us at birth).\(^{214}\) Appalled by the roturiers’ buying their way into Louis XIV’s court, the jaded aristocrats established salons to create an alternative meritocracy that absorbed and diluted rising bourgeois power. La Rochefoucauld captures the spirit in a posthumous maxim: “L’honnêteté n’est d’aucun état un particulier, mais de tous les états en général” (Honnêteté is not of any caste in particular, but of all the castes in general).\(^{215}\)

\(^{213}\) Auerbach (1984), 165.
\(^{214}\) Molière (2010), 308-309.
\(^{215}\) Rochefoucauld (1967), 174. Posthumous maxim 61. I understand “état” here to mean one of the trois états, i.e. nobility, priests, and the rest, and therefore find it fitting to translate it as “caste”.
The as-if attitude that sustains the peaceful comingling of aristocrats with bourgeois is one facet of the relational metaphysics generated by salon culture. The notion of personhood espoused by La Rochefoucauld and Méré is not one in which essence precedes existence. Indeed, La Rochefoucauld entirely dismantles the idea that we can know ourselves as pre-social, discrete individuals equipped with virtues or rational qualities; *amour-propre* is there at every turn—“on ne peut sonder la profondeur ni percer les ténèbres de ses abîmes” (we cannot sound the depth or pierce the darkness of its abysses)—distorting any attempt at objective knowledge of our personal qualities.

What counts, therefore, is an “*être* substitutif, que l’homme découvre non pas en lui, mais dans l’ordre de la *relation*, par-delà le néant de sa nature première” (substitute *being*, that man discovers not in himself, but in the order of a *relation*, beyond the emptiness of his primary nature). It’s counterintuitive to think of our being in society, a being so fragile that it only exists in relation to others’ opinion, as more ontologically robust than the self that we live with every evening in bed. But this is the ontology implied by the theorists of *honnêteté*. At the apex of the ontological hierarchy in this social world is the *honnête homme* who has entirely mastered the art of *bienséance*. Inherited from mid-century aesthetics, this term connotes that one’s external gestures and actions—the persona that one inhabits within society—resonate harmoniously with one’s latent, internal character. Truth—and ontological completeness—is not the bare appraisal of self, but the “musical” attunement or concordance between our external gestures and actions.

---

216 Ibid, 419. Maxim 94 in the *Manuscrit de Liancourt*.
217 Starobinski (1966), 224. Original emphasis.
218 Both Starobinski and Russo pick up on the musical metaphors in La Rochefoucauld’s writings about *bienséance* and *commerce*, Starobinski (1996), 223 and Russo (1997), 389.
our *disposition intérieure*. *Bienséance* therefore adds two subtleties to the social manifestation of the performance of analysis. First, it places limitations upon the hypothetical states that launch the process of transformation and actualization. As evident in the case of Monsieur Jourdain, *bienséance* does not permit everyone to pick an ideal social self at will. Rather, one must use judgment and feedback to postulate a social persona that best fits one’s natural disposition. La Rochefoucauld repeats this idea throughout his *Réflexions diverses*:

> Il y a un air qui convient à la figure et aux talents de chaque personne; on perd toujours quand on le quitte pour prendre un autre. Il faut essayer de connaître celui qui nous est naturel, n’en point sortir, et le perfectionner autant qu’il nous est possible.  

(There is an air that matches the figure and talents of each person; one always loses when one abandons it to take on another. It’s necessary to know which is natural to us, not to leave it, and to perfect it as much as possible.)

La Rochefoucauld’s reflection gestures towards the second subtlety. The *honnête homme* comes into possession of the qualities that define him while in the process of inventing and consolidating his appearance (“it’s necessary to know which is natural to us, not to leave it, and to perfect it as much as possible”). The external self he generates through the performance of analysis becomes his real self through the assiduous maintenance of an ideal social persona. Others’ habitual reaction to external self-presentation confirms and actualizes this substitute being.

---

219 Rochefoucauld (1967), 188. Another example is in reflection 11, in which la Rochefoucauld defines falseness as attempting to adopt a persona that clashes with one’s natural character.
Ideally, the social performance of analysis results in the actor’s becoming so habituated to his artificial persona that it transforms into second nature. Recall that Furetière defined *habitude* as an “accoutumance qui donne facilité à faire des actions qu’on a plusieurs fois reitérées” (acclimatization that brings ease to actions that one has reiterated many times). A voluntary action transformed into a habit when it became involuntary, internalized, and easy to carry out. Just as Nicole and Pascal advocate constant vigilance and pious exercises to engineer the conversion to Christianity, so too does Méré advocate constant vigilance of social rules and graces to engineer the creation of a true *honnête homme*. As he claims in his *Suite de la vraie Honnêteté*:

…[Q]uand on trouve [l’honnêteté], et qu’on ne la perd point de vuë, on ne manque jamais de l’acquerir. Aïons-la toûjours devant les yeux, et si nos passions nous veulent détourner de ce qu’elle nous ordonne, rebuttons-les sevèremen…preferons à toutes nos volonte ce qui sied le mieux. Nous y sentirons d’abord quelque contrainte, mais elle ne sera pas longue…

(…When one finds [honnêteté], and one doesn’t let it leave one’s sight, one never fails to achieve it. Let’s keep it always in front of our eyes, and if our passions try to turn us away from what it orders, let us severely drive them away…let us prefer to all our desires that which is most appropriate. First we will feel some constraint, but it won’t last long…)220

Influenced by the period’s obsession with the performance of analysis, Méré interprets Castiglione’s famous notion of *sprezzatura*, the nonchalance that conceals any effort and artifice as if it were effortless, as the result of a process of habituation. As Bernard

---

220 Méré (1930), III 88-89.
Tocanne articulates it, “l’art vrai (…) est assimilé, intériorisé comme une seconde nature (…. ) Le signe du génie, c’est de pouvoir convertir la démarche apprise en démarche naturelle facile, sous la forme de la verve, de la virtuosité” (true art (…) is assimilated, interiorized like a second nature (…. ) The sign of genius is the power to convert a learned approach into a natural, simple approach, in the form of verve, of virtuosity). 221 Méré’s argument, we note, is not that aristocrats spontaneously possess a certain je ne sais quoi that is unavailable to the newly inducted bourgeois. If there is a merit or genius associated with the elite, it is their capacity to use discipline to naturalize artificial convention. Frequentation of society, therefore, develops the habits that secure the ontological security of the new persona. For Méré and la Rochefoucauld, ease is the hallmark of truth.

The maxim as a token of membership and authority

Mastery of Latin and Greek, persuasive power in debates, and composition of an integral treatise were required to make the cut as a savant; fencing and savvy field strategy were requirements to make it as a soldier. As their memoirs make evident, both the Cardinal de Retz and La Rochefoucauld spent their youth fighting in the civil war of La Fronde. At this stage, therefore, they sought excellence through traditional channels of military valor. But in the wake of the civil war, the locus of recognition changed. Seeking to gain entry into Mme de Rambouillet’s famous chamber bleue or Mme de Sablé’s salon, the honnête homme was judged not by his technical skills, but by his capacity to hold witty conversation. Speaking like other people in the clique, therefore,

221 Tocanne (1978), 297.
was a rite of passage for membership. Writing about Ben Jonson, Stanley Fish has described how certain language can function as a code to signal inclusion within a group:

Poetry that so withholds itself and closes its face to anything outside its circle puts pressure on those who read it to demonstrate, in the very act of reading, that they are already in. Rather than acting as an exhortation to virtuous activity (...) these poems provide their intended readers, who are also their addressees, with an occasion for recognizing that whatever informs these poems—and it is never, can never, be specified—informs them too. At the same time that they restrict access to the community, the poems also—and by the same act—generate the community; generate it not by creating its members (who are already what they are), but by providing a relay or network by means of which they can make contact and identify with one another.222

In this next section, I propose that La Rochefoucauld’s *Maximes* provide the idiom for the members of a salon to establish their social persona through the token speech that signals their inclusion with the group.

In keeping with the fact that the ideology of *honnêteté* favored the general and scorned the overt manifestation of individuality, the primary faux pas of salon conversation is to speak too much about oneself. La Rochefoucauld marks his disdain for self-centeredness throughout the *Maximes* and *Réflexions*:

138: On aime mieux dire du mal de soi-même que de n’en point parler.

(We rather say negative things about ourselves than not talk about ourselves.)

222 Fish (1984), 40.
L’extrême plaisir que nous prenons à parler de nous-mêmes nous doit faire craindre de n’en donner guère à ceux qui nous écoutent.

(The extreme pleasure that we take in speaking about ourselves should make us fear that we are not giving any to those listening to us.)

Réflexion IV: Il faut éviter de parler longtemps de soi-même, et de se donner souvent pour exemple.

(One must avoid speaking a long time about oneself, and to often give oneself as an example.)

Although La Rochefoucauld and Méré’s writings provide ample evidence of the sociological importance of conversation in the period, they never include recorded transcripts of what was actually uttered in salons. I recognize this lack, and request that the reader approach this second section as an imaginative reconstruction of what polite conversations may have looked like. To overcome this methodological hurdle, a more rigorous historical reconstruction might include analysis of gallant literature presented as a conversation, which was a popular genre in the period (e.g. P. Bouhours’s *Les entretiens d’Auguste et d’Eugène* (1671) or Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686)), analysis of conversations embedded in other literature, or reports on conversations cited in correspondence in the period (e.g. Mme de Sévigné).

Conversational linguistic theory like that of Paul Grice might also prove useful for interpreting the pragmatic significance of early modern conversation.

For now, I propose that the combination of the culture’s disdain for first-person anecdotes and its ideology favoring universalism and generality made pithy maxims a...
perfect idiom for salon conversations. Maxims are classified as gnostic statements, along with adages, apothegms, proverbs, and sayings. A brief, law-like phrase intended for citation, the term “gnomic” dates back to Aristotle’s definition of a gnômé in the *Rhetoric*. According to this philosopher, a gnômé is a statement “not relating to particulars, as e.g. the character of Iphicrates, but to universals; yet not to all universals indiscriminately, as e.g. that straight is the opposite of crooked, but to all such as are the objects of (human) action.” Not all gnostic statements, however, were refined enough for salon conversation. Charlotte Schapira describes how “parler proverbe” (to speak in proverbs) was a pejorative expression in seventeenth-century culture, denoting the “trivial and common” manner of speaking of “all sorts of people.” Indeed, the collected “wisdom of the people” was often associated with servants in neoclassical comedies:

Petit Jean (Racine, *Les Plaideurs*)

Tel qui rit vendredi, dimanche pleurera (I.1)

(He who laughs on Friday, will cry on Sunday.)

Sabine (Molière, *Le Menteur*)

Elle tient, comme on dit, le loup par les oreilles. (IV, 7)

(She’s got, as they say, the wolf by the ears.)

Certainly general insofar as they can pick out different referents in different situations, proverbs are marked by their brevity but also their positive straightforwardness. Note the simple structure of Petit Jean’s quotation above: *Tel qui rit vendredi, dimanche pleurera.* The subject of the first clause, the general “tel” remains the same in the second; the

---

chiasmus adds an elegance (rit vendredi, dimanche pleurera) that smooths the rhythm of the phrase. Even the content suggests the common dependence upon the changes of fortune, a notion that a moment of happiness fatally couples with sadness. Maxims, on the other hand, are not the inherited wisdom of a collective, but the personalized creation of an individual or smaller group. Also general in character, maxims are marked by the critical energy against commonplace opinion that they condense into a short phrase:

La plupart des femmes ne pleurent pas tant la mort de leurs amants pour les avoir aimés, que pour paraître plus dignes d’être aimées. (La Rochefoucauld, 362)

(The majority of women don’t so much cry about the death of their lovers for having loved them than in order to seem more worthy of being loved.)

Maxims often take one term, like “aimé”, and vary it subtly (from the active “avoir aimés” to the passive “être aimées) to engender a shocking effect. They also tend to qualify their universality (not all women, but “la plupart” (the majority)) in order to catalyze reflection: which women fall into this category and which don’t? Why is that the case? Is it possible to modify this generality? Seemingly alike, therefore, the different kinds of gnomic statements actually differed from both a sociological and a linguistic perspective.  

There’s no dearth of evidence that gnomic statements were a hallmark feature of seventeenth-century discourse. Schapira goes so far as to call them the “moyen stylistique privilégié” (privileged stylistic tool) of the Age Classique, analyzing their ubiquitous appearance in drama (Corneille, Molière, and Racine), fables (La Fontaine), moralist literature (La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère) and aesthetics (Boileau). Aesthetic

225 For a complete linguistic analysis of the different types of gnomic statements in seventeenth-century France, see Schapira (1997).
treatises in the period often treat gnomic statements as the primary vehicles of a work’s moral content, as Corneille makes clear in his *Discours de l’utilité et des parties du poème dramatique* (1660): “La première [maniège de render un poème utile] consiste aux sentences et instructions morales qu’on y peut semer partout” (the first [way to make a poem useful] consists in the sentences and moral instructions that one can disseminate throughout). For such critics, a play’s moral message was not only—or even principally—delivered through the attitude different characters exhibited towards within a situation; rather, the message was fragmented throughout discrete flashes of gnomic insight that had more direct impact than the attenuated whole. The imbalance between capacious attention that absorbs the compositional whole and discrete attention that lingers around the fragment reflects certain contemporaneous practices of reading designed to cull gnomic wisdom from longer texts. “L’habitude intellectuelle du fragment,” writes Bernard Beugnot, “conduit à une lecture volontiers parcellaire qui isole et juge des détails plus qu’elle n’apprécie un ensemble et son organisation interne” (the intellectual habit of the fragment leads to a voluntarily fragmented reading that isolates and judges details more than it appreciates the totality and its internal organization).

Describing the publication history, from 1503 to 1669, of the anthology of the *Polyanthea*, a massive florilegium, or compendium of gnomic statements and apothegms collected from ancient and medieval texts, Beugnot reminds readers that the practice of

---

226 Corneille (1963), 39. Corneille then tempers the importance of maxims by describing how they can be jarring to dramatic verisimilitude and fluidity.

227 It is this lack of systemic integration that Descartes criticizes in Renaissance technologies of memory. His insistence upon the systemic and structural relationships between various parts of discourse foreshadows the aesthetic shift in what counted as verisimilitude, the shift that engineers the transition from the episodic romance to the integrated plot structure of the modern novel.

228 Beugnot (1977), 32.
commonplace gathering still flourished in seventeenth-century France. The critic marks P. Bouhours’s *Entretiens* as the culmination of a tradition that “invented” material to say about a topic or theme by mixing together famous things that others have said about it. Lafayette’s contemporaneous publication of the *Princesse de Clèves* (1678) is a symptomatic of the emerging shift in literary taste away from the general and fragmented and towards the particular and unified, which would explode into the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century.

There are multiple, interconnected epistemological practices that one might draw on to explain the decline of gnomic statements as viable loci of knowledge at the end of the seventeenth century and into the Enlightenment. The shift that best accounts for the conversational value of sharp, critical *sententiae* in salon society is that pertaining to the site of discursive authority.

In *Framing Authority*, Mary Thomas Crane characterizes the sixteenth-century humanist practice of gathering and framing gnomic statements as an effort to “transmit the authority of antiquity without transgressing modern cultural codes, to provide the matter for copious speech while making sure that speech was grounded and controlled.” Crane narrates how the task of many sixteenth-century works of logic was

---

229 Expanded to 23 tomes in 1669, the *Polyanthea* was an enormous endeavor. As Beugnot (1977), 123, points out, the effort to organize and navigate its content gave rise to early manifestations of information management technologies. For a more contemporary take on the relationship between gnomic statement collection and information management technologies, see Ann Blair’s *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (2010).

230 One might consider: the rise, and eventual triumph, of empiricism under the influence of Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton; the shifting relationship to Classical authority as a foundation of knowledge; the Foucauldian shift in *episteme* away from truth generated through resemblance to truth generated through analytic equality; etc…

231 Crane (1993), 7.
not to analyze the syntactical properties of linguistic statements but to comb through past texts to find something to say.\footnote{Ibid, 12.} Students of logic and rhetoric were to keep commonplace books filled with gnomic statements from authoritative texts that maintained relevance within the social context of their age. Faced with any discursive topic, therefore, a Humanist could consult his commonplace collection to find something both appropriate and authoritative to say about any subject. Theorists in the age thought that \textit{copia} augmented the collector and orator’s discursive authority in two ways. First, by using another’s words to communicate his own ideas, he transcended his local particularity to tap into the “signs” of eternal and natural laws: this was not him speaking as himself, but serving as a mouthpiece for a truth already expressed by thinkers with as much cultural significance as Aristotle. Still, and this is the second point, the gatherer augmented his authority by displaying his faculty of judgment, be it by selecting apt commonplaces or manifesting a good sense of \textit{kairos} by “disposing” them to maximize rhetorical effect. The basis of knowledge, therefore, was not careful observation of empirical data but “skillful manipulation” of ancient texts:

Knowledge of the places offers students a way to control both the immensity of nature and the powerful influence of ancient literature. It furnishes a safer way than imitation of whole texts to transfer that power to the modern writer, because it teaches him how to recognize the traces of authenticity in the ancient text and appropriate them for himself.\footnote{Ibid, 25.}
Gnomic statements are tokens of Humanist authority because they index a reader’s keen judgment in sifting through vast amounts of text to retain only the universal, trans-cultural, and trans-historical âme (soul).

Descartes, Galileo, and the other heroes of the scientific revolution are known for having relocated the site of authority, as Roland Greene describes it, away from the pair original writer/present reader and to the pair present observer/present writer. Crane articulates that commonplace collection and disposition is intended to circumscribe discursive authority within contemporary cultural codes. Ideologically conservative, commonplaces align with the reigning doxa to keep society stable. In contrast, La Rochefoucauld’s maxims almost categorically critique and overturn established doxa to reveal it as a mere illusion. The first maxim in the 1678 edition provides a clear example:

Ce que nous prenons pour des vertus n’est souvent qu’un assemblage de diverses actions et de divers intérêts, que la fortune ou notre industrie savent arranger; et ce ne’st pas toujours par valeur et par chasteté que les hommes sont vaillants, et que les femmes sont chastes.

(That which we take to be virtues is often nothing but an amalgam of diverse actions and diverse interests, that fortune or our cunning know how to arrange; and it’s not always out of valor or chastity that men are brave and woman are chaste.)

Although they appear formally similar to proverbs and other gnomic statements, maxims do different semantic work. La Rochefoucauld and his contemporaries, moreover, were acutely aware of the difference. Whereas it appears extremely doubtful that a

---

compendium like the *Polyanthea* would shock polite ladies of high society, the correspondence surrounding the *Maximes* testifies to the scandal la Rochefoucauld’s work provoked. Writing to Mme Sablé, for example, Mme de Schonberg expressed her concern that La Rochefoucauld’s claims about the tyrannical claim the passions held over the mind and the will would, pushed to the extreme, engender moral laxity and anarchy. Alain Brunn, moreover, gives a reading of the history of the prefaces to the five editions of the *Maximes* that allegorizes the transition from the Humanist to the modern site of authority. Indeed, the 1665 edition begins with a long *Discours* La Rochefoucauld commissioned from the Port-Royal savant Henri de La Chapelle-Basse. The preface, as Brunn notes, includes long citations from “great authorities” like Tacitus, Tasso, the Church Fathers, Montaigne, and Horace. Subsequent editions eliminate this preface, replacing it with a maxim selected from the text itself, not from another. Brunn notes that this is the first time in the history of French literature that a French author placed an auto-referential citation at the beginning of a work. The gesture is one of mockery, tricking the reader into mistake the tome for a classical compendium.

Still, if commonplaces establish social unity through reassurance and familiarity, how can maxims, which uproot and expose the traditional foundations of morality, foster group cohesion and unity? My answer is that they perform a pretense of upheaval and criticism without actually executing it. Disdaining *savants* as pedantic windbags, the *mondains* also rejected historical affiliation as a site of authority. Recall that the social

---

235 Craveri (2005), 133-135, narrates how Mme de Sablé and La Rochefoucauld anticipated a polemical response and took elaborate care to structure the text’s reception.  
237 Brunn (2009), 70.  
238 Ibid, 70.
ethic of honnêteté is founded acts of judgment, a reciprocal relationship between the “sujet qui juge” (subject who judges) and the “objet jugé” (object judged). Starobinski writes:

La structure fondamentale….selon le code classique, lie une personne à une autre à travers un acte de jugement…Le bon juge est celui qui “voit le prix de tout”, qui “estime”, qui “approve les bonnes choses”; l’honnête homme, s’il se montre, saura “mériter l’estime”, “être loué.”

(The fundamental structure, according to the classical code, links one person to another through an act of judgment…The good judge is he who “sees the worth of everything”, who “estimes”, who “approves of good things”; the honnête homme, if he reveals himself, will know how to “merit estime”, “be praised.”)

In this context, then, the authority required to maintain group cohesion and exclusivity is some sign of one’s sharp faculty of judgment to separate the wheat from the chaff. As performative utterances, La Rochefoucauld’s maxims show precisely that one has this required faculty of judgment, that one is demystified enough to recognize the limitations of conventional ethics and reveal people for who they truly are. Inserting a pithy maxim as a rejoinder in polite conversation is therefore a means to provide listeners comfort that they are in the company of true honnêtes hommes capable of carrying out the acts of judgment that secure group exclusivity. If maxims do threaten the group’s cohesion, it is because they draw attention to the as-if pretense that governs the social game. Perhaps sensitive to this seriousness, Méré dismisses sentences as having an “alleure grave et serieuse” (grave and serious allure) that clashes with the desired tone of lightness and

239 Starobinski (1989), 64.
agreeability. Critical maxims nonetheless preside as the locus of authority because they tap into the structures and lacunae of power that support salon society.

Repetition as a Social Skill: Habituation and Style in La Rochefoucauld’s Maximes

As a type of gnomic statement, one of the maxim’s primary characteristics is its brevity. Such compression enables the maxim’s circulation as a pragmatic token signaling inclusion within the clique. Because the maxims—unlike proverbs or commonplaces—demystify conventional moral codes, they also preserve the group’s exclusivity. Only conversationalists with a keen faculty of wit and judgment will, according to the theory, have the wherewithal to place maxims skillfully. But what about the newcomer who seeks acceptance into the clique? In a circular fashion, the same faculty of bon sens that qualifies a salonnière as a gatekeeper is the characteristic the gatekeeper looks out for in new participants. That means, to gain acceptance, the newcomer has to train him- or herself to think, act, and speak like those already inside the clique. One solution, proposed by Méré, is to frequent salons as much as possible, taking good care to imitate the gestures and diction of the most successful participants (which is already a test of good judgment insofar as the newcomer can recognize who holds the real power in the salon). Another solution, I would like to suggest, is to perform cognitive exercises to habituate one’s thought patterns to think like someone with keen judgment thinks, and to be able to articulate these thoughts like the high rollers in society. As a corollary, I claim that the Maximes fulfill a second social function as a handbook whose pedagogical value resides not in its content, but in its form. The kernel syntactical

Méré (1930), II 120. Although critical of the use of maxims in conversation, Méré does grant a gesture of recognition to La Rochefoucauld’s text.
structure of repeated time and again throughout the *Maximes* is of the form *what we mistake to be x is nothing but y*. This pattern does not structure every maxim, but appears with enough frequency throughout the text that it is statistically relevant. By encountering this single syntactical structure over and over again while browsing the maxims, the reader becomes so habituated to phrasing ideas in this form that he internalizes the structure. He therefore develops his faculty of judgment by habituating himself to pattern the world within this structure of negation. The final pedagogical step is for him then to imitate this syntactical structure in conversation, not necessarily by repeating the maxim’s content verbatim, but rather by creatively inserting variety and diversity that hold interlocutors’ attention and keep them entertained. The repetitive style of La Rochefoucauld’s *Maximes* is therefore the formal representation of Méré’s claim that the nonchalance of the *honnête homme* is the result of a sustained practice of discipline and self-perfection.

A reader as early as La Bruyère observed that the *Maximes* express one “unique pensée…multipliée en milles manières différentes [mais] toujours, par le choix des mots et par la variété de l’expression, [avec] la grâce de la nouveauté” (unique thought…multiplied in a thousand different manners, but always, by the word choice and the variety of expression, with the grace of novelty).²⁴¹ I agree with La Bruyère that the *Maximes* is as much a treatise about demystification as it is about the pleasure in infinite variation. In my reading, that which is reapeated is the curious epigraph, “Nos vertus ne sont, le plus souvent, que des vices déguisés” (Our virtues, most often, are nothing but vices in disguise) Curious, as mentioned above, not because of what it says but because

of what it does. Indeed, the epigraph is at once a particular maxim, originally listed with others and identical to them in kind, and a formulaic pattern, different in kind from the individual maxims because it is their blueprint for generation. The Table de Concordance that Truchet appends to his 1967 edition of the Maximes shows the history of the epigraph through the five seventeenth-century editions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Edition</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>V</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maxim #</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>172, epigraph</td>
<td>epigraph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One might interpret La Rochefoucauld’s decision to make this maxim an epigraph as a move to indicate his work’s thematic focus on demystifying conventional beliefs. Restricting the interpretation to theme, however, does not account for his stylistic move to repeat this syntactical form of the epigraph throughout the text. If it were only an indication of theme, what followed the epigraph could have been a standard, discursive treatise. By replacing La Basse-Chapelle’s discursive preface with a single maxim, La Rochefoucauld claims his new authority, an authority manifested in judgment, esprit. In linguistic terms, the act of demystifying judgment appears as a restrictive copula

* Nos vertus ne sont, le plus souvent, que des vices déguisés

*Subject Nominative is (often) nothing but Predicate Nominative*

in which the predicate nominative is most often the logical inverse of the subject nominative (virtues ≠ vices). The sense of demystification arises from the subject nominative and the predicate nominative being logical inverses: La Rochefoucauld does not say we need to qualify our understanding of virtues slightly, he says we’ve mistaken a
virtue for its opposite. The maxim’s elegant form is therefore equally as important as its
demystifying content in defining the new locus of authority.

This basic structure then repeats itself throughout the 504 maxims, demonstrating
the infinite creative potential of one formal structure. Some maxims evidently share the
restrictive copula structure, while others are more complex variations. Maxims of the
form, *X virtue is nothing but Y vice* are simply concrete applications of the general
epigraph:

La constance des sages n’est que l’art de renfermer leur agitation dans le coeur.
(20)
(The steadfastness of the wise is nothing but the art of containing their agitation in
their heart.)

La sincérité est une ouverture de coeur. On la trouve en fort peu de gens; et celle
que l’on voit d’ordinaire n’est qu’une fine dissimulation pour attirer la confiance
des autres. (62)
(Sincerity is an openness of heart. One finds it in very few people; and that which
one ordinarily sees is nothing but a fine dissimulation to gain others’ trust.)

Here are some variations.

*Variation 1: X is Y*

La modération est une crainte de tomber dans l’envie et dans le mépris que
méritent ceux qui s’enivrent de leur bonheur (…. ) (18)
(Moderation is a fear of falling into the jealousy and contempt merited by those
who become overjoyed by their happiness (…. ))
Le refus de louanges est un désir d’être loué deux fois. (149)

(The refusal of praises is a desire to be praised twice.)

At first glance, the $X$ is $Y$ variation of the epigraph looks like a straightforward definition. Schapira argues convincingly, however, that they are only “pseudo-definitions” because the relation between subject nominative and predicate nominative in maxims does not exhibit the categorical reciprocity required in a proper definition. The example she gives is the definition of a chair ($chaise$). *Le Petit Robert* defines a *chaise* as “un siege à dossier sans bras.” Similarly, a seat (*siège*) “will itself be defined by a hyperonym: furniture (*meuble)*.” Crucial is the reciprocity of the relationship between the subject and predicate: because the predicate nominative spans a larger semantic range than the subject nominative (the set of seats contains chairs, sofas, thrones, stools, etc… and the set of furniture contains chairs, desks, tables, beds, etc…), the subject will always be “contained” within the predicate. In La Rochefoucauld’s maxims this containment relationship does not hold. For example, were maxim 18 to be a definition, *modération*, or at least one of its metonymies, would be contained within the set of concepts and metonymies associated with *crainte*. Richelet’s 1680 dictionary defines the two terms as follows:

---

242 Other examples of this form are maxims 175, “La constance en amour est une inconstance perpétuelle, qui fait que notre coeur s’attache successivement à toutes les qualités de la personne que nous aimons, donnant tantôt preference à l’une, tantôt à l’autre; de sorte que cette constance n’est qu’une inconstance arrêtée et renfermée dans un même sujet,” and 205, “L’honnêteté des femmes est souvent l’amour de leur reputation et de leur repos.”

crainte: Une certaine affliction ou trouble d'esprit lorsque nous venons à nous imaginer qu'il nous doit arriver du mal qui regarde notre perte, ou menace notre vie, ou du moins qui nous doit fort affliger.

(A certain affliction or trouble of spirit when we come to imagine that some mishap will occur that will kill us, menace our life, or at least make us suffer.)

modération: Sorte de vertu qui sert à nous régler et à prescrire à nos actions de certaines bornes au deça et au delà desquelles la raison ne veut pas qu'elles aillent.

(A type of virtue that serves to regulate us and prescribe certain limitations upon our actions, above and below which reason does not want them to go).

Words like affliction, trouble d'esprit and imaginer contrast with words like vertu, bornes, and raison, marking metonymic opposition, not overlap. That is, X is not merely Y: the trappings of a definition are as deceptive as any of la Rochefoucauld’s habiles hommes. The reader is therefore trained to see how what seems to be a definition is actually more closely related to the original, restrictive copula.

Variation 2: That which men (we) mistake to be X is nothing but Y

Shapira describes such maxims as advertisements of paradox. In his article on the Maximes, Jonathan Culler’s understanding of paradox as “an apparent contradiction dissipated by the process of understanding” determines his interpretive approach.

According to his analysis, any of the restrictive copulative maxims built around a single

---

244 Maxim 1 on page 19-20 of this chapter is an example. Other examples include maxim 83, “Ce que les hommes ont nommé amitié n’est qu’une société, qu’un ménagement réciproque d’intérêts, et qu’un échange de bons offices; ce n’est enfin qu’un commerce où l’amour-propre se propose toujours quelque chose à gagner,” and 246, “Ce qui paraît générosité n’est souvent qu’une ambition déguisée qui méprise de petits intérêts, pour aller à de plus grands.”

245 Culler (1973), 28.
contradiction $X = -X$ (virtues = vices; constancy = agitation; sincerity = dissimulation etc…) count as paradoxes because la Rochefoucauld is careful to include predicate and adverbial qualifiers that, when understood, dissipate the internal contradiction. In the epigraph, for example, la Rochefoucauld changes the illogical

\[ \text{Virtues are vices} \] (for a strict nothing but would entail the equation of sets)

into

\[ \text{virtues are the most often} \] (adverbial qualifier) \text{vices in disguise} (adjectival qualifier).

Instead of deriding the maxim as illogical, we are forced to consider what it would mean for vices to be disguised as virtue and what cases of exception motivate the qualifier \textit{le plus souvent}. Shapira, on the other hand, restricts the set of genuinely paradoxical maxims to those that explicitly articulate a \textit{doxa} (“generally admitted opinion”) only to negate it, implicitly accusing the reader—or anyone who holds the doxa—of having “too easily accepted a received idea.”

\[ \text{246 Two things stand out in such maxims. First, the implicit articulation of the author’s individual voice and capacity for critique: “others might think that something x is virtue, but I know that it is nothing but y, a vice”. Second, and this in line with Culler’s analysis, the recognition that the restrictive copula does not so much serve to equate two contradictory sets as it does to establish a means for relating the ontologically distinct domains of \textit{appearance} and \textit{essence}, what things appear to be and what they really are.} \]

\[ \text{Variation 3 (distinguo): X is to a certain extent true, but needs to be restricted through concision} \]

\[ \text{246 Shapira (1997), 153.} \]
Un honnête homme peut être amoureux comme un fou, mais non pas comme un sot. (335)

(An *honnête homme* can be in love like a madmen, but not like a fool.)

Il y a de bons mariages, mais il n’y en a point de délicieux. (113)

(There are good mariages, but there are not delicious ones.)

The *distinguo* is a type of scholastic argumentation used to indicate concession of part of an argument (*concedo*) and negation of another (*nego*). We can rewrite the examples of the maxims with two types of openings:

*I concede that* un honnête homme peut être amoureux comme un fou

*I negate that* un honnête homme puisse être amoureux comme un sot.

*I concede that* il y a de bons mariages.

*I negate that* il y ait des mariages délicieux.

Schapira thinks these maxims are indeed another variation on the restrictive copula because they also create a conflict between the first element (the generally admitted opinion) and the second element (the qualification made by the speaker who has a keener sense of judgment). The second variation in my list looks the most like a *distinguo* maxim. Both forms entail a virtual interlocutor who represents the set espousing common opinion (*doxa*) about a particular topic. We can easily replace the phrase *I concede that* with *That which you consider to be*, the set up a similar conceptual gesture in the first part of the maxim. In both cases, the second half of the maxim functions to critically contort the initial supposition, albeit with different logical tools.

---

The repetition of syntactical structures that overturn common opinion, therefore, provides the reader both a cognitive exercise to train his judgment and a set of tokens into the discursive network within which salon participants recognize one another. The irony of the maxims is that their content cannot be taken seriously, for such seriousness would destroy the delicate pretense sustaining the social game. That is to say, everybody already knows the truths that the maxims express. They know them because they underwent the process of donning their social mask in order to make it into the clique. They’ve accepted that in reality, they are all circulating amidst a collection of masks, but that the principle rule of the game is never to probe deeper than the surface. Note, however, that the kernel form for all the maxims contains an adverbial qualifier: *le plus souvent* (the most often). Unlike most gnomic statements, which express categorical and law-like universals, La Rochefoucauld’s maxims often include qualifiers like *souvent, la plupart* or *d’ordinaire* that restrict their generality:

La passion fait *souvent* un fou du plus habile homme, et rend *souvent* les plus sots habiles. (6)

(Passion often drives the most clever man crazy, and makes the most idiotic clever.)

On ne loue *d’ordinaire* que pour être loué. (146)

(One does not ordinarily give praise except to be praised.)

These restrictions again activate the reader’s judgment: while many people haunting salon society only practice a *fausse honnêteté*, there are a select few who have achieved *vraie honnêteté*. The qualifiers therefore index the nucleus of the group’s power. Those who have truly mastered the game inhabit a sanctuary beyond criticism and wit, whose
whereabouts are protected in the subtle suggestion of an adverb. Although critical of the masses, the *Maximes* suggest and protect a silent space of genuine moral perfection. At least, they suggest this could be the case, so as to sustain the delicate illusion keeping the group intact.

Like Descartes’s *ego sum, ego existo*, the epigraph to the *Maximes* is a meditative *sententia* that needs to be repeated by the reader over and over again to imprint a new cognitive habit, to transform his or her *disposition intérieure*. Unlike Descartes’s *cogito*, the maxims exhibit infinite stylistic variation upon one single form because diversity of expression is required for felicitous delivery in a social setting: “la diversité plaist toujours (…) pourveu que tout ce qui la compose, soit bien d’accord et bien proportionné” (diversity always pleases (…) as long as everything that composes it fits together well and is well proportioned).²⁴⁹ Scholars often argue that the *Maximes* challenge the Cartesian *esprit géométrique* because they lack systematic order and undercut our rational capacity to secure a stable self. In contrast, approaching both texts from the vantage point of the performance of analysis reveals surprising similarities: *Meditationes* and the *Maximes* both exhibit stylistic eccentricities that can be best explained as iterative exercises intended for the reader’s self-transformation. A firm belief in the power of habit is the philosophical foundation underlying both texts. As Méré confirms, “Il importe extrêmement pour bien parler, de se rendre le goût bon, et de s’en acquérir une parfaite habitude” (in order to speak well, it is extremely important to develop good taste and to acquire a perfect habit).²⁵⁰

I’ve argued that the *Maximes* are a pedagogical book of cognitive exercises for a student wishing to assimilate the conversational habits of a gentleman or lady. In the first section of this chapter, I also showed how, according to the philosophy of *honnêteté*, one transforms into the external persona one carefully hones by means of the performance of analysis. Now, in 1659, La Rochefoucauld published his self-portrait in a collection entitled the *Receuil des Portraits et Eloges en vers et en prose dédié à Son Altesse Royale Mademoiselle*. Advertising an agreeable, though not scandalous, self-awareness, the first-person text begins with a description of physical appearance and ends with one of moral hopes; overall, it is a calculated portrait of the *honnête homme*. From 1665 on, the duke focused all his creative energy on obsessively expanding and editing the *Maximes*. The duke made it a daily practice to compose a new maxim, to refine his style, and to share his creation to his friends and mentors. He never published the *Maximes* under his own name because “for a gentleman to officially recognize authorship of a book meant lowering himself socially.”251 After all, “le vrai honnête homme est celui qui ne se pique de rien” (the true *honnête homme* is he who doesn’t show anything off). (203) Even if they give off a pretense of mysterious generality, the maxims are La Rochefoucauld’s performative self-portrait as an *honnête homme*, the carefully crafted social persona that he presented to the world in lieu of exposing a first-person self. What began as a token of his having made it into society became a well-developed avatar or persona. And it was the habit of composing maxims that transformed La Rochefoucauld from a gentleman into an author.

Sir Isaac Newton had a complicated relationship with Descartes. In his youth, he was greatly inspired by Van Schooten’s Latin translation of Descartes’s *Géométrie* (1659). Heeding Descartes’s closing suggestion that his reader should apply the analytic method to solve other problems, Van Schooten appended an enormous selection of solutions to his edition. Newton knew the text by heart and greatly expanded upon its potential in 1666, the *annus mirabilis*, when he developed the theory of fluxions that would eventually be formalized as the calculus. After spending more time with the historian and mathematician Isaac Barrow, however, Newton altered his path. The first occupier of the Lucasian chair at Cambridge, Barrow was a conservative mathematician who deplored the formalism of colleague John Wallis, Newton’s progressive tutor in his early years. Unlike Descartes and Wallis, who worked to develop modern alternatives to ancient mathematical techniques, Barrow wanted to retain the standards for rigor and precision defined in Greek mathematics. Sharing Barrow’s reverence for Greek mathematicians, Newton renounced some of his earlier mathematical achievements and sought to establish a theoretical foundation for his calculus in line with classical standards like Eudoxan proportion theory. This posture of veneration towards the ancient geometers modified his hermeneutical approach to texts like the *Collectio*, where Pappus describes the method of analysis. Adhering to Greek tradition, Barrow and Newton thought that synthesis alone had the formal rigor to present complete arguments.

---

252 Book I, section 1 of the *Principia* attempts to give this rigorous foundation. However, as Huygens, Whiteside, Guicciardini and I have all pointed out, many of Newton’s proofs in Book I employ methods he developed in his earlier years that are far too sophisticated to meet the lip-service to conservative foundations.
What, then, happened to analysis? The combination of Newton’s hermeneutical conservatism and his espousal of the tenets of empiricism held by the Royal Society resulted in a different interpretation of analysis than the one I’ve examined throughout this work. As he explains at the end of his *Opticks* (1704), Newton stretched the domain of analysis, applying it not only to mathematical constructs, but also to structure investigations of empirical fact:

As in Mathematicks, so in Natural Philosophy, the Investigation of difficult Things by the Method of Analysis, ought ever to precede the Method of Composition [Synthesis]. This Analysis in making Experiments and Observations, and in drawing general Conclusions from them by Induction, and admitting of no Objections against the Conclusions, but such as are taken from Experiments, or other certain Truths. For Hypotheses are not to be regarded in experimental Philosophy (…. ) By this way of Analysis we may proceed from Compounds to Ingredients, and from Motions to the Forces producing them; and in general, from Effects to their Causes, and from particular Causes to more general ones, till the Argument end in the most general. This is the Method of Analysis: and the Synthesis consists in assuming the Causes discover’d, and establish’d as Principles, and by them explaining the Phaenomena proceeding from them, and proving the Explanations.253

Newton’s application of the method of analysis to natural philosophy—what we call physics—was entangled with his methodological principle never to “feign hypotheses:” instead of using the imagination to concoct theoretical explanations of phenomena, he

---

constructed theories using conclusions derived from the method of analysis, or the resolution of compound data into simpler parts. The test of the veracity of the theories lay in their predictive power. If one had performed analysis accurately and completely, then one should be able to use the theory to predict future events from a past data. This complex apparatus guiding modern science, however, depends upon a fundamental assumption, which Newton articulates as the second rule in Book III of the *Principia*: “Therefore, the causes assigned to natural effects of the same kind must be, so far as possible, the same.”

If we observe the same effects, we can assume they result from the same causes. This assumption gives prediction its epistemological value. Indeed, the scientific method only records effects; one tests the theory of an unobservable cause by being able to predict which effects it will bring forth.

The problem, of course, is that there is no way to justify Newton’s rule that like effects result from like causes. Like an axiom, it simply needs to be granted to make the rest of the argument function. Unlike an axiom, however, it is not self-evident. It’s impossible to deny the Euclidean axiom that “the whole is greater than the part,” but it’s completely reasonable to conclude that the phenomenon “heat” is caused by either fire or friction, two evidently different causes (at least before analysis becomes so granular that heat is accounted for as the movement of electrons). David Hume recognized this difficulty, and devoted the first sections of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) to discerning the psychological mechanism that grants experience epistemological value. Just as Newton simply had to assume the value of experience as a rule, Hume claimed that “there is no chain of reasoning” behind the inference that future

---

events will occur in the same manner as past events, for example, that because the sun has always risen, that it will rise again tomorrow morning. To prove his point, he makes a contrast between “relations of ideas”—geometry and arithmetic—and “matters of fact.” To make statements about the properties of triangles, one only needs to examine one single triangle: demonstrative conclusions are “as perfect at first, and upon one instance, as after ever so long a course of experience.” The examination of 4000 different triangles will not give any further insight into the Pythagorean theorem than the examination of one. Matters of fact, says Hume, after different. If a “person, through endowed with the strongest faculties of reason and reflection, [be] brought on a sudden into this world,” there is no way that, by seeing one inert billiard ball, he or she could induce that a billiard ball would transfer its momentum to another billiard ball upon contact. It is only by observing this action many times that he would come to anticipate the outcome of the transfer of force. And the “principle which determines him to form such a conclusion,” claims Hume, “is Custom or Habit: For wherever the repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation, without being impelled by any reasoning or process of the understanding, we always say, that this propensity is the effect of Custom.”

Hume’s description of habit, or “customary conjunction,” as the genesis of “belief” in a state of affairs illustrates how empiricism shifted the discourse about habit in the eighteenth century. As I’ve examined throughout this dissertation, seventeenth-century French thinkers conceptualized habit as an instrument for actualizing

---

255 Hume (1975), 34.
256 Ibid, 36.
257 Ibid, 42-43. Original emphasis.
epistemological, religious, or social conversion. The performance of analysis is a “rational-choice scenario,” where “the rational agent pre-commits belief and conduct based on a logical and rational means-end calculus (for instance Pascal’s famous wager), after which point habits serve to maintain and carry out the originary decision to believe or act.”  

Descartes, for example, makes a deliberate choice to train his mind to associate ideas according to the framework of his method; it is only after making this decision that he mobilizes exercises and repetition to instill cognitive habits that match the method. Hume, in contrast, does not describe habit as an instrument to carry out a pre-determined choice but as a passive aspect of observation that determines the manner in which conceive and feel ideas:

The imagination has the command over all its ideas, and can join and mix and vary then, in all the ways possible. It may conceive fictitious objects with all the circumstances of place and time (…. ) But as it is impossible that this faculty of imagination can ever, of itself, reach belief, it is evident that belief consists not in the peculiar nature or order of ideas, but in the manner of their conception, and in their feeling to the mind.

Whereas Descartes upheld the order of ideas as the primary index of truth, Hume thinks that we are unable to distinguish fiction from fact using order alone, and must instead consider the intensity with which we trust an association. Because they imprint patterns, habits instill deeper intensities. Hume therefore describes habit as the involuntary foundation of inference, as opposed to describing habit as a tool to voluntarily instill a style of inference. Assuming that all ideas start with individual sensations, philosophers

---

259 Hume (1975), 49. Original emphasis.
in the eighteenth century have to explain how such sensations are eventually transformed into generalized knowledge. Habit is a central mechanism in their explanation. The cogito gets transmuted into the procession of lilacs and roses that waft, one by one, in front of Condillac’s statue…

Although the concerns of empiricism eclipsed the model of habit embodied in the performance of analysis, the paradigm, albeit presented in different terminology, has recently resurfaced in contemporary neuroscience. Admittedly not an expert in this discipline, I’d nonetheless like to close by adumbrating the comparison. In their recent work *A General Theory of Love*, Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon describe a process of they call “limbic revision: the power to remodel the emotional parts of the people we love, as our [neural patterns] activate certain limbic pathways, and the brain’s inexorable memory mechanism reinforces them.” The idea is that, our cognitive patterns are not set in stone but rather “traced on a sand dune that the winds of time and experience gradually sculpt from one shape to another.” Each experience of sensory input activates a group of neurons to link together to form a network that lasts a split second then disappears. The experience of a similar sensation will activate a slightly different neural network, which nonetheless overlaps considerably with the last one. A mechanism called “Hebbian machinery” reinforces the areas of overlap between these two networks. As similar experiences accumulate over time, they will utilize many of the same neurons and make the links between them grow even stronger; Hebbian machinery

---

261 Ibid, 134.
then stabilizes neural pattern, which can actively impact how we process future sensations by grafting them to the pattern.\textsuperscript{262}

Having understood this, argue Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, we can use it to our benefit. They focus on unhealthy emotional tendencies. Certain childhood experiences graft neural networks that lead us to be attracted to abusive partners or situations. But, they say, it’s in our power to restructure these patterns and to cultivate our minds to desire healthier relationships. The power, of course, consists in making a choice to develop new neural networks using Hebbian machinery: we must spend time in situations that graft new patterns that replace the old ones. This, I propose, is a modern day description of the performance of analysis. The seventeenth-century thinkers may have been incorrect in assuming the distinction between mind and body, but their intuition in the power habit has to genuinely change how we think and feel was spot on. The lesson we can take from this is that we all have the power to modify our thoughts and emotions, to cultivate the ideal version of our self. We simply must accept that the conversion won’t happen in a day, but takes long-term work, habit, and practice.

\textsuperscript{262} Ibid, 134-137.
WORKS CITED

Primary Sources


Nicole, Pierre. *Essais de morale*. The University of Michigan. Orig Publishing Date,


**Secondary Sources**


Braider, Christopher. “*Cet hymen différé*: The Figuration of Authority in Corneille’s *Le


Fitzgerald, Allan D. *Augustine through the ages: an encyclopedia*. Grand Rapis, MI:


Klein, Jacob. Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra. Cambridge: MIT


