

Esotericism in reverse

Descartes and the poetic imagination in the seventeenth century

Western esotericism appears to be a field most precarious in terms of positioning. This article will highlight the divide between ‘critics’ and ‘religionists’ from a pre-Enlightenment position by discussing René Descartes’ role within esotericism. The study attempts to show that a pro-Enlightenment predilection tends to blur its object of research as to the kinds of knowledges that are under scrutiny. The conclusions drawn from the case of Descartes suggests that the perception of what the ‘esoteric’ in modern studies is generally agreed upon being, is reversed.

IN MODERN SCIENTIFIC REASONING the faculty of the imagination has become curiously divided as to its nature and capabilities. While the imagination may be seen to be occupying an uncontested place within forms of artistic creativity, its position in the scientific process, for example in terms of producing scientific results, is notoriously complex and ambivalent. This article takes its point of departure from recent writing on the imagination and religion where it is argued that ‘the imagination should be promoted to the status of a key topic in the study of religion’ (Hanegraaff 2017: 32), while at the same time it is suggested that the understanding of the imagination should be regarded as deceptive and delusional. What makes the imagination deceptive? The simple answer seems to be that the modern scientific mind *demand*s that the imagination be regarded with suspicion. To the extent that the imagination is regarded as a scientific problem that could be resolved by rational and empirical inquiry, the inherent skepticism of the inquiry insists that it will be an open question until it is verified by critical methods. This ‘criticality’, the skepticism and radical doubt of the scientific mind,

is commonly regarded as one of the major legacies of the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650).

There is, however, also a place for Descartes *within* the history of esotericism that is more rarely touched upon. When Descartes is mentioned in the field of Western esotericism he appears predominantly as the pre-Enlightenment philosopher who paved the way for critical reasoning and the scientific frame of mind (see, e.g., Faivre 1994, Hammer 2004). Descartes as the esotericist, what appears to be his very antidote, has a particular significance to the extent that the scientific mindset may be seen to be connected to traditions that are more commonly discussed within esoteric historiography. This I will partly try to disclose by displaying some lesser-known representations or *personas* of Descartes,¹ and partly by discussing the role of the ‘poetic imagination’ in his early thinking. As my aim is to provide a short presentation only, to the extent that it serves the points put forward in this article, I lean mostly on available second-hand sources that illuminate this alternative image of the French philosopher.²

- 1 For the discussions of the philosophical *persona* I have consulted the excellent studies in *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe: The Nature of a Contested Identity*, eds Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger and Ian Hunter (Cambridge University Press 2006)
- 2 The literature on Descartes is naturally vast and complex; my principal sources are Shea 1991, Shapin 2000 and Cottingham 2006. Descartes and Rosicrucianism has often been touched upon in connection with his dreams, which aspect I deliberately leave aside here. Suffice is to say here that dreams were commonly regarded at the time of Descartes from their classical and biblical sources, as a poetico-philosophical device through which God communicated with men. See Shea 1991: 117.

The study of esotericism is built, generally speaking, on two legacies that are often conceptualised as the 'two cultures'; on the one side critical studies, on the other the approach of 'religionists' or 'care-takers'. The latter, represented in various degrees by, for instance, Antoine Faivre and before him the *Eranos* circle (e.g. Mircea Eliade and C. G. Jung), share an understanding of the poetic imagination as a positive tool and premise for knowledge.³ When Faivre addressed one of his six characteristics of esotericism as the imagination, it was this creative, poetic imagination he encapsulated:

It is the imagination that allows the use of ... intermediaries, symbols, and images to develop a gnosis, to penetrate the hieroglyphs of Nature, to put the theory of correspondences into active practice and to uncover, to see, and to know the mediating entities between Nature and the divine world. ... It would be instructive to trace the history of the imagination in the West, i.e., its status. We would thus shed light on its importance for it is in no way, as in Kant, the simple, restrained psychological faculty between perception and concept, or 'the mad woman in the attic,' mistress of error and delusion whose victims are those who flee the world but remain trapped in their own inner universe. (Faivre 1994: 12–13)

My attempt is to prove Faivre's assessment correct as to the culture of learning within which Descartes formulated his philosophical ideas. My position is that of the historian of religion. This article is a continuation of some previous themes in which I have focused on traits (primarily Millenarian and Paracelsian) in the Protestant milieu and the Pietistic movement – so as to highlight ideas of the *adept* (see, e.g., Mansikka 1999, 2007, 2017). In this article I will illustrate that Descartes, on the basis of the natural philosophical and humanistic learning prevailing at the time, held that we can arrive at new and deeper understandings of the world by means of the poetic imagination. Before I proceed to examine Descartes' understanding, I will briefly look at some issues as to the origins of the poetic imagination that were held in common in the seventeenth century.

3 See, e.g., Wasserstrom 1999. A modern author in the tradition is Arthur Versluis (2004).

The poetic imagination and the origins of esotericism

In the early eighteenth century Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) formulated a humanist philosophy, partly against the influence of Cartesianism, where he made a distinction between three types of imagination or *fantasia*. The first is creative, at base *poetic*, the second is *mythical*, the third *rational* and constrained by the facts, the *verum-factum* principle.⁴ This tripartite working of the imagination ultimately construes the arts, religion, and philosophy (or science) in their distinctive and peculiar ways. R. G. Collingwood extracts the essentials as follows:

According to Vico, poetry is the natural mode in which the savage or childish mind expresses itself; the sublimest poetry he maintains, is the poetry of barbarous or heroic ages, the poetry of Homer and Dante; as man develops, reason prevails over imagination and passion, and poetry is displaced by prose. Intermediately between the poetic and purely imaginative way of presenting its experience to itself, and the prosaic or purely rational, Vico placed a third, the mythical or semi-imaginative. This is the stage of development which puts upon the whole of experience a religious interpretation. Thus Vico thinks art, religion, and philosophy are three different ways in which the human mind expresses or formulates to itself its whole experience. They cannot live peaceably side by side; their relation to each other is one of dialectical success in a definitive order. It follows that a religious attitude towards life is destined to be superseded by a rational or philosophical one. (Collingwood 1951: 76)

By taking as our point of departure the faculty of the imagination instead of *ratio*, we may thus speak of not two, but of three 'cultures'. Although there is, in Vico's view, a historical development from a poetical and mythical to a prosaic or rational experience, the modes of the imagination at work do not replace each other but are, as human enterprises, destined to live side by side. What construes them as cultures are

4 The *verum-factum* principle was based on the assumption that we can truly know only what we have ourselves made. What is true (*verum*) and what is made (*factum*) are as concepts interchangeable and convertible (Vico 1988: 45–7).

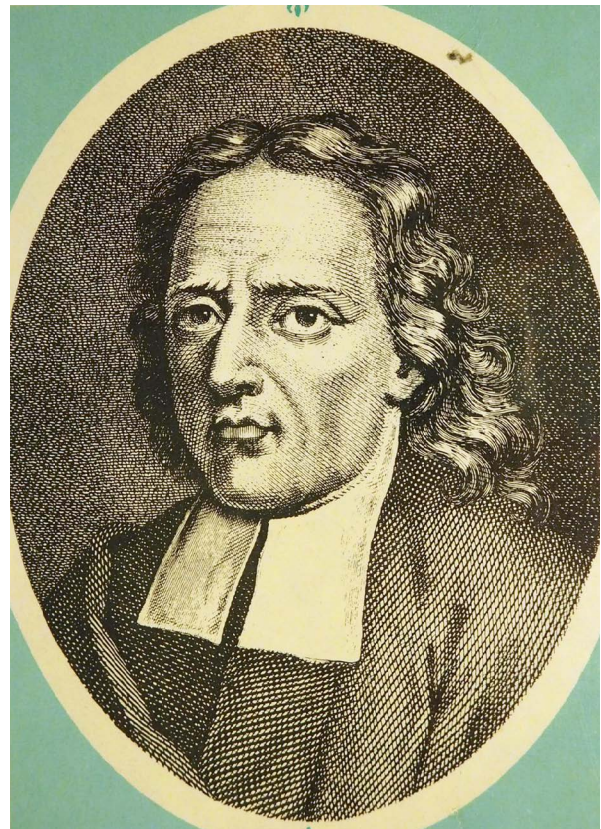
their distinctive modes of expressing 'whole experiences.' Poetic or artistic creativity remains a living part of the culture alongside the rational and critical experience, as does the mythical or religious cognisance. The latter, as a semi-imaginary or semi-poetic form of expression, is basically a disposition towards the social structure of the people who invented them; that is, an adumbration of the order of the heroes and gods of the mythical times (Collingwood 1951: 70).

Vico made the imagination the focal point of his philosophy or 'science of humanity'. The earliest form of communication was poetic; all cultures have in their earliest mythical stages expressed themselves poetically, for example, through performances, paintings, music and dance. Vico's understanding was in line with the humanist and historical heritage of the Classical Age. A precursor to Vico's view may be seen in the transition described by Plutarch (c. 45–120 CE) from late Antiquity.⁵ Serving as a priest in Delphi, Plutarch wrote a famous work on 'Why Pythia does not give oracles in verse', in which he described the cultural transformation that was felt among intellectuals at his time as to interpret and make sense of their religious and cultural heritage (Stroumsa 2005: 11). In early times men had, according to Plutarch,

reduced to poetic and musical form all history and philosophy and, in a word, every experience and action that required a more impressive utterance. This aptitude for poetry, rare nowadays, was then shared by most people, who expressed themselves through lyre and song, using myths and proverbs, and besides composed hymns, prayers, and paeans in honour of the gods in verse and music. (Cited in Stroumsa 2005: 13)

At some point however a transformation occurred which prompted a change in the concept regarding how to express truth, or truthfulness. As the poetic style was embedded in mythical tales and the fabulous, behind polyvalent and metonymic expressions, it not only concealed as much as it revealed, but could also hide fraud:

5 In this section I lean on the important study by Guy Stroumsa 'Myth as enigma: cultural hermeneutics in Late Antiquity', in Stroumsa 2005; all quotes of Plutarch are from Stroumsa.



Giambattista Vico (1668-1744).

As a result, people blamed the poetic language with which the oracles were clothed, not only for obstructing the understanding of these in their true meaning and for combining vagueness and obscurity with the communication, but already they were coming to look with suspicion upon metaphors, riddles and ambiguous statements, feeling that these were secluded nooks of refuge devised for furtive withdrawal and retreat for him that should err in his prophecy. (Cited in Stroumsa 2005: 15)

Whereas poetry, as the character of the oracles, was peculiar to riddles and enigmas, prose on the other hand was conceived of as 'naked speech', that is, the unequivocal character of common language. A growing disenchantment with strange and grandiloquent expressions had brought about a change more broadly also at the religious level: to display intellectual honesty and simplicity implied that religious truth should also be expressed in clear and simple prose. Thus, the ambiguity of classical religious language was that it had the character of a double entendre, indirect statement. Through the medium of

poetry the truth was hidden in intimations: 'the god neither told, nor concealed, but indicated'. However, though the communication was concealed from the less philosophically minded, the wise leaders or philosophers would understand the message perfectly (Stroumsa 2005: 15–16).

The poetical-mythical expression is historically bound up with the enigmatic and esoteric. It could be argued also that we deal here with two fundamental aspects of esotericism. In the first place, it is the poetic expression itself. Secondly, it is the rational mind which, by leaving out all ornaments extracts and reveals the kernel and unadorned truth (*a-lètheia*) behind the tales (*muthoi*). If in the first instance the access to truth is the creative imagination itself, in the second it is the rational interpretation of this truth, as the philosopher's task was that of the interpreter (as *homo interpres*) (Stroumsa 2005: 14, 17). This transformation, Plutarch thought, was for the best, as people think more clearly and more properly now than they used to in former times (*ibid.* 19).

Maximus of Tyre, like Plutarch a Platonist, shared Plutarch's analysis of the change in philosophy, but not his optimism. While for both thinkers the poetic expression referred to traditional and esoteric ways of expressing truth, for Maximus this applied also to the philosophical expression:

Everything is full of enigmas, with the poets as with the philosophers; the modesty with which they cover truth seem to me preferable to the direct language of modern writers. In questions unclear to human weakness, myth is indeed a more honourable interpreter. (Cited in Stroumsa 2005: 19)

Descartes and the poetic imagination

In Descartes' time, the common conception of the origins of the poetic imagination was that they were rooted in the early dawn of humanity, when men's imaginative power was still unchained. While the immediate poetic expression may have been historically lost, we still have access to it through our imagination; to be driven by this creative force was the state of *enthusiasm*. In a passage from Descartes' early writings we read:

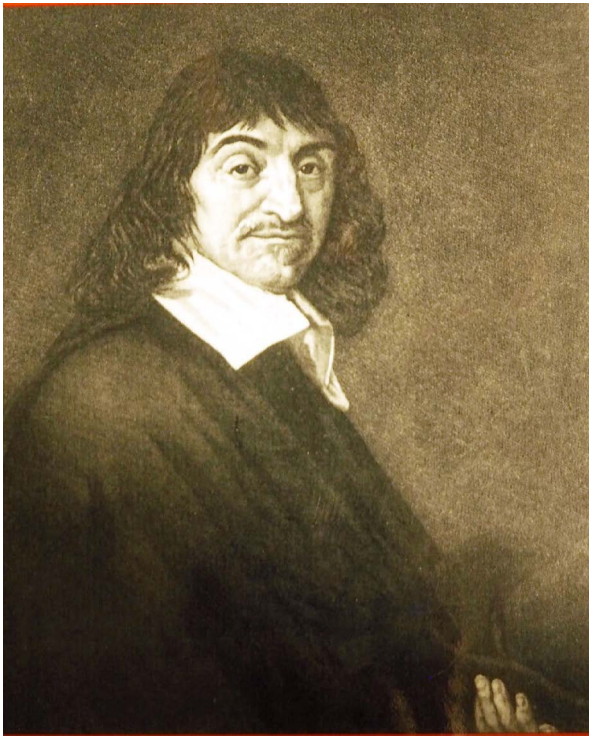
It may seem surprising to find weighty judgements in the writings of poets rather than in

those of philosophers. The reason is that the poets were driven to write by enthusiasm and the force of imagination. We have within us the seeds of science, as in a flint; philosophers extract them through reason, but poets force them out through sharp blows of the imagination, so that they shine more brightly.

(Cited in Shea 1991: 101)

Descartes further confessed that it was by way of this force and in a state of enthusiasm that he had arrived at his universal method. Descartes' admission appears less controversial when we take into account the synoptic or comprehensive nature of the natural philosophy at the time. Like other early modern intellectuals, Descartes displayed a pragmatism as to the different traditions, methods and knowledges. A portion of these traditions were extra-academical, as the one he submerged into in his youth and eventually attempted to reform, namely the mnemotechnical or 'logico-encyclopaedic' tradition, which played an important role in the rise of early modern science and logic (Rossi 2000). Together with the hermetic-Neoplatonic philosophy, the Art of Memory belonged to the non-Aristotelian forms of thoughts, having their institutional home within royal courts rather than in the university faculties (Hunter 2006: 39). Both traditions had in common a broader understanding of philosophy as a restitution of knowledge; systematising the arts and the sciences was for famous mnemotechnics like, for example, Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588–1683) ultimately attached to renewal and optimism, pacification and millenarian hopes: to work towards a unitary knowledge that would ultimately liberate mankind.⁶

6 As a Calvinist philosopher and mnemotechnic Alsted exerted a major influence on Protestant culture in the early seventeenth century. At a basic level, the Art of Memory was a method or system designed to increase the capacity and accuracy of memory. This was generally done by way of an imagined structure, a building or a 'theatre', in which images were arranged in a certain order, carrying the thoughts and concepts that were to be remembered. In this procedure the act of memorising consisted of an imagined walk through the building while placing images or pictures on its walls, whereas the act of remembering was to retrace the steps through the same building, recalling the original ideas with which the images had been invested. See Rossi 2000, Yates 1984.



René Descartes (1596-1650).

The principal textbook Descartes studied as a schoolboy at the Jesuit College at La Flèche imparted to its readers a comprehensive summary of dialectics, morals, physics and metaphysics. As a principal aspect of natural philosophy the work's ultimate goal was, however, human happiness.⁷ The years in the college also included rhetoric and poetry and convinced Descartes at an early age of the force and superiority of poetic inspiration as opposed to mere philosophical reasoning (Shea 1991: 4; Rossi 2000: 113-14) Poetry held an important position in the mnemotechnical tradition, its premise being that the extraordinary impresses on the memory better than the ordinary. Thus, as Aristotle had affirmed, 'the first philosophers composed poetry, because fables, which are composed of marvellous things, leave a greater impression on the memory' (Albert the Great, 1200-80; Rossi 2000: 10-11).

What united men such as Johannes Trithemius, Agrippa, Comenius and Descartes, was that they strove to devise methods for short cuts to knowledge. In his attempt to arrive at a new method Descartes consulted, among other works, Cornelius Agrippa's

7 '[U]niversae philosophiae finis est humana felicitas' (Cottingham 2006: 193).

Commentary on Raymond Lull, a work he highly valued. The willingness of Descartes, writes William Shea, 'to look everywhere for the keys to the world of nature should not be overlooked [but] should prepare us to read the mechanical philosopher in a broader and more resonant context' (Shea 1991: 120).

Descartes as a Rosicrucian

It is within such a context that the following reading of Descartes will take place. Descartes' connection with the mythical-poetical and emblematic worldview of the Rosicrucians is a familiar narrative among scholars of Descartes and has been dealt with in a number of studies (see note 2 above). I will recount this story mainly from the aspect of the poetic imagination in an attempt to reveal a lesser-known philosophical *persona* of Descartes.

Up until the year 1619, when he was twenty-three, Descartes had had high ambitions, but had been at loss as to what his future career would be. As had others of similar social status and education at the outbreak of the Thirty Year War, he had travelled to Holland to enrol in the army. As the Twelve-Year Truce (1609-21) was still in force between the Netherlands and Spain, Descartes was spared from engaging in actual combat and spent the time mostly connecting with other intellectuals and philosophers. In 1618 Descartes had befriended Isaac Beeckman (1588-1637) who became his initial inspirator and co-worker in his scientific and philosophical projects at the time. On advice from Beeckman he started to keep a diary⁸ and on the 10 November 1619, was quartered in a small town in Bavaria in a stove-heated room. Here in seclusion Descartes came to reflect upon a discovery he had made and wrote that he was 'full of enthusiasm', as he had found the foundation of an 'admirable science'. On the following night, he experienced a series of dreams, which he faithfully described and interpreted. It was at this time that the Rosicrucians became significant in his life. He had heard, wrote his seventeenth-century biographer Adrien Baillet,

8 Known as the *Cogitationes privatae* or 'Private Thoughts', the diary was written in Southern Germany in the years 1619-20. The notebook is lost, but has survived in summaries and excerpts noted by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz from 1676 and Descartes' biographer Adrien Baillet in his *La vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes* from 1692.

... of a Brotherhood of scholars established in Germany some time ago under the name of the *Brothers of the Rosy-Cross*. They were greatly prized, and Descartes was told that they knew everything and promised a new Wisdom, the true science that had not yet been discovered. Upon hearing these remarkable things, and knowing the stir that the new Society was making in the whole of Germany, Descartes was shaken. (Cited in Shea 1991: 97, 102)

Descartes was 'shaken' as the news 'reached him at a time when he was in the greatest perplexity concerning the way that he should follow in his quest for truth', Baillet continues (Shea 1991: 97). Descartes eventually blamed himself for not having been contacted by and invited into the fraternity, perhaps by not living up to their moral standards. Following the request of the Rosicrucian tractate *Fama Fraternitatis* that the readers should 'declare their minds', Descartes drafted a work, dedicated to 'certain people who promise to show us miraculous discoveries in all the sciences'. The work – it is uncertain if it was ever finished or published – was titled *The Mathematical Treasure Trove of Polybius, Citizen of the World* and was offered to 'learned men throughout the world and especially to the distinguished B.R.C. (Brothers of the Rosy Cross) in Germany'. He had met the challenge by announcing that he was ready to appear in the 'theatre of the world' ... 'wearing a mask' (Shea 1991: 106).

With Rosicrucianism we enter into the emblematic-alchemical world of mystery and hope which centred around Johann Valentin Andreae (1586–1654) and his circle in Tübingen (see, e.g., Andreae 1999; Mansikka 2017). Rosicrucianism was a movement of universal reform and millenarian expectancy. The 'invisible brothers' were anticipators, precursors of a newly emerging collective mind, which was assumed to grasp the ultimate order of all things, to which belonged the Platonic conception of sciences as 'seeds' in the soul to be recovered. The Rosicrucian manifesto acknowledged that the seed of chemistry had been revealed by Paracelsus.⁹ As mathematics had not yet been recovered, Descartes' entry on the stage may well be interpreted as one of the miraculous discoveries still in waiting; in the dedication he

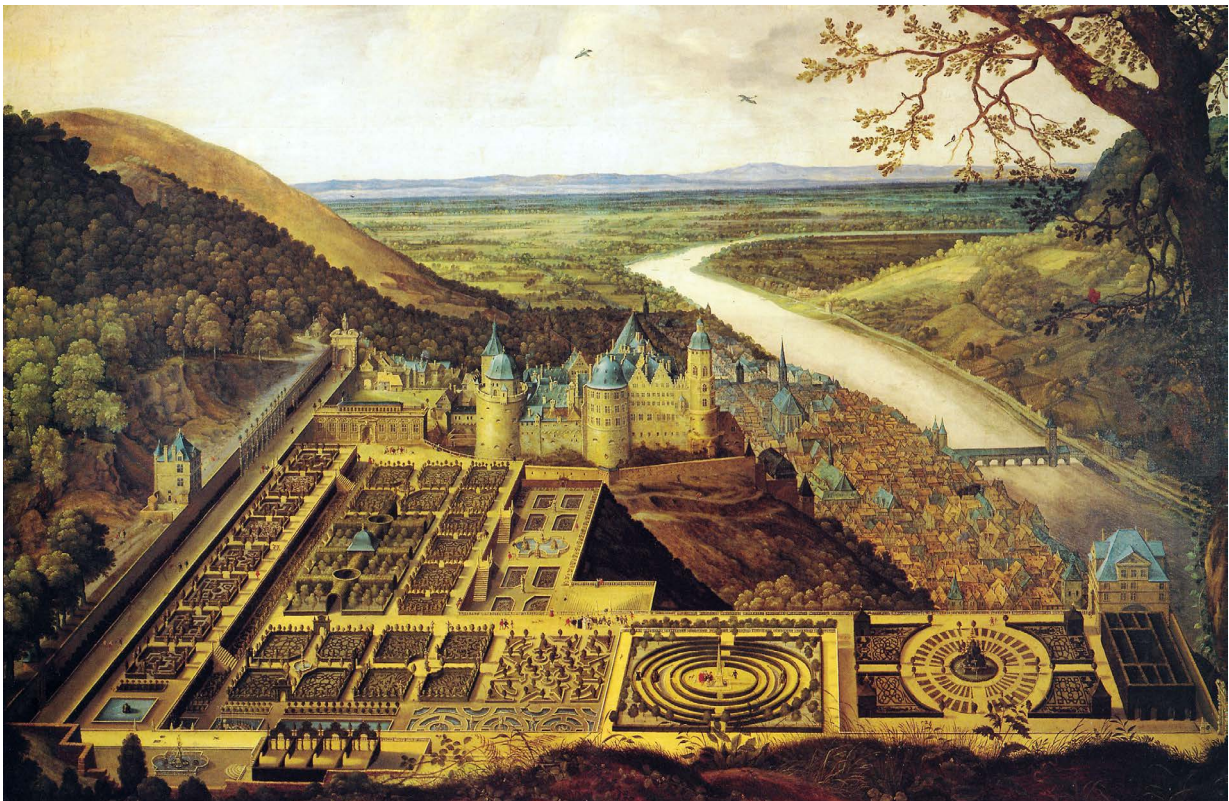
9 See *Fama Fraternitatis*, printed in Yates 1986: 238–51, pp. 241–2.

declares that the work '... lays down the true means of solving all the difficulties in the science of mathematics, and demonstrates that the human intellect can achieve nothing further on these questions' (cited in Shea 1991: 106). Although the movement remained shrouded in mystery and never fulfilled the promises of a universal amendment, the image of them was pervasive in the seventeenth century, as confirmed for instance by Robert Burton: 'We had need of some general visitor in our age, that should reform what is amiss; a just army of Rosie-crosse men, for they will amend all matters (they say), religion, policy, manners, with arts; sciences, &c.' (Burton (1652) 2009: 87).

Wearing or hiding behind a 'mask' (*persona*) could imply a number of meanings that involved expressing one's will, judgment, reason or autonomy. However, not being a socially-instituted office holder, like the priest, the *persona* in principle lacked authority. Nevertheless, Stephen Gaukroger writes that 'just as in Renaissance culture the moral philosopher had been expected to manifest his morality in his *persona*, so too the new natural philosopher manifested his worth through his *persona*' (Gaukroger 2006: 25). The aim of the natural philosopher was not merely to discover truths, but also to produce new works for the public good. At the same time there lay a 'protean irresponsibility of role-play' in the *persona*, it could be argued, as the player's *persona* could promote a role such as, for instance, displaying judgment and specific skill pertaining to the 'duties of poet and audience' (Condren 2006: 68–9).

The early seventeenth century witnessed a milieu of self-assertions.¹⁰ In the world of Rosicrucian

10 Andreae and Descartes are both, in their own way, representative of this emerging individualistic culture. Robert Appelbaum writes that 'Andreae and Descartes alike are participating in an intellectual movement which is having an impact on all the arts and sciences of the seventeenth century, not only on architecture and the art of designing ideal cities. This movement, whatever one wishes to call it – neo-classicism (Foucault's "the classic age"), the baroque, late Renaissance or post-Reformation humanism, or in its English redaction ... "Puritan ameliorism," not to mention the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century to which it is intimately related – includes among its characteristic impulses not only the deliberate accentuation of the individual point of view, the limited yet foundational perspective of the individual, but the quest for what Hans Blumenberg calls



The Garden of the Palatinate (Hortus Palatinus) attached to the Heidelberg Castle by the Flemish landscape painter Jacques Fouquier (1580/91-1659). Commissioned by Frederick V, the garden was constructed between 1614 and 1619, the time of Descartes' travelling years in German and Dutch districts. This at the time 'Eighth Wonder of the World', rich in Rosicrucian symbolism and with various exotic plants brought from the tropics, was destroyed during the Thirty Years War. Wikimedia Commons.

linguistics wearing a mask referred most conspicuously to the philosophical *persona* in the tradition of Hermetic-Platonic philosophy as the *adept* (Hunter 2006: 40; Mansikka 2007). As an adept, there was more to the Rosicrucian *persona* than a mere intellectual recovering of the sciences. As the Rosicrucians possessed expertise in medicine, among other sciences, they had learned the secrets of prolonging human life by way of conducting their lives properly, so as to manifest personal health and moral stature. The 'invisibility' of the Rosicrucians was at times of societal turmoil and discord a mark of ingenuity and intellectual honesty.¹¹ Andreae writes in

"self-assertion," or, more expansively, "the immanent self-assertion of reason through the mastery and alteration of reality" (Appelbaum 2004: 45).

11 The *persona* was one of J. V. Andreae's frequently-used expressions. A mask hid the true character of men, but could be exposed by pointing to moral types. In his work *Turbo*, the wanderer (*Peregrinus*) tells his questioners in Elysium that back on earth 'we all wear masks (*personati*). Within us we are all ruled by discord and ignorance and delusion and

Christianopolis (1619) that the rulers, after 'being found unworthy to rule any longer' and 'spurred on to greater interpreting', will 'after the mask has fallen ... lose their authority among the people' (Andreae 1999: 146-7). The mask thus also served as a veil to hide moral degeneration, if not sheer stupidity, at least until the time of universal renovation and restitution of all things.

Behind the mask one could, as Descartes did, bring about something new and ingenious by way of expressions of the poetic imagination. J. V. Andreae would argue for the use of poetry, riddles and metaphors in expressing religious truths (see, e.g., Montgomery 1973: 62-3, 128, 134-6, 148). Andreae's

lies' (Andreae 1999: 57). 'Yet anyone who has even once looked more deeply into the world will clearly observe that nothing is so insupportable to deceivers as truth and uprightness, which they hate so much that in their fury they forget their weakness, throw off their masks, covers and wrappings, jump forth naked and reveal the secret of their wickedness in its entirety' (*ibid.* 149).



Descartes had a profound interest in music and musical theory. In *Trois jeunes musiciens*, the French painter and contemporary of Descartes, Antoine Le Nain (1598-1648) captures three young musicians in a pose both timeless and modern. Wikimedia Commons.

ideal city of Christianopolis was a poetical commonwealth rich in symbolic levels; in a higher degree this applies of course also to the poetical-mystical world of the Rosicrucians (Mansikka 2017). Andreae's declaration to write a poetical utopia could however easily be paraphrased egotistically, as it is by his contemporary Robert Burton: 'I will yet, to satisfy and please myself, make an Utopia of mine own, a New Atlantis, a poetical commonwealth of mine own, in which I will freely domineer, build cities, make laws, statutes, as I list myself. And why may I not?' (cited in Andreae 1999: 152n311). Andreae the Rosicrucian wore a different mask than Andreae the Lutheran minister and office holder. Soon after the publication of the Rosicrucian manifestos Andreae, witnessing the stir they aroused and their subsequent misrepresentations, downplayed his role by hinting that 'a little while ago someone wearing a mask sought to carry out rather an ingenious sort of joke in the market-place of learning' (Andreae 1999: 147n291).

Health and longevity had a special relationship with philosophical knowledge in Descartes' times. To claim possession of a new and more potent knowledge should, it was thought, be displayed also in personal health and well-being. This was an important feature in Descartes' philosophical thinking and one of the aims Descartes publicly committed himself to

work towards. Descartes had a reputation of being reclusive; he had given up high living for a simple life, and through his special diet was predicted to be a 'long-liver'. The philosophy of self-healing, or dietetics, promoted the idea of being one's own specialist. What Descartes would have advised or recommended as a doctor, would have been, according to Steven Shapin, according to the following:

First of all, once you have got a sufficient stock of experience with your body, reflect upon and trust that experience, and do not be led by medical experts whose knowledge of your body is manifestly inferior to your own.

Observe dietary moderation: be neither ascetic nor a glutton. Go for high-fibre diet: more vegetables than meat; avoid very spicy and salty foods. Do not drink too much. Variety of foods is good. Soup is very good.

On the whole, let your appetites be your guide. Your body is probably telling you something: listen to it. (Shapin 2000: 149)

The modesty and privateness of Descartes may be seen displaying a more 'modernist' *persona*, not unfamiliar with the self-healing philosophies within the New Age thinking of our time. As to this aspect, Descartes may even be seen as a kind of a 'proto-Californian' (Cottingham 2006: 193-4). Rosicrucianism was closely associated with the, at the time, extra-academic fields of chemistry, botany and medicine. Botanical knowledge had only recently freed itself from being constituted of mere book-knowledge of moral *exemplars* to achieving the status of empirical research; medicine combined chemistry and botany in exploring the native soils to find new and useful remedies (Mansikka 2017). The experimental aspect of being a physician included testing herbs to find efficient 'virtues' and remedies, a practice Descartes doubtless was well versed in. In fact he may even be seen as a precursor of the modern experimenter of mind states, and his 'miraculous discovery' could also be cast doubt on for this reason. Meric Casaubon explicitly raised suspicions concerning Descartes' alleged short cut to knowledge in writing that 'if he would have dealt ingenuously, he might in two or three lines, that had contained the names of three or four herbs, have prescribed a far shorter way' (cited

in Spiller 1980: 68). In a satire *A Voyage to the World of Cartesius* of 1692, the author Gabriel Daniel was more specific: it was by sniffing tobacco, mixed with a certain type of herb, that Descartes had arrived at his admirable science. Moreover, Descartes and his friends had a greater interest in experimenting with herbs as they attempted to dissociate their souls from their bodies.¹² (Daniel (1692) 2003: 21–2; Heyd 1995: 119)

Descartes' early affiliation with the Rosicrucians was to follow him during his lifetime and, after his death, at least until the end of the century. The popular picture of Descartes recalls that on his return from Germany to Paris in 1622, he found himself surrounded by rumours of being one of the Brethren of the Rosy Cross. As they were reported to have knowledge of making themselves invisible, Descartes eventually did his best to show up publicly to contradict the rumours. He was described in 1692 by another satirist, Daniel Huet, as the perfect Rosicrucian, making him confess that 'I renounced marriage, I led a wandering life, I sought obscurity and isolation, I abandoned the study of geometry and of the other sciences to apply myself exclusively to philosophy, medicine, chemistry, the cabala and other secret sciences' (cited in Shea 1991: 114).

12 'Mean while the Snush-Box, which I mention'd, his Body held in its left-Hand, made *M. Descartes* call to mind, That before his Extasie he had taken Tabacco-Snush, and he could not tell but so extraordinary an Effect might have been produced by the Vertue of that Tobacco. That which he took of was an unusual kind, which a Merchant of *Amsterdam* had brought over from an *Island* near *China*, and presented him: It was extremely strong, and *M. Descartes*, to mollifie it had mix'd a certain Herb in it, dried to Powder, whose Name he never would acquaint me with, nor the Place where it grew, though he presented me with a great Quantity of the same: He laid a sufficient Dose upon the Back-Side of his Hand, and gave it his Body to take; and at the same Time happen'd this prodigious Effect in his Brain; for all the Vapours raised there since his last taking were dislodged and dissipated in an instant. He observed it was only the Particles of the Tobacco that scattered the Fumes of the Brain, and that those of the Herb which he had tempered with it being not so fine, and having very little Motion, fastned themselves in the Nerves that cause Sensation, and made them looser than they were before. Seeing that Effect, he no longer doubted, but consulted it to be the Herb, which he mix'd with the Tobacco, that caus'd his Trance, and took away his Senses...?' (Daniel (1692) 2003: 21–2)

Esotericism in reverse: Descartes as an enthusiast

The closest equivalent to what we today would regard as an 'esotericist' or 'occultist', would, it appears, in Descartes' time have been to be an 'enthusiast'.¹³ However, the *persona* of Descartes as the Rosicrucian and dietetic, that has been portrayed above, was in fact not so much that of an 'esotericist' of his time, if we stick to standard definitions of esotericism. While conservative seventeenth-century intellectuals saw Descartes as an enthusiast rather than a rationalist, they did not necessarily link him with the Rosicrucians. This was the case for instance with one of the foremost critics of Descartes, the humanist and Aristotelian Meric Casaubon, who saw his enthusiasm as being primarily linked with 'contemplative philosophy', alluding to Platonism, mystical theology and, from the mid-century onwards, Quakerism, as well as with scepticism and materialism. (Heyd 1995: 109–10, 144)

In the seventeenth century it was conventional to think of the poetic imagination as a faculty by means of which we are able to grasp deeper 'truths'. It was by means of the imagination that man became creative and innovative, as the *homo ingenium*, a view that Vico subsequently developed in great detail (see, e.g. Milbank 1981). The view of Descartes that was deemed dissenting and dangerous was not that of the imaginative enthusiast, as it were, but that of the *self-asserter*. While traditional learning was public and served as the basis of the social order, Descartes was seen as having set up a method of introversion which was private and subversive. Descartes had thus deviated from the principle that knowledge is shared; he had transferred the power from the authority of tradition to the authority of self. More severely, he had leaned on schemes woven by others and placed himself above them as a 'Single Self, without any Co-partner', as his contemporary John Sergeant remarked (Spiller 1980: 69; Heyd 1990: 36, 44, 45, 57).

Descartes' universal method evolved from a comprehension of an inner world of clear and distinct ideas. As Cartesianism was founded on the detachment of the reason from the senses, it was at base Platonic. An argument involved in attempts at distancing Descartes from the Rosicrucians was

13 Enthusiasm was, according to Michael Heyd, a derogatory label ascribed to groups or individuals who claimed to have direct divine inspiration or secrets (Heyd 1990: 36).

curiously enough taken from the divide of rationalism and empiricism. Thus in 1670 a French translator of Descartes, Nicolas-Joseph Poisson, wrote in an attempt to vindicate Descartes, that he 'was too sophisticated to be a friend of these visionaries [Rosicrucians] who rest all their arguments on empirical evidence rather than on reasoning' (cited in Shea 1991: 115). As we have seen, this was a conspicuous trait in Rosicrucianism as it connected to the extra-academic and empirical fields of chemistry, botany and medicine. But it is not the legacy of Descartes as the physician and botanist that has been transmitted into modernity. This, if one wishes, 'ecological' or 'holistic' tradition, has probably continued more or less unchanged. What has changed is the method Descartes devised for his purely scientific project. At the centre of Descartes' metaphysics lies a vision that involves the contemplation of the good and the true, through the exercise of will and reason. Following the lead of the Platonists this epistemology implied, according to Cottingham, that

In the upward ascent of the mind from doubt and darkness to the light, whether of truth or of goodness, we first need to exercise our will to turn away from what is deceptive or unreliable. But once we free ourselves from illusion and focus on the objects revealed by the light of reason, then we arrive at our destination: the work of the will has been done, and it can now subside into automatic assent to what is revealed with the utmost clarity as good, or as true: 'from a great light in the intellect there follows a great propensity in the will'. (Cottingham 2006: 199)

As Descartes' metaphysical project was an attempt to secure a mindset by a mental process of arriving at a destination of clear ideas it was in certain senses also a mindset that had completed its journey to knowledge, as it reached the goal of clarity. The French historian Paul Hazard wrote as regards this change of perception that

Our eighteenth-century ancestors would not have believed that all that was clear was true; but on the contrary that 'clarity is the vice of human reason rather than its virtue,' because a clear idea is a finished idea. They would not have believed that reason was our first faculty,

but on the contrary that imagination was.
(Cited in Verene 1993: 2-3)

Thus, the geometrical philosophy that was regarded esoteric in the seventeenth century is transformed into modernity as a scientific 'world-view' or a 'mindset'. As such the esoteric has become exoteric, public. From this reverse order it follows that its power has shifted from the authority of the self to the authority of the collaborative and anonymous. By this constellation it ultimately also erases the self, as a will or subject and a *persona*. Ernesto Grassi writes that since

the rational process is deductive and should be achievable by everyone according to logical rules, independent of the individual subjective disposition, rational (or scientific) discourse will appear to be characterized by its anonymity. That is to say, every subject can and should be replaceable in the reasoning process. Moreover, inasmuch as the conclusions of the rational process are not and cannot be limited to a given time or place, and are deduced by universal and necessary stringency, their *ahistoricity* is manifest. The only things that change according to time and place are problems. (Grassi 1969: 40)

Peter Harrison expresses a similar view:

Central to the prestige of scientific methods is their insensitivity to the personal qualities of those who employ them. The putative universality and objectivity of science are attributed to the fact that the production of dependable knowledge does not rely on its practitioners sharing a common set of personal characteristics, but rather on their observance of a common set of procedures. In this respect modern science differs radically from its medieval and early modern predecessor, natural philosophy. Natural philosophers, engaged as they were in a branch of philosophy, were expected to conform to traditional models of the philosophical persona, in which the moral characteristics of the individual were the pledge of the truth of what they knew. (Harrison 2006: 202)

Cultural dialectics thus has it that what in modern critical studies is usually defined as the 'esoteric', that

is to say, a rejected and secret knowledge that is manifested in, among other things, artistic creativity and New Age spirituality, was a reverse constellation in the pre-modern world. As the foundation of humanistic learning was, besides the promotion of memory and imagination, a pluralism of methods, Cartesianism as a philosophy of criticality introduced a view that was alien to this, as it fostered a single view; to substitute all other methods with one method, that is, to assign the same truth to different objects (Belaval 1969: 79). While it is highly unlikely that this would have been Descartes' intention¹⁴ it became the hallmark of Cartesianism and subsequently the modern scientific mindset. ■

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- 14 Comenius writes in his autobiography on his meeting with Descartes: 'One day my friends ... brought me into colloquy with René Descartes, then living in a charming retreat outside the town. We exchanged speech for about four hours: he expounded to us the very essence of his philosophy, and I maintained all human knowledge, such as derives from the senses alone and reasonings thereon to be imperfect and defective. We parted in friendly fashion: we begged him to publish the principles of his philosophy (which appeared in the following year), and he similarly urged me to realise my own plan saying: Beyond the things that appertain to philosophy I go not, mine therefore will be that only in part, whereof yours will be the whole' (Comenius 1975: 157).
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