“Ardent Masturbation” (Descartes, Freud, and Others)

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What is the status of ontological certainty in the work of René Descartes? A long tradition in Cartesian scholarship has taken that certainty for granted—even while frequently attacking the grounds of Descartes’s apparently secure assurance of being. In the third of the seven sets of Objections solicited by Descartes himself and published in the same volume as the first and second editions of the Meditations in 1641 and 1642, Thomas Hobbes (who had fled to France for political reasons in 1640) writes: “All philosophers make a distinction between a subject and its faculties and acts, i.e. between a subject and its properties and its essences.” But Descartes, he objects, “is identifying the thing which understands with intellection, which is an act of that which understands.” I think, Descartes argues, therefore I am a thinking thing (a res cogitans); “I might just as well say,” Hobbes comments, “I am walking, therefore I am a walk.”1 Closer to us, Martin Heidegger, in the critique of traditional ontological presuppositions that opens Being and Time, accuses Descartes of leaving “undetermined . . . the kind of Being which belongs to the res cogitans, or—more precisely—the meaning of the Being of the ‘sum.’” Descartes came to suppose, according to Heidegger, that the certainty inherent in the cogito “exempted him from raising the question of the meaning of the Being which this entity possesses.”2

An indubitable ontological certainty is the precondition and justification for Descartes’s epistemological assurance. This connection between being and knowledge is crucial; however shaky or rudimentary Cartesian ontology may be, its nature is, in a sense, secondary to the assurance it gives Descartes in his fundamental project, as he puts it in the Discourse on Method, of distinguishing the true from the false. The certainty derived from the cogito is what allows Descartes “to reject shifting earth and sand in order to find rock or clay,” that is, to exercise fully and confidently his extraordinarily energetic, we might even say militant will to know. Indeed, Michel Foucault goes so far as to identify the beginning of the modern age in the history of Western configurations of subjectivity with what he calls the “Cartesian moment,” the moment of the prioritizing of knowledge to the detriment of what Foucault designates as “care of the self” or spirituality. Descartes’s purpose, as Edmund Husserl emphasized, was “grounding science absolutely” and, we might add, to realize the acquisition, through science, of power over the world. The steps to be followed for reaching truth, the criteria to be used for testing all propositions and the certainty of being—both the thinker’s being and God’s being—are the preliminary stages of an investigation into the laws of nature. (“These six Meditations,” Descartes wrote in a letter to his friend Marin Mersenne, “contain the entire foundation for my physics.”) They are the necessary ground of the exciting enterprise that will allow us to become, as Descartes formulates it in the final section of the Discourse, “masters and possessors . . . of nature” (DM, p. 50). Such is Descartes’s ambition and, it has generally been recognized, such is his modernity: a boundless confidence in the possibilities of rational scientific inquiry. The weakness of Descartes’s mechanistic account of the laws of physics and the subsequent changes in both the methodology of the sciences and the confidence regarding our ability to master and possess nature do nothing to reduce


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Descartes’s seminal importance in the historical prioritizing of scientific knowledge.

There is, however, something else missed even if we have adequately formulated both the weaknesses and the originality of Descartes’s thought and his importance in the history of modern philosophy. We should, I think, find something at once strange and familiar in our experience of reading Descartes. Bernard Williams, among others, in discussing the Meditations, makes a distinction between the author René Descartes and the “thinker,” “the ‘I’ that appears throughout [the Meditations] from the first sentence on [and who] does not specifically represent” the author. The latter “is not answerable for every notion entertained by the thinker and for every turn that the reflection takes on the way” (MD, p.vii). For Williams, the distinction between the author and the thinker (or, as L. Aryeh Kosman has put it, between the author and the naïve narrator)7 is that the latter, unlike the former, doesn’t know, as he goes along, how the argument will turn out, and this fiction expresses Descartes’s “intention to engage the reader in the argument.” He “aims to convince us by making the argument ourselves” (thus presumably giving us the freedom to write the Meditations differently) and, in so doing, to show ourselves to be “the kind of creatures [the thinking things] that [the book] finally shows us to be” (MD, pp. viii, x).

Williams’s distinction is useful, but it seems to me that foregrounding on the thinker may have less to do with engaging the reader in the movement of the argument than with a certain movement on the part of the thinker himself in his search for the steps of the argument. Let’s look at the beginning of the third Meditation. I’m less interested here in what the Cartesian thinker has discovered (I am a thing that thinks; whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true; sensory perception can deceive me regarding the correspondence between my ideas and the things outside me) than in the inventory of procedures leading to these discoveries: “I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, and withdraw all my senses”; “I will converse with myself and scrutinize myself more deeply”; “I will cast around more carefully to see whether there may be other things within me which I have not yet noticed”; “but there was something else which I used to assert, and which through habitual belief I thought I perceived clearly, although I did not in fact do so” (MD, pp. 24–25). These are steps in the search for how and what the “thinking thing” thinks, an exercise of consciousness designed to caress from consciousness the grounds and cer-

tainty of its being. Critics have pointed to the resemblance between Descartes’s meditations and works of religious meditation. Like the latter, Descartes’s work aims to help the reader to get rid of “misleading and seductive states of the soul,” but, unlike religious meditation, Descartes’s exercises are not intended as guides to a spiritual discipline (MD, p. viii). If, as Williams writes, Descartes seeks to give guidance in an intellectual discipline, to enlist the reader in Descartes’s own progress toward truth, there is also considerable self-consciousness in the Cartesian mental exercises. The Meditations let us in on and spell out a very private sort of activity. Something within the thinker’s mind is presupposed, but the thinker doesn’t know what it is. Giving guidance to the reader seems to me less pressing than the essentially solitary task of providing guidance to the thinker himself in his self-exploration. This is not the same thing as, say, the ancient Stoic exercise of scrupulous self-examination conducted less in the service of an ideal of self-knowledge than as a kind of ethical hygiene, a practice of self-care. And while there are obvious similarities between Descartes’s highly deliberate progress through the steps of an argument toward the goal of truth and Socrates’s careful articulation of all the intellectual moves that must be made in order to arrive at knowledge of the nature of love or of the soul, the Cartesian meditation is significantly different from the Socratic dialogue. There is always, in that dialogue, the interlocutor—who-knows, and the articulation of the stages of an argument constitutes what can seem like a pseudoexchange in which Socrates, the masterful pedagogue, guides his disciples to the knowledge already possessed by the master. Descartes’s conversations with himself, his self-scrutinizing, are, on the contrary, not intended to educate the self being addressed and scrutinized; rather, they aim to shed light on that self, to persuade or seduce or coerce it into fully disclosing itself. The thinking thing doubles itself in order to interrogate itself about the nature of thinking.

Perhaps the indeterminacy of the Cartesian subject (the I in the sum) — Descartes’s failure, as Heidegger put it, to specify “the kind of Being which belongs to the res cogitans” — has to do with its being a divided subject. There is the I that is searching, and there are “the things within [him] which [the thinking thing has] not yet noticed.” Descartes insisted on—even exaggerated—his solitude during the years of his quest for intellectual certainty. Settling in Holland allowed him, he writes in the Discourse, “to have as solitary and retired a life as in the remotest of deserts” (DM, p. 26). Such physical solitude would be appropriate to the intrinsic solitariness of the search. The ultimate goal is the mastery of nature, but knowledge of the world might also be considered (at least as Descartes stages the
preconditions for this knowledge in the Meditations) as an afterthought in his extraordinary adventure in self-knowledge. The “Cartesian moment” may be, as Foucault claims, the prioritizing of a knowledge of objects over “care of the self,” but the pursuit of object-knowledge depends on a wholly solitary pursuit of the subject of knowledge. And this latter pursuit is just as arduous as the investigation of nature. The various steps and aspects in the process of self-questioning constitute a rigorous discipline for approaching, encircling, and finally mastering the inner grounds of thought’s certainty, about which there can be no doubt whatsoever.

The “Cartesian moment” may, then, be just as much about a radical redefinition of introspection as it is about setting up the criteria for, and initiating, the mind’s possession, its appropriative knowledge, of the world. It is as if an essentially transparent I included something experienced as a foreign territory, one that has been obscured, as Descartes emphasizes in the Discourse on Method, by centuries of false reasoning leading to doubtful conclusions. True, the Cartesian unconscious is, at least from our perspective, peculiarly nonpsychological. It is the ground of indubitable knowledge that has been hidden behind or below centuries of intellectual error. In this respect, it is very different from more recent searches of and by a divided mind. The criteria for establishing the absolute certainty of knowledge—and, more fundamentally, the assumption of self-transparency—are hardly what we have come to expect from attempted explorations of the unconscious. And yet the exercise of mind, the arduous self-searching meticulously traced in the Meditations, is close to us; the mind (which for Descartes means the being) it presumes is very much the modern mind, one that can easily appear to be the antithesis of Cartesian intellect. In the modern period, a pattern of autonomous self-reflection links Descartes to otherwise very distinct thinkers who follow him.

I will associate Descartes’s modernity with Proust and Freud. The famous episode of the petites madeleines occurs near the beginning of Proust’s monumental novel. No sooner do the tea-soaked crumbs of the plump little cake touch Marcel’s palate than he feels a shudder run through him; he stops, “intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me.” A pleasure that makes the vicissitudes of life indifferent to me, “its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory,” has invaded his senses, filling him with “a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me.” But what is this “me,” where did it come from, how can it be seized? The next two pages give us an inventory of mental procedures intended to bring to the surface of consciousness this hidden, precious essence of self. Marcel drinks a second mouthful, then a third, but “the potion is losing its
magic,” and in any case it’s clear that “the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself.” Only Marcel’s mind can discover the “truth” hidden within it. And so he tries to make the extraordinary state reappear. Here is a partial description of his effort:

I retrace my thoughts to the moment at which I drank the first spoonful of tea. I rediscover the same state, illuminated by no fresh light. I ask my mind to make one further effort, to bring back once more the fleeting sensation. And so that nothing may interrupt it in its course I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea, I stop my ears and inhibit all attention against the sounds from the next room. [SW, p. 49]

Finally, the memory that accounts for the “all-powerful joy” rises from a great depth of his mind: from Marcel’s cup of tea “the whole of Combray and its surroundings . . . spring into being” and are transmuted into the literary narrative of the next section of Proust’s novel (SW, p. 51).

Marcel’s memory is of a different order from Descartes’s formulation of intellectual certainty. But in both cases we are given the physical and mental details of an adventure in self-analysis, of a determined effort to reach and to make present something that, without this mental work, might remain inaccessible to consciousness. This is not an enterprise of self-vigilance intended to discover sinful inclinations within the soul (as in Christian self-examination), nor is it an exercise in self-fashioning, in the elaboration of the self as an “ethical subject of truth” (Foucault’s description of Seneca’s scrupulous recording, every evening, of what he has thought and done during the day). Rather, the mind has become a secret object to itself; the inventory of the most banal steps in the conduct of an excavation of this hidden mind underlines the difficulty and the strangeness of entering a territory at once native to and distant from the exploring subject. The Proustian narrator explicitly recognizes the uncanniness of this psychic doubling: “What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing” (SW, p. 49).

The Cartesian subject-object dualism of res cogitans and res extensa is, in the exercise of thought recorded in the Meditations, an internal dualism of subject-mind and object-mind. The self-questioning of the Meditations ends with the subject’s possession of that which transforms the Cartesian

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9. Foucault, Hermeneutics of the Subject, p. 484.
thinker into the one who already knows, the author as distinct from the narrator-thinker. There is no such unified subject in Proust, no piercing through an inner opacity obviously closer to the psychoanalytic mind than to Cartesian consciousness. The attempt to penetrate the world—more particularly in Proust, to know the secrets of others—continues even after it has been recognized as the displaced repetition of a hopeless attempt to penetrate the self. Once Marcel’s jealousy has been unleashed by Albertine’s revelation of her friendship with the lesbian Mlle Vinteuil, Marcel will make her a virtual prisoner in his parents’ apartment while explicitly recognizing that the Albertine who has suddenly become the object of a doomed need to know is actually not outside of him but within him. What Marcel calls the “inconceivable truth” of Albertine’s desires is a projection of the inconceivability of Marcel’s desires. Albertine’s consciousness is a screen for the otherness hidden within Marcel’s consciousness. “As there is no knowledge,” the narrator writes, “one might almost say that there is no jealousy, save of oneself.”

The world seen as differential otherness is a misrecognition of the subject’s perception of a differential otherness within himself.

The Proustian narrator’s awed recognition of a vast unknown region at once identical to and other than the subject who seeks that region strikes a note that is clearly more Freudian than Cartesian. It is as if, in removing himself from all human company in order to become modernity’s master athlete of self-exploration, Descartes intuited the reality of a divided self articulated two and a half centuries later as the psychoanalytic distinction between consciousness and an unconscious that is anything but a certainty of being or of knowledge. In several letters to Wilhelm Fliess, especially during the fall of 1897, Freud speaks of his self-analysis. He is exhausted from self-observation, at times dejected, but he is also exhilarated by the discoveries he is making. “Since I have been studying the unconscious,” Freud writes, “I have become so interesting to myself.” Self-analysis is his “chief interest. Everything is still obscure, even the problems, but there is a comfortable feeling in it that one has only to reach into one’s storerooms to take out what is needed at a particular time.” The results of Freud’s self-analysis will, as in Descartes and Proust, be made public, shared with others (especially in The Interpretation of Dreams), and even before that Freud

more or less regularly sends Fliess accounts of his discoveries. Analytic treatment itself will be an exchange, but psychoanalysis begins in solitude, and the inner “storerooms” are excavated by the solitary seeker with a resoluteness worthy of Descartes. The aim of Descartes, Proust, and Freud in the passages I have discussed is one of knowledge, but the emphasis in all three is on introspection itself, both in its procedures and as an adventure. Foucault’s Cartesian moment, at least as it is embodied in these three great figures of what might broadly be called modernity, is one of a willed identity of knowledge and being. The condition of this identity is an extraordinarily active solitariness that is, I should add, not a renunciatory or rebellious turning away from the world. In Descartes, Proust, and Freud an absolutely unique individuality is at the same time the key to a universal being: the thinking thing that is all men in Descartes, the shared singularity that art reveals and that is hidden behind particular personalities in Proust, and the universal mental functions obscured by the subterfuges of everyday conscious life in Freud.

Extraordinarily, this implicit reduction of the many to the one, the identity of the individuating with the universal, is articulated by Freud as a certain paradigm of sexual desire. The first of the three “Contributions to the Psychology of Love,” the 1910 essay entitled “A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men,” may be considered as a mise en abîme of the self-analysis that is the precondition for philosophical and psychological knowledge in Descartes, Proust, and Freud, as well as for their relation with the world. Introspection is enacted here as a folding-in of desire onto the self. The type of object-choice described by Freud in this essay characterizes a certain form of neurotic behavior, but, as Freud claims here and elsewhere, the so-called abnormal behavior of the neurotics most readily available for clinical psychoanalytic study recalls and provides insight into similar behavior “in people of average health or even in those with outstanding qualities.”

So the type of object-choice we are about to study is, like self-analysis itself, at once exceptional and universal.

The men studied in this essay need, as the first condition of love, “an injured third party”; they can desire only a woman to whom, as Freud puts it, “another man can claim right of possession.” But the second condition in this type of object-choice doubles both the subject and the object of the injury. The loved woman must be “in some way or other of bad repute sexually”; her own sexual interests have to extend beyond her husband, who is now “injured”

not only by the original desiring subject but also by the other men the woman turns to (“ST,” p. 166). Inevitably, this makes of the lover we are studying the object as well as the agent of injury. Indeed, the jealousy necessary, as Freud emphasizes, in this sort of object-choice is directed toward all these others and not toward “the lawful possessor of the loved one” (“ST,” p. 167). Both the lover and the husband are now together, as it were, on the side of the injured. Not only is it necessary for the woman to multiply the objects of her desire; the lover himself, Freud goes on to say, also repeats this kind of passionate attachment “with the same peculiarities . . . again and again.” Indeed, “the love-objects may replace one another so frequently that a long series of them is formed” (“ST,” p. 168). The choice of object is a choice of objects, an exercise in infidelity on the part of the lover and the loved one; the woman may be unfaithful with many lovers simultaneously, while the man may have several passionate attachments successively, one after the other.

This is quite a cast of characters: the lover, the loved one, her husband, all the other women the lover loves in exactly the same way, all the other men toward whom the woman may direct her desire. But when Freud turns to the psychological explanation for this type of object-choice, the cast suddenly shrinks to three. Multiple objects of desire are merely illusory objects of desire, and Freud’s interpretation of the kind of object-choice he is studying in this essay will save it from the multiple traits by which its unity as a single type is threatened (traits such as the need that the loved woman desire many real or virtual lovers, the absence of any jealousy on the lover’s part toward the “official” object of the woman’s desire, her husband, and the idealizing of the very “lightness” that sexually discredits the woman, and finally—a trait I have not yet mentioned—the lover’s need to rescue the woman from the sexual unreliability that had been a principal condition of the man’s desire). Freud, while recognizing the remoteness of any hope of tracing all these characteristics back to a single source, nevertheless promises that “psycho-analytic exploration into the life-histories of men of this type” will easily accomplish this task (“ST,” p. 168). It will, we might say, “rescue” the piece from its menacing confusions, and, if the essay is principally remembered for the passages on rescuing, this may be less because a fantasy of sexual and moral rescue is one of the traits of this type of object-choice than it is because the essay itself is an exercise in intellectual self-rescuing.

Not surprisingly, these peculiar conditions and “this very singular way of behavior in love . . . are derived from the infantile fixation of tender feelings on the mother, and represent one of the consequences of that fixation.” All the women desired in this type of object-love are “mother-
surrogates”; the unconscious desire for some irreplaceable thing “fre-
quently appears as broken up into an endless series: endless for the reason
that every surrogate nevertheless fails to provide the desired satisfaction”
(“ST,” pp. 168–69). We are reminded of Freud’s famous declaration in
*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*: “The finding of an object is in fact
a refinding of it,”°⁴ as well, perhaps, of the Lacanian dictum according to
which the object of desire is not the cause of desire. The requirement that
the woman be sexually discredited corresponds to the boy’s discovery that
his parents can no longer be thought of as “an exception to the universal
and odious norms of sexual activity,” a discovery at once painful and sex-
ually liberating (the mother can now be desired). But the appearance of
desire is also the advent of jealousy, at which point we encounter psycho-
analysis’s major reductive explanatory tool: the Oedipus complex. Perhaps
because of its very reductiveness, this clarification only muddles the pic-
ture even more. At first Freud identifies the “injured third party” men-
tioned earlier in the essay as the father (injured, presumably, by the son’s
claims on the mother), although two pages later the boy himself is the
injured third party by virtue of the mother’s infidelity to him in having
sexual intercourse with the father. Strangely, there is no correlative to the
Oedipal child’s murderous Oedipal jealousy of his father in the type of
object-love being analyzed; the woman’s husband, her “lawful possessor,”
was never the object of the lover’s jealousy. Much more strangely, the
father with whom the mother is unfaithful is actually the son himself, “or
more accurately . . . his own idealized personality, grown up and so raised
to a level with his father” (“ST,” p. 171). At first glance, the Oedipus com-
plex reduces the number of fantasy figures to three. With, however, the
boy’s assimilation of himself to his father, we are down to two characters,
and the injured third party is once again the boy, who has become one with
the father. The injured third party is internal to the conjugal couple, and in
engaging in sexual relations with her husband the woman (rather seriously
manhandled in this essay) is being unfaithful simultaneously to him and to
her son.

It is when Freud tries to analyze the rescue fantasy that his essay gets into
its most serious trouble. He begins by acknowledging the tenuous connec-
tion between the explanation he is about to give and the rescue fantasy
discussed earlier: “In actual fact the ‘rescue-motif’ has a meaning and his-
tory of its own, and is an independent derivative of the mother-complex,
or more accurately, of the parental complex” (“ST,” p. 172). Rescuing the

Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 7:222.
loved woman from the social dangers inherent in her “unreliab[le]” sexual temperament, or simply encouraging her to remain “on the path of ‘virtue’” (“ST,” p. 168) seems, however, to have very little to do with the aspects of the “parental complex” Freud goes on to describe (“ST,” p. 174).

First of all, rescue mutates into repayment. The child wishes to repay his parents for the gift of life. With the father, the fantasized repayment is defiant; in imagining that he rescues his father from some dangerous situation, he becomes quits with him, repaying him for all he has cost him. Rescuing the mother takes the form of giving her a child, of making one for her, “needless to say, one like himself” (“ST,” p. 173). Although Freud insists that this departure from the original idea of rescuing is not too great, and is in no way arbitrary, it has in fact become nearly impossible to see how this can be called a rescue fantasy. Almost as an afterthought, Freud mentions that the boy’s mother had by her “efforts” rescued him from the dangers to life inherent in birth; the child he gives her is, I suppose, a tribute to those efforts, although—and Freud is explicit about this—the one being saved in this fantasy is not the mother but the infant being born (both the real son and the son he makes in fantasy for his mother) (“ST,” p. 173). This slippage is especially significant since, just before mentioning rescue from the dangers of birth, Freud had given the final, all-inclusive meaning (I will come to it in a moment) of all the conditions, the behavior, and the psychoanalytic interpretations that are crowded into this short study of a special type of object-choice. And once this meaning is given, it is only natural that the one being saved is identical to the one who saves, since now there is no one left but the son-lover. “All his instincts, those of tenderness, gratitude, lustfulness, defiance and independence, find satisfaction in the single wish to be his own father” (“ST,” p. 173). Astonishingly, this type of object-choice, in which objects of love seemed to multiply indefinitely, realize the causa sui project, that of being the origin and cause of oneself.

The mother is the vessel, the necessary but perhaps incidental instrument for this extraordinary working out of a fantasy of self-creation. Even more—and finally—in a concluding remark Freud seems almost casually to note that rescuing the father will also occasionally have “a tender meaning. . . . In such cases [it aims] at expressing the subject’s wish to have his father as a son—that is, to have a son who is like his father” (“ST,” p. 174). Not only, then, does the son become his own father, he can also become his father’s father. This pushes further than the son’s fantasy of identification with the father. The latter has become the creation of the former. In a dizzying conflation of being, the self-fathered son is also that son’s father. And why not continue this multigenerational oneness? The new son (who
was the original father) can fantasize not only giving birth to himself but also fathering his father (who originally was his son, before that son had him as his son), and there is no reason for this fantasmatic process not to continue indefinitely. The crowd of loved ones we began with (the men favored by the woman “of bad repute sexually,” the successive women with whom the lover reenacts this type of object-choice) is, so to speak, more than compensated by this potential future army of one. Except for the nearly dismissable (if, obviously, indispensable) woman through whom all these self-replicas must pass, the psychic logic of this indeed very special type of object-choice culminates in a fantastical multiplication of sameness.

The logic of this process is, as I’ve indicated a few times, not always especially logical. The fantasy requirements of the men Freud describes, as well as the interpretive connections Freud himself makes among the elements of this type of object-choice, obviously do not obey the rules and procedures of conscious rational thinking. There is nothing surprising about this, since the connections being made are mainly unconscious, and, as Freud reminds us in discussing the identification of the pure mother with the harlot, something that, “in the conscious, is found split into a pair of opposites often occurs in the unconscious as a unity” (“ST,” p. 170).

More interestingly, Freud’s own interpretations and speculations throughout his work—in particular, in the metapsychological papers as well as, most notably, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (which Jean Laplanche has characterized as *un texte en lambeaux*—a text in fragments, disconnected parts)—frequently have a certain incoherent connectedness that has always seemed to me central to Freud’s genius. I don’t mean only that he must take into account the flouting of conscious logic in the moves of unconscious fantasy and of primary process thinking. More interestingly, in taking those moves into account, Freud’s own interpretations remain faithful to them; his conceptual sense fails to make sense. The Freudian text frequently performs the demolishing of its own arguments. I’m thinking especially of the fragile nature of the dualisms to which Freud always remained attached, for example, the invasion of the death drive by the pleasure principle in the very text meant to demonstrate that there is something “beyond the pleasure principle” and the collapse of the central opposition between sexuality and aggressiveness while that opposition is

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being elaborated in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.\(^\text{17}\) There is also the tenuous nature of the differences between presumably distinct drives or psychic categories, especially between sadism and masochism, and the further, always threatened merging of those drives into narcissism. Language comes too late; it depends on distinctions and intervals of which the fundamental subject of psychoanalysis, as well as the psychoanalytic subject, are ignorant. The heroically impossible project of psychoanalysis is to theorize an untheorizable psyche, and the exceptional nature of the Freudian (and, I would add, Lacanian) texts in the history of psychoanalysis is that they allow unreadable pressures to infiltrate the readable, thus creating a type of readability at odds with how we have been taught to read while also accounting for that which, in the psychic structure, is anterior to all readable accounting for. The Freudian text performs the blockages, the mergings, the incoherence inherent in the discipline Freud invented.

Aware perhaps of the strangeness of the transition he is about to make, Freud writes: “With a slight change of meaning, such as is easily effected in the unconscious and is comparable to the way in which in consciousness concepts shade into one another, [the son’s] rescuing his mother takes on the significance of giving her a child or making a child for her—needless to say, one like himself” (“ST,” p. 173). Semantic discontinuities are, then, characteristic of the conscious as well as of the unconscious mind, a truth exemplified in the very sentence that announces it by Freud’s jump from the rescuing motif to the idea of the subject’s giving to the mother a child who is none other than the subject himself. How might we speculate about the pressure that has led to this particular leap of sense, that has, I think, made it necessary? The *causa sui* project turns out to be crucial to this type of object-choice, although until Freud interprets the impulse to rescue the loved one, the kind of love he has been describing seems merely to be yet another manifestation of the Oedipus complex. But something else has been emphasized between the Oedipal solution and Freud’s reading of the rescue fantasy, something that, it seems to me, will provide the pressure necessary for the incongruous link between rescuing the mother and giving birth to oneself through her. Freud has said that under the sway of the Oedipus complex, the boy, blocked in his desire for the mother by his sense that she is being unfaithful to him with his hated rival, the father, finds his only outlet for his thwarted desires in masturbation, masturbation accompanied by images of the mother being infidel. Masturbation also allows for revenge against the father; it is accompanied by images of the mother being

unfaithful with the boy himself, a boy idealized as a man equal to or like the father. The “ardent masturbation” practiced in puberty\(^{18}\) (I prefer Joan Riviere’s 1925 translation of *die eifrig geübte Onanie* to Alan Tyson’s more sedate, even superegoically tinged “masturbation assiduously practised,” a later translation used in the *Standard Edition* [“ST,” p. 172]) helps to fixate the fantasies that go along with it, fantasies that, having become fixated during puberty, are realized later on by the type of object-choice that has been the essay’s subject.

How necessary or inimical is the world to knowledge? Can thought be caressed into knowledge? Is the very notion of knowledge as something we can possess grounded in an ontology of thought as appropriative—and, first of all, as self-appropriative? Is there a nonmasturbatory mode of thinking and, I might add, of writing? In asking this last question, I don’t mean, absurdly, to reduce thinking and writing to masturbation. In fact, my discussion of Descartes, Proust, and Freud has, if anything, raised masturbation in my esteem. Descartes shutting his eyes and conversing with himself, Proust stopping his ears and shutting out all ideas extraneous to his self-concentration, Freud’s attentiveness to the associations that accompany his memory of a dream, associations guiding him to the store-rooms deep within his mind—all three are moving toward what we might call sublimated climaxes (the certainty of being for Descartes, the present presence of the past for Proust, and the operations of the unconscious for Freud), but their preparations for these discoveries curiously resemble preludes to an activity of considerably less historical significance. And yet this apparently trivializing analogy may help us to see the peculiarity of what have generally been unquestioned assumptions about the nature of thought and the relation between thinking and being.

In fantasy, as in Cartesian introspection, the world is set aside in order that the elements of its presence within the subject may be reassembled in view of a mastering of the world—in masturbatory fantasy, a mastery coterminous with the rearrangement itself, in Descartes, a mastering subsequent to the solitary introspective reassemblage of the instruments of conquest. The Oedipus complex narrativizes the subject-object dualism that has been central to modern Western notions of the bonds between the subject and the world. In this myth, the father rescues the child from the world-excluding mother-child dyad, but the rescuer is also, from the very start, a threatening intruder. As such, he may color the world with the hatefulness of a being hostile to the desiring subject. The Oedipal father

embodies the world as a potentially violent rival, one that must be submitted to or gotten rid of. Once this father has been disposed of, the son, as we have seen, can be born again, this time as his own father. The *causa sui* project is perhaps the foundational motive of Oedipal rivalry. That project is much more than an avatar of a family story. It is an extravagant figuration of what may be an inescapable psychic requirement: that of the autonomy of consciousness, of thought as independent of the world in which the thinking thing thinks or at the very least as capable of appropriating and mastering that world with instruments ranging from the crudest sexual fantasies to the most refined scientific inquiries and philosophical investigations.

Other ways of being-in-the-world, of being-with-the-world, have of course been formulated. Even within the introspective, self-analytic tradition, there are indications of an epistemologically-oriented, Cartesian, or subject-object relation being transformed into an exchange between the subject and the world, one in which there are accretions and modifications of being rather than appropriations of knowledge. Except for those proto-Cartesian moments when (as in the *Symposium*), Socrates “goes off . . . and stands motionless, wherever he happens to be,” absorbed in his own thought; and however factitious we may find the dialectical appearances of Socratic dialogue, the knowledge Socrates pursues is always produced within a dialogue.\(^\text{19}\) There is Platonic doctrine, but Socratic truth, more elusively and more originally, emerges from a continuously renewed sociability. And if psychoanalysis begins with Freud’s solitary self-explorations, the clinical practice he initiated is an analytic exchange, one in which, as Adam Phillips and I have argued in our recent book *Intimacies*, the exchange itself may be more therapeutically transformative than the self-analysis.\(^\text{20}\) Moreover, there are counter-Cartesian moments in the history of modern philosophy that propose versions of being as mobilized and continuously modified through exchanges that collapse the subject-object dualism. I’m thinking of Baruch Spinoza’s claim that nothing is separable from a universal relationality (what he calls common notions represent mobile relational compositions);\(^\text{21}\) of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of the “dawning of an aspect,” which could be read as a reformulation of fantasy as grounded in the perception of external reality (the real object
and its relations become “echoes” of our thought; we surround an object with our fictions in a perception at once new and unchanged); and of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s insistence, especially in the section of The Visible and the Invisible called “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” on the adhesion—not the dualism—of the seer and the visible (the look is inscribed in, it is the “lining,” of the order of being it discloses to us).

Finally, Descartes himself proposes, in spite of himself, a nonmasturbatory, world-immersed mode of thinking and of writing. By making explicit to his readers the procedures of investigation I referred to at the beginning of this discussion, Descartes initiates and sustains a kind of intellectual sociability that could be thought of as superseding the solitary concentration that led to his certainties about being and the conditions of knowledge. The use of language is already and always a frictional encounter between a nonlocatable subject and a continuously articulated otherness. (The fantasy of language as separating us from authentic being exemplifies philosophical onanism.) As speaking and writing subjects, we can’t help but fail to reach the incongruous, illusory climaxes of erotic and intellectual desire—climaxes to what should rather be recognized as the sustaining sensuality of our failure to be. If, as Samuel Beckett never ceases to demonstrate, language never goes anywhere, it fails to go with the others we share it with; it is, to use the title of one of Beckett’s writings, “company.”

So, having separated himself from all society, having shut his eyes, stopped his ears, withdrawn all his senses in order to converse only with himself, Descartes, simply by his impassioned confiding of all this to us, may have indefinitely postponed that unprecedented climax he mistakenly believed was so close at hand.

