

ARTICLE

## The Role of Descartes's Dream in the *Meditations* and in the Historical Ontology of Ourselves

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper situates the dream-hypothesis in Descartes's *First Meditation* within the historical ontology of ourselves. It looks at the way in which the dream enters into and transforms Descartes' relation to his "system of actuality." In order to get free from his confinement within his system of actuality – an actuality defined by relations of power-knowledge, government, veridiction, and subjectivity – Descartes draws on the disruptive, *negative* capacity of the dream. But, while Descartes draws on the dream to get himself free and to establish a way of thinking and living differently, he also disqualifies the dream as a *positive* source of knowledge, truth, or subjectivity. Excavating this ambivalent place of the dream in the genealogy of our present, we aim to recover the dream not only in its negative power but also to open up the possibility of re-imagining its positivity as a form of counter-conduct, problematization, and element in the care of the self. This paper represents one piece of a larger genealogical study that examines the history of relationships between the arts of dreaming and the problematization of power-truth-subjectivity.

Foucault's "Introduction" to the French translation of Ludwig Binswanger's "Dream and Existence" appeared in 1954.<sup>1</sup> Foucault's first published work (according to the bibliography in the *Dits et Ecrits*), it was in fact far more than an "introduction" to Binswanger's existential psychoanalytic interpretation of dreaming.<sup>2</sup> It represents Foucault's own attempt to pursue the problematic he sees opened up in Binswanger's work: to grasp "existence as it appears to itself and can be deciphered in the dream."<sup>3</sup> Thirty years later, in 1984, shortly before he passed away, the *The Care of the Self*, Volume 3 of

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault and Ludwig Binswanger, *Dream and Existence*, ed. Keith Hoeller [1954] (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits I: 1954-1969*, ed. by Daniel Defert and François Ewald (1994), 13-64.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, "Introduction", in *Dream and Existence*, 33.

*The History of Sexuality* appears (simultaneously with *The Use of Pleasure*, Volume 2 of the same study).<sup>4</sup> The last of his works to be published while Foucault was still alive and according to his own intentions, *The Care of the Self* opens with an extended commentary on a text from the second century CE, *The Interpretation of Dreams* of Artemidorus.<sup>5</sup> In a certain sense then, the entire trajectory of Foucault's intellectual life from his first publication in 1954 until his death in 1984 – the work that came to define him – begins and ends with the interpretation of dreams. The dream itself and a certain fascination with it would form the horizon of the vast and varied territory Foucault explored during those thirty years. Would this explain the dream-like quality of so much of Foucault's writings and lectures – both in content and form?

Perhaps we shouldn't make too much of what is probably mere coincidence. And yet, like a dream, this detail offers itself as meaningful. In fact, during those thirty years of work, Foucault had relatively little to say of the dream. Nevertheless, Foucault does claim that, "a whole study could be made of the dream as alethurgy, in what and why [it] speaks the truth."<sup>6</sup> In the following I would like to offer a fragment of such a study. This paper represents one piece of a larger work that examines the relationship between the arts of dreaming and the historical problematizations of power-truth-subjectivity. We will attempt to establish, in this historical ontology of ourselves, the place of the dream in Descartes's *First Meditation*.<sup>7</sup>

It is within the historical problematization of the relation of subjectivity to truth and to power that Foucault reads Descartes's *Mediations* and the role of the dream in his work. What we want to see is the way in which the dream enters into and transforms

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'Usage des plaisirs* and *Le Souci de soi* (1984). English translation by Robert Hurley published by Vintage Books: *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume 2*. 1990; *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality Volume 3*. 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality 3* (1988), 1-36.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France 1979-1980* (2012), 49. The term alethurgy is coined and defined early in the first lecture: "we could call 'alethurgy' the manifestation of truth as the set of possible verbal or non-verbal procedures by which one brings to light what is laid down as true as opposed to false, hidden, inexpressible, unforeseeable, or forgotten, and say that there is no exercise of power without something like an alethurgy" (*ibid.*, 6-7).

<sup>7</sup> René Descartes, *The Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume II*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (1984), 3-62. Foucault returned to this text, and other Cartesian texts, throughout his life. For example: *Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. (1961). All references in this paper will be from the English translation: *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalifa. (2006); *Les Mots et les choses* (1966). References will be to the English translation: *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1994); "Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu," first published as an appendix to *Histoire de la Folie à l'âge classique* (1972). References will be to the English translation: "My Body, This Paper, This Fire," published in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 2*, ed. James D. Faubion (1998.); *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982* (2005). I have treated Foucault's engagement with Descartes extensively in a number of other places: "Foucault's Cartesian Meditations," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 45:1 (March 2005), 41-59; *Foucault's Askésis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (June 2007); "René Descartes," in *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, ed. Dr. Leonard Lawlor and Mr. John Nale, (December 2014); "Deconstruction, Care of the Self, Spirituality: Putting Foucault and Derrida to the Test," in *Between Derrida and Foucault*, ed. Yubraj Aryal, Vernon W. Cisney, Nicolae Morar and Christopher Penfield (October 2016).

Descartes' relation to his "system of actuality." We will show that in order to get free from his confinement within a system of actuality – an actuality defined by relations of power-knowledge, government, veridiction, and subjectivity – Descartes draws on the disruptive, negative capacity of the dream. This allows us to see the dream in terms of resistance and transformation and as a possible form of counter-conduct, subjugated knowledge, or problematization. But, while Descartes draws on the dream to get himself free and to establish a way of thinking and living differently, he also disqualifies the dream as a positive source of knowledge, truth, or subjectivity. Excavating this ambivalent place of the dream in the genealogy of our present, we aim to recover the dream not only in its negative power but also to open up the possibility of re-imagining its positivity as a form of counter-conduct, problematization, and element in the care of the self.

## 1

Beginning with the *Subjectivity and Truth* lectures (1980-81) and up until his death in 1984, Foucault's primary focus was a history of the "arts of living" (*techné tou biou*) that defined ancient philosophy and was central to Western cultures for many centuries.<sup>8</sup> This line of research emerged from Foucault's continuing genealogy of the ways in which individuals have been made into subject/objects of knowledge and control, of the processes of subjectification (*assujettissement*) and of his questions about the relations between subjectivity and the truth. After a long, winding path these questions enabled him to re-discover ancient Western culture and philosophy in an original way. This opened up a new field of exploration for Foucault, what he variously called the "arts of living" or the "technologies of the self", the "aesthetics of existence", the "care of the self."<sup>9</sup> In this framework – which defined philosophy from the ancient Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman periods, and from the early Christian and medieval periods, and right up until

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<sup>8</sup> While new material from this period continues to be published, the main sources for understanding Foucault's final research are his lectures at the Collège de France from 1980 until 1984. All references will be to the English translations of these lectures: *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981*. (2017); *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*. (2005); *The Government of the Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983* (2011); *The Courage of the Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983* (2011).

<sup>9</sup> These terms and variations of them in Greek, Latin, and French can be found throughout Foucault's writings and lectures from 1980-1984. While there have been attempts to make to make systematic distinctions and definitions, it seems to me that Foucault's use of the terms was more fluid, reflecting the exploratory, tentative and constantly evolving and shifting status of his understanding of the material at hand. The terms 'arts of living', 'arts of existence', 'aesthetics of existence', 'technologies of existence' all refer roughly to the developed attempts to give a certain 'style' to one's life, to manifest oneself in a form of living – speaking, acting, relating to others. The 'care of the self' refers more to the 'inner' relation of the self to itself – the value one places on one's emotions, appetites, thoughts (are they to be renounced, understood, affirmed, cultivated, moderated, etc.); the mode of self-reflexion one takes up with respect to these, for example interpretative, juridical, aesthetic etc.

the end of the Renaissance – philosophy was primarily a way of life and its practices were oriented towards the transformation of the self.

Foucault argued that philosophy in the ancient world was a reflection on and practice of care of the self (*epimeleia heauton, souci de soi*); that is, philosophy was conceived of as the art of living.<sup>10</sup> As care of the self, or the art (aesthetics) of existence, philosophy consisted of a wide range of experiments, theories, relationships, and practices that sought to cultivate a relationship between the self and itself. In some schools the care of the self was a preparatory work meant to be a foundation for living a noble, political life, displayed in one's virtuous actions and speeches. In other schools care of the self was itself seen as the *telos* – attaining a state of tranquility, self-mastery, or joy in the relationship of self to itself was not a means to a further end, but was itself the goal to be accomplished in life. One way or the other, it is in this context of care of the self and the arts of living, that the dream and dream interpretation, oneirocriticism, take on their singular importance. The interpretation of dreams is, Foucault writes,

a certain way of defining what to do with one's dream, what to do when awake, what to make of that obscure part of ourselves that is illuminated in the night. When we are awake we cannot not be the same person we were when we were sleeping, so how can I insert the dreamer subject that I was, how can I integrate it, give it meaning and value in my waking life? Ancient oneirocriticism is this: a way of living, a way of living inasmuch as, for at least a part of one's nights, one is a dreamer subject.<sup>11</sup>

The dreaming subject and the waking subject had to be integrated. The waking self had to confront, understand, and live with the truth of the dream. This experience of dream-truth was premised on a specific form of relationship between subjectivity and truth, what Foucault called in his 1982 Collège lectures, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, "spirituality."<sup>12</sup> Spirituality was foundational to the ancient Greek, Hellenistic, and Christian theories and practices of care of the self, and structured the experience of dreaming. Spirituality, Foucault holds, entails three basic postulates. First, that the subject does not have a natural right or capacity to know the truth. The very being or subjectivity of the subject – its initial and everyday, ordinary mode of being or way of living – cuts it off from the truth. In order to gain access to the truth, then, the subject must undergo a conversion, a transformation of its very being as subject. The second postulate of spirituality is that this conversion is brought about either through *eros* or *askésis*. In the erotic conversion the subject is torn away from itself in the overwhelming experience of *eros* that elevates and transforms the subject, raising it to a new perspective on itself and the world. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault does not spend much time discussing

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<sup>10</sup> This is the general position Foucault maintains from 1981, and certainly from 1982 in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, until his final lectures.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981*, 49-50.

<sup>12</sup> For this, and the following discussion of 'spirituality', see especially Lectures One and Two, January 6, First and Second Hour (*ibid.*, 1-30). I have also covered this topic in detail in *Foucault's Askésis* and in "Spirituality," in *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*.

erotic spirituality, but he deals extensively with *askésis*, spiritual exercises and spiritual direction. In *askésis* the subject brings about a conversion through working on itself, through the labor of spiritual exercises. This work transforms the subject in its subjectivity giving it access to truth, to true being. Finally, the third postulate of spirituality is that truth is not experienced as a quality of propositions, it is not the correspondence between a proposition and a state-of-affairs. Rather, truth is experienced in existential terms as salvation – that is, as beatitude, tranquility, peace, joy, fulfillment, self-mastery. Truth is realized in a true life. The dream finds its place in this spiritualized mode of subjectivity-truth relation: “the problem, the theme of the dream reappears when it is a matter of founding the subject’s access to truth, of wondering about the truth of the truth, or again of searching for what is the truth of the subject.”<sup>13</sup>

The care of the self and spirituality, the art of living, had essential political implications. The care and government of the self and others was continuously problematized. From Ancient Greece to the time of the Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and Renaissance, the search for an art of the ‘government of the self and others’, was linked to relations and strategies of power and knowledge. A central theme in the struggles around care and government was the relation of the subject to the truth – in order to live a true life (*alethes bios*) the subject must have the courage to hear and speak the truth freely (*parresia*). One cannot govern oneself or others, one cannot live a true life, without this capacity to hear and speak truth, without *parresia*. Only someone who first took care of his soul and of the truth could then be ready to take care of the city and have the good sense (knowledge, truth) to properly care for, govern, the polis. Good government of the self by itself was the foundation of the capacity to govern the polis.

Eventually this problematization was taken up by and formed the basis of Christian arts of living – ascetism, monasticism, mysticism.<sup>14</sup> And over the course of a long slow series of struggles and transformations, it took form in the pastorate and the pastoral government of souls, in the practices and relationships of spiritual direction and confession for example.<sup>15</sup> In Foucault’s account, the major upheavals of the Reformation, Renaissance, and Scientific Revolution that so radically transformed Western civilization were essentially tied to struggles over the arts of living, of governing oneself and others, over the institutionalization of processes of subjectivation and subjection, and of the re-

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<sup>13</sup> *Subjectivity and Truth*, 49-50.

<sup>14</sup> It was in the context of his study of the history of sexuality and the formation of sexuality in the Christian practices and relations of penance, confession, and spiritual direction that Foucault was initially led to study ancient Greek philosophy care of the self, *parrésia*, etc. In his last two lectures of *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983* (2011), 310-328, he sketches how the problematization of *parrésia*, care of the self and the art of living is taken up by the early Christians. But, from 1980-1984 he repeatedly points out the contrasts between Christian practices of the self and ancient Greek and Roman practices of the self.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault deals with this historical event in a number of texts but the most extensive treatments are to be found in *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983* (2007) and *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France. 1979-1980* (2014).

relationship of subjectivity to the truth.<sup>16</sup> Who governs who, how, and upon what basis of knowledge and truth? This broad set of interlocking questions has been at the root of so much of the history of the West. Descartes' thought represents a major historical rupture in which the relation between the subject and the truth undergoes a fundamental change. In the midst of the general outbreak of the problem of government of self and others in the Renaissance and Reformation periods, Descartes enables the displacement and disqualification of spirituality and care of the self to make room for the modern subject of scientific objectivity. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault calls this ("within a lot of inverted commas"), the "Cartesian moment."<sup>17</sup> This transformation is one of the foundations of our own actuality, founding our relation to truth as well as helping establish and intensify the processes of disciplinary panopticism and normalization, bio-political regulation and control, and neo-liberal governmentality that constitute our relations to our selves, others, and the world.

The (post)modern polis, which has been under construction and contestation since the time of that outbreak of revolt, transformation, invention, is premised upon the rupture of the "Cartesian moment." The disqualification of spirituality made room for the rise of modern objective, impersonal scientific knowledge. The displacement of care of the self made room for the rise of disciplinary, bio-political, and eventually neo-liberal governmentality.

## 2

It is in the context of his genealogical problematization of the relation between practices of the self, relations of government, and modes of truth telling (veridiction) beginning in ancient Greece that Foucault provides a clue for a genealogy of dreaming. In *Subjectivity and Truth*, Foucault begins his third lecture – a lecture which will be devoted to a commentary on Artemidorus' *The Interpretation of Dreams* – with a brief reflection on the role of the dream in the history of subjectivity, truth-telling, and government. He states that "the dream is obviously a strategic point, a privileged test [*épreuve*] for the question of relations between truth and subjectivity."<sup>18</sup> In order to understand the significance of this statement we must, as briefly as possible, place it within the framework of Foucault's project.

I will say that Western knowledge has encountered the problem of the dream in two or three of its main moments, and at the precise moment when what was at issue was the redistribution, the reevaluation of the apparatus [dispositive] of the relations between the truth and subjectivity, truth and subject. [...] When the question had to be posed of

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 227-230.

<sup>17</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 14ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Subjectivity and Truth*, 47.

how the subject can be certain of having access to the true truth, how he can possess the truth of the truth, this question, contemporary with the foundation of classical science, could be answered only by way of the problem, the obstacle, and the threat of the dream. [...] This was not only Descartes' problem, but Descartes gives it what is clearly its most radical expression in the seventeenth century.<sup>19</sup>

When it is a question of the subject's access to truth, why does Descartes, or more generally, "Western knowledge," begin to dream? Why does the dream appear in the form of a problem, obstacle, or threat that must be overcome at the beginning of the modern era and the beginning of the modern deployment of power-knowledge-subjectivity? And what might this tell us about the relation between dreaming and that deployment?

Perhaps, we come right to the heart of the problem in a line from Binswanger's *Dream and Existence*: "To dream means: I don't know what is happening to me." Foucault captures this idea when he writes in his Introduction to Binswanger that the dream "points to man as a transcended being."<sup>20</sup> It is precisely this 'being transcended' who is in a position to gain the "truth. To dream is to undergo the trial (*épreuve*) of being transcended. Being transcended is what happens to and what constitutes the dreamer as dreamer. In the ancient and medieval arts of living, "within the framework of the spiritual relation of subjectivity and truth, the dreamer's being transcended was precisely the condition of the dream as truth. Referring to the "canonical form of veridiction in archaic Greek texts," such as those of Homer or Hesiod, Foucault says,

dreams speak truth [...] precisely because I am not the master of the dream and something else happens to me in the dream, someone else emerges, someone who speaks, who gives signs, and this is where the astonishing, almost constant and universal element of the dream that speaks the truth is formed in Western, as well as other civilizations.<sup>21</sup>

The dream exposed the dreamer to a truth of the world and of himself that transcended his own reason. The dream granted access to the truth that one could not reach through his own effort, reasoning, or careful investigation of the facts. The dream transcended, disabled, the subject as agent, in order to grant the subject access to a truth he could not acquire on his own.

This aspect of dream-truth leads us to two others. First, because of the transcendent nature of the dream and its importance in the art of living, it is necessary to properly prepare for sleep and the dream. Foucault usually refers this aspect of dream-truth to the Pythagorean tradition:

Since dreaming while you sleep is, for the Pythagoreans, to be in contact with a divine world, which the world of immortality, beyond death, and also the world of truth, you must prepare yourself for the dream. Before sleep, then, you must engage in a number

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> "Introduction," in *Dream and Existence*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Government of the Living*, 48-49.

of ritual practices that will purify the soul and thus enable it to enter into contact with this divine world and understand its meanings, the more or less ambiguous messages and truths it reveals.<sup>22</sup>

In order to receive and understand the truth revealed to us in the dream, we need to prepare ourselves. We need to engage, for example, in ritual practices of purification so that our psyche will be ready to enter the dream world and to learn the truth there. Sleep is not merely a time of rest when we recharge our batteries for the next day. It is the time when we enter a realm beyond and more real than our own.

Furthermore, expressing transcendent truth from a divine realm, dreams speak in a language of symbols, the meanings of which are not immediately obvious to the dreamer. Therefore, in addition to learning and practicing the art of purifying our psyche before sleep, and just as important, we must be ready with an art of interpreting our dream when we wake up. We see an example of this aspect of the dream in *Subjectivity and Truth*, and in *The Care of the Self*, where Foucault comments on Artemidorus's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. This text, Foucault reminds us, is exemplary of a vast body of "oneirocriticism" that the ancient world produced.

As is generally the case in the tradition of the care of the self, in order to learn and practice the art of living, one needs to find a master, a spiritual director who can lead one in the attempt to achieve one's goal of living a true, beautiful, or noble life.<sup>23</sup> In order to receive and to understand the truth, one must become a disciple, one depends upon others, and upon the arts that one must learn and use properly. Artemidorus points out, further, that the only way he could learn his art of dream interpretation was to study the works of all those who went before him, and perhaps even more importantly he has listened to the dreams and dream interpretations of others.<sup>24</sup> The obscurity of dreams, like the obscurity of oracles, requires that one possess the proper interpretative key to understand. The dreamer must consult an expert who possesses the art of dream interpretation. In this sense dreaming was absorbed in the practice of spiritual direction, like the pastoral government of souls which was founded upon the pastor's capacity to produce individualized knowledge of each member of the flock, to interpret behind the conscious, intentional thoughts and feelings of each member of the flock the spiritual meanings, the truth, of his or her soul, but the truth that necessarily eludes the individual who thinks or feels it. Dream truth is not immediately clear and distinct – preparing to receive it and to interpret it ties one to an ancient tradition, to obscure arts, rituals, and relations of power-knowledge that displace the self-conscious agent's faculty of judgment and will.

This "spiritualized" experience of the dream as a key to the subject's relation to truth and to itself, also hooks on to the episteme of "sixteenth century thought" excavated by

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<sup>22</sup> *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> *Care of the Self: History of Sexuality* 3, 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Foucault in *The Order of Things*.<sup>25</sup> This episteme was founded on the play of resemblances. In other words, sixteenth century thought experienced knowledge and the search for truth by following the movement and play of resemblances between things: “The universe was folded in upon itself: the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars, and plants holding within their stems the secrets that were of use to man... the theatre of life or the mirror of nature, that was the claim made by all language, its manner of declaring its existence and of formulating its right of speech.”<sup>26</sup> Sixteenth century resemblance took, Foucault shows, four main forms.<sup>27</sup> One of those forms of “similitude” is “the play of sympathies”: “Sympathy plays through the depths of the universe in a free state. It can traverse the vastest spaces in an instant: it falls like a thunderbolt from the distant planet...”<sup>28</sup> Already, in the “Introduction” to *Dream and Existence*, Foucault appeals to the experience of a cosmos whose unity is constituted by the play of sympathy. And this unity is shown in extraordinary clarity to the dreamer:

In the dream and its individual significance Chrysippus saw the universal concatenation of the world and the effect of *sympatheia* which conspires to form the unity of the world and which animates each fragment with the same spiritual fire. Much later the Renaissance will take up the idea again.<sup>29</sup>

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These constitutive characteristics of dream-truth are precisely what Descartes had to free himself, and the modern subject, from. These elements are what threatened the foundation of a scientific, objective knowledge. As we have just seen, dreaming in the ancient world is an experience of truth in which the subject – the rational, self-controlled ego – is transcended. The modern scientific subject, the modern subject-object pair, and truth in the form of evidence, requires a subject who has direct, perceptual access to the truth. Descartes founds scientific truth in the absolutely certain truth of self-consciousness, of the cogito. The cogito in this moment of direct self awareness is the foundation, “the truth of the truth.” If, however, it is the dream that offers the truth of the subject, the truth of the *kosmos* and the subject’s place in it, then the cogito’s claim to be the truth of the truth would be undermined. Truth, in this case, would be rooted in illusion. And a ‘truth’ rooted in illusion, for Descartes, is too uncertain, unstable, unclear, and indistinct to believe in. It is no truth at all. For Descartes, the dream has already lost its power to provide positive, meaningful truth or evidence. This power can only belong to the dreams of a pre-modern subject of error, still asleep and caught up in the experience of

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<sup>25</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [1966] (1970), 17-45.

<sup>26</sup> *Order of Things*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-25.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-25.

<sup>29</sup> “Introduction,” in *Dream and Existence*, 47.

spirituality. Descartes's dream, the dream he dreams in the Meditations, is no longer the dream of Homer, Pythagoras, or Artemidorus, but it is also not yet the dream of Nietzsche or Freud. So what, then, was the dream for Descartes?

Descartes confronts the problem of the dream in the First Meditation. In the following I will develop Foucault's reading of this text which is spelled out in a number of different texts.<sup>30</sup> First, let's recall that Foucault famously claimed, in Chapter 2 of *The History of Madness*, that Descartes' *First Meditation* was one sign among many that a new experience of Unreason had displaced the previous one. Prior to the time of Descartes, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the mad were recognizable figures in the social landscape – they formed an essential, if problematic, part of the scenery and meaning of the everyday world. But this suddenly changed in the seventeenth century when the mad – as well as the poor, vagrants, libertines, among others – found themselves excluded and confined in the great houses of internment. Foucault argues that Descartes's *First Meditation* is the philosophical analogue of the social practice of this exclusion and confinement, this disqualification of Unreason and the mad.<sup>31</sup>

What motivates Descartes, he tells in the First Meditation, is his realization that so often he believed in things that have turned out to be false. The *Meditations* are driven by Descartes' desire to evade this error and uncertainty – he has erred too often and concerning fundamental, foundational matters. Foucault says that "I do not think we can understand the meticulousness with which [Descartes] defines his method unless we have clearly in mind his negative target, that from which he wants to distinguish and separate himself, which is precisely these methods of spiritual exercise that were frequently practiced in Christianity and which derive from the spiritual exercises of Antiquity, and especially from Stoicism."<sup>32</sup> Reading this text with Foucault, enables us to see this notion of 'error' within the context of the genealogy of power-knowledge-subjectivity. This allows us to grasp Descartes' desire to secure himself from error and to establish a foundation of scientific truth, as a desire to get free from the old regime of truth and subjectivity, the deployment of power-knowledge-subjectivity that we have traced above, which links a sixteenth century episteme of resemblance with a Christian practice of spiritual direction and pastoral power over and government of souls (government of the self and others).

Descartes asks: is it possible then to secure himself from error – from wandering blindly in uncertainty, believing in falsehoods? Can I, he asks, dispel illusions and get a secure, absolutely certain grip on reality? In other words, can I break free of this old regime of power-knowledge-subjectivity, and establish a new relation to the truth through the practice of a new government or conduct of my thoughts and my life? Descartes's aim is to establish his own, novel method for the conduct of his thoughts – a relation of

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<sup>30</sup> See note 7 above.

<sup>31</sup> Foucault, *History of Madness* [1961] (2006), 47.

<sup>32</sup> *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 294.

the self to itself, a government of the self by itself.<sup>33</sup> In the *Meditations*, the method takes the form, of course, of systematically pursuing and radicalizing doubt and uncertainty. This should allow him to see what beliefs, if any, can withstand the most extreme conditions of doubt and uncertainty. But for doubt to be systematic it must adhere to the discipline of reason: doubt only that which I have a *reason* to doubt. In order to avoid deception, for the sake of the meditation, Descartes will treat as false any belief for which he can find a reason to doubt, however unlikely that reason is. This way, Descartes will only accept as true those claims for which he can find absolutely no reason for doubt. For Descartes, only such a belief would be a suitable foundation for scientific knowledge. Furthermore, rather than hopelessly submitting every belief to the test, his method was to go straight to the foundational beliefs, the foundations of his other beliefs. First among these: the belief that the senses give an accurate report of the material objects affecting them. Among the reasons to doubt the senses, Descartes introduces the figure of madmen who believe they are kings when in fact they are poor; they believe they are gourds or made of glass. Could I be like them, he asks, could my senses be deceiving me about my body and its immediate surroundings? Descartes dismisses the possibility: *but such people are insane*, he writes, and I would be just as mad to compare myself to the mad.

This passage is the basis of Foucault's claim that Descartes's text is emblematic of the more general exclusion of the mad at the dawn of the modern era. For Descartes the idea that he might be mad in the very moment he is employing a rational method is *unthinkable*. This marks an important rupture. For his predecessor, Montaigne, for example, madness was always a possibility because Reason and Unreason could not be clearly distinguished. No matter how logical one's thoughts seem, no matter how carefully one sticks to the method, one could still be mad.<sup>34</sup> Montaigne and Descartes inhabit two different orders of thinking – for the former the relation of the self to itself and to the truth is always internally threatened by Unreason and consequently madness. For Descartes, insofar as he is thinking logically and following a rational method he cannot be mad because Unreason no longer dwells within the heart of Reason. Unreason and Reason have been divided such that they are now external to another.

But, does this mean that sense perception, so long as we are not mad, provides us absolutely certain knowledge of our immediate surroundings, that our embodied presence to the environment directly in contact with us is the foundation of truth? Descartes offers another condition in which seemingly direct sensory awareness of our embodied situation is deceptive, namely, when we are dreaming. Dreams, unlike madness for Descartes, cannot be kept at a distance from a rational, healthy individual. They haunt our perceptual experience from within: "I recall that I am a man who sleeps at night and

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<sup>33</sup> This can be seen in (and Foucault refers to) a number of Descartes' texts: *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, *Discourse on Method* (especially Parts 1-3 on living and 6 on the purpose of science), *Principles of Philosophy* (especially the First Principle), and of course *Meditations on First Philosophy* (especially the First Meditation), in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volumes I and II* (1984).

<sup>34</sup> *History of Madness*, 45-46.

dreams". In dreams I have sensory experiences of objects that are not there. In dreams we sometimes imagine things even madder than what madmen believe. But other times we dream scenes and events that are extremely familiar, that resemble day-to-day life so perfectly that we do not doubt them for a second. Only when we wake up do we recognize that these experiences were only imaginary. Dreams then can resemble genuine sense experience so perfectly that Descartes, at this stage of his meditations, can find no absolutely certain way of distinguishing being asleep and dreaming from being awake and conscious of a material world of objects surrounding his body. In other words, even though it feels like he is awake, sitting by the fire, with his papers before him, it is possible that all of that is imaginary and he is in fact in bed asleep, dreaming.

This is not the place to address Derrida's famous deconstruction of this passage from *The History of Madness*.<sup>35</sup> But it did give Foucault the occasion to elaborate his interpretation of the Meditations. Here we will remain focused on what this text reveals about the dream in Descartes and in the history of the relation of the self to itself and to the truth. Responding to Derrida, Foucault writes that, we "must keep in mind the title itself of 'Meditations'".<sup>36</sup> Keeping this in mind means paying attention to the nature of the "discursive events" of which the text is composed. In a "pure demonstration", in a text composed exclusively or primarily of arguments, statements are linked by formal rules and ought to be understood and evaluated according to their logical validity. Consequently, "the subject of the discourse is in no sense implied in the demonstration".<sup>37</sup> In other words, in a text devoted to logical demonstration, each statement takes place, or happens, as the result of the application of the formal rules of logic and the aim of the demonstration is to arrive at the proper conclusion, which follows necessarily from the sequence. The essence of an argument is in the relation of each statement to the others. The existence and status of the subject who writes or reads is inessential to the meaning or structure of the text. But a meditation, on the other hand, "produces, as so many discursive events, new enunciations that bring in their wake a series of modifications in the enunciating subject".<sup>38</sup> This is the ascetic or meditative dimension of the text. Insofar as the meditation aims at bringing about modifications in the subject, it is a practice of the self – a practice that aims at the transformation of the subject.

In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault returns to this very point and we can see him insert Descartes's text into the tradition of philosophical care of the self and the spiritual relation of subjectivity and truth. In this text he defines meditation "not as the game the subject plays with his thought but as the game thought plays on the subject".<sup>39</sup> In the case of the first meditation, Foucault writes that, "Descartes is not thinking about

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<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness," in *Writing and Difference* (1978). For extensive discussion of the "dialogue" between Foucault and Derrida see, for example, *Between Derrida and Foucault* (2016).

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, "My Body, This Paper, This Fire," 405.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 405-406.

<sup>39</sup> *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 358.

everything in the world that could be doubtful. [...] Descartes puts himself in the position of the subject who doubts everything. [...] This, then, is not at all an exercise carried out on thought and its content. It is an exercise by which, through thought, the subject puts himself in a certain situation".<sup>40</sup>

The *Meditations*, according to Foucault's reading, include both demonstrative reason and meditative, ascetic thinking. In his reply to Derrida, Foucault traces the two kinds of discursive practices as Descartes' employs them in the development of doubt in the first meditation. Foucault follows and paraphrases the sequence of demonstrative statements up to the point where the doubt requires ascetic thinking. As we have seen, Descartes states a principle of practical reason: do not trust someone who has deceived you. He notes that the senses have deceived him on numerous occasions. Therefore, the senses should not be trusted. This is merely sound reasoning. The concluding statement follows logically from the previously established premises. But, though Descartes now has arrived at the valid conclusion of his argument, he finds himself unable actually to doubt his senses. They may be unreliable under specific conditions in which perception is difficult – for example, when objects are far away or very small. But while the senses have deceived him in these situations, he cannot make himself question the certainty that he is here in this room, even though it is nothing other than his supposedly unreliable senses which convince him of these facts. In other words, the immediate actuality of the subject, the givenness of the existing subject who is trying to doubt here and now, resists rational, methodical doubt. The obstacle that resists rational doubt, that will not submit to the reason, Foucault calls, the "system of actuality".<sup>41</sup>

What is the "system of actuality"? In his response to Derrida, Foucault writes that the progress of doubt in the *Meditations* runs into the resistance of the "body" and the "immediate perception" of it, or "more exactly an area defined as 'the vivid and the near'".<sup>42</sup> The obstacle to doubt, Foucault writes, "is not certain things that in themselves [...] resist doubt, but, rather, that which characterizes the actuality of the meditating subject (the place of his meditation, the gesture he is in the process of making, the sensations that strike him)".<sup>43</sup> This is what Foucault calls the "whole system of actuality which characterizes this moment" of Descartes's meditation. It includes "all these guarantees of rational meditation which he gave himself in choosing [...] the moment of the undertaking [...], its conditions [...], its place".<sup>44</sup> The system of actuality is constituted by all that makes the meditation possible, all that constitutes Descartes as the meditating subject who he is in that actual moment – its here and now, its order, meaning, and reality. The notion of the 'system of actuality' places the accent on embodied emplacement and perceptual awareness of oneself in one's immediate surroundings. For Descartes, who seeks to doubt as far as possible, the solidity, the experiential density of the 'system of actuality

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "My Body, This Paper, This Fire," 405.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 408.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

ty' in its embodied immediacy, represents an obstacle. He cannot get free of it for doubting his own actuality – his own presence and self-presence – heads toward madness, and yet getting free of this actuality is precisely what reason demands. The system of actuality threatens to ensnare the freedom and mastery of reason. It threatens to govern Descartes's thought precisely at the moment when he seeks to get free of its power.

What is the power of embodied emplacement? The system of actuality is imbued with its obstinate 'thereness', its way of rising up to meet me, whether that be in the form of a familiar environment where I have a practical mastery, or as something strange or hostile, it is lived as 'outside', 'other' or 'independent'. *But* we might speculate a bit, looking back on these texts in light of the work Foucault went on to do. Foucault, at least from the time of writing *The History of Madness*, had come to see that the 'thereness' of the world of experience, the 'system' of the 'system of actuality' was historical in nature. Particular, historically unique deployments of power-knowledge-subjectivity, Foucault says in the Introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, provide the coordinates, constitute the axes, where experience can arise and unfold in all of its dimensions, and take on its volume, density, and trajectory.<sup>45</sup> In the unusual phrase, 'system of actuality', I hear an echo of this space of experience that is historically singular and configured by practices, relations, discourses of power-truth-subjectivity. When Foucault writes that the doubt runs into an obstacle in the form of the "system of actuality" of the meditating subject, I think we can take that to mean the historical field of experience formed along the poles of power-truth-subjectivity. In essence, the waking subject – the very subjectivity of the waking self – forms one of the axes of the system of actuality. The subjectivity of the waking self is part of that system, one its constitutive elements.

It is at this point, according to Foucault, that the discursive procedure of the text shifts from the demonstrative order to the ascetic. Given its embodied, embedded nature, the system of actuality harbors a power of confinement operating 'below' the level reached by a logical demonstration, so to speak, that cannot be escaped merely through being represented in propositions. Foucault shows that when logic reaches its limits – when it runs up against the historical conditions of its very possibility as the obstacle it must overcome – the subject needs to undergo a conversion, needs to modify its very being as a subject, through an *askésis* in order not simply to cognize propositions but "to feel their truth."<sup>46</sup> The dream of Descartes then represents a disruption or interruption of this system, the possibility of disengaging from it, de-actualizing it.

Meditating on the dream, recognizing that it is at once delusional like madness, as vivid and compelling as perception, and the ordinary occurrence of any person, sane or

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<sup>45</sup> Referring to his approach in writing *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, he writes that he came to understand experience "as the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture" (*The Use of Pleasure*, 4). He goes on to explain in the following paragraphs that this means showing how experience is constituted along the axes of relations of power ("types of normativity"), modes of discourse ("fields of knowledge"), and practices of the self ("forms of subjectivity").

<sup>46</sup> "My Body, This Paper, This Fire," 406.

mad, results in Descartes's becoming disoriented, dazed, unsure of whether or not he is awake or asleep. Consequently, his relation to his own immediate actuality, his very presence in the room has been modified: "The subject who thinks of dreaming is thereby disturbed."<sup>47</sup> Meditating on the dream has the power here to induce a sort of quasi-sleep, a dream-like state, in the meditating subject – he begins to dream. This disturbance opens up the possibility of continuing doubt just at the point where demonstrative reasoning had reached its limit. The dream frees Descartes from being captive to his "system of actuality" – the dreaming subject constitutes itself precisely in the mode of a departure from the waking subjectivity of the self. It *de-actualizes* this system, or *de-systematizes* the actual, making room for Descartes to give new shape to his life and to the world, to invent a new form of life and the possibility of a new kind of polis.

## 4

In the *Meditations* the dream is both different from and identical with perception. It is so similar as to be indistinguishable, and yet like madness it is delusional in that what we see and hear in it is not really there. Descartes never wonders about this uncanny duality of the dream, its ambiguous place somehow between madness and clear perception, that blurs the distinction between the two. From the beginning, the dream appears to him wholly in negative terms, in terms of its deceptiveness and emptiness. And yet for all its nothingness, it still has a power to fascinate, deceive, and disturb. This power does not come to it from the ego cogito – rather it threatens to undermine the cogito even as the cogito attempts to bend it to its own ends. Descartes never takes up the dream in its positive dimensions or investigates the dream world simply in its own terms. He never wonders about its positive relation to the world of the cogito who is awake.

For Descartes it is as though the dream's positivity necessarily connects it to a whole deployment of power-knowledge-subjectivity that he seeks to escape. Unlike madness, the dream haunts the sleep of the reasonable and sane just as it does the unreasonable and the mad. Being transcended each night in one's sleep, being submitted to the "phantasmagoria" of the dream-world is enough to cast doubt upon the waking consciousness even of a healthy, rational, sane, person. Seen in this context, Descartes's dream in the *Meditations* is not merely offered as another step in a deductive argument, another reason why we should doubt our senses. From this angle it serves as an index of the conquest of that entire regime of truth – it signifies that the old episteme, the old order of government, and the spiritual relationship of subjectivity and truth have been overcome and the path towards an objective science of nature grounded in the subject has been cleared.<sup>48</sup> For Descartes the language of resemblance, of a world bound together by *sym-*

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>48</sup> *Order of Things*, 47.

*patheia*, is the language of madness, or of the dream. The dream – with its obscure system of symbols, rituals of purification, and presumed masters of the arts of dream interpretation – is no longer the source of truth but rather a threat to the truth. It is no longer a path to insight, but a constraint upon the agency, the freedom, of the individual thinker. For Descartes, only the rational, wide-awake cogito can gain access to the truth through clear and distinct perception.

In Descartes' First Meditation we can see the disruptive power of the dream to de-systematize actuality or de-actualize systems. This negative power to problematize one's concrete present allows dreaming to open up a space of freedom for critique and for invention. At the same time, the disqualification of the dream in its *positive* power to change the subject, grant access to truth, or even change the world has been, according to Jonathan Crary, a distinctive factor of the rise of modernity – of what Foucault diagnoses as the rise modern relations of power and government, modes of veridiction, and practices of the self. Crary writes,

The imaginative capability of the dreaming sleeper underwent a relentless erosion, and the vitiated identity of a visionary was left over for a tolerated minority of poets, artists, and mad people. Modernization could not proceed in a world populated with large numbers of individuals who believed in the value or potency of their own internal visions or voices.<sup>49</sup>

It is this erosion of the "imaginative capability of the dreaming sleeper" that we have begun both to diagnose and counter in this paper. But what are we to make of the dream's positivity? We are not in a position to spell out a positive theory of dreaming here. Nevertheless, we can at least give an indication and example of our possible orientation. The dream can be taken as a world of its own, with its own experiences, visions, sounds, meanings, ideas, and affects. Freud and Jung, Nietzsche and the surrealists, and of course, Binswanger all entered into this world. In the modern era, Freud was the one who went furthest in re-opening the dialogue with the dream in its positivity and saw it as the "royal road to the unconscious."<sup>50</sup> Freud recovered the associative thinking of a world constituted by the play of resemblances, of *sympatheia*. However, for Freud, the dreamer is no longer a *being transcended*, but rather a *being repressed*. And for him the positivity of the dream had to be translated into the language of an ego cogito who must adjust to and find happiness within the deployment of disciplinary normalization, bio-power, and neo-liberal government. It is Nietzsche, on the other hand, who takes up the dream as the fundamental truth of the actual, not as a symptomatic retreat from it. It is Nietzsche who has the "wonderful and new" and yet "fearful and ironic" insight:

I have *discovered* for myself that the ancient humanity and animality, indeed the whole prehistory and past of all sentient being, continues within me to fabulate, to love to

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<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7* (2014), 106.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1900].

hate, and to infer – I suddenly awoke in the middle of this dream, but only to the consciousness that I am dreaming and that I must go on dreaming lest I perish...<sup>51</sup>

This is not the place for us to ask what Nietzsche's wonderful yet fearful and ironic insight means for us now, much less to follow its path to the surrealists and beyond. No doubt, attempting an answer to this question would mean something other than merely reviving the ancient practices, myths and metaphysical speculations surrounding the dream world. Rather it would lead us to consider ways in which the dream might escape its reduction to an object of scientific or psychological analysis and become subject again. Within the modern system of actuality, sleeping and dreaming are merely biological functions which must be managed and optimized with respect to health and productivity. But what if we sought to invent new practices of entering into sleep as a domain of truth and freedom all its own? Our modern scientific focus on empirical objectivity attempts to locate the dream as an objective, empirical fact, an occurrence that can be *observed* in brain activity during sleep. But such a view obscures the fact that dreaming begins before sleep and continues after we wake, drifting in and out of reverie, distraction, fantasy and when we allow ourselves the chance to speak and listen without the interruption of judgment, the demand to make logical or moral sense and we free ourselves from the neo-liberal demand to economize every instant of our time. Thomas Ogden, for example, drawing on the work of Klein, Winnicott, and Bion, writes that these "silent" moments (which interrupt the overlapping monologues of reason, economy, discipline, neo-liberal governmentality) constitute a "space occupied by the interplay of reveries."<sup>52</sup> For Ogden dreaming cannot truly be reduced to the activity of a self-contained ego, but rather is a space and movement that constitutes the subjects who enter into it – for example, the analyst and analyzand in the process of analysis. Can insights such as this inform our attempt to re-imagine a dream-practice that is not merely negative, that both honors the solitary flight of the sleeping dreamer but also enables new forms of relationship and community, new freedoms and forms of life? These questions go beyond the scope of this paper. The positive task of answering them demands a more extensive genealogy of the problematization of dreaming, the dreaming subject and its relation to power, truth, and who we are today.

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<sup>51</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (2001), 63.

<sup>52</sup> T. H. Ogden, "Reconsidering Three Aspects of Psychoanalytic Technique," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 77 (1996), 883-899.

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