Descartes, Luther, and the Fifth Lateran Council

Aderemi Artis

In the dedicatory epistle to his *Meditations*, Descartes presents his work as a fulfillment of *Apostolici regiminis*, the bull produced by the eighth session of the Fifth Lateran Council: ‘the Lateran Council under Leo X, in the eighth session, has expressly commanded Christian philosophers to demonstrate the truth with their utmost strength.’ An examination of the text of *Apostolici regiminis* seems to corroborate Descartes’ claim. We there find the council proclaiming, ‘We command each and every philosopher teaching in universities of general studies or teaching publicly...to use all their efforts to make clear to their students the truth of the Christian religion.’ It therefore would have been a bitter irony had Descartes lived to see his *Meditations* and other works placed on the *Index of Prohibited Books* in 1663, thirteen years after his death.

The relationship between Descartes’ work and the Christian religion have been the subject of both scholarly and lay attention from the beginning of his philosophical career. The topic of this essay will be confined to the specific issue of the relationship between the *Meditations* and *Apostolici regiminis*, although we will have occasion to discuss selected other elements from Descartes’ oeuvre. My primary aim will be to show that when we attend to the specifics of the bull, and to the content and character of Descartes’ claims in the *Meditations* and elsewhere, we find that Descartes does an exemplary job of carrying out the central doctrinal decree of the bull.

I will begin with an examination of the assumptions made about *Apostolici regiminis* by much Descartes scholarship, and will argue that the chief doctrinal decree of the bull is to deny the doctrine of double truth and assert there to be a single truth. I then contend that Martin Luther played a significant role in confounding the issue of the immortality of the soul with that of the doctrine of the double truth. Therefore, by the time Descartes began his work, specific doctrinal controversies prompted by the Reformation had sensitized his readers to topics such as the immortality of the soul and transubstantiation, to the

1 Concilium Lateranense sub Leone X habitum, sessione VIII, & expresse mandat Christianis Philosophis...veritatem pro viribus probent’ VII, 3. All translations are my own; I have benefited throughout from consultation with various extant English translations, as can be found in the bibliography. All quotations from Descartes are from the Adam and Tannery edition, all quotations from Luther are from the Weimar edition.

2 Insuper omnibus et singulis philosophis in universitatibus studiorum generalium, et alibi publice legentibus...mandamus...eisdem veritatem religionis christianae omni conatu manifestum facere’ 606 in Tanner (1990).
neglect of the overriding theme of the doctrine of the double truth. Finally, I show how, throughout his career, Descartes staunchly held to the notion that there is only one truth, that truth cannot contradict truth, and that philosophy and reason, rightly employed, can never produce claims contrary to the established doctrines of the Holy Catholic Church.

The Significance of Apostolici Regiminis

Descartes’ presentation of his Meditations as a fulfillment of the bull of the Fifth Lateran Council has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Most scholarship that takes up the relationship between the Meditations and Apostolici regiminis proceeds according to two key assumptions: first, that the purpose of Apostolici regiminis is to decree the human soul to be immortal, and, second, that the key relationship between the Meditations and the bull centers on the same topic. In addition to these two key assumptions, some scholars conclude that Descartes’ attempts, while perhaps sincere and valiant, were, in the end, a failure.

An exemplary instance of this approach can be found in Stephen Gaukroger’s Descartes: An Intellectual Biography, where he claims that the purpose of ‘the decree of the Lateran Council of 1513’ was to attack ‘Alexandrian and Averroist heresies,’ and that Descartes in the Meditations hoped to ‘defend the Church orthodoxy on God and the soul.’ Gaukroger gives a succinct summary of the heresies he sees as the target of Apostolici Regiminis: ‘in its Averroistic version...the intellect is in no way personal because mind or soul, lacking any principle of individuation in its own right, cannot be apportioned one to each living human body...in its Alexandrian version...the soul is conceived in purely functional terms; in either case, personal immortality is denied, and its source in both versions is Aristotle himself.’ Finally, with regard to Descartes’ relationship with these heresies, Gaukroger concludes, ‘Alexandrianism and Averroism are the Charybdis and Scylla through which Descartes must steer a passage in setting out his doctrine of the nature of the mind. In this, he faces insuperable difficulties.’

I contend, in contrast to the kind of position taken by Gaukroger and others, that the primary doctrinal goal of Apostolici regiminis is not to decree any specific doctrine regarding the human soul, its immortality, and the metaphysical underpinnings of this immortality, but rather to decree the doctrine of ‘single truth’ against that of ‘double truth.’ The most extreme version of the doctrine of double truth is, essentially, dialetheism – that a

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1337.
2Ibid.
3Ibid.
4149.
5348. See also C. Fowler, in Descartes on the Human Soul: Philosophy and the Demands of Christian Doctrine, who writes that ‘at the Fifth Lateran Council...[the human soul was] defined as immortal, in opposition to the sixteenth century followers of the Averroist and Alexandrian interpretations of Aristotle’ 312.
6My account of the council’s aims closely follows that of Constant (2002).
proposition and its negation can both be true. This is the position attacked in
the condemnation of 1277, which claims that the doctrine of double truth is that
‘there is a truth resulting from philosophy, but not catholic faith, as if there
were two contrary truths.’\textsuperscript{1} However, it is doubtful that any theologians or
philosophers targeted by the condemnation actually held such an extreme view
as naked dialethism. A weaker but more plausible version would be that
reason can arrive at conclusions in direct opposition to those of faith, which
need not imply dialethism, but is potentially more threatening because it
opens up the possibility that faith might have to give way to reason on a given
issue.\textsuperscript{2} This version will occupy our attention.

The central doctrinal statement of Apostolici regiminis is the decree that
truth cannot contradict truth, and that the truths and conclusions of reason and
philosophy can never come into conflict with the truths of faith. The first and
most compelling reason to believe that the doctrinal declaration of the eighth
session was directed at the issue of single truth versus double truth, and not at
the issue of the immortality of the soul, is a close examination of the text itself.
The paradigmatic linguistic expression of formal decree, the verb \textit{decernere} –
decree – and the closely related \textit{definere} – define, are found not in the passages
that discuss the specific issue of the immortality and nature of the human soul,
but in those dedicated to proclaiming the doctrine of single truth against that of
double truth. The Council writes that because ‘true cannot contradict truth, we
define every assertion contrary to the truth illuminated by faith to be
completely false...we decree that the detestable and abominable heretics and
infidels weakening the Catholic faith will be punished and shunned.’\textsuperscript{3} This
explains why the disciplinary section of the bull specifies that the seeds of error
and heresy are to be found in ‘overly long studies of human philosophy, which
God, according to the word of the Apostle, has made foolish and empty, and
which, without the spice of divine wisdom and the light of revealed truth, lead
into error.’\textsuperscript{4} In contrast, when it comes to the passages in Apostolici regiminis
that take up the issue of the immortality of the soul and its Aristotelian
underpinnings, instead of employing the language of decree or definition, the
Council rather presents belief in immortality as already established both on
grounds of scripture and of a previous conciliar proclamation.\textsuperscript{5} The treatment
of immortality by the Council, then, is at best merely a restatement of what it
took to be existing church doctrine. What the Council seeks to make clear is

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\item \textit{ea esse vera secundum philosophiam, sed non secundum fidem catholicam, quasi sint due
contrarie veritates’ 543 in Denifle (1893).}
\item Pine (1968) argues that Pomponazzi adopts precisely this position.
\item \textit{Verum vero minime contradicat, onnem assertionem veritati illuminae fidei contrarium,
omino falsam esse definimata...detestabile et abominabile haereticos et infideles,
catholicam fiden labefactantes, vitandos et puniendos fore decernimata’ 605-6 in Tanner
(1990).}
\item \textit{praecipue humanae philosophiae sua diuturniora, quam Deus, secundum verbum Apostoli,
evacuavit et stultam fecit, absque divinæ sapientiae condimento, et quae sine revelatae veritatis
lumine in errorem...inducunt’ 606 in Tanner (1990).}
\item The biblical passages appealed to are Matthew 10:28 and 25:46, John 12:25, and I Corinthians
Corinthians 15:19; the council is that of Vienne.
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that the root of doubts on the point of immortality lie in the infestation of
human philosophy into the field of the divine.

While *Apostolici regimini* may have begun as an attempt to eliminate the
doctrine of double truth in favor of that of single truth, it soon became
embroiled in the emerging controversy between Martin Luther and the Roman
Church. The issue of immortality rose to the forefront when Luther lampooned
the bull as emblematic of the diremption of the church. While Luther at times
appears to distinguish between the claims of *Apostolici regimini* concerning
the immortality of the soul and those concerning the doctrine of double truth,
he also frequently conflates these two elements of the bull. Thus, while he was
in a position to recognize that the core of *Apostolici regimini* was directed the
doctrine of double truth, and that the issues surrounding immortality were seen
by the council as growing out of a failure to adhere to the central truth of faith,
there are a number of reasons why he nevertheless fails to do so clearly in his
published writings. Chief among these are, first, the fact that his remarks on
*Apostolici regimini* are typically launched in a polemical fashion, and, second,
that his opinions on the bull were formed simultaneously with worries about
how the church had handled, and was handling, the nature of spiritual authority
and the proper sources of Christian belief.

**Luther's Polemics**

*Apostolici regimini* apparently first came under Luther's scrutiny in
preparation for the Leipzig debate of 1519, and his response to the bull is
paradigmatic of the internal dialectic that lasts throughout his career. In
the course of his preparations he writes that 'today everything in the city is utterly
wicked and corrupt...what wonder, if under the name of the venerable Roman
church so much evil floods into the whole church with full force and vigor, that
no one can resist...on account of the study of Roman laws and the neglect of
the Gospel, they had to make a statute in the latest Council that the human soul
is immortal. What do you think this decree indicates?' In this instance, Luther
connects the material in *Apostolici regimini* on immortality with the falling
away of the church from the revealed biblical word, and, in addition, to the
church having become too closely entangled with the secular domain. Thus, on
the one hand, he asserts that the Fifth Lateran Council has found it necessary to
make a statute on immortality and uses this to ridicule the state of the Roman
Church. On the other hand, he tacitly acknowledges that what is really at stake
is the broader issue of the primacy of scripture over secular learning. In 1520,
not long after Leipzig, he again references the bull, writing that 'it is even

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1 Much of this account derives from the work of Headly (1973).
2 Hodie omnia sint in urbe inquinatissima et corruptissima...Quid mirum, si sub venerabili
Rhomanae ecclesiae nomine tota inadaverint in omnem ecclesiam pleno impetu et
praecipitu, cui nemo resister possit...Legum Rhomanarum studium et evangeli neglectus, ut
necesse habuerint statuere in concilio novissimo, Animam hominis esse immortalem. Quid,
putas, hae decreta indicat? II, 226.
agreed by means of Aristotle\textsuperscript{1} and natural reason that the soul is immortal, thus suggesting an appreciation that the relationship between reason and faith is at the heart of Apostolici regiminis. However, in the same year, he writes that it is on account of the ‘worldly splendor’\textsuperscript{2} of the Roman church that it has become necessary to make spiritual immortality an article of faith, intimating that it is simply another symptom of secular corruption that the council had to make pronouncements on anything regarding immortality. Apostolici regiminis returns to Luther’s thoughts periodically throughout his career, and the twin elements of ridicule of the Council’s treatment of immortality based on the perceived worldly corruption of the Church, and recognition that there was a more general issue at stake, vie for primacy in his writing. The fact that the issue of the authority of councils was also addressed by the Fifth Lateran, and that Luther developed charged feelings on this topic in opposition to the council, could only exacerbate his attitude toward its pronouncements considered more broadly.

Luther was not, then, wholly unaware that there were more global issues at stake than immortality for the Fifth Lateran Council when it met in its eighth session. But his outrage and disgust at the Roman church led him to periodically focus on immortality as symptomatic of this corruption. And as Luther’s antipathy to the church of Rome accelerated, it became more and more difficult for him to engage in a measured analysis of conciliar decrees. The emphasis on the making of formal decrees on a host of specific doctrines at the later Council of Trent, along with the fractal processes of doctrinal confessionalization that permeated late sixteenth and early seventeenth Europe, meant that specific topics such as immortality highlighted by Luther became issues upon which lines could be drawn and factions demarcated.

Descartes and the Double Truth

Thus, by the time Descartes began his work, the atmosphere had become charged with a multitude of specific confessional disagreements; nevertheless, there was no point at which Descartes believed the rational enterprise of philosophy he pursued to be incompatible with established and official Catholic doctrine. Indeed, quite the opposite: he was convinced that his own philosophy was superior to that of his competitors on every major front on which his claims intersected with dogmas of Roman Catholicism. He was convinced of this for the precisely same reason that the church was convinced of the ultimate harmony of faith and reason: truth cannot contradict truth. Thus we see Descartes struggling again and again to map out his particular account of a host of specific issues related to church teaching, such as the nature and immortality of the soul, the structure of the solar system, and the Eucharist, and these struggles are present in both his private correspondence and published work spanning many years. In none of these instances does Descartes

\textsuperscript{1}Es ist auch beschlossen durch...Aristoteles’ VII, 425.

\textsuperscript{2}‘weltlicher pracht’ VI, 433.
relinquish the overarching principle of single truth and primacy of sound Catholic doctrine. Since the question of the relation between the truth of faith and the truth of reason arises not only in the topic of the immortality of the soul, but also in the other particular topics explored by Descartes, it will provide a helpful background to briefly examine his treatment of two of these other topics, the Eucharist and Copernicanism. In addition, we will examine some of the occasions Descartes takes to address the topic of the relationship between faith and reason more generally.

Descartes believed that his philosophy provided a better explanation for the Eucharist than its Aristotelian competition, and tried valiantly to convince interested contemporaries. In a 1638 letter to Vatier he writes, concerning the publication of ‘my physics and metaphysics...fundamentally, I have no fear that anything against the faith will be found there, because, on the contrary, I boast that it has never rested so firm on human reasons as it does on my principles. More particularly, transubstantiation, which the Calvinists seize on as impossible to explain by the ordinary philosophy, is very easy to explain by mine.’ Similarly, in another letter to Vatier appended to the Latin edition of the Meditations, he gives the Eucharist as an example of how his philosophy surpasses his competition, and in this context writes, ‘since it is never possible for one truth to oppose another, it would be impious to fear that truths discovered in philosophy could oppose those of faith.’ The parallel to the bull Apostolici regimini is unmistakable. Copernicanism, like the Eucharist, was an issue that vexed Descartes for many years, and although his attitude toward it was somewhat different from that of the Eucharist, his conviction of the compatibility of faith and reason never wavered. Much of Descartes' thoughts on the issue can be surveyed in a series of letters, most of which were written to Mersenne in a period spanning over a decade from 1633 to 1644. In an early instance revealed in a 1633 letter, Descartes discusses the status of the Copernican system, and the relationship of his Le Monde to this system. It is clear that Descartes had been, during the composition of Le Monde, convinced of Copernicanism, and had believed it to be compatible with Catholic doctrine. However, in his letter he says that he has since become aware that important authorities in the Church have come down against Copernicanism, and writes, ‘I admit that if it is false, all the foundations of my philosophy are also false, because it can obviously be demonstrated from them...but as I would not, for anything in the world, want something to come from my one discourse in which the smallest word could be found that had been disapproved of by the

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1 For in-depth discussions see chapter seven in Ariew (1999), Armogathe (1977), and Gouhier (1972).
2 Ma Physique & Metaphysique...Je crains nullement au fons qu’il s’y trouve rien contre la foi; car au contraire j’ose me vanter que jamais elle n’a esté si forst appuyee par les raisons humaines, qu’elle peut estre si l’on suit mes principes; & particulierement la Transubstantiation, que les Calvinistes reprennent comme impossible a expliquer par la Philosophie ordinaire, est tres-facile par la mienne’ I, 564-5.
3 Cum una veritas alteri adversari munquam possit, esset impietas timere, ne veritates in Philosophia inventae iis quae sunt de fide adversentur’ VII, 581.
Church, I also strongly want to suppress it.\textsuperscript{1} In this case, Descartes' desire to publicly pursue a particular doctrine concerning the solar system is overridden by the fact that, at that moment, the Church appeared to be leaning against Copernicanism, even if only well below the conciliar and papal levels.\textsuperscript{2} And yet all this is not to say that Descartes has no confidence in reason, because when he is convinced that nothing in his work conflicts with Catholic teaching, as he is when he writes to Mersenne concerning the movement of the earth in 1640, he again closely and strikingly echoes the position of the Fifth Lateran: 'believing very strongly in the infallibility of the Church, and also not doubting my reasons, I cannot fear that one truth is contrary to the other.'\textsuperscript{3}

We find a similar situation in his general statements about reason and faith. The \textit{Principles of Philosophy} (1644), Descartes' last and in many ways most comprehensive major treatise, presents a few brief but paradigmatic examples of his conviction regarding the single truth and the position of supremacy of the universal church. Here he writes, 'the highest rule to be set in our memory should be that those things revealed to us by God are to be believed with the greatest certainty of all.'\textsuperscript{4} Later in the work, after delivering to the reader a comprehensive compendium of his philosophy, he declares that 'remembering my frailty, I affirm nothing, but submit everything here...to the authority of the Catholic Church.'\textsuperscript{5} In a polemic written near the end of his life, Descartes once again addresses the question of double or single truth directly. He writes that, while there are some propositions which 'are believed by faith alone, such as those concerning the mystery of the Incarnation, the Trinity, and such like,'\textsuperscript{6} there are others which, 'while they pertain to faith, can also be inquired into by natural reason...[such as] the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and body.'\textsuperscript{7} Here Descartes explicitly offers the existence of God and the distinction between the soul and the body as instances of the more general thesis of the unity of truth, be it arrived at by faith or by natural reason.

It is against the background of Descartes' conviction of the compatibility of all truth, and of the superior harmony of his own philosophy with Catholic

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\textsuperscript{1}Je confesse que s’il est faux, tous les fondemens de ma Philosophie le sont aussi, car il se demonstre par eux evidemment...Mais comme je ne voudrois pour rien du monde qu’il sortit de moy vn discours, o où il se trouvast le moindre mot qui fust desaprouvé de l’Eglise, aussi ayme-je mieux le supprimer I, 271. It is not without irony that Copernicus himself, in the preface to his \textit{De revolutionibus orbium coelestium}, positioned his efforts as carrying out the edicts of the Fifth Lateran to amend the ecclesiastical calendar.

\textsuperscript{2}Whether or not Descartes ever ceased to subscribe personally to the movement of the earth is beyond the scope of this essay.

\textsuperscript{3}Croyant tres-fermement l’inafllibilité de l’Eglise, & ne dountant point aussi de mes raisons, je ne puis craindre qu’une vérité soit contraire à l’autre’ III, 259.

\textsuperscript{4}memoriae nostrae pro summmâ regulâ est insegundum, ea quae nobis à Deo revelata sunt, ut omnium certissima esse credenda’ VIII, 39.

\textsuperscript{5}Memor meae tenutatis, nihil affirmo, sed haec omnía, tum Ecclesiae Catholicae auctoritati...submitto ‘ibid., 329.

\textsuperscript{6}solâ fide creduntur, quales sunt de mysterio Incarnationis, de Trinitate, & similibus’ VIIIIB 353.

\textsuperscript{7}quamvis ad fidem pertinere, ratione tamen naturali quaerì etiam possunt, inter quas Dei existentia & humanae animae à corpore distinctio’ ibid.
doctrine over competitors, that his dedicatory epistle in the *Meditations* must be read. Moreover, correctly parsing his epistle is not always a simple matter, in part because he often addresses numerous issues in a single thought. Such is the case when he brings up the Fifth Lateran, as is evident when we return to the passage mentioned at the very beginning of this essay. Here Descartes mentions and distinguishes between the specific issue of immortality and the general issue of double truth, and yet fails to keep the two issues sufficiently demarcated. This becomes evident when we look at the statement in fuller context: ‘With regard to the soul, many judge its nature to be far from easy to investigate, and some have even dared to say that human reasons lead to the conclusion that the soul perishes with the death of the body, and that the contrary is grasped by faith alone. However, since the Lateran Council under Leo X, in the eighth session, has condemned them, and expressly commanded Christian Philosophers to refute their arguments and demonstrate the truth with their utmost strength, I have accordingly not doubted to undertake this.’ Here Descartes claims that, while some have held that reason can arrive at conclusions contrary to those of faith, he opposes this in the spirit of *Apostolic regiminitis*. However, he also merges this claim with his opposition to a specific position in the debate about of the possibility of a philosophical demonstration of immortality, thus making it difficult to recognize that there are indeed two distinct issues at stake. A somewhat similar challenge is presented in another passage in the dedicatory epistle where he writes, ‘although it is enough for us to be faithful to believing that God exists and that the human soul is not the same as the body, it is obvious that the infidels can be persuaded of no religion or any moral virtue unless they have already accepted these two claims through natural reason.’ Here Descartes indicates that the single truth that God exists, or that the soul is distinct from the body, can be arrived at through faith or through reason, and that while Christians like himself can rely on faith, it would not be possible to convince a non-Christian unbeliever through faith, and thus reason must be employed. However, reason must arrive at the same truth as that arrived at by Christians through faith. Once again, he distinguishes between the general notion that faith and reason must arrive at identical truth, and the specific issues of immortality and God’s existence, and yet again joins their discussion in a way that makes it difficult to clearly and distinctly recognize the difference. Notwithstanding this difficulty, the specific issues treated in the *Meditations* are offered as key instances of the more general principle: this is precisely the position of *Apostolici regiminitis*.

1Quantum ad animum, ets multi ejus naturam non facile investigari posse judicarent, et nonnulli etiam dicere ausi sint rationes humanas persuadere illam simul cum corpore interire, solaque fide contrarium teneri, quia tamen hos condemnat Concilium Lateranense sub Leone 10 habitum, sessione 8, et expresso mandat Christianis Philosophis ut eorum argumenta dissolvant, et veritatem pro viribus probent, hoc etiam aggregi non dubitavi’ VII, 2-3. 2Quamvis nobis fidelibus animam humanam cum corpore non interire, Deumque existere, fide credere sufficiat, certe infidelibus nulla religio, nec fere etiam ulla moralis virtus, videtur posse persuadere, nisi prius illis ista duo ratione naturali probentur’ ibid., 1-2.
Conclusion

Throughout much of his career, Descartes attempted to show how a host of particular theological truths could be arrived at philosophically. He was guided by the conviction that reason and faith must be compatible because there is only a single truth. In the Meditations, Descartes presents his ideas as the fulfillment of Apostolici regiminis, and insofar as the chief doctrinal aim of Apostolici regiminis is to assert the univocity of truth in opposition to any doctrine of double truth, Descartes is completely in line with the church. However, between the conclusion of the Fifth Lateran Council in 1514 and the publication of the Meditations in 1641, Martin Luther had begun a rebellion against the church, specifically targeting Apostolici regiminis for its vitriolic fire. The Council of Trent was also convened between the Fifth Lateran and the Meditations, leading to a focus on doctrinal specifics and away from the general issue of the compatibility of reason and faith. These events help account for why the efforts of the Fifth Lateran on the single versus double truth have been obscured from Descartes’ time to our own. When we return to the original statement of the council, we can see the doctrine of double truth as its real target. At least with respect to Apostolici regiminis and the spirit it embodied, the Roman Catholic Church erred in its prohibition of Descartes’ works.

Bibliography