Teaching Descartes' First Meditation With Digital Humanities: A Farewell From the Didactics of Philosophy

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Although the paper can be read as a commentary on digital presentation or as a text introducing digital presentation, the reader requires both approaches. They present an approach to teaching Descartes' *First Meditation* in a way that complements the usual linear reading with the opportunity to comprehend each paragraph in the structure of the entire text. Paying attention to questions, problems, or issues already implies a form of intention: preparing the foundation for the structure as the integral didactic aspect of the text. The ground of this didactic idea is Husserl's notion of active synthesis, which can be presented using digital technology. For this purpose, the background to this attempt is first presented, followed by its practical implementation and the digital aspect that constitutes its contribution to Digital Humanities.

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POUČEVANJE DESCARTESOVE PRVE MEDITACIJE Z DIGITALNO HUMANISTIKO: SLOVO OD DIDAKTIKE FILOZOFIJE

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Čeprav je članek mogoče brati kot komentar digitalne predstavitve ali kot uvod v digitalno predstavitev, bralec potrebuje oba pristopa. Avtorji predstavljajo način poučevanja Descartesove *Prve meditacije*, ki dopolnjuje običajno linearno branje z možnostjo razumevanja vsakega odstavka v strukturi celotnega besedila. Pozornost na vprašanja, probleme ali dileme že implicira obliko namere: pripravo temelja za strukturo kot integralni didaktični vidik besedila. Temelj te didaktične ideje je Husserlova zamisel aktivne sinteze, ki jo je mogoče predstaviti z uporabo digitalne tehnologije. V ta namen je najprej predstavljen teoretski okvir tega pristopa, nato njegova praktična izvedba in digitalni vidik, ki predstavlja prispevek k digitalnim humanističnim vedam.

1 Introduction

The aim of this short paper (with the concomitant online presentation) is to offer an approach to teaching Descartes' *First Meditation* in a way that complements the usual linear reading with the opportunity to comprehend each paragraph in the structure of the whole text. The reason lies in the difficulties beginners face in philosophy, as it is challenging for them to perceive the structure of the whole. The basis of this didactic idea is Husserl's notion of active synthesis, which can be presented using digital technology. For this purpose, I present the background to this attempt, its practical deployment, and its digital aspect.[1]

2 Background

2.1 Teaching Context

The present article is exclusively didactic, meaning that our interest lies solely in the manner of teaching itself and presenting the text as a foundational and integral part of high school education. This implies that our interest in historical context is limited to what is essential. Along with the latter, the question naturally arises whether this is necessary in the teaching process itself. The answer is not straightforward, as it depends on the teaching concept. When it comes to a historical approach to teaching philosophy, placing it in a historical context is a necessary and integral part of teaching to achieve its purpose. However, in a problem-based approach, guidance is that which is necessary to introduce the problem. Ultimately, the criteria are set by the objectives and expected outcomes of the subject. If these are already defined in the subject's design and are also the subject of assessment, as is the case with national or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams, then the expected results for knowledge assessment become the key criterion. However, if the teacher is not bound by external knowledge assessment, they have more freedom and responsibility for their teaching concept. When discussing my approach, when I am not bound by external assessment, I could set aims and learning outcomes myself and, in doing so, continuously explore and assess what each design brings. For the purposes of this article (as a farewell to teaching), I want to present a design in which the fundamental question was how to introduce and collectively explore the path into philosophy

[1] https://prezi.com/b0-yn_zg6ojv/desc-prva-medit/?present=1

with students (or introductory philosophy course students) during their first and, in most cases, also their last, encounter with philosophy. In this context, there was a specific treatment of a philosophical text, which, in most cases, was the *First Meditation* (including the first three paragraphs of the *Second Meditation*) from Descartes' *Meditations*. The goal was to collectively follow the philosopher in his work, sentence by sentence.

2.2 Brief Historical Contextualization of the Text

In recent research on Descartes' Meditations (Detlefsen, 2013; Broughton & Carriero, 2008), John Carriero (2009) holds a significant position, which is also relevant to our purpose. He observes that "Descartes wrote the Meditations in the hope that it would be adopted as a textbook. This gives the work an accessibility not often found in major works in philosophy" (Carriero, 2009, p. X). Moreover, he believes that "Descartes attempted to write the Meditations in an intuitive and accessible way that encourages this sort of direct encounter" (Carriero, 2009, p. 5). This aligns with my reasons for choosing this text, which I considered crucial throughout my four decades of teaching: the clarity and systematic nature of the text, which, with the help of a teacher, will be accessible to students for understanding a segment of a philosophical work or for following the philosopher in his work. Introducing students to the *First Meditation* simultaneously introduces them to the first steps in philosophy.

In placing Descartes in the historical context and considering recent research, it makes sense to offer a brief outline of the environment in which his philosophy was developed. Carriero highlights two aspects: the aspect of philosophical theology and the aspect of knowledge. The aspect of philosophical theology is connected to Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas' path gradually moved from philosophy of nature and metaphysics to natural theology, requiring an understanding of Aristotelian thinking about matter, form, change, and causality to transition to arguments for the existence of God. In contrast, "one can hardly take a step in the metaphysics and epistemology of Descartes (the *Third Meditation*, if not the *First*) before finding oneself knee-deep in philosophical theology" (Carriero, 2009, p. 9). According to Carriero, this holds true for Descartes' contemporaries as well: Spinoza, Leibniz, and Malebranche, as Spinoza and Leibniz "both seem to believe that we have the unproblematic access to God's essence or nature that Descartes thinks we have" (Carriero, 2009, p.9).

From the perspective of knowledge, Descartes fundamentally differs from Aquinas, as "the mind does not depend on the senses for its access to reality, but rather is naturally endowed by God with such access" (Carriero, 2009, p.16). The fundamental is not "the ability to cognize universally /…/ but to see that something is true (to make judgments)" (Carriero, 2009, p.17). Carriero acknowledges Descartes for "developing a new conception of the human mind and its situation in the universe that it knows/.../" which is not merely "a power (the intellect) of some more fundamental thing (a human being). It is a thing in its own right, a "substance" (Carriero, 2009, p. 3). Although Carriero recognises Descartes' revolutionary ideas, he subjects his Meditations to radical criticism:

"I believe that Descartes was a truly revolutionary figure and that his originality can more readily be appreciated if one concentrates on certain fundamental themes (e.g., the place of the senses in human cognition, or certain framing commitments in philosophical theology and what sort of cognition of God is supposed to be available to us in this life) than if one focuses on more technical matters. While I do believe Descartes won the revolution he initiated, I don't think he gained the victory through hand-to-hand combat." (Carriero, 2009, p. 7)

And here comes Carriero's exceptionally extensive and detailed critique. As I follow his detailed analysis of the *First Meditation*, I wonder if there is anything unproblematic left in the argumentation. I pose this question as an educator contemplating the significant dilemma of whether contributions to the research of Descartes' Meditations should be an integral complement to the teaching of critical reading of the text. In other words, should the purpose of reading Descartes be to view him solely as "a truly revolutionary figure" who "won the revolution he initiated," or also as a potential 'defeated' figure "through hand-to-hand combat"?

This question has no definitive answer, as it depends on the educational context. In the case of external assessment, where learning outcomes prescribe the student's dialogue with the author, it is essential in teaching to present both the historical context and to discuss problematic aspects of the text. However, the question of whether this dialogue should occur spontaneously in the initial reading or be reserved for a second reading remains. My experience has shown that in the initial stages of reading, when the primary focus is on comprehension, insight into the structure, and the placement of individual parts within the structure, diverting

attention to the problematic details can be disruptive. If students notice something problematic, they can temporarily note it and save it for the second reading to avoid distraction from the initial educational aims. A second reading, where problematic areas are more easily discernible in the overall structure, allows for this additional perspective. However, in the context of general introductions to philosophy with limited time, where the fundamental goal is merely to acquaint students with what philosophy is all about, knowledge and understanding take precedence as objectives. Dialogue and critical thinking as demonstrations of philosophical orientation have their limited place throughout the entire course. In the next section, we will primarily focus on the didactic aspect of the first reading.

3 Approach to Reading the Text in the Classroom

With this, I will focus on the central question of how to approach the reading of the *First Meditation*. In doing so, I will draw from my teaching experiences, which have shown me that continuous attention to structure is helpful for students on the path to a common goal. Since there is no royal road (or shortcut) to understanding Descartes' *First Meditation*, it is, therefore, still necessary to first read the text with students carefully, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. It is up to the teacher to decide how to read the text with students. My approach is one of several possibilities. I'll provide a brief description of my approach, which involves a gradual exploration of the underlying structure. This presentation is limited to textual understanding, so when we read the text, we rely on the text itself without questioning the concepts that could be contested.[2] This means that we mainly refer to the concepts Descartes uses. How did we start and proceed? Students were given guidelines for reading each paragraph:

- What is the broader problem or general question?
- What is the concrete issue, problem or question in each paragraph?
- What is the thesis, statement, position?
- What is the reasoning or argument?
- Are there any objections or counterarguments?
- What is the resolution?

[2] What would be an end and a means for Descartes? See interpretations by Williams (1978, pp. 35–36) and Wilson (1978, p. 2).

– What remains open as an issue for the next paragraph?

As an illustration of collaborative work with students, let us examine the approach in the *First Meditation*. Careful reading began as early as paragraph §1. It is usually challenging for them to establish the author's END and his MEANS. This could be found in the *if* clause "/.../ if I desired to establish a firm and abiding superstructure /…/" and checked in §2 and in the last sentence of §10 – *certainty*. If that is the end, then we will inquire about what the means would be. Although we collectively seek that which is implicit in the title of the *First Meditation*, namely doubt, it is difficult for students to directly recognise in the first two paragraphs. Instead, it is more indirectly expressed in the terms *highly doubtful* (§1) and *indubitable* (§2). The whole introduction, consisting of §1 and §2, is typically challenging for students, as they need assistance in the form of WHY, WHAT, and HOW questions. Finding answers to these questions is usually not straightforward. While the answer to WHY is somewhat easier to find in the first sentence of §1, the answer to WHAT is a bit more challenging, especially in identifying expressions conveying *stability* and the quality of being *likely to last*; the term *certainty* itself as the goal must be sought in §10. A specific task that usually takes more time is answering the question of HOW. Refuting opinions as the first step, which is then formulated together as *doubt*, goes somewhat smoothly, and at that point, the meaningful connection to the previous questions, and of course with the title of the *First Meditation*, becomes apparent – a significant step in recognising the structure. In §2, without the teacher's assistance and a more detailed analysis to recognise its methodological nature, it is not straightforward. However, a more detailed analysis enables the identification of what we refer to as consistency or rigour, addressing the foundations themselves. This makes the structure of the entire introduction recognisable to the students. Here, an additional didactic goal can be achieved, which is reflected in their essays: that they themselves recognise the meaningful formulation of a clear introduction, which they can learn in their essays by using the three questions: WHAT, HOW and WHY. These questions, along with the exploration of ends and means, provide an opportunity to discern Descartes' strategy and its clear structure.

In transitioning to the next paragraph, §3, Descartes' formulation "I will at once approach" emerges as a useful detail. This can be seen as an intermediate connecting link between the introduction and §3, which, in turn, proves to be a valuable experience in learning how to connect individual sentences or paragraphs in writing.

Now let us consider all three paragraphs, which, in the emerging structure, appear as a whole and that, in returning to the question of the entire *Meditations*, presents a more concrete question: "Can I doubt the senses?" (§§3, 4, 5) The broader problem or the general question, which arises from an understanding of the structure as a whole, is: if the general question or issue is "What can be called into doubt?", the next step is the question, "Can I doubt the senses?" So, a more concrete answer follows, which students seek in §3: YES. And, of course, the following question is WHY? For students encountering philosophy for the first time, this is also their initial encounter with a situation where they must discern how the author justifies their claim or provides reasons for it. They find these reasons in Descartes' reference to the senses and their *deceitfulness*, as well as in *prudence*. The next paragraph, §4, is usually surprising, as they do not consider why one should question something that is already justified. Nevertheless, they agree with Descartes when he presents the famous example of being wrapped in a winter coat, sitting by the fire, and so on, in which doubt is deemed impossible. Therefore, the teacher's question about what to do with this situation perplexes them. In this way, students, in their first step into philosophy, acquaint themselves with another novelty –the counterargument. The subsequent paragraph, §5, serves as a rejection of the counterargument and a return to the original thesis that doubt can be cast on the senses. This, too, is a new development for them. Inviting them to examine all three paragraphs as a whole and their place in the overall context, especially in relation to the title of the *First Meditation*, introduces another layer of novelty. Of course, each of these steps can be a subject of discussion or problematisation. In this regard, as a teacher, I seek balance and pay attention to what my primary aim is and whether the possibility of problematisation could be a distraction hindering the achievement of the fundamental goal. If we were to incorporate Carriero's radical criticism, which questions the very first sentence of paragraph §1, it is difficult to believe that we would achieve our primary goal with beginners in philosophy.

Paying attention to questions, problems, or issues already implies a form of intention: preparing the foundation for the structure as the integral (didactic) aspect of the text. Repeating both the broader and more specific questions draw attention to their importance for readers to orient themselves in the text as a whole, which has consistency and coherency by itself. The challenge is for this to become clear to students as readers and as essay writers.

To proceed, we can already foreshadow what we have acquainted ourselves with in the previous three paragraphs. This means that we will be examining what the next section might entail and which paragraphs would constitute it. Following the previous example, we revisit the general question of what can be doubted. After establishing that the senses are the objects of doubt, we inquire about the next step.

Reading §6 proves to be challenging for students, as they rarely manage to follow, through dreams and the images of painters, the images in consciousness as posed by the question of this section: whether it is possible to doubt general things such as the most general concepts or categories. Just when students think they have grasped this concept, they are once again surprised by Descartes' in §9, searching for reasons to doubt (that he can sometimes be mistaken) even in this realm. Rereading paragraphs §6 to §9 provides them insight into the construction of this section. Frequently, they find themselves questioning what else remains for doubt. Encountering doubt in God in §10 finally concludes the descent with the assertion that "there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised".

Given the structure of the *First Meditation*, up to this point, students naturally ponder what Descartes will do next. The answer is not difficult for them to find in §11, as the statement about "taking an opposite judgement of deliberate design" stands out. However, they may struggle to realise that, in terms of the structure of the *First Meditation*, this marks a methodological turn, complemented by §12, introducing the famous thought experiment involving the "evil demon." This is also an opportunity for them to recall the movie *The Matrix* and observe the interconnection. The question of what comes next remains and where the important methodological principle from §2 is relevant – that he will find something certain only if he firmly adheres to it and accepts nothing until something certain appears, even though the only certainty might be that there is nothing certain – which, of course, echoes the formulation from the first paragraph of the *Second Meditation,* leading us to cogito as the Archimedean point in §3. We now recap the path traversed together through the overall structure, first highlighting the placement of each detail within its respective section and then within its entirety.

Lastly, where (if at all) is the place for introducing either Descartes' Objections and Replies or research findings, such as Carriero's, in beginner-level teaching? Again, there is no unequivocal didactic answer, as beginners can be gradually invited into their own reflections as an introduction to critical thinking, but only to the extent that the initial goal is achievable. For advanced levels (e.g., external assessment demanding it), adapting the introduction accordingly to the context and situation in relation to learning outcomes makes sense.

In summary, my experiences have demonstrated that reading with additional attention to structure contributes to better understanding. Without such attention, students may see individual "trees" but struggle to grasp the "forest" and feel like they are lost because of this. The structure also aids in easier memorisation of Descartes' entire reasoning, accompanied by noticeable improvements in the organisation of their essays. The benefit lies in the fact that, based on my experience, they approach their essays in a way that gives them a meaningful structure. And, finally, in the case of external examination (as is the case with high school final examinations or the International Baccalaureate), the exam question related to the chosen philosophical work (specifically Descartes' *Meditations*) is presented in the form of a passage that the student must recognise and comment on, while also considering the broader context. A student who has gone through the aforementioned process thus navigates this task fairly confidently, as they have been able to identify the place of each paragraph in both the narrower and broader context throughout this process.

However, the complexity of the whole remains a challenging issue for beginners. In this regard, a potential solution could be a graphical representation incorporating both the argumentation in individual paragraphs and the mentioned levels of structure, providing insight into the entirety as well as all structural levels down to the details. In comparison to traditional graphical representation, which might only be captured by a large poster, modern digital technology offers a much simpler and more effective solution. Instead of a typical linear presentation with a succession of individual slides, we can utilise programs that, at any stage of the presentation, facilitate quick overviews of the entirety and details through "zoom in" and "zoom out" functions. Experience shows that this technological advancement eases the resolution of the mentioned difficulties. Simultaneously, we are interested in

understanding both how to interpret this advancement and what potential concerns may arise.

4 Husserl and Digital Humanities

4.1 The Role of Digital Technology in Reading as a Contribution to Digital Humanities

In §17 of the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl (1960) offers the well-known example of a cube (a die):

"The sort of combination uniting consciousness with consciousness can be characterised as synthesis, a mode of combination exclusively peculiar to consciousness. For example, if I take the perceiving of this die as the theme for my description, I see in pure reflection that "this" die is given continuously as an objective unity in a multiform and changeable multiplicity of manners of appearing, which belong determinately to it. These, in their temporal flow, are not an incoherent sequence of/subjective processes.) Rather they flow away in the unity of a synthesis, such that in them "one and the same" is intended as appearing. The one identical die appears, now in "near appearances", now in "far appearances": in the changing modes of the Here and There, over against an always co-intended, though perhaps unheeded, absolute Here (in my co-appearing organism). Furthermore, each continued manner of appearance in such a mode (for example: "the die here, in the near sphere") shows itself to be, in turn, the synthetic unity pertaining to a multiplicity of manners of appearance belonging to that mode." (Husserl, 1960 [1973], pp. 39–40 [pp. 77–78], §17)

If we transfer the analysis of §17, which introduces the distinction between active and passive synthesis as a feature of conscious experience, into our context, we can observe the beginner's difficulties in reading the *First Meditation*. The beginner may not recognise the structure, even though they may understand individual paragraphs, which could correspond to what Husserl calls an "incoherent sequence". Therefore, "synthetic unity"[3] is necessary here, and only synthesis with an overview of the

[3] In German, "Diese sind in ihrem Ablauf nicht ein zusammenhangloses Nacheinander von Erlebnissen. Sie verlaufen vielmehr in der Einheit einer Synthesis, dergemäß in ihnen ein und dasselbe als Erscheinendes Bewußt wird" (Husserl, 1973, pp. 78–79, §17).

whole through structure enables understanding and insight into what it is fundamentally about.[4] The process of synthesis has two aspects. One involves reading the text itself, attempting to understand Descartes' argumentation in individual paragraphs, the connections between paragraphs in broader sections, and ultimately, the connections of all parts in the entirety of the *First Meditation*. This pertains to comprehension. The second aspect is more explicitly what Husserl refers to when talking about seeing the cube itself. In this sense, a graphical representation provides INSIGHT into all the previously mentioned connections, evident in the graphical representation of the structure on individual levels, as well as the structured view from the perspective of the whole. The result is not just the final insight but is the outcome of the teacher's conscious, continuous directing of attention to the place of details in the entirety, enabling the ongoing process of students' synthesis, which ultimately manifests in a comprehensive understanding of the whole and the place of each part within it. It is crucial to emphasise that we are talking about beginners, not professional philosophers who typically possess the capability to navigate through all of this without the assistance of such representation as a didactic tool.

The digital presentation of Descartes' *First Meditation* represents an attempt to shift the teaching methodology. It goes beyond linear presentation and reading toward synthetic unity (a holistic view): we have immediate access to all 12 paragraphs of the *Meditation* and its content, its structure, and its entirety. However, for our purpose, specific requirements are needed: digital presentation software that, in addition to a linear presentation, provides the ability to create our structure, a holistic view of the structure, and the option to zoom in and zoom out from the whole to each detail and its place within the whole. Unfortunately, the availability of user-friendly software with these capabilities is quite limited.[5] Examining the presentation at Prezi (https://prezi.com/b0-yn_zg6ojv/desc-prva-medit/?present=1), we note that all three requirements are necessary for this "nonlinear" view.

[4] When Husserl talks about "synthetic unity pertaining to a multiplicity of manners of appearance", it is necessary to mention that this version of the translation of Husserl's expression "Mannigfaltigkeit" uses the word *multiplicity*, yet "manifold" can better express not only many but also *diverse* manifestations. (*polypoíkilos* in ancient Greek).
[5] So far, I have found Prezi and Focusky software useful for presentations and similar alternatives.

The presentation is also an attempt to illustrate the approach to our text as an example within the Digital Humanities. If "[d]igital artefacts like tools could then be considered as 'telescopes for the mind' that show us something in a new light" (Ramsay & Rockwell, 2012), then my task is to show how a digital presentation of *First Meditation* can shed 'new light' in pedagogy (Brier, 2012). If we ask ourselves whether it offers anything new, we must admit the answer to be paradoxical. If we recall the analysis of the text in section 2 of this paper, we notice that the structure is integrally pre-existent, and we can also say that this very structure constitutes the whole. On the other hand, we could also argue that beginners in philosophy, who may not have gained this insight before, can now perceive it in this digital presentation when they visualise it in comparison with the previous image.

However, considering Husserl's distinction between passive and active synthesis, we can say that our consciousness still made this shift, which is characteristic of active synthesis. He describes this distinction as succession and continuity in different ways: an object "given beforehand in passive intuition continues to appear in a unitary intuition" or "the synthesis of a passive experience", followed by "active grasping" (Husserl, 1960 [1973], p. 78 [p. 112], §38), or "/.../ passive synthesis (into which the performances of active synthesis also enter) /…/" (p. 79 [p. 113]). And finally, the following interesting formulation: "/.../ what we call unknown has, nevertheless, a known structural form /.../" (p. 80 [p. 133]). Thus, this "structural form" as "unknown" can also become known through digital technology: zooming in and zooming out is not merely a fancy feature of digital presentation software but can be a significant didactic tool.

4.2 Controversies

The serious question arises whether the attempt to simplify things for students may, in our case, also mean doing something instead of them and thereby depriving them of learning through their own effort, which holds its own pedagogical value. Another more general question or a series of questions pertains to the role of digital technologies in general. The fundamental question, and thus the criterion for us, is whether digital technologies, like other resources, are merely a means to achieve educational goals or whether, through their use, we distance ourselves from direct learning experiences and, with uncritical usage, fall into potential pitfalls, as cautioned by Vlieghe (2017, pp. 1795–1800). In both cases, it is a significant

challenge for the teacher to utilise, with sensitivity to these concerns, only what is absolutely necessary, crucial, and unavoidable for achieving the required purpose.

5 Conclusion

In my final farewell didactic article, I aimed to share the results of my 40 years of experience in teaching Descartes' *First Meditation*. Specifically, the idea was to guide students through reading difficulties by following individual paragraphs and arguments, providing them insight into the structure of the *First Meditation*. Subsequently, I aimed to offer them an additional understanding of how Descartes constructed or structured it.[6] Clarity in structure, as an additional aspect, not only aids students in retaining the material more easily but also contributes to their ability to structure their own essays, whether in philosophy or elsewhere. In all of this, digital presentation plays a crucial role, as it allows for a simultaneous overview of the entire structure, its arrangement, and the role of individual "building blocks" in the whole. The option of digitally navigating from the whole to any level, zooming out to the whole, and zooming in through all levels to basic details, reveals the clear place of each detail in the entirety – representing a contribution to Digital Humanities.[7]

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[6] In the last slide of the presentation, there is an outline of another possible example: the structure of the first seven paragraphs of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.

[7] In addition to my own teaching experience, I also shared my presentation with some of my colleagues. One of them was Professor of Philosophy Toni Klis, who teaches at II. gimnazija Maribor, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for our successful long-term collaboration. In our correspondence, he reported the following: "The material proved to be very useful. The presentation clearly illustrates the structure of the meditation and is excellent for analyzing its elements and learning how to construct a high-quality philosophical essay. In my case, this aspect became so dominant on Friday that it overshadowed the content analysis. In my context, this was ideal, as the students are already familiar with the basic narrative of the Meditations, and we were now able to build on that by analyzing its structure."

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