Abstract: In the Discours de la méthode, Descartes presents himself as a heroic figure, standing up against the current Aristotelian orthodoxy in philosophy, and offering something new, a mechanist physics and the metaphysics to go along with it. But Descartes was by no means the only challenger to Aristotelian natural philosophy: by Descartes’s day, there were many. Descartes was read as one of this group, generally called the novatores (innovators) in Latin, and often severely criticized for their advocacy of the new. Descartes himself wanted to separate his philosophy from that of the novatores, who were thought to seek novelty rather than truth. But it was not so easy to distance himself. Many contemporary commentators, like Charles Sorel, put Descartes squarely in their camp, but at exactly the moment when novelty and innovation in natural philosophy was changing from being worthy of scorn to being praiseworthy.

The Discours de la méthode tells the story of Descartes as a young man in search of knowledge:

From my childhood I have been nourished upon letters, and because I was persuaded that by their means one could acquire a clear and certain knowledge of all that is useful in life, I was extremely eager to learn them. (AT VI 4)\(^1\)

Descartes was a diligent student, well thought-of at La Flèche, considered one of the best schools in Europe. But yet, the young Descartes was disappointed:

But as soon as I had completed the course of study at the end of which one is normally admitted to the ranks of the learned, I completely changed my opinion. For I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my attempts to become

\(^1\) References to Descartes will generally be given in the text. The original-language citations are to Descartes (1996), abbreviated by ‘AT’ and cited by volume and page number in that edition. Unless otherwise noted translations are from Descartes (1984–1991). Since that translation gives the page numbers of AT in the margin, the translation will not be cited independently.
educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance. (AT VI 4)

The conclusion he reached is that he should leave school and take off on his own to learn what he could: “That is why, as soon as I was old enough to emerge from the control of my teachers, I entirely abandoned the study of letters” (AT VI 9). After wandering through Europe, learning about other cultures and reflecting on the state of knowledge and how to improve it, Descartes reports that he found himself in Germany, alone in a stove-heated room, where he began the process of setting the foundations for a new and more secure knowledge. What he concluded, first of all, was that “there is not usually so much perfection in works composed of several parts and produced by various different craftsmen as in the works of one man” (AT VI 11). And so he decided that what he must do is to reject everything he had formerly learned, and start anew, from the beginning, single-handedly to build a new and more secure system of knowledge. A few pages later, Descartes reports on the new knowledge that he discovered in this way, a view of the world rather different from what he learned in school, grounded in an immediate apprehension of his own existence, “I am thinking, therefore I exist,” the famous Cogito argument (AT VI 32). And from this modest beginning Descartes sketches out the essential features of the new world that follows.

Descartes presents himself here as a something of a heroic figure. The way in which Descartes tells his story has the effect of turning himself into a kind of mythological character, larger than life. Virtually all of his readers, at least the male readers who had had the opportunity attend school, would have recognized the detailed descriptions of the school curriculum, and many of the lettered women who could and did read this text knew enough about what went on in the schools to understand what he was talking about. The school curriculum Descartes followed at La Flèche was grounded in the philosophy of Aristotle, a world of matter and form, earth, water, air and fire, radically distinct terrestrial and celestial realms; in this respect it was very much in line with what would have been taught in virtually any other school in Europe at the time, and, indeed, from roughly the fourteenth century or so. And in the natural philosophy that was sketched in part V of the Discours and later exemplified in the Dioptrique and Météores, two of the essays that follow the Discours, his readers would have appreciated a very different world, a radical alternative to the Aristotelian natural philosophy of the schools. In the Discours de la méthode, then, they

---

2 There is a vast literature on university education in the early modern period. A particularly good overview focused on France is Brockless (1987); see especially chap. 7 for the teaching of natural philosophy (physics). For the teaching of philosophy more generally in Europe see Brockliss 1996, 578–589. For the Jesuit Ratio studiorum, the plan that governed instruction at La Flèche, see Lukás 1986 and Demoustier 1997. For information specific to the organization of studies at La Flèche, see Rochemonteix 1889.

3 Descartes did not always emphasize the novelty of his views. See his letter to Regius, January 1642 (AT III 491–492) where he advises his then disciple about how to hide the views that
would have seen Descartes representing himself as the lone eagle, standing up against the current orthodoxy, and offering something new, something to replace it. In essence, this is the story of an intellectual revolution, orthodoxy challenged by a new paradigm that seeks to replace it.

1 Meet the Novatores

But there is another point of view. Descartes was by no means the only challenger to Aristotelian natural philosophy: by the time Descartes was writing, there were many. In 1625, Marin Mersenne, later to become Descartes’s close friend and supporter published a book, *La vérité des sciences* (Mersenne 1625), whose aim was, in part, to defend the very Aristotelian learning that Descartes was to reject in 1637. In the course of that polemic, he makes the following comments about the group of contemporary philosophers who have attempted to reject the philosophy of Aristotle:

> François Patrice (i.e., Patrizi) tried to discredit this philosopher (i.e., Aristotle), but he didn’t succeed any more than did Basson, Gorlaeus, Bodin, Charpentier, Hhil (*sic*), Olive, and many others, who through their quills, only left monuments to the fame of this philosopher, who were not able to fly high enough to dampen the soaring and glory of the Peripatetician, since he transcends everything sensible and imaginable, and the others crawl on the ground like little worms. (Mersenne 1625, 109)

Mersenne ends the passage with a famous line: “Aristotle is an eagle in philosophy, and the others are like chicks, who wish to fly before they have wings” (1625, 109–110). The lone eagle is not the philosopher, who, like Descartes, challenges tradition and tries to find an alternative to orthodoxy: the true eagle is Aristotle himself, and those who challenge him are part of a flock of mere wingless chicks.

Mersenne was not alone in seeing those who challenge Aristotelian orthodoxy as belonging to a kind of club. The list of opponents to Aristotelianism that Mersenne gives here is remarkably stable, a collection of heterodox (and heterogeneous) thinkers who are grouped together again and again. In his *Quaestiones celeberrimae in Genisim*, his 1623 commentary his list included Campanella, Bruno, Telesius, Kepler, Galileo, Gilbert, Bacon, Fludd, Hill, and Basson (1623, pref. p. 1 and col. 1838). Jean-Cecile Frey, a contemporary of Mersenne’s and a professor at the University of Paris included Campanella, Patrizi, Bacon, Telesio, Ramus, Godefridus Chassinus, “the Vile Villon,” Gassendi, Pomponazzi, Valla, Raimon Llull, and Basson (Frey 2003). Gabriel Naudé named Telesio, Patrizi, Campanella, Bacon, Gilbert,
Jordano Bruno, Gassendi, Basson, Gomesius, Charpentier, and Gorlaeus (Naudé 1627, 135). These figures were often called innovators: “novateurs” in French, “novatores” in Latin, “novelists” in English. Such lists continue late into the seventeenth century, where we see the same names coming up again and again.  

Though we may think of this group as a club, these figures have little in common except for the fact that they reject Aristotelian natural philosophy. Telesio explains everything in terms of hot and cold; Gilbert explains everything in terms of magnetism. Others, like Basson, Gorlaeus, and Gassendi are some variety or another of atomist. Galileo isn’t really a natural philosopher in the sense of offering a system of explanation at all, but offers non-Aristotelian doctrines of cosmology and motion. Dona Oliva was a medical writer whose views were anti-Galenic. And Bacon’s innovations largely involved method and experiment. Though they all agree in rejecting Aristotle and Aristotelianism in some way or another, they could hardly be said to form a uniform school of thought.

People had been complaining about novelty and innovators since the ancients. The Oxford Latin Dictionary lists “subversive, seditious” as one of the meanings of the word “nouus,” literally “new” in classical Latin, supported with quotations from Cicero, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Hirtius. The history of novelty and its opponents is long and tangled. But to understand the debate over new scientific ideas in the early-modern period, it is important to understand a particular decidedly theological turn that it took in the sixteenth century.

The Reformation of Luther, Calvin and a multitude of lesser reformers was, of course, a major event in European history. The Roman Church, of course, opposed the new theological movements on numerous grounds. But one theme is repeated over and over: the so-called reformers of the church, the Luthers and Calvins and other opponents of Roman Catholic orthodoxy are innovators, who are abandoning tradition and introducing new and dangerous ideas. In the decree of Session XIV of the Council of Trent (25 November 1551), for example, the Protestants are referred to as “novatores” (Denziger 1952, §905). In the Académie Française dictionary of 1694, “novateur” is identified as a theological notion. The Académie defines the word as follows: “He who introduces some novelty, that is, some dogma contrary to the views and practice of the Church.” By this the authors certainly mean the Catholic Church, of course. And the example sentence that they add makes it even clearer that it is something that they disapprove of: “Les Novateurs sont dangereux.” “The innovators are dangerous.” But the Protestants, too, argued that it was the Catholics, and not them who were the true novatores. Luther, from the beginning, argued for the greater antiquity of the reformed faith that he advocated, and argued that the Roman Church had introduced innovations.  

---

4 For a fuller list of such lists, see the appendix to Garber (Forthcoming).

text here is the so-called *Magdeburg Centuries*, which traced the history of the church from its origins to 1298, and sought to show the continuity between the ideas of the original Church and later Protestantism.\(^6\)

Now, theology and natural philosophy were closely connected. For the Catholics, the understanding of the Eucharist in terms of the transformation of the host into the body of Christ had been understood in terms of Aristotelian notions like form and real accident since the time of St. Thomas. And from the Council of Vienne in 1312, the Church held that the soul was the substantial form of the body, a doctrine repeated in the sixteenth century in the Fifth Lateran Council and in the Council of Trent. (See Denziger 1952, §§481 and 738.) It is no surprise that Aristotelian natural philosophy, taught through his texts, such as the *De anima* and the *Physica*, through commentaries, or through textbooks, retained its centrality in universities and schools in Catholic countries. This can be illustrated by the treatment of Aristotelianism in the Jesuit schools. In connection with their expanding educational mission, the Society debated explicitly the form their curriculum should take. But in both the 1586 and 1591 preliminary versions of their *Ratio studiorum*, and in the final version of 1599, Aristotelian philosophy, as interpreted through St. Thomas maintained its centrality (Lukás 1986, 55, 98–107, 279–284, 396–402).

Aristotelianism was somewhat more controversial among the Protestants. Both Luther and Calvin spoke strongly against Aristotle and Aristotelianism. In an address published in 1520, Luther wrote that “My advice would be that Aristotle’s *Physics, Metaphysics, Concerning the Soul,* and *Ethics,* which hitherto have been thought to be his best books should be completely discarded along with all the rest of his books that boast about nature.”\(^7\) Calvin seemed hardly less sympathetic. Since he was less concerned with secular learning than Luther, Aristotle comes up less frequently in his writings than he does in Luther’s. But when Aristotle’s name does come up, the remarks are not very complimentary. He writes, for example:

> Aristotle [was] a man of genius and learning; but being a heathen, whose heart was perverse and depraved, it was his constant aim to entangle and perplex God’s overruling providence by a variety of wild speculations; so much so, that it may with too much truth be said, that he employed his naturally acute powers of mind to extinguish all light.\(^8\)

It does not take much imagination to see in these a critique of the university curriculum of his day. In the early years of his association with Luther,

---

\(^6\) On the Protestant use of history, see, e.g., Polman 1932, Lyon 2003, and Krumenacker 2006. For the Catholic response, see, e.g., Pullapilly 1975.

\(^7\) Quoted in Kusukawa (1995, 42). See also the quotations on pp. 32, 33, 45. Kelley (1981, 139–140) links Luther’s position to sixteenth-century Humanism.

Luther’s close colleague Philip Melanchthon would seem to have agreed with him. But Aristotle soon crept back into Wittenberg’s curriculum, and to that of other Protestant universities. Though he may originally have envisioned a natural philosophy curriculum without Aristotle, Melanchthon’s Wittenberg eventually returned to teaching the *De anima* and the *Physica*, indeed, using textbooks that Melanchthon himself had written for the purpose. By the late sixteenth century, Protestant universities were every bit as much committed to Aristotelianism as were Catholic universities. Indeed, they often taught from the same textbooks used by Catholic teachers (Petersen 1921).

It is not surprising, then, that the critique of novelty and innovation eventually moved from the domain of theology and religious practice to that of natural philosophy. In a celebrated incident in 1624 in Paris, a group of three young philosophers organized a private disputation just outside the city walls of Paris in which they were planning to refute Aristotle. It was closed down by the Parlement of Paris, with the advice of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris. In their report to the Parlement, the Faculty wrote the following:

> Clearly, nothing is more dangerous in a Christian Republic and, according to the common judgment of the Fathers, nothing should be guarded against with more care than novelty, especially novelty which is known to be obviously opposed to true knowledge and sacred doctrine. (Launoy 1653, 63, trans. in Garber 2002, 156)

The words of the Faculty are echoed in another response to that same event, this from the French astrologer Jean-Baptiste Morin:

> There is nothing more seditious and pernicious than a new doctrine. I speak not only in theology, but even in philosophy. For if . . . the true knowledge of visible and corporeal things, that is, the true natural philosophy raises and delights us toward the knowledge and love of invisible and incorporeal things, . . . it is quite certain that the false philosophy or knowledge of the things in nature cannot lead the mind to the same end, and can only lead it to errors, heresies, and atheism. (1624, ded. letter 3–4)

Morin goes on to observe that almost all heresies involve departures from the philosophy of Aristotle.

> Much of the critique of the *novatores* in philosophy turns around these sorts of theological issues, and the idea that rejecting Aristotle leads to heresy. But not all. There is also a political dimension to the critique. This is another theme in Morin’s critique. For false philosophical views,

---

9 See Kusukawa 1995, chaps. 3 and 4, and Petersen 1921.

10 For a fuller account of the event and its repercussions, see Garber 2002.
and the heresies they lead to might cause sects to be formed, sects “from which follow division and the ruin of provinces and whole kingdoms” (1624, ded. letter 4–5). Belief is not a matter of individual choice; it is a matter of politics, and well-ordered states, “tous Estats bien policez” have an obligation to prevent such intellectual novelties from arising, and to punish severely those who try to spread them. Behind this worry are the religious wars that began in the sixteenth century, and continued well into the seventeenth century. More personally, Morin sees those who reject Aristotelian natural philosophy as challenging the very institutions of society. Insofar as the University is committed to Aristotelian natural philosophy, to claim it is false is to challenge the University, the learned professions, law, theology, and medicine which depend on the University, and the very state itself. Morin writes specifically about Villon, one of the three who challenged Aristotle, that he presents “a public challenge to all the schools, sects, and great minds” of Paris (1624). He must be answered:

To defend the truth, which is here impugned with great licentiousness, . . . for the sake of the honor of the sect of Aristotle, which is here reviled, . . . and for the honor of the celebrated city of Paris, and to prevent Villon from bragging here or elsewhere that in Paris there isn’t any man who has the boldness or capacity to refute these theses, and that he (Villon) can overturn the doctrine of Aristotle. (Morin 1624, 19–20)

But others see more personal attacks in the novatores. Jean-Cecile Frey, a Paris professor, prefices his published lectures against the novatores with the following remarks:

My intention here is to shake the principal anti-Aristotelian doctrines of the principal authors (collected here into this little bundle, as it were) through a sieve of dialectical truth. . . . We, who look to Aristotle, the father of both human and divine wisdom, are called dull and stupid, while they, just like puppies, are redolent of the happy images of our fortune reversed. (Frey 2003, 29–30)

It is obvious that Frey feels personally affronted by the novatores. But the problem isn’t just with wounded pride: there are also some very practical considerations. When Cartesianism threatens to take over the teaching of natural philosophy in Utrecht, for example, an issue we will take up shortly, the complaint from the theologians is that unless students are taught their Aristotle, they will not be prepared to take up advanced work in theology, which assumes that students have a knowledge of the basics of

---

11 Morin seems particularly upset that the three anti-Aristotelians would dare to hold their disputation “not in a village, but in the city of Paris, opposite the Sorbonne, the entire University, and the most famous senate in the world.”
the Aristotelian world view. One could say the same for medicine. And finally, while I have not yet found anyone who has said so openly, I can’t imagine that the attack on Aristotelianism wasn’t profoundly unsettling for teachers who had built their entire careers around writing and refining their lectures on Aristotelian natural philosophy. They were being asked to set aside years of work, page after page of lecture notes and published school manuals and established curricula, without a clear idea of what would replace it. It was important here to remember that with the novatores we are not talking about a single alternative to the orthodoxy, but multiple challenges to authority, a list of novatores “that increases day by day,” as Gabriel Naudé observed in 1625. Give up Aristotle, and what do you replace him with? The novatores were regarded, in a way, as an attack on authority, intellectual as well as social, but without providing a new authority. From the point of view of the orthodox Aristotelians, the situation is nicely summarized by Mersenne’s image of the eagle and the chicks, a flock of immature birds, not ready even for flight, challenging the authority of the king of birds.

2 Descartes against the Novatores

Descartes came to be closely associated with the group of novatores. His earliest appearance as a novator was probably in 1643, in Martin Schoock’s, Admiranda methodus novae philosophiae Renati des Cartes (1643), the first extended public discussion of Descartes’s philosophy, outside of the Objectiones that Descartes published with his Meditationes. The Admiranda methodus was composed in the midst of the celebrated debate over Descartes’s philosophy in Utrecht. The trouble started with a series of disputations sponsored in 1641 by Henricus Regius, a professor of medicine at Leiden. Regius, then a friend of Descartes’s and expositor of his ideas, offended Gisbertus Voetius from the Theological Faculty by attacking Aristotelian natural philosophy. Descartes, living in the neighborhood, inevitably got drawn into the dispute that erupted. His account of the affair can be found in the Letter to Dinet, which was added to the Amsterdam edition of the Meditationes in 1642. The dispute exploded outside of the

---

12 This issue comes up in the complaints brought against Descartes in connection with the Utrecht affair, to be discussed later in this essay. See Descartes and Schoock 1988, 120–22 and Verbeek 1992, 19.

13 For some interesting reflections on why seventeenth-century teachers were reluctant to give up teaching Aristotle and Aristotelian doctrines, see some comments that Charles Sorel made in his 1635 essay, “Le sommaire des opinions les plus estranges des novateurs en philosophie,” discussed in more detail below, Sorel (1635, 269–271). Sorel claims that one of the reasons that they give is that they are afraid of losing students if they abandon the standard scholastic Aristotelian fare for the new, suggesting that students felt that they needed to know the traditional material in order to get ahead in their studies (270). He also suggested that they were reluctant to admit any flaw in Aristotle since they then “would not know which author to follow” (271).
Descartes among the Novatores

Descartes among the Novatores

confines of the University, and soon became a legal dispute over the right to teach Descartes’s philosophy in the University. The details are too complex for this context, but one interesting document connected with the dispute was a book, written in good part in response to Descartes’s public Letter to Dinet by Martinus Schoock, a disciple of Voetius, intended to support Voetius’s position in the controversy. This was the Admiraenda methodus novae philosophiae Renati des Cartes, published in Utrecht in early 1643. Descartes, who obtained proofs of Schoock’s book, and thinking it had actually been authored by Voetius, responded with the Letter to Voetius in April or May of the same year.14

In the Admiraenda methodus, Descartes is discussed squarely in the context of the novatores, in whose number he is counted. The names of Gorlaeus and Taurellus come up often in the book; they were very much as issue in the earlier disputes in Utrecht involving Voetius and Henricus Regius.15 But among the novatores Schoock also includes Ramus, “the two Patrizzi,” Telesio, and Basson.16 Schoock begins the Introduction of his Admiraenda methodus as follows:

Should this zeal of mind that afflicts certain who, otherwise seem to be tranquil, be counted among the virtues or among the vices of this century? Initially filling the mind with an agreeable tickle, it leads them to despise antiquity (which is, however, venerable) and leads them to a desire for the new (which is, however, dangerous) in the church, in the state, and in the academy. (Schoock 1643, 1)

This sets the tone for the rest of the book, where Schoock criticizes innovation and innovators in the most extravagant and derisive terms, including especially Descartes. After this first appearance as a novator Descartes appears regularly on later lists of novatores. But even though Descartes was taken as an innovator, his attitude toward novelty was rather careful and nuanced. Descartes was clearly presenting

---

14 For a history of the disputes, see Verbeek 1992, chap. 2 and his preface and introduction to Descartes and Schoock (1988). The Letter to Dinet can be found in AT VII 563–603, and the Letter to Voetius in AT VIIIB 1–194. Schoock’s text is Schoock (1643). A French translation of the Letter to Dinet, the Admiraenda methodus, and, in part, the Letter to Voetius can be found in Descartes and Schoock (1988), along with a helpful introduction by Verbeek. In what follows I shall cite the pagination only of the original versions of the text along with my own translations, but in preparing my translations I made extensive use of Verbeek’s very useful French versions.

15 For a recent account of the life and thought of David Gorlaeus, see Lüthy 2012.

16 For the list of novatores in Schoock, see Schoock 1643, 6. Gorlaeus and Taurellus are also mentioned in the unpaginated preface, Schoock (1643, v and *6r) and later in chapt. 3, Schoock (1643, 42). They are also mentioned in Descartes’s Letter to Dinet, AT VII 586. Gorlaeus and Taurellus play an especially large role in the “Narration Historique,” an account of the disputes prepared by a commission of professors at the University of Utrecht and presented to the faculty senate on March 6, 1643, in Descartes and Schoock (1988, 94, 98, 100, 101, 103, 109, 112, 113).
something new, and he knew it. As we have already seen, in his *Discours de la méthode*, he began by complaining about what he didn’t learn at school. His response, of course, was to leave school and to find for himself what he was not taught in school. It is astonishing, though, that despite the audacious way in which he began the *Discours*, he sent the book, the *Discours* and accompanying essays to Père Noël, his teacher at La Flèche, with the following note:

I am sure that you don’t remember the names of all of the students which you have had in the last twenty-four years, since you have taught philosophy at La Flèche. (AT I 383)

Descartes sent him the book with the remark that “I am very pleased to offer you this (book), as a fruit that belongs to you and for which you have tossed the first seeds into my mind” (AT I 383). The Père Noël must have complained about the novelty in the book, since in the next letter he wrote to him, Descartes felt that he had to defend the novelty of his project:

I know that the main reason why your Colleges take great care to reject all sorts of innovations in philosophical matters is their fear that these innovations (*nouveautés*) may bring about some change in theology as well. That is why I want especially to point out that you have nothing to fear on this score so far as my own innovations are concerned, and that I have reason to thank God that the views which, from my reflection on natural causes, seemed to me most true in physics were always those which are the most compatible with the mysteries of religion, as I hope to show clearly when I have the opportunity. (AT I 455–456)

In this way, Descartes seems to defend the novelty of his views in philosophy, while admitting that one must be cautious about novelty in theology.

The letter to Noël shows that he was sensitive to what it is about novelty that disturbed others. I suspect that the events at Utrecht beginning in 1641 made him even more so. The Letter to Dinet was written to respond directly to the Seventh Objections of Bourdin. But the events at Utrecht were very much present in that letter as well. Much of the letter is a detailed account of the events in Utrecht, the attacks on Regius and the Cartesian philosophy on the part of Voetius at the University of Utrecht. The comments there show that he was very much aware of what disturbed people about novelty. Descartes wrote:

But people may not believe that the truth will be found in the new philosophy which I have undertaken to publish. For it may hardly seem likely that one person has managed to see more than hundreds of thousands of highly intelligent men who have followed the opinions that are commonly accepted in the Schools. Well-trodden and familiar pathways are always safer than new and unknown
ones, and this maxim is particularly relevant because of theology. For the experience of many years has taught us that the traditional and common philosophy is consistent with theology, but it is uncertain whether this will be true of a new philosophy. For this reason some people maintain that new philosophy should be prohibited and suppressed at the earliest opportunity, in case it should attract large numbers of inexperienced people who are avid for novelty, and thus gradually spread and gain momentum, disturbing the peace and tranquility of the Schools and the universities and even bringing new heresies into the Church. (AT VII 578–579)

Later in the Letter to Dinet he concludes:

In the past, so many people have produced new opinions in philosophy which have later been recognized to be no better, and in many cases more dangerous, than the ordinary accepted views, that if anyone who does not yet have a clear perception of my views is asked to give his opinion of them, it would be perfectly fair for him to say that they should be rejected. (AT VII 601)

Descartes is very much aware of the dangers posed by novelty, and why certain of the orthodox would hesitate to accept novelty and novelties. But even after the Letter to Dinet, Descartes will continue to defend novelty. In the Letter to Voetius, written in response to the *Admiranda methodus* of Schoock, which, in turn, is a response to the Letter to Dinet, Descartes wrote:

Without doubt, in religious matters, every attempt at innovation is offensive. . . . For philosophy, it is quite another matter: I admit that man has only a very imperfect knowledge, and that it admits of many improvements. Thus nothing is more praiseworthy than to be a novator. (AT VIIIIB 26)

This seems to be a rather strong defense of novelty, and an admission that what he is doing is genuinely new.

But almost at the same time as he wrote this defense of novelty, there is a new strategy taking shape. Starting at least in the Letter to Dinet, and going long afterward, Descartes represented his own views as the oldest, and Aristotle’s views as being novelties. In the Letter to Dinet, Descartes wrote:

I shall add something that may seem paradoxical. Everything in peripatetic philosophy, regarded as a distinctive school that is different from others, is quite new, whereas everything in my philosophy is old. For as far as principles
are concerned, I only accept those which in the past have always been common ground among all philosophers without exception, and which are therefore the most ancient of all. Moreover, the conclusions I go on to deduce are already contained and implicit in these principles, and I show this so clearly as to make it apparent that they too are very ancient, in so far as they are naturally implanted in the human mind. By contrast, the principles of the commonly accepted philosophy—at least at the time when they were invented by Aristotle and others—were quite new, and we should not suppose that they are any better now than they were then. (AT VII 580)

This view is echoed in part IV §200 of the *Principia philosophiae* of 1644:

200. *I have used no principles in this treatise which are not accepted by everyone; this philosophy is nothing new but is extremely old and very common.* I should also like it to be noted that in attempting to explain the general nature of material things I have not employed any principle which was not accepted by Aristotle and all other philosophers of every age. So this philosophy is not new, but the oldest and most common of all. (AT VIIIA 323)

In the Letter to Dinet Descartes even claims that the Peripatetician had burned the books of his predecessors to hide the unfair distortions he introduced into his accounts of their thought (AT VII 588).17

Just as the Protestants claimed that it was the Catholics who were the innovators, and that they, the Protestants were returning to the original Christianity, Descartes argued that it is his opponents, the Aristotelians who are the true novatores. But did Descartes really believe that his philosophy was older than Aristotle’s? Responding to the claims Descartes made in the Letter to Dinet, Schoock wrote a chapter in the *Admiranda methodus* entitled in part “Descartes tries in vain to attribute in some way the glory of antiquity to his philosophy.” Needless to say, Schoock wasn’t convinced:

What remains if not to consider the dogmas of this man like a new madness, that adorns itself with the spoils of antiquity in the same way in which the poor crow wears the feathers of other birds. (1643, 70)

This wasn’t surprising, of course. But this theme was very prominent, and, one supposes, credible to Constantijn Huygens. Huygens’ Latin poem in honor of the *Principia philosophiae* ends with the lines:

---

17 This is similar to claims that Francis Bacon made about Aristotle. See *Cogitata et visa* (1607–1608?), *Bacon 1858–74*, vol. 3, 602, translated in *Farrington 1964*, 84.
Thus does the defender of the true deserve to be called a
novator, Momus? He makes of Aristotle a novator!  

I suspect that Descartes knew perfectly well that his claim to antiquity
was not credible, and that it wasn’t meant entirely seriously, though it was
a good rhetorical figure. I suspect that in the end, Descartes simply did
not think that antiquity—or novelty—gave anyone’s views any particular
advantage. In a letter to Isaac Beeckman from 1630, long before the later
controversies that made the issue of novelty so prominent, Descartes wrote:

Plato says one thing, Aristotle another, Epicurus another,
Telesio, Campanella, Bruno, Basson, Vanini, and the novatores all say something different. Of these people, I ask
you, who is it who has anything to teach me, or indeed, anyone who loves wisdom? Doubtless it is the man who
can first convince someone by his arguments, or at least
his authority. (AT I 158)

He advanced his own philosophy not because it was old or new, but because
it was, he thought, demonstrably true. At the very end of the Discours he
wrote:

As to the opinions that are wholly mine, I do not apologize
for their novelty. If the reasons for them are considered
well, I am sure they will be found to be so simple and
so much in agreement with common sense as to appear
less extraordinary and strange than any other views that
people may hold on the same subjects. I do not boast of
being the first to discover any of them, but I do claim to
have accepted them not because they have, or have not,
been expressed by others, but solely because reason has
convinced me of them. (AT VI 77)

And, for Descartes, truth is what distinguished his philosophy from all of
the others then available, either old or new. In this way, Descartes tried
to take himself outside of the debate over the novatores altogether. For
Descartes, it was he, himself, who was the eagle in philosophy: under no
circumstances did he want to be mistaken for a wingless chick.

3 Descartes among the Novatores

Though Descartes wanted to separate himself from the novatores, it was
not easy to do. By the early 1650s, his name regularly appeared in the
standard lists of novatores as one of their number. But interestingly enough,
at this moment, the tide seems to be shifting: unlike earlier, when few, if
any, had much good to say about being a novator, including the novatores
themselves, the novatores begin to be treated in a much more positive light.

18 “Sic meruit veri vindex audire novator,/ Mome! novatorem fecit Aristoletem” AT IV 658.
As part of an introductory essay ("Discours à la recommendation de la Philosophie ancienne restablue en sa pureté") to his French translation of Jean d’Espagnet’s Enchiridion physicae restitutae (La Philosophie naturelle restablue en sa pureté [1651]), a curious alchemical work published anonymously in 1623 in Latin, Jean Bachou discussed the new philosophers of his age. Bachou sought to put d’Espagnet in their number, indeed, as the first among them in a way that showed that he obviously valued those who attempted something new. The authors Bachou discussed include many of the regulars we have seen in other lists, Telesio, Patrizi, Campanella, Bacon, Fludd, Gorlaeus, Taurellus, and Ramus. But in their number he includes “ce rare Homme,” Descartes, whose “inventiveness and subtlety” he values, though he does complain that that his physics is not sufficiently grounded in experience.19

Similarly, Adriaan Heereboord, a Leiden professor and supporter of Descartes, discussed the novatores in a lecture entitled “Consilium de ratione studiendi philosophiae,” published in his Meletemata philosophica (Heerboord 1654). Heereboord divides the novatores into two camps, those who are just destructive of the old, and those who may contribute to a new project. The former includes Vives, Ramus, Patrizi (in his Discussiones Peripateticae), Gorlaeus, Campanella, Telesio, Basson, and the brothers Boot. In the latter group he includes Patrizi (in his Nova Philosophia), Bacon, Comenius, and Descartes. According to Heereboord, Descartes’s published writings: “presented the true key to the true philosophy, disclosed not a few of the mysteries of nature, and opened the door for entering into the fixed truths about things” (1654, 28).

But perhaps most interesting of all is the treatment that Descartes gets by Charles Sorel. Sorel was an extremely prolific writer, who first burst into print in 1622 at the age of 20 or maybe a little bit older, with the daring romance entitled Francion, which became a great success, as did a number of literary works that followed. But in his mid-30s, Sorel turned away from the libertine literary life he had led, and toward what he considered more mature and serious stuff. In 1634 he began a series of books that collectively made up what he called La science universelle, a project that occupied him for more than 20 years.20 One of the summary essays he wrote at the end of this project, in a volume published in 1655, was entitled “Le sommaire des opinions les plus estranges des novateurs en philosophie” (Sorel 1655, 209–275). In that work he added his own list of novateurs: Telesio, Patrizi, Cardano, Ramus, Copernicus, Galileo “& autres Astonomes” (Kepler is included in the chapter), Bruno, Gorlaeus, Carpenter, “Enchyridion de la physique restituée” (Jean d’Espagnet), Basson, Campanella, Descartes, “les nouvaters chymistes, de Paracelse & autres, & particularem d’Estienne de Claves, Henry de Rochaz (Rochas).” While it is somewhat larger than

19 The essay is unpaginated, but immediately precedes (Espagnet 1651, 1), the opening Canon.
20 On Sorel’s project see Picardi 2007.
among the Novatores 15

Sorel has very positive comments about his novateurs. Sorel admits that while the views of some are “fantastiques et imaginaires,” “the others address themselves to solid truths, and are to be praised the more for their being hidden” (1655, 210; cf. 267). He continues:

Although the very name of “novateur” might be odious to many people, we must be careful that even if it is to be feared in matters concerning theology, it isn’t so in natural and human philosophy. (1655, 210)

He admits that there are some who are novateurs simply out of a spirit of contradiction (1655, 267; cf. 210). But he praises others for their courage to point out the errors of Aristotle. While Sorel does not agree with Telesio’s natural philosophy, he writes that “we must praise the grandeur of Telesio’s courage, for having dared to be the first to criticize the errors of the ancients.” (1655, 267; cf. 218). Sorel ends his essay with a plea for being open-minded. One shouldn’t accept the ancients dogmatically, nor should we reject them all. “One should take the middle way in this matter,” accept a view when it warrants being accepted, and suspend judgment in all things uncertain (1655, 273–274).

As I noted, among the novateurs Sorel discusses was René Descartes (1655, 252–258). Sorel’s discussion of Descartes is very interesting, both for the company he keeps among other novateurs, as it is for the specific things that Sorel says about him, what he finds most interesting and important. At the time that Sorel is writing, in 1655, Descartes already had a number of disciples, particularly in the Netherlands, though also in Paris. But Sorel is not writing as a Cartesian, or, in a way, even as a philosopher, natural or otherwise (though he does have some pretentions to that), but as an intelligent and pretty well informed observer of the intellectual world at that time.

The entry on Descartes is rather long, six full pages in the essay, one of the longer discussions, but by no means the only one. (Bruno and Bernard Palissy, for example, get roughly the same.) In the discussion, Descartes follows directly on Campanella. Sorel begins by saying that “at almost the same time (as Campanella), there was a French philosopher who garnered a great deal of credit, as much for his novelty as for the subtlety of his doctrine: I mean René Descartes, a Breton” (1655, 252). Sorel then goes on to talk in detail about Descartes’s writings and his opinions. He begins with a long discussion of the Discours et essais of 1637, summarizing the Discours de la méthode and mentioning the Géométrie, Dioptrique, and Météors. Then follows a long discussion drawn mainly from the Principia philosophiae. Sorel discusses in some detail Descartes’s cosmology and the denial of the vacuum. About the cosmology, Sorel seems particularly impressed with the theory of vortices and with the theory of an unlimited universe, filled with suns: “Among all the novateurs, I have not seen any at
all who are so far from the common opinions” (1655, 255–256). At the very end of the discussion of cosmology Sorel mentions the Meditationes (about four lines of text), which he dismisses as repeating the view in Discours de la méthode IV, and the Passions de l’âme (about six lines). This is followed by a brief mention of Henricus Regius and his Fundamenta Physices, whom he considers Descartes’s “abreviateur and his compilateur,” despite the fact that Descartes himself clearly rejected Regius. Sorel also mentions the commentaries of Jacques Du Roure that had recently appeared in Paris.

In the course of his discussion of Descartes, Sorel passes along certain criticisms that had been made of Descartes. He notes that there are some who “are not persuaded that all of these opinions (in his cosmology) come from his own invention,” and notes the similarity between some of his ideas and those of Bruno and d’Espagnet, whom I mentioned earlier (1655, 256). Sorel notes that even if Descartes had borrowed from others, “one should recognize that he added many subtle thoughts, which should be judged entirely his own” (1655, 257). Sorel continues: “Some say that his philosophy is obscure and full of strange imaginations, but we must recognize that extraordinary things always surprise at first, and that those who discover a new doctrine and develop it in detail have something which surpasses the common laws” (1655, 257). Others complain that his philosophy reads like pure mathematics, using too many diagrams with capital letters unlike “a man who knows the art of writing clearly and intelligibly, and can express himself with the descriptions of his discourses alone” (1655, 257). Sorel claims not to endorse these criticisms, but one can wonder. Sorel has positive words for Descartes, but then he has positive words for many of his novateurs. The discussion suggests that he considers Descartes as just another one of the novateurs with his own curious opinions, one wingless chick among many. Only the last sentence suggests that Descartes may be something more: “This can do as an explication of this author, who does not lack followers” (1655, 258).

Sorel republished the whole essay a few years later, in 1668 (1655, 360–449). The bulk of the section on Descartes was almost completely unchanged (1655, 360–449). But at the end, he added some additional material that suggests that Descartes’s reputation had gone up in the intervening years, and that he had become more than just another novateur. First, Sorel adds some new figures to the list of commentators that he gave in his original list, Louis de La Forge and Gérauld de Cordemoy. Sorel continues:

---

21 On Descartes’s relations with Regius, see Verbeek 1992, chaps. 2 and 4.
22 See Du Roure 1653 and Du Roure 1654.
23 In addition to the republication of the earlier essay, Sorel added a discussion of Villon and the 1624 dispute in Paris over Aristotelianism, discussed above, as part of his treatise on “L’ancienne philosophie.” See Sorel 1655, 352–359. This section contains further observations on the status of Aristotle and Aristotelianism in the intellectual world of his day.
The doctrine of M. Descartes is today followed in many academies and classrooms (conferences): there are many professors of Philosophy who teach it, and are much more satisfied with it than they are with the old philosophy. The memory of such a famous philosopher has been an object of such veneration among certain people that they have brought his body back from Sweden, where he died, and have buried it in a church in Paris with great honors. We believe that the respects that one renders to such a learned person are to the benefit of all of those who cultivate the sciences. (1655, 426)24

In this later edition of Sorel’s essay, Descartes is still presented among the novatores, one among many.

But something important has changed. One might say that Descartes is in the process of leaving the company of the novatores behind, and becoming the singular character that he is for us, a unique and uniquely significant figure in the history of philosophy, the father of modern philosophy, if you will. Descartes always knew that that was his destiny. What he didn’t acknowledge is that there were many other contemporary novatores who thought exactly the same about themselves.

Daniel Garber
E-mail: dgarber@princeton.edu

References:
Denziger, Heinrich. 1952. Enchiridion symbolorum. 28th edn. Freiburg and Barcelona: Herder.

24 On the return of Descartes’s remains to Paris from Sweden see Baillet 1691, vol. 2, 433–444.


Lüthy, Christoph. 2012. *David Goralæus (1591-1612): An Enigmatic Figure in the History of Philosophy and Science.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.


