The Light of Descartes in Rembrandt's Mature Self-Portraits

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The Light of Descartes in Rembrandt’s Mature Self-Portraits

Melanie Kathleen Allred

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Light of Descartes in Rembrandt’s Mature Self-Portraits

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Rembrandt’s use of light in his self-portraits has received an abundance of scholarly attention throughout the centuries—and for good reason. His light delights the eye and captivates the mind with its textural quality and dramatic presence. At a time of scientific inquiry and religious reformation that was reshaping the way individuals understood themselves and their relationship to God, Rembrandt’s light may carry more intellectual significance than has previously been thought. Looking at Rembrandt’s oeuvre of self-portraits chronologically, it is apparent that something happened in his life or in his understanding that caused him to change how he used light. A distinct and consistent shift can be observed in the location and intensity of light to the crown of the forehead. This change indicates that light held particular significance for Rembrandt and that its connection to the head was a signifier with intentional meaning. This meaning could have developed as a result of Rembrandt’s exposure to and interest in the contemporary theological and philosophical debates of the seventeenth-century Netherlands, particularly those relating to the physical and eternal nature of the soul stemming from the writings of René Descartes.

The relative religious and intellectual freedom of the Dutch Republic provided a safe place for Descartes to publish and defend his metaphysical ideas relating to the nature of the soul and know-ability of God through personal intellectual inquiry. The widespread disturbance to established thought caused by his ideas and methods sped their dissemination into the early seventeenth-century discourse. Rembrandt’s associations with the educated elite, particularly Constantijn Huygens and Jan Six, increases the probability that he knew of this new philosophy and had the opportunity to consider its relevance to his own quest for self-knowledge. With his particular emphasis on self-exploration and expression, demonstrated through his prolific oeuvre of self-portraits, and his inclination toward emotive, complex, and interdenominational religious works, it follows that Rembrandt would be eager to embrace Descartes’ metaphysics and demonstrate his awareness through his self-portraits. Light on the forehead becomes a metaphor for enlightenment and is the key to reading Rembrandt’s late self-portraits through the lens of Cartesian influence.

Keywords: Rembrandt, self-portraits, light, René Descartes, Cartesian philosophy, dualism, metaphysics, free will, self-knowledge, soul, intelligence, identity, Dutch Republic, scholasticism, Aristotle, Discourse on Method, Geometry, Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul, Self-Portrait with Two Circles, Laughing Philosopher, Self-Portrait as Zeuxis Laughing, Self-Portrait at the Age of 63, Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer, Return of the Prodigal Son, Christ with Arms Folded
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Introduction

Rembrandt’s self-portraits from the last decade of his life reflect the image of a man who sought diligently for light and truth amongst the religious and philosophical ideas circulating during his time. Having left at least seventy-five self-portraits and only a handful of letters to patrons regarding business matters, Rembrandt bequeathed a subjective lot of “autobiographical relics” to future scholars from which to determine his private character and personal views. Scholarship specifically focused on his self-portraits tends to tread cautiously—favoring a formal analysis of his painting and etching techniques, or the use of his self-portraits as technical head studies.¹ Mariët Westermann goes so far as to deny Rembrandt’s self-portraits a reading beyond their value as objects for consumption, suggesting that they are “clearly no philosophical tracts” based on their wide distribution and nonexistence in Rembrandt’s personal collection when his estate was liquidated in 1656.² Forays into psychological evaluation, individualism, and the theatricality of his self-portraits do exist—most notably engaged by H. Perry Chapman—but, as Ann Jensen Adams asserts, “Too often Rembrandt is presented as having somehow ‘discovered’ human psychology, or at least having discovered how to paint it.”³ She posits that, instead, Rembrandt’s portraits demonstrate that “the artist participated in a shift in the function of portraiture for the viewer at a time when the new emphasis on introspection and self-knowledge

¹ Jakob Rosenberg, Rembrandt: Life and Works (London: Phaidon Press, 1964) offers an example of early scholarship that provides a foundation for much of what followed for decades. Rosenberg emphasizes general stylistic changes and provides a psychological reading of Rembrandt’s self-portraits that is heavily dependent on a framework of formal analysis.
³ Ann Jensen Adams, Public Faces and Private Identities in Seventeenth-Century Holland: Portraiture and the Production of Community (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 97. Adams’ refutation regarding Rembrandt as the discoverer of human psychology is in direct response to Chapman’s assertion in the first paragraph of her first chapter that “Rembrandt discovered the self...he discovered the value of self-portrayal.” See H. Perry Chapman, Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990):10. Additionally, Chapman’s work is valuable for its comprehensive overview of foundational scholarship on Rembrandt’s self-portraits and her own analysis, to which Adams must be deeply indebted. Chapman is one of the first scholars to acknowledge that Rembrandt developed as an artist during a time of great individualism and self-awareness and to demonstrate its influence.
became important for individuals.”⁴ More than anywhere else in Europe, Margaret Jacob and Catherine Secretan note that this introspective climate led to a dramatic increase in Dutch and English autobiographical writing “anchored by religious sentiments or anxieties.”⁵ Rembrandt’s prolific production of self-portraits demonstrates that he fit squarely into this self-reflective, autobiographical community, his self-portraits becoming a veritable visual diary of his personal experiences and innermost thoughts. While much of Rembrandt scholarship accepts the generally autobiographical essence of his self-portraits, what remains to be studied is how they communicate his thorough processing and internalization of the flourishing, dynamic, and pervasive religious and scientific philosophical debates of the Northern Provinces.

Created after the 1660’s, Rembrandt’s mature self-portraits are products of a society steeped in intense religious pluralism and aggressive divisions over the philosophy of René Descartes and its derivatives.⁶ In particular, Rembrandt’s intentional use of light and compositional elements in Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul, 1661 (Fig. 1), Self-Portrait with Two Circles, ca. 1665 (Fig. 2), and Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher], 1668 (Fig. 3), reveal

⁴ Adams, Public Faces and Private Identities, 97.
his engagement with the widespread discourse on Descartes’ dualism, and lead to the culmination of his convictions in *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63*, 1669 (Fig. 4). These portraits provide insight into Rembrandt’s ultimate understanding that the soul and intelligence are inseparable, that they reside in the mind, and that they are immortal as a result of divine origin.

Looking at Rembrandt’s oeuvre of self-portraits chronologically, it is apparent that something happened in his life or in his understanding that caused him to change how he used light. In his earlier self-portraits, prior to about 1660, the source of facial illumination tends to originate from the bottom corner or side of the image, as seen in his self-portraits from 1628 and 1658 (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). After 1660, however, Rembrandt consistently used light from the top corner of the frame, giving the crown of his forehead the brightest highlight. This distinct and consistent shift in the location and intensity of light indicates that light held particular significance to Rembrandt and that its connection to the head was a signifier with intentional meaning. This meaning developed as a result of Rembrandt’s exposure to and interest in the contemporary theological and philosophical debates of the seventeenth-century Netherlands, particularly those relating to the physical and eternal nature of the soul. I propose that the consistent use of light on the forehead in Rembrandt’s late self-portraits is a key indicator that guides viewers to “read” his autobiographical images and comprehend his identity with an understanding of the enlightened perspective of René Descartes.

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7 Rembrandt’s c. 1668 Cologne self-portrait has many different titles based on the many interpretations it has been given. In the Wallraf-Richartz Museum collection catalogue, its title is simply *Self-Portrait*. The most common title scholars currently use to discuss this work is *Self-Portrait as Zeuxis Laughing*. Because this title identifies the self-portrait in a way that inhibits further interpretation, I am using the less common title *Laughing Philosopher* for the purposes of this paper. Additionally, while the Wallraf-Richartz Museum lists the date as c. 1668, the Rembrandt Research Project determined that the date on this self-portrait should be c. 1662-1663. See Ernst van de Wetering, ed, “Self Portrait as Zeuxis Laughing,” in *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, Rembrandt Research Project Foundation vol. IV (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 551-561. I am using the museum’s information as the authoritative source. While my argument sets the four self-portraits it discusses in a general timeline, my basic argument still holds if *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* was created after *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]*. 


Religion and Philosophy in Rembrandt’s Dutch Republic

Rembrandt’s religious associations have been thoroughly debated, with the consensus that he either frequently changed affiliations or never committed to one denomination in particular. This lack of confessional association was common in the Northern Provinces, where, by 1620, as many as fifty-percent of the population were considered religious without claiming church membership. For those who did align with a confession there were many available including Roman Catholic, Reformed, Mennonite, Anabaptist, Socinian, an ever-growing number of additional Protestant sects, and several other immigrant religions that came to the Netherlands seeking asylum. Included in their many dogmatic disagreements was the eternal nature of the soul and the influence and scope of Christ’s atonement for sin on the soul’s salvation. It is clear from Rembrandt’s oeuvre that he was thoroughly aware of the religious heterogeneity of his community, associated with persons across the denominative spectrum, and was personally deeply religious. This proof resides in the quantity of images he produced—personally or through commissions—devoted to religious subjects, the instances where he inserts his self-portrait into biblical narratives, and the depth of feeling attributed to these works.

Protestantism emphasized sola scriptura and encouraged Christians to personally read and become familiar with the teachings of the Bible in their search for truth—an invitation Rembrandt took seriously. His biblical scholarship is undeniable through the masterful way he conflated multiple narratives of the same or similar events to create an emotive, single image. 

*The Hundred Guilder Print*, 1649 (Fig. 7), is one such example. In this print, Rembrandt unified

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several seemingly disparate parables and teachings from the nineteenth chapter of Matthew into a harmonious representation of their combined moral value. Rembrandt’s tendency toward compassion for biblical depictions of sinners is also repeated throughout his career in works such as *Repentant Judas Returning the Pieces of Silver*, 1629 (Fig. 8), and *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1668 (Fig. 9). These works clearly express his personal concern over the imperfection of man and the need for a merciful redemption. The Prodigal Son was a particularly well-known narrative in the Protestant North used to convey God’s father-like nature and demonstrates, as John Calvin describes, the “boundless goodness and inestimable forbearance of God, that no crimes, however aggravated, may deter us from the hope of obtaining pardon.”

Constantijn Huygens, secretary to two of the Princes of Orange, influential social and political figure, and early supporter of Rembrandt and his work, offers further insight into Rembrandt’s supreme ability to convey God’s grace to his contemporary audience in his response to *Repentant Judas Returning the Pieces of Silver*. As recorded in his autobiography, Huygens asserts:

> The posture and gestures of this one despairing Judas, leaving aside so many other breathtaking figures [brought together] in a single painting, of this one Judas I say who, out of his mind and wailing, implores forgiveness yet holds no hope of it, or has at least no trace of hope upon his countenance; that haggard face, the hair torn from the head, the rent clothing, the forearms drawn in and the hands clasped tight together, stopping the blood-flow; flung blindly to his knees on the ground in a [violent] access of emotion, the pitiable horror of that totally twisted body—that I set against all the refined art of the past.

Huygens’ emotional engagement with this image demonstrates Rembrandt’s ability to convey successfully and powerfully his personal, emotive interpretation of a biblical narrative to an audience. Rembrandt’s repeated emphasis on personal interpretation of the Bible and eternal

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salvation places him securely within the context of the religious milieu of the Northern
Provinces. Without being aligned to any fixed, institution-based point of view, Rembrandt would
have been able to listen objectively to the varying ideas available and independently choose
which perspectives fit within his personal philosophical-religious paradigm.

Fundamentally intertwined with an individual’s understanding of religious doctrine in the
seventeenth century were the contributions of metaphysical philosophy. Philosophy was
dedicated to the study of ancient dialectics, particularly those associated with Aristotle, and
involved applying logic to an understanding of the relationship between the physical and
invisible world. As a fundamental foundation and companion to understanding medicine, law,
and theology, philosophy was taught in Dutch universities and its principles were disseminated
through intellectuals and professionals into Dutch culture. One could not contemplate the
nature of the immortal soul or the function of salvation in relation to the soul without the
influence of established or contemporaneously debated philosophy.

Rembrandt was formally educated at the Latin school until he was approximately thirteen
years of age and it is recorded that he registered at the University of Leiden in 1620. It is
unknown how long he attended the university, but his combined experience at Latin school and
the university provided first-person familiarity with the humanistic curriculum and intellectual
format of contemporary education and taught him the academic language of Latin. Aside from
one year spent in Amsterdam with artists Pieter Lastman and Jacob Pynas, Rembrandt spent the
majority of his formative years in Leiden and it was the location of his first workshop. This early

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13 Theo Verbeek, Descartes and the Dutch: Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637–1650 (Carbondale and
14 Chapman, Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits, 14. Charles Mee, Jr., Rembrandt’s Portrait: A Biography (New York:
Simon and Schuster, 1988), 26–27. Mee notes that it was at Rembrandt’s request that his parents allowed him to
leave the University of Leiden to enter an art apprenticeship with Jacob van Swanenburg.
and extensive exposure to the academic environment of one of the most important cities and universities that would facilitate the advancement of Cartesian philosophy lays a solid foundation for the fact that Rembrandt knew the relationship between metaphysical philosophy and religious ideals and expected to be exposed to contemporaneous debates. Additionally, from 1631 until his death in 1669, Rembrandt spent most of his career in Amsterdam, the publishing center for one of the most influential philosophers of the seventeenth century—René Descartes.

A native of France, Descartes settled in the Netherlands to write and publish his groundbreaking works on the nature of the soul. *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences* (also known as Discourse on Method) was published in Leiden in 1637, and then in Amsterdam in 1644. *Meditations on the First Philosophy in which the Existence of God and the Distinction Between Mind and Body are Demonstrated* (*Meditations on First Philosophy*) was also published in Amsterdam in 1642, followed by *The Principles of Philosophy* in 1644, and *The Passions of the Soul* in 1649.¹⁵ In addition to his connections with Descartes’ main publishing center, Rembrandt’s twenty-four year history with Leiden gave him social and academic associations to one of the first Dutch cities and universities where Descartes also lived and studied.

Furthermore, Rembrandt’s religious autonomy and artistic skill led him to a variety of patrons, many of whom were the educated elite of the Dutch Republic where new philosophies—especially contentious ones—were discussed.¹⁶ Huygens was one of Descartes’ greatest advocates from the time he arrived in the Netherlands until his death. More than one hundred and

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twenty extant letters document the closeness and content of their interactions. Included in these letters are exchanges between Descartes and Huygens dated March 1637 regarding early editions of *Discourse on Method* and *Geometry* with requests from Descartes that Huygens provide comments and feedback on his ideas.\(^\text{17}\) Huygens’ intimate knowledge of Descartes and his publications as well as his understanding of the controversial nature and reception of his ideas no doubt influenced those seeking his favor. Rembrandt’s letters to Huygens from January 1639 are among the sparse collection of Rembrandt’s writings that still exist. While these letters do not contribute to an understanding of the full spectrum of the relationship between the men, they do establish that they were still in contact two years after Huygens had assisted Descartes with preparation for the publication of *Discourse on Method*. Rembrandt needed the relationship with Huygens to maintain his patronage connection with Prince Henry Frederick. This need makes it possible that Rembrandt was aware of Huygens’ interests in and involvement with the burgeoning conflict of Descartes’ ideas and possibly engaged them himself as a way to maintain an intellectual association with his esteemed sponsor. In addition, from about 1647 to 1654, another one of Rembrandt’s devoted patrons was Jan Six, a wealthy merchant and poet, with an extensive library that included the contemporary writings of Descartes.\(^\text{18}\) An etching of Six in his study from 1647 (Fig.10) places Rembrandt in unmistakably close proximity to physical copies of Descartes’ works. Whether his relationship was a genuine friendship or strictly professional is

\(^\text{17}\) *Correspondence of Descartes and Constantyn Huygens, 1635-1647*, Leon Roth, ed., from the manuscripts now in the Bibliothèque Nationale formerly in the possession of the late Harry Wilmot Buxton, F.R.A.S. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926). The introductory material gives a complete biography of the letters and documents exchanged between Descartes and Huygens. For correspondence regarding Descartes’ request for Huygens to review *Discourse on Method*, see in particular letters on pages 38-43: Descartes to Huygens, 22 March 1637, and Huygens to Descartes, 24 March 1637, and Descartes to Huygens, 29 March 1637.

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., 31 and Mee, *Rembrandt’s Portrait*, 280.
unknown. However, some who appeared in Six’s circle, such as the poet Jeremias de Decker, were close friends with Rembrandt his whole life. Associations with patrons from the erudite class of Dutch society and the fact that Rembrandt could more than likely read Latin—the language of scholarly publications, including *Discourse on Method*—increased the depth with which Rembrandt was able to engage contemporary controversy in modern philosophical and religious thought.

**Faith, Reason, and Religion: The Conflict and the Liberation of Descartes’ Dualism**

Descartes’ ideas stemmed from a growing movement toward the use of reason as a means to establish faith, which was encouraged by Pope Leo X through the Fifth Lateran Council of 1513. Christian philosophers were mandated through the papal bull, *Apostolici regiminis*, promulgated at the eighth session of the Fifth Lateran Council, to clarify truth and correct error in existing philosophies. Additionally, anyone studying philosophy or poetry for more than five years was mandated to concurrently study theology in order to avoid being led astray. In a letter to the Theology Faculty at Sorbonne, Descartes references the mandates of the papal bull as one of the driving forces behind his work:

> As regards the soul, many people have considered that it is not easy to discover its nature, and some have even had the audacity to assert that, as far as human reasoning goes, there are persuasive grounds for holding that the soul dies along with the body and that the opposite view is based on faith alone. But in its eighth session the Lateran Council held

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19 Clara Bille, “Rembrandt and Burgomaster Jan Six: Conjectures as to their Relationship,” *Apollo* 85, no. 62 (April 1, 1967): 260-265. Bille makes the most thorough case for the complex nature of Rembrandt and Six’s relationship. She exposes the many anecdotal references and discrepancies in early biographies that provide the foundation for scholarly assumptions. See also, Westermann, *Rembrandt*, 196-204, 235 and Golahny, *Rembrandt’s Reading*, 72-74. Westermann offers her perspective on this relationship utilizing the admiration Six had for Rembrandt’s work. She also includes the fact that Six loaned Rembrandt money around 1653 in order to assist the artist in his financial crisis. Shortly after Rembrandt’s bankruptcy, Six severed his relationship with Rembrandt.

under Leo X condemned those who had taken this position, and expressly enjoined
Christian philosophers to refute their arguments and use all their powers to establish the
truth; so I have not hesitated to attempt this task as well.\textsuperscript{21}

The \textit{Apostilici regiminis} was a passive-aggressive response to the interest in ancient texts and the
revival of classical ideas in the Renaissance that brought secular Aristotelian concepts about the
nature of the soul into direct opposition with the faith-based doctrines of the Catholic Church.
According to Aristotelian philosophy, the soul was an inseparable part of the whole body and
could only know and understand what the bodily senses experienced. Upon death, the soul died
and decayed at a rate equal to the decay of the physical body, eventually ceasing to exist or, at
best, rejoining a universal substance.\textsuperscript{22} These conclusions were achieved through logic and an
understanding of the tangible world and contradicted Christianity’s faith-based acceptance of the
salvation of the soul and the divine authority of the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{23} The philosophies that
grew from this renaissance of Aristotelian ideas opened a Pandora’s Box of questions and
doubts, which made available an assortment of reasoning not only addressing the nature of the
soul, but challenging the foundation and authority of established thought. Overwhelming and
contradictory philosophies caused division amongst Christians who believed that an

\textsuperscript{21} Rene Descartes, quoted in C. F. Fowler, \textit{Descartes on the Human Soul: Philosophy and the Demands of Christian

\textsuperscript{22} W. Von Leyden, \textit{Seventeenth-Century Metaphysics: An Examination of Some Main Concepts and Theories}
See also Fowler, \textit{Descartes on the Human Soul}, 71–72, 310 and Clarke, \textit{Descartes}, 23. The idea of a universal soul
was Averroes’ thirteenth-century interpretation of Aristotle’s teachings and was an early attempt to fit Aristotle’s
teachings into Christian theology instead of rejecting them outright. It was met with great criticism but was still a
part of the discussion in the seventeenth century.

\textsuperscript{23} Clarke, \textit{Descartes}, 20–24. See also Veitch, \textit{The Philosophy of Descartes}, 6–11. The Catholic Church fully
accepted Aristotle’s cosmology and mathematics, but did not accept his concept that the individual soul dies with
the body or the possibility of a universal soul to which every human soul collectively belonged. A great
misunderstanding had occurred with translations of Greek text and the inability to consistently monitor how
Aristotle was taught. As the realization developed that Aristotle’s views of the nature of the soul (or lack thereof)
came to light, the Church had to respond. The Fifth Lateran Council required that Aristotle’s teachings be accepted
unless they contradicted Church doctrine, at which point educators were to abandon Aristotle in favor of Church-
approved, faith-based teachings. See also Eric A. Constant, “A Reinterpretation of the Fifth Lateran Council Decree
\textit{Apostolici regiminis} (1513),” \textit{Sixteenth Century Journal} 33, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 354.
understanding of the body, mind, and soul should ultimately be achieved by faith, and those with differing opinions about how to apply science and reason to gain an understanding of intangible, eternal things.²⁴

In the Netherlands, Catholics and Protestants generally agreed upon the basic Aristotelian notion that the soul was contained in the entirety of the body, and that at some point resurrection (or regeneration) would occur, but disagreed over what happens to that soul upon death. For Catholics, the souls of the good (but imperfect) existed in purgatory awaiting the resurrection. This liminal existence necessitated masses and prayers to free the soul as soon as impurities were sufficiently purged, giving the Church a type of power over the eternal destiny of mankind.²⁵ For Protestants, no such cleansing was required and the soul’s progress was definitively suspended until the Last Judgment—which could occur immediately upon death or at some future period, depending on the theologian. Ever-evolving variations and debates relating to Luther’s soul sleep and Calvin’s intermediate residence in Abraham’s Bosom demonstrate the lack of stability within Protestantism to resolve this concern. Luther believed the soul fell into a deep sleep, existing in a state of insensibility until the day of resurrection, when the power of Grace would restore the soul and body to consciousness.²⁶ For Calvin, souls absolutely retain their consciousness in their interim state, having already achieved their salvation or damnation.²⁷

²⁴ Clarke, Descartes, 75.
²⁶ Susan Karant-Nunn, Reformation of Ritual: An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 187. For simplicity, I have divided the camps into Catholics and Protestants, but it is important to note that “Protestants” is a diverse group of non-Catholic Christians and that they each held their own belief regarding the nature of the soul. Some, such as the Socinians, even sided with Aristotle’s belief in the deterioration of the soul with the body. In addition to conflicting views of the resurrection, doctrine regarding Christ’s suffering for sin was also disputed. The soul’s torment in purgatory significantly reduced or negated the power of Christ as the intercessor for sin through His prayer and spilt blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Protestantism’s predestination limited its application to a select few.
Regardless of religious affiliation or dogmatic alignment, the existence of a soul and its condition after death could ultimately only be reaffirmed by faith. This unsteady foundation is what Descartes believed could be conclusively resolved through reason, a resolution Rembrandt would thoroughly appreciate.

Descartes’ scientific approach to define the nature of the soul sought to prove, once and for all, that the soul and the body are distinctly separate and to define the functional purpose for each. By methodically doubting the existence of the sensual world—Aristotle’s world—Descartes arrived at the notion published in *Discourse on Method* that the soul exists as a completely separate entity from the body, residing in a gland in the brain while the body is living, but capable of existing as intellect independent from the body.\(^{28}\) The body becomes an extension of the intellect, allowing the intellect to choose to participate in the sensual experiences the body provides, but also capable of acting without the body as occurs when a person stills the body to meditate.\(^{29}\) Thus, the experience of thinking reveals that the soul is pure intelligence, and that through intelligence immortal existence is possible, or, in Descartes’ famous words, *Cogito ergo sum*—“I think, therefore, I am.”\(^{30}\)

The significance of an intelligent, self-directing soul that utilizes the body as an instrument for interacting with the tangible world in the formation of personal identity cannot be overstated. Doctrinal tension between man’s freewill and God’s grace was one of the divisive issues that led to the eventual separation of Protestants from the Church. Protestants held that men are creatures acted upon by a provident or vengeful God at the mercy of foreordained good


or bad passions that move the soul. As a result, no man sins of his own volition and his salvation is guaranteed through Christ’s mercy. This mode of belief makes intelligent action unnecessary. The Church held that freewill was necessary; that individuals could look to themselves as agents acting upon a God-given world. Descartes took this a step further, proving that the God-given world could be known through individual reason, not the result of self-revealing Platonic Ideals.\textsuperscript{31} In a letter to Christina of Sweden, Descartes expressed the extreme value he placed on individual agency:

\begin{quote}
Now freewill is in itself the noblest thing we can have because it makes us in a certain manner equal to God and exempts us from being his subjects; and so its rightful use is the greatest of all the goods we possess, and further there is nothing that is more our own or that matters more to us. From all this it follows that nothing but freewill can produce our greatest contentments.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

Motivation for actions, then, should stem from a desire to use this intelligent agency correctly in order to instigate our own happiness. According to Charles Taylor, seventeenth-century self-worth, therefore, is not dictated by fear of an external eternal judgment but is a natural byproduct of a rational proof: “If rational control is a matter of mind dominating the disenchanted world of matter, then the sense of the superiority of the good life, and the inspiration to attain it, must come from the agent’s sense of his own dignity as a rational being.”\textsuperscript{33} Descartes’ use of science and reason to support the Church’s stance that man is an agent unto himself due to his possession of an intelligent soul was never intended to challenge Christianity, the Catholic Church, or religion’s authority. While the unconventional, possibly heretic nature of his methods cast a shadow over his good intentions, it simultaneously propelled his ideas into the academic (and eventually the public) discourse.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[32]{Letter from Descartes to Christina of Sweden, quoted in Taylor, \textit{Sources of the Self}, 147.}
\footnotetext[33]{Ibid., 152.}
\end{footnotes}
The Inescapable Influence of Cartesian Debates on Dutch Society

Descartes’ metaphysics were cautiously embraced by those looking for an alternative to Aristotelianism, and vehemently attacked by others. Their promulgation can be attributed to disputation presented at the Universities of Utrecht in 1641 and Leiden in 1644. While Descartes’ first city of residence in the Netherlands was Leiden, professors at the University of Utrecht were the first to significantly adopt and argue his metaphysics. In 1641, Henricus, a physician and professor of theoretical medicine and botany at the university, presented three disputation on physical systems that integrated Cartesianism and gained him many theological followers. In his “Medical Disputations,” Regius reaffirmed that cognition and the soul were synonymous, further specifying that the pineal gland was the seat of the soul. However, Regius crossed theological boundaries by making the mind-body union accidental instead of substantial—which directly conflicted with the Christian dogma of the resurrection and the importance of the body to salvation. This inflamed the rector of the university, Gysbertius Voetius, who was himself a theologian and staunch Calvinist, and who had initially supported Regius’ physical theories. The response was an attack on Regius, Descartes, Cartesian philosophy, and all teachings that contradicted Aristotelianism published in several disputation by Voetius. A handful of other theologians, scholars, and burgomasters also entered the disputation controversy, which expanded beyond metaphysics and into attacks on personal character by all parties, including harsh accusations of skepticism and atheism. The

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34 Verbeek, Descartes and the Dutch, 13–14.
36 Ibid., 29. To be called a skeptic or an atheist was possibly the worst insult and defamation that could be leveled at a rival.
Engagement with Descartes’ philosophies in Leiden began in 1644—the year that metaphysics was finally added to the university’s curriculum. Descartes attended Leiden University as a student of mathematics in 1630, and the first edition of *Discourse on Method* was published there in 1637. However, without a metaphysics department, the University of Leiden was without official means to scrutinize, counter, and disseminate his theories. Thus, Descartes’ theories had little initial influence in Leiden while debates gained momentum in Utrecht. After the addition of metaphysics, it took Adriaan Heereboord, a professor of logic and ethics at the university, and a great supporter of disputation and metaphysics, to initiate the dialogue. In a disputation published in 1644, Heereboord agreed with Descartes’ conclusion that “the starting point of philosophy is reason, mind, the natural light of the human intellect” and that doubt was a better method to arrive at truth than the senses. In this instance, the notion of doubt as a means of attaining truth was the impetus for severe criticism of Cartesian principles, leading to their notoriety in Leiden. In a similar response to Voetius in Utrecht, Jacobus Revius, the regent of the Leiden University, theologian, and upstanding Calvinist, disagreed with Heereboord’s support of Cartesian methods. Doubt contradicts faith and if the arrival at a knowledge of God required doubt, then one must deny God’s existence prior to accepting His existence. To Revius, even this momentary lapse in faith was unforgivable, and he began his own personal quest to confound

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37 Other philosophers were taking part in the metaphysical discussions of the time, but the fallout from the controversies in Utrecht and Leiden propelled Descartes and his contribution into the forefront.
38 Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 37. The University of Utrecht attracted many students because of their metaphysics courses and the University of Leiden hoped to match their success by adding it to their own curriculum.
39 Adriaan Heereboord, *Sermo extemporaneus de recta philosophicè disputandi ratione* (Leiden: F. Hackius) from Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 37. Trusting reason over the senses overturned Aristotle’s view that the senses should be the primary source of knowledge. Aristotle’s method was considered the foundation for all academic and theological studies, and so to overturn Aristotle was to overturn the entire world order.
Cartesianism once and for all. Again, several theologians followed suit, publishing books, pamphlets, and disputations for and against Descartes.

Print culture in the Northern Provinces facilitated widespread community engagement with ideas, particularly those with religious or political implications, like Descartes’. This was achieved through the distribution of pamphlets and printed disputations whose primary purpose was to persuade public opinion with a sense of immediacy. Members of the public also felt it a civic duty to share their viewpoint concerning current events or respond to published opinions through the same forum as statesmen, scholars, and ecclesiastical leaders. Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen note: “in the new Republic, everyone had an opinion; and the government was made painfully aware that if it did not explain itself to the people, then someone else would set the political agenda—through pamphlets, sermons, or gossip on the streets.” Even the illiterate could participate in learning about and discussing the most recent scandal. It was common for groups to gather and hear pamphlets read out loud. Disputations might occur in written form between smaller groups of commentators, published in book or pamphlet form by their authors, but also took place orally in the university setting. These oral disputations were open to the public and the contents, published at the cost of the disputant, were distributed without charge to those in attendance. Johannes de Raey’s 23 December 1647 disputation in Leiden in favor of Cartesianism incited a tremendous amount of public interest. It is recorded that “people climbed on the benches so as not to miss anything” and Heereboord recorded that

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“the heads reached to the vaults.”44 Public access to contemporary philosophical ideas was so valuable that nearly all of Descartes’ treatises were translated from French or Latin into Dutch.45

The combined controversies in Utrecht and Leiden had a considerable impact on the spread of Cartesian philosophy and highlight the deeply religious consequences of considering a new and radical metaphysics relating to the know-ability of God, the nature of the soul, and the individual as the source of knowledge. Philosophy and religion were mutually dependent on each other for their very existence, and Aristotelian Scholasticism had maintained a manageable, yet fragile balance that Cartesianism tipped into chaos. The benefit of the disruption to the system—especially Descartes’ emphasis on the individual intellect—was that it allowed individuals, like Rembrandt, to consider their understanding of God, their relationship to Him, and the nature of their own soul without having to appeal to an institutional intercessor or external source. Descartes declared: “I think that all those to whom God has given the use of this reason have an obligation to employ it principally in the endeavor to know him and to know themselves.”46

Rembrandt’s Dutch Republic offered fertile soil for him to take great interest in and follow Descartes’ injunction to use reason as a means to know God and himself. Protestantism and its emphasis on individual study of the Bible gave him access to personally motivated, divine instruction. His humanist education ensured a foundational knowledge of Scholasticism and Latin that would empower him to take interest in the intense Cartesian debates and their challenge to religious authority. Prolific print culture and associations with the academic and social environment in Leiden combined with his upper class patrons, such as Huygens and Six, provided Rembrandt the opportunity to come into physical contact with Descartes’ publications

44 Verbeek, Descartes and the Dutch, 48.
46 Rene Descartes in a letter to Marin Mersenne quoted in Fowler, Descartes on the Human Soul, 57.
and their civic and scholarly deliberation. With this context as a foundation, the metaphorical light that Cartesianism cast on the Dutch Republic and its implications on the formation of personal identity becomes distinctly evident in Rembrandt’s mature self-portraits.

By consistently illuminating himself with an intense highlight on the forehead, Rembrandt reveals his engagement with Cartesian dualism and its identification with the soul-intellect’s residence in the brain. With this light source as the key indicator that *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul, Self-Portrait with Two Circles, Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]*, and *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63* are to be understood from a Cartesian perspective, Rembrandt uses each self-portrait to express specific ways in which this new philosophy influenced his self-knowledge and relationship to God. In particular, *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul* communicates his first steps toward enlightenment and demonstrates the complexity of conflating spiritual and scientific thought in a similar way that his earlier works conflate biblical narratives. *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* confirms his physical interaction with a copy of Descartes’ publications, reveals his thoughts on man’s dual nature, and expresses his feelings about the afterlife of the soul. *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]*, as a bookend to *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, ratifies Rembrandt’s total break with the Scholastic and authoritative philosophies of the past and confirms his sense of freedom to decide his own identity. *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63* quietly testifies to how deeply and profoundly the rupture caused by Descartes’ philosophy influenced the way Rembrandt understood himself as a dual-natured being with a personal relationship to the Divine.
Rembrandt’s Late Self-Portraits as an Exploration of Cartesian Philosophy

In *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul* from 1661 (Fig. 1), Rembrandt demonstrated his assimilation of the Bible’s teachings about the relationship of God to man with Cartesian philosophy. Rembrandt’s keen understanding of Paul and his teachings and associations between Rembrandt’s self-identification with Paul as a sinner saved by grace are commonly acknowledged amongst Rembrandt scholars. The presence of a book and sword as well as Rembrandt’s emphasis on Apostle portraits during the late 1650’s and early 1660’s are the key evidences that continue to make this identification indisputable. However, how this historicized self-portrait demonstrates an intelligent synthesis of Rembrandt’s biblical knowledge and religious identity with his understanding of Cartesianism has never been addressed.

In *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*, Rembrandt clearly assigned himself an active biblical role instead of the more passive role seen in his earlier works, such as *Raising the Cross* from 1633 (Fig. 11), where he maintained his contemporary identity while aiding others in Christ’s crucifixion. Assuming the identity of the Apostle, a figure he had already painted many times, Rembrandt completely aligned himself with Paul, the sinner-turned-saint. By doing so, he acknowledged his own faults and subsequent conversion as an institutionally independent, devoted follower of Christ and advocate for the centrality of His atonement for sinners. Light plays a key role in this portrait, symbolizing Rembrandt’s turn from spiritual darkness to divine light as he literally turns his head from the darkness on his left side to the light on his right. His raised eyebrows indicate the extent to which his eyes strain to abandon the blindness of darkness and widen to take in this new light. This visual metaphor of turning from darkness to light originates in Paul’s teachings to the Ephesians: “For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye

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light in the Lord,” demonstrating that Rembrandt not only took upon himself Paul’s character, but thoroughly understood his teachings, as well. As divine light descends from above, intentionally illuminating his forehead, Rembrandt combined his spiritual enlightenment with a developing belief in Cartesian principles and the location of the soul in the mind.

If divine light descends upon and resides in the intellect, and if creative power originates in the mind, then a relationship must exist between creative and divine power. As an artist, Rembrandt would have recognized himself as a creator, an attribute of God clearly indicated in the first verses of the Old Testament: “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.”

The New Testament reiterates this divine creative power: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.” Using the “Word,” or Christ, God created material forms, organizing relationships between them until a complex, living world was formed. Rembrandt also used the word of God, or the scriptures, conflating narratives to create complex visual and thematic compositions and then formed these ideas into material images that required a tremendous amount of study, creativity, and intellectual ability. In *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*, Rembrandt holds a sword and an open scroll where the artist would normally hold his palette, brush, and maulstick, as seen in *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* and *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]*. The sword in his left hand, held close to his breast under his cloak, references the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” from Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians with the scriptural word of God represented by the

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48 Ephesians 5:8 (KJV). This scripture and idea is used by Chapman in *Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits*, 124 but applied to a different painting: *Apostle Paul in Prison*, 1627. She also briefly mentions light as “inspired artistic imagination.”

49 Genesis 1:1. See also Adams, *Public Faces and Private Identities*, 49. Adams makes a like-minded comparison of artists to God through their creative powers using Genesis 1:27 in her discussion of portraiture.

50 1 John 1:1–3.
scroll in his right hand. The sword of the Spirit supplies and makes affective and alive the words on the page in the same way that Rembrandt’s palette supplies the paint for his brush. Imbuing his figures with life and individual identity could be considered akin to the breath of life breathed into Adam by God himself. Rembrandt’s understanding of God as Creator, himself as creator, and their mutual relationship to Christ as the source of their creative power would have given tremendous substance to Paul’s teachings regarding man’s relationship to the Supreme Creator in the book of Acts:

God made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

In true Cartesian style, Rembrandt could well have reasoned that: If God is a creator, and “I” am a creator, then God and “I” are related, and this truth is confirmed by the writings of Paul and his declaration that man is an “offspring” of God. If this relationship is accurate, then “my” creative capacity, which is based on “my” intellectual capacity, must lead to a belief that the intellect is in fact the location of the soul and the portion of man that endures after death. This process of self-directed reasoning and association with intellect and existence has its roots in Descartes’ philosophy and his deduction, “I think, therefore, I am.”

In light of the eternal and divine connection of man’s intellect to God, Descartes’ statement could also read “I think, therefore, I AM,” referring to God’s declaration of His identity and purpose in response to Moses’ inquiry as to how to identify God to the children of

51 Ephesians 6:17.
52 Genesis 2:7.
This connection of “I am” to “I AM” reaffirms a parallel relationship to God through a mutual, soul-as-intellect existence in the eternal cosmos. If God considers His own, immortal and omnipotent existence as tied to His intellect, and if man’s immortal existence is tied to man’s intellect, then man and God share the source of their immortality and eternal significance. To exist as intelligence is to exist as God exists—a glorious, illuminating concept for Rembrandt to consider.

Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* (Fig. 2), painted around 1665, gives further insight into his personal engagement with Descartes’ philosophies on the dual nature of man and advances his personal identification with the creator-God. Current scholarship regarding this self-portrait identifies either the circles in the background or the unfinished quality of his style, particularly visible in his extremely loose brushstrokes and smudged looking hands, as the key to unlocking its potential meaning. It has been suggested that the circles reference cabbalistic symbols and the perfection of God, an unfinished version of a map that was a popular subject in Dutch art and interiors, or associated with the legends of Apelles’ perfect line and Giotto’s perfect circle as manifestations of exceptional artistic skill. Simon Schama suggests that through a “still, steady head and the whirling hand” Rembrandt makes a statement in favor of his personal artistic style that demonstrates intelligence and ability—the “circle of thought and the circle of action.” Chapman’s interpretation that this self-portrait ultimately represents Rembrandt’s assertion of the “dignity of his profession and supremacy of his style” is the most widely accepted. She argues that this self-expression is achieved through the extreme painterly quality unique to Rembrandt’s style and combines the map and legends interpretations of the

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54 Exodus 3:14.
56 Chapman, *Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits*, 98-99. Chapman provides a concise overview of the scholarship as of 1990. Her overview and personal stance continue to be the foundational scholarship regarding this enigmatic work.
circles to indicate that through his artistic perfection he had mastered representing the visible world.57

Thijs Weststeijn contributes the most compelling and useful scholarship regarding the possibilities for Rembrandt’s inclusion of two circles in this self-portrait through a study of one of Rembrandt’s students—Samual Van Hoogstraten. In analyzing Van Hoogstraten’s 1678 publication, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst; anders de zichthaere werelt* (*Introduction to the Academy of Painting; or the Visible World*), Weststeijn includes the importance of the visible and invisible worlds to Van Hoogstraten’s art theory.58 To do so, Weststeijn provides a thorough review of iconographical traditions that include two circles, concluding that they have the possibility of representing universal knowledge, the visible and invisible worlds as they pertain to a type of vanitas, and then retreats to the safety of the idea that two circles could simply represent the familiar double hemisphere map. His ultimate conclusion regarding Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* favors the idea that the two circles represent the vain pursuit of worldly skill through the juxtaposition of the visible and invisible worlds. The artist must master all aspects of the visible world but likewise accept that their life and works are subject to the ravages of time. Thus, for Weststeijn, Rembrandt’s self-portrait is the artist’s acknowledgement of this paradox.

The student-master relationship between Van Hoogstraten and Rembrandt is valuable in determining what ideas Rembrandt may have passed on to his student through *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*. Included in Van Hoogstraten’s text is an engraving of the author with two orbs adjacent to the artist’s right shoulder (Fig. 12). One sphere is clearly identifiable on the far left

57 Ibid., 100-101.
side of the print as Atlas bears its weight on his shoulders. The other is much more vague with barely defined borders. Located between the artist’s shoulder and Atlas’ sphere, it is partially covered by clouds with a faint reflection of light touching the artist’s robe. Van Hoogstraten identifies these spheres as the visible and invisible worlds in an inscription that can only be seen on some copies of the print. Weststeijn posits that Van Hoogstraten inclusion of two circular forms in the background of his self-portrait may have been emulating the composition of Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*.

If the student copied his master, Rembrandt’s circles would likewise represent the visible and invisible worlds. While Weststjein’s *vanitas* argument is valuable, it still does not reach very far beyond interpretations that this self-portrait is a representation of Rembrandt’s artistic skill that has been reinforced by Chapman and Schama. Additionally, Weststeijn’s emphasis on the artistic, iconographic tradition for representing these two realms ignores the artist’s ability to subvert these traditions and repurpose them to reflect contemporary philosophical and intellectual thought. If, however, the concept of the visible and invisible world is applied to the philosophical and religious context of the Dutch Republic, knowledge of self beyond artistic skill and visual tradition can be identified. The purpose of philosophy as an academic discipline in the seventeenth century was to apply logic to an understanding of the visible and invisible worlds. Thus, with an understanding that Rembrandt was influenced by Cartesian philosophy and that his late self-portraits use light as a key to recognizing his intellectual expansion, the bright highlight on Rembrandt’s forehead is the first indication that *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* should be read within the context of Cartesian dualism. Further, by depicting two circles, Rembrandt demonstrates physical contact with Descartes’ publications in conjunction with the soul-body dualism implied by visible and invisible worlds.
Along with his metaphysical discourses, Descartes was incredibly influential in mathematical theory, publishing several treatises including one titled, *Geometry*, which was published in the same volume as *Discourse on Method*. *Geometry* was created as an exercise in how to apply his methods to discover truth in a practical setting, and applied algebraic equations to circles and curved lines.\(^5^9\) Descartes believed that the ancient mathematicians had limited their contribution to an understanding of the circle because their inability to solve its mysteries rendered it essentially unknowable.\(^6^0\) Discovering solutions to an unknowable problem magnified Descartes’ status as a potent and credible finder and purveyor of truth. The idea that the study of mathematics was intertwined with the study of philosophy and the discovery of truth regarding the material and immaterial worlds is best summarized by Galileo in his letter to Virgino Cesarini, published in 1623:

> Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.\(^6^1\)

In *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, written in 1628 but not published until 1684, Descartes established his expectation that those who study his metaphysical philosophy have a basic understanding of geometry and mathematics. The purpose is closely aligned with the ideas set forth by Galileo: that to understand the difference between intellect (the soul) and extension (the

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body), mathematics provides the mental framework and method that makes the idea of a soul-body distinction and the interaction between them comprehensible.\(^6\)

The significance of Descartes’ *Geometry* to Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* is the inclusion of partial circles or curved lines in the background. No other self-portraits are known to contain such clear geometric forms, making their appearance in this portrait extraordinarily significant. Since *Geometry* was published in the same volume as *Discourse on Method*, where Descartes’ introduced the soul-body distinction, it is very probable that Rembrandt would have come into contact with Descartes’ mathematical theories, or at least their diagrams (Fig. 13) at the same time he discovered *Cogito ergo sum*. By including the circles, Rembrandt made it conspicuously clear that he had been in contact with Descartes’ physical publications and asserted that he had the necessary foundation of geometry and mathematics to understand and practice Cartesian philosophy and its methods. To escape the ‘dark labyrinth’ that keeps the universe unknowable, Rembrandt proclaims that he has acquired the light—the language—used by Divine Intelligence to create the world. In *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*, Rembrandt explored the language of creation as the Word, found in the Bible. In *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*, he explored the language of creation in the form of geometry. Further, the artist depicts himself with his tools of creation—brushes, palate, and maulstick—held in a manner that resembles a compass, the geometer’s tool for making a perfect circle. In manuscripts from the middle ages, God is often represented as a geometer, holding a compass as he creates the circle that becomes the world (Fig. 14). With this allusion, Rembrandt reaffirmed that his ability to create aligned him with the creative intellect of God in the cosmos. Thus, *Self-Portrait*

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as the Apostle Paul and Self-Portrait with Two Circles work together to communicate Rembrandt’s combined wisdom of the spiritual and physical aspects of his intellectual and creative capacity as well as his understanding of both the metaphysical and methodical aspects of Cartesian philosophy.

In addition, Descartes’ stance on the intelligent soul included the idea that memory would be retained by the intellect after it separated from the body.63 This concept would have been of great value to Rembrandt. He was intimately familiar with death when Self-Portrait with Two Circles was created, having lost three infants between 1635 and 1640, followed by his beloved wife, Saskia, in 1642, and his mistress, Hendrickje in 1663. Thinking of his loved ones existing as divine intelligence, with memories of him, awaiting resurrection would provide a much greater sense of comfort than the unsettling alternatives of Catholic purgatory or Protestant non-existent “soul sleep.” With the premise established that Rembrandt’s circles identify his acceptance of the visible and invisible worlds and adoption of Descartes’ metaphysics, the two, independent circles can also represent the two, independent, extant natures of the body and the soul. Rembrandt placed himself in front of the circle representing the body, or the visible world, in such a way that the circumference of the circle intersects the highlight on his forehead. This connection represents his soul-intellect’s current residence in the body’s brain. Additionally, if the circle is completed, it intersects Rembrandt’s right eye—the eye that is in the light—and it is with the eyes that the visible world is discerned. The circle on the right is distinctly separate from the artist and the first circle indicating its metaphorical representation of the invisible world. This intentional placement and the distinct gap between the circles represent the concurrent existence of the eternal intellect of those he loved that were, at that time, already separated from their

bodies, but never far from him. *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* is a complex, multivalent chapter in Rembrandt’s autobiographical self-portraits that demonstrates his deeply personal, intellectual assimilation of Cartesian philosophy with personal identity and a hopeful and enlightened religious belief in the state of the soul post-mortem.

With the concept of a happier post-mortal state and confidence in his own intelligent authority, Rembrandt would be in the perfect position to create *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]* in 1668 (Fig. 3). As with much of Rembrandt’s work, the possible meaning and function of this self-portrait has been oft debated. In 1973, Albert Blankert laid the foundation for what is now the most widely accepted interpretation of this self-portrait, which was ratified and further expounded upon by Ernst van de Wetering with the Rembrandt Research Project in 2005. According to Blankert and van de Wetering, Rembrandt casts himself in *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]* as the 5th century BC painter, Zeuxis, who died laughing while painting an old woman.64 Other interpretations conclude that Rembrandt represents himself as the laughing Democritus juxtaposed with the stern Heraclitus or, more generally, that he laughs in the face of his own impending death. However, when viewed as a personal response to the philosophical light of Descartes’, as indicated by the bright highlight on his forehead, this self-portrait becomes a bookend to ideas presented in an earlier work.

*Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* (Fig. 15), was painted in 1653—at least a decade before *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]*.65 It is fitting that Rembrandt’s path to enlightenment before his final reconciliation portrait would revisit the notion of antiquity

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65 Ibid., 558. Van de Wetering believes the date on *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]* should be closer to 1662-1663, not 1668. This difference in time should not be considered a substantial issue in my analysis of these two works since the primary point is that *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* was painted prior to the self-portrait, regardless of which date is preferred.
meeting modern thought that can be seen in this earlier work. When Rembrandt sent Aristotle
*Contemplating the Bust of Homer* to its patron, Antonio Ruffo, it did not include a title, leaving
the patron and generations of scholars a wide margin for possible explanations of its subject.
Ruffo’s 1654 catalog records the painting as that of a philosopher…either Aristotle or Albertus
Magnus. That Ruffo’s initial assumption relates to philosophy and particularly to Aristotle is
no coincidence. By 1653, Ruffo would have been well versed in criticisms toward Aristotelian
ideas from those taking place in his own country, made particularly public by the Church’s
censoring of Galileo’s texts. Additionally, debates regarding Cartesian philosophy had been
taking place for more than a decade, making Descartes’ influence a permanent fixture in Dutch
discourse. Currently, Julius Held has contributed the most authoritative scholarship on this
work. He agrees with Ruffo’s documentation that the main figure is Aristotle and argues that
Rembrandt depicted Aristotle caught in the midst of a personal moral dilemma—his favored
right hand adoringly placed on Homer’s head, his lowered left hand fingering the chains of honor
that simultaneously bind him to his patron. I agree with Held’s conclusion that the bust
represents Homer and that the main figure is Aristotle. However, I posit that Ruffo’s initial
instinct to consider the philosophical nature of this work must also be taken into consideration.
Rembrandt, like Ruffo, had sufficient time to reflect upon and participate in the evolving
philosophical religious discourse of his generation. Knowing the elevated status of his patron,
Rembrandt desired to demonstrate his engagement in this discourse through *Aristotle
Contemplating the Bust of Homer*.

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12. See footnote 35 to trace Held’s source.
67 Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 82. Verbeek claims that “it can be shown that Cartesianism was almost normal
as early as 1650.”
In *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, the living Aristotle rests his hand on the old poet’s lifeless bust, signifying Aristotle’s superiority over the ancients in his status and position as Alexander the Great’s tutor. A wall of books concealed by a curtain behind Aristotle, and the few books that are visible as a backdrop behind Homer’s bust, further confirm the preeminence of Aristotle’s wisdom over antiquated thought. Aristotle may have adored Homer’s poetry and been brought up on their sustenance, but his own contributions to modern ideals relegated the past to the past. As he fingers a large, sparkling, golden chain, Aristotle draws attention to his sanctioned status by Alexander the Great—one of the most powerful kings of ancient Greece. By emphasizing Aristotle’s authoritative qualities and dressing him in an anachronistic collection of contemporary garb, Rembrandt acknowledged his understanding that Aristotle’s ideas continued to dominate modern thinking, suppressing and supplanting the development of new ideas by seventeenth-century scholars who disagreed with Aristotelian principles.\(^68\) Aristotle’s chains, while a symbol of acclaim and prestige, also bind the man to his patron metaphorically binding seventeenth-century scholars to the authoritative producers of acceptable information. By signing Homer’s bust, Rembrandt inserted himself into the image indicating his personal subjugation to Aristotle’s influence. Introverted and contained, *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* communicates a sense of quiet discomfort associated with Aristotle’s limited, insular monopoly on knowledge.

Fifteen years later, the antique and modern meet again, but this time, Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]* counteracts the oppressive tone of his earlier work. On the left, a heavily cropped, gnarled figure looms in stern indignation looking down on a laughing image.

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\(^{68}\) Julius Held, *Rembrandt’s Aristotle and Other Rembrandt Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 15–16. “Contemporary” in this instance refers to the fact that all of the pieces of this costume, while not from a single period of time, post-date Aristotle’s era. They were also most likely pieces of clothing from Rembrandt’s costume collection.
of Rembrandt. This elevated, enigmatic figure has puzzled scholars attempting to explain its inclusion in this self-portrait and its correlation to Rembrandt’s sardonic expression. It is, however, generally accepted to represent antiquity as a bust, herm, or even as an old woman.\(^{69}\) However, its likeness to a drawing by Peter Paul Rubens of a bust portrait of Aristotle (Fig. 16) from the Fulvio Orsini collection is notable. Rembrandt’s well-documented emulation and ownership of Rubens’ images makes it possible that this drawing influenced the way Rembrandt painted the mysterious figure in this self-portrait leading to the possibility that it could be an alternate representation of Aristotle.\(^{70}\) The faint golden chain around the figure’s chest recalls the golden chain draped across Aristotle’s chest in *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, reinforcing the possibility that this figure is, indeed, meant to be associated with the well known philosopher. Regardless of who or what served as Rembrandt’s model, the figure’s association with the old and outdated is clear, and in comparison to *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, it echoes the conquering of the antique world represented by the bust of Homer. Placed at the edge of the painting and almost completely obscured in darkness, the ancient figure now embodies the convoluted, prevailing ideas bound to Aristotle’s philosophies challenged by modern philosophers.

\(^{69}\) Chapman, *Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits*, 101–104 and Ernst van de Wetering, “Self Portrait as Zeuxis Laughing,” in *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, 551-561. Chapman and van de Wetering give good overviews of the scholarly attempts to identify this figure. See also Held, *Rembrandt’s Aristotle*, 14–15. Held provides interesting information on the disagreement in the late sixteenth century over whether or not Aristotle had a beard and discusses the wide variety of artistic representations, attributions, and reattributions relating to images of Aristotle.

\(^{70}\) Held, *Rembrandt’s Aristotle*, 14. See also Julius Held, *Rubens Selected Drawings* (London: Phaidon Press, 1959), 1:50. In Held’s analysis of *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, he explains that Rubens’ drawing of Aristotle was based on a bust located in the Fulvio Orsini collection in Rome and was one of the many iterations of Aristotle’s visage that was available in the seventeenth century. I am indebted to Held for introducing me to this image through his publication. The comparison to the figure in *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]* is completely my own. As far as Rembrandt’s exposure to the drawing, it is not known if this drawing was ever published, but it appears to be one of many drawings of ancient busts and coins that were intended for an eventual publication. Chapman, *Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits*, 64. Rembrandt emulated Rubens often, especially in his early works, and it is known that he had drawings and prints of Rubens’ images in his personal library. However, this drawing is difficult to locate and it may never be known if Rembrandt saw it in the flesh.
As an independent, intelligent, and eternal being capable of complex reasoning, Rembrandt became his own authoritative source of knowledge, usurping Aristotle’s central position in the painting and his role as the fountainhead of truth. Instead of contemplating the relics of the past or privately reveling in his own enlightened state, Rembrandt’s portrait engages the viewer, looking outward and away from the ancient and directly into the face of the modern. The once-modern Aristotle in Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer symbolically becomes the ancient figure in Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher], and the new modern philosopher becomes the image of Rembrandt himself, a role that he then extends to include the viewer. The importance of the individual intellect championed by Descartes and the religious independence of the Netherlands empowered all people to cast off the chains of compulsory and prescribed philosophical religious doctrine in favor of personally reasoned understanding. While stoically attempting to hold onto its position of authority, the old figure—and all it represents—fades into darkness, as Rembrandt laughs, spiritually and intellectually free, while bathed in glorious light. Having used his own intellectual abilities to discern physical and eternal truth and having lived a life independent from organized religion and ideology, Rembrandt could have confidence in spite of the teachings of the ancients who once sought to extinguish the immortal existence, purpose, and hope of mankind. The light of the divine, intellectual soul emanates from Rembrandt’s forehead, the brightest light in the painting, and in stark contrast to the fading, retreating, antiquated figure of once-dominant ideas.

The fully reconciled Rembrandt is depicted in possibly the last self-portrait he created, Self-Portrait at the Age of 63, in 1669 (Fig. 4). As if exuding a great sigh of introspective and existential relief, this self-portrait is often allowed to speak for itself as an image that recalls a man who is in the late season of his life. The honesty of his aged skin, absence of artist’s tools,
and definitive painterly style make it easy to assume this self-portrait is a visual statement of the “I am what I am” mentality that comes with crossing the threshold of advancing age. This approach is not without its merits, but limits the work’s communicative power. In *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63*, narrative detail is eliminated and the viewer is presented with a simple man. The energy of his early self-portraits gives way to a profound silence through the rich red color of his robe, the soft yet bright light around his face and hands, and the gentle dissolving of the background into inky blackness. Rembrandt’s secure, peaceful, self-assured gaze invites viewers to look carefully at his face and notice the intense and intentional highlight on his upper right forehead. If it has not been noticed or has been explained away in his earlier mature self-portraits, surely this one communicates that light is not only useful as an artistic convention but also as a signifier with meaning to be explored. When considered as a metaphor for the light of Cartesian philosophy, this self-portrait becomes a profound and extensive commentary on Rembrandt’s cumulative personal, religious identity.

*Self-Portrait at the Age of 63* demonstrates Rembrandt’s personal rejection of Aristotelian dependence on the physical senses for gaining knowledge, favoring, instead, the power of the thinking man championed by Descartes. Unlike *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*, *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*, and *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]*, the artist is not attempting to cast himself in any kind of dramatic role or show himself engaged in any type of outward activity. Huygens once praised Rembrandt for “the natural power with which he is able to move the spirit of the viewer” with his works, and this self-portrait is no exception to this praise.71 With an emphasis on self-reflection in this final presentation of his personal identity, Rembrandt compels viewers to feel as though standing in the presence of a man who has made

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71 Chapman, *Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits*, 16.
peace with the events of his life. It encapsulates the image of a man who developed a personal
relationship with God and Jesus Christ through his studies of the Bible as evidenced in his many
depictions of Their attributes in his paintings and prints. This is the image of a man who spent
his life contemplating the purpose of life and the potential of immortality and discovered a truth
that gave him comfort in life and death. With the aid of Descartes’ contributions on the nature of
the soul, Rembrandt’s truth could include that the soul lives on as intellect, consciously and
happily awaiting the day of resurrection through the Grace of Jesus Christ and the penitent and
joyful reunion of God with his offspring.

*Return of the Prodigal Son*, painted in 1668, reveals Rembrandt’s mature understanding
of the relationship between God and man that is quietly evident in *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63.*
Who could paint an image as moving, as simple, and yet full of complex emotion, and so full of
the love of a father for his child if he did not know that his relationship to God was both intimate
and eternal?72 Instead of depicting the great feast and restoration of the prodigal son to glory,
Rembrandt related the first tender moment of the reunion of a father with his lost son. The
household looks on as a patient and forgiving father quietly and lovingly receives his broken and
penitent son into the warmth and safety of his bosom. The Apostle Paul taught that “…all have
sinned, and come short of the glory of God” but that this failure is not permanent because man
has been “justified freely by [God’s] grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom
God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for
the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.”73 Like the father of the
prodigal son, a patient, father-God provides a way to redeem the immortal soul of His impossibly
fallen children—of Rembrandt—through faith in Christ’s spilt blood.

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72 Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, 358.
73 Romans 3:23–24.
Additionally, the tones, posture, gesture, and light of *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63* mirror his depiction of Christ in *Christ with Arms Folded* (Fig. 17), painted a decade earlier, visually securing the relationship of “the great I AM” with Rembrandt’s personal, immortal identity. Earth tones dominate the canvas in both paintings, giving strong emphasis to the exposed skin of the face and hands of both figures. Christ’s face seems to glow with heavenly light from an internal source that escapes through every pore. Rembrandt’s facial illumination is slightly different with a more centralized source of light that originates from the right side of his forehead and radiates to encompass his head. In this self-portrait, Rembrandt does not presume to be Christ, but draws attention to the location of his immortal soul in the brain, indicating that his ability to reason and to know himself and God allows him to find kinship with the Divine.

The quotation of Christ’s hands with a slight change in the position and lighting serves to further reinforce a resemblance to God’s Son through the creative endeavors of each figure. Christ’s hands are open, allowing Rembrandt to depict him making a cross with his forearms, indicating His work of salvation through His crucifixion. The luminosity emanating from where his hands cross could also express an extension of Rembrandt’s reading of the first chapter in John:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that as made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men….That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not….But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God.

According to John, Christ’s light is the ultimate source of life for all mankind and by receiving Christ a man becomes a son of God. Rembrandt’s understanding of this scripture could well have

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been that Christ’s work is to create, give light to mankind, and make it possible for himself to be born of God as His son. Rembrandt’s life was similarly devoted to creation, with a special emphasis on light and the relationship of man to the Divine in his religious works. This is evident in *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63* as a soft light draws attention to his clasped hands. His left hand grasps his right hand—the hand that would have held his brush or stylus as he painted or etched works of his own creation—in a humble acknowledgement of his limitations when juxtaposed with the ultimate Creator. Unlike *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*, no tools are needed to identify himself as a creator in this work. His reputation as an artist and the fact that he painted this self-portrait are sufficient witnesses. Further, the light on Rembrandt’s forehead exceeds the light on his hands, possibly indicating the Cartesian principle that the body is an extension of the soul/intellect and obeys the command of its immortal counterpart.

By stripping away symbols of occupation or worldly status and emphasizing the forehead with brilliant light, Rembrandt showed himself in *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63* as a man who absolutely knew that as the shadow of death approaches, the materials of the world may disappear, but the godlike light of the intellect and his eternal relationship with God endures. John Calvin taught:

> God has not put men in this world to deny them any intelligence for he does not wish them to be like asses or horses, he has endowed them with reason and has wished them to understand….There are two primary endowments of the soul. The first is the capacity to reason, the other to judge and choose. The soul of man excels first in intelligence or reason, then in judgment, on which choice will depend….The more anyone endeavors to approach God, the more he proves himself endowed with reason.\(^\text{75}\)

Building on the Protestant foundation of the Dutch Republic, his knowledge of Catholic doctrine, the influence of Descartes’ contemporary metaphysics, and his God-given intelligence,

Rembrandt employed all of the resources available to him to reason, judge, and choose his personal, immortal identity.

**Conclusion**

While it is impossible to definitively prove that Rembrandt engaged Cartesian philosophy directly, it is necessary to consider that he felt its influence. The relative religious and intellectual freedom of the Dutch Republic provided a safe place for Descartes to publish and defend his metaphysical ideas relating to the nature of the soul and know-ability of God through personal intellectual inquiry. The widespread disturbance to established thought caused by his ideas and methods sped their dissemination through publications and pamphlets into early seventeenth-century discourse. Rembrandt’s associations with the educated elite, particularly Constantijn Huygens and Jan Six, increases the probability that he knew of this new philosophy and had the opportunity to consider its relevance to his own quest for knowledge. His careful reading of the Bible and concern over man’s relationship to God are evident through his inclination toward emotive, complex, and interdenominational religious works. With his particular emphasis on self-exploration and expression, demonstrated through his prolific oeuvre of self-portraits, Rembrandt showed his consistent engagement with contemporary concerns about his own rational ability to define a personal and religious identity.

The spirit of individuality and promotion of autobiographical recordkeeping made the Dutch Republic an environment where self-portraiture should be considered to document and reflect more than just the image of the sitter, the artist’s technical skill, or his occupation. Rembrandt was the product of a vibrant, dynamic community that was heavily engaged in religious, political, and intellectual debate. Any analysis of his work must recognize the powerful
impact this information would have had on his creative works. As an artist who is universally acknowledged to have been experimental, imaginative, and incredibly confident (practically rebellious), the status quo was not the foundation of his identity.

Through self-portraits painted during the last decade of his life, Rembrandt revealed his personal engagement with the intense religious and philosophical debates of the seventeenth century in his personal search for truth. With his particular emphasis on light reflected on the forehead in *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*, *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*, *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]*, and *Self-Portrait at the age of 63*, he asserted his belief in the true nature of the soul as intelligence and insisted that his self-portraits be understood from a Cartesian perspective. As intelligence capable of creating, Rembrandt declared that the relationship between God and man is as that of a parent to his offspring, affirming man’s eternal significance and destiny. Casting off Aristotelian and popular religious notions that tied the soul to earthly decay or a meaningless and terrifying limbo, Rembrandt was able to fully embrace and appreciate the divine intellectual qualities of God and Jesus Christ that he had studied and represented throughout his life.
Fig. 1. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*, 1661.
Fig. 2. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*, c. 1665.
Fig. 3. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait [Laughing Philosopher]*, c. 1668.
Fig. 4. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait at Age 63*, 1669.
Fig. 5. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1628.
Fig. 6. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, 1658.
Fig. 7. Rembrandt, *The Hundred Guilder Print*, 1649.
Fig. 8. Rembrandt, *Repentant Judas Returning the Silver*, 1629.
Fig. 9. Rembrandt, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, ca. 1669.
Fig. 10. Rembrandt, *Jan Six in his Study*, 1647.
Fig. 11. Rembrandt, *Raising the Cross*, 1633.
Fig. 12. Samuel van Hoogstraten, Self-Portrait in *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst* (Rotterdam: 1678).
Fig. 13. Photograph of pages from René Descartes, *La Geometrie* (Leiden: 1637).
Fig. 14. God as Architect/Builder/Geometer/Craftsman, Frontispiece of Bible Moralisée, ca. 1220-1230.
Fig. 15. Rembrandt, *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, 1653.

Fig. 16. Peter Paul Rubens, *Aristotle*, Drawing, date unknown.
Fig. 17. Rembrandt, *Christ with Arms Folded*, 1657–1661.
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