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Descartes's *Meditations*

Critical Essays

EDITED BY  
VERE CHAPPELL

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Chapter 10, "Descartes, Sixth Meditation: The External World, 'Nature' and Human Nature" by John Cottingham, originally appeared in *Philosophy Supp.* 20 (1986): 73-89.



Chapter 11, "Truth and Stability in Descartes' *Meditations*" by Jonathan Bennett, originally appeared in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* Supp. 16 (1990): 75-108.

## Note on the References

Most references are made parenthetically within the text. References to secondary works use the author-date system: thus "Kenny 1968: 171" refers to page 171 of a book or article by Kenny published in 1968. Full information about works thus referred to is given in a list of references at the end of the volume.

References to works of Descartes are made to the edition of Adam and Tannery (abbreviated "AT"), originally published in 1897-1909 and republished with revisions in 1964-74. Thus "AT VII 25" refers to page 25 of volume VII of Adam and Tannery. Few students, of course, will have access to this edition; but the two English translations of the *Meditations* that they are most likely to read, those by Cress and by Cottingham, both give the AT volume and page numbers in their margins, as does the now-standard English translation of all of Descartes's major works by Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, and Kenny. Further information about these editions and translations will be found in the bibliography of this volume.

There are a few references to primary texts by authors other than Descartes. In the case of most of these, no particular edition or translation is cited, and the passage referred to is identified by the chapter or section in which it occurs (or, in the case of the writings of Plato and Aristotle, by the page numbers of the earliest standard edition—the so-called Stephanus and Bekker numbers). In the few cases in which a particular edition is cited, an author-date reference is used: thus "Spinoza 1985" refers to Volume 1 of Curley's English translation of Spinoza's collected works. These editions are included in the list of references at the end of the volume, and full information about them is given there.

Unless otherwise noted, when quotations from the works of Descartes are given in English, the translations used are those of Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch 1985 or Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, and Kenny 1991.

## Introduction

The *Meditations* is a philosophical classic. Besides being one of the founding books of modern thought, it is a work of extraordinary depth and power in its own right. Furthermore, the *Meditations* contains dramatic elements that are not often found in philosophical texts. It has a narrative structure, a plot, with beginning, middle, and end. And it is presented as a personal struggle on the part of its author to achieve an objective of very great value. The reader is urged to share in this struggle, and indeed to replicate it in his own intellectual life. For the objective, Descartes believes, is of value to everyone, and everyone at least every serious thinker ought to pursue it.

These features of the *Meditations*'s intrinsic merit, its historical impact, its drama have helped to make it one of the most widely read philosophical books of all time. It is also one of the most frequently used texts in college and university philosophy courses, not only in France, Britain, and America but also in countries throughout the world. Instructors assign it because of its importance and because they think it will be intelligible to students.

The basic plotline of the *Meditations* is not, indeed, hard to discern. Descartes states his objective at the outset: it is to establish something "firm and lasting in the sciences." By "the sciences" he means what we now call the natural sciences—physics, chemistry, and biology—as well as the more properly philosophical "science" of metaphysics. Descartes is looking for comprehensive scientific knowledge that is not only true and certain but immutable, a permanent systematic understanding of the world and everything in it, including ourselves.

Descartes uses a house-building metaphor to describe the way in which he thinks we must proceed to reach this objective. We already live in an epistemic house, he says in effect: we have, if not knowledge, at least many convictions about the way the world is. But these convictions are faulty: they change over time, many of them turn out to be false, and none is properly grounded or fully understood. The only way to achieve secure, certain, and fully intelligible knowledge, Descartes declares, is to tear down the existing structure and build a new one. We

must build from foundations that are solid and unshakeable; we must proceed in an orderly fashion, with great care and consciousness of what we are doing; and each new level we construct must be firmly and completely supported by what has already been established.

To carry out the demolitionary phase of his project, Descartes employs his well-known "method of doubt." To reach an unshakeable foundation that is, principles that are absolutely certain we must set aside every proposition we can find the slightest reason to doubt. What is left at the end of this undertaking will then be indubitable, and hence will have the certainty we seek. As reasons for doubting, Descartes invokes two arguments, one based on the fact that one can never be sure, at any given time, that she is not dreaming, the other on the possibility that a powerful and malevolent demon is constantly working to deceive us with respect even to the things that seem most certain to us.

Descartes's effort to doubt everything he can find the least reason to doubt is recounted in the First Meditation. At the beginning of the Second Meditation he asks what, if anything, has survived this endeavor. The first thing that strikes him is his own existence. That he himself is, he observes, is beyond the scope of any possible doubt, at least it is so as long as he is in any way conscious, as long as he is actually thinking. This is the famous Cartesian "cogito" "I am thinking and so I exist" and it constitutes the first and most obvious part of the bedrock on which Descartes proceeds to reconstruct the edifice of scientific knowledge. As he reflects on this principle he notices other certainties associated with it: that he is a being whose whole essence is to think; that he thinks about a variety of things in a variety of ways; and that all of this is indubitable not only that he is thinking in some specific mode at some time, but that he is thinking about this or that object, even if the object itself does not exist.

Even with such matters added to the cogito, however, the foundation Descartes marks out in the Second Meditation seems narrow and slight too much so to support the weight of a whole system of scientific knowledge. At the beginning of the Third Meditation, therefore, he casts about for some further basis on which to build. Such a basis he claims to discover in a kind of rule for distinguishing true propositions generally from those that are false or undecidable. The rule is that any proposition that is clearly and distinctly perceived is certainly true. The rule holds, he maintains, because there is

nothing in the propositions he has already seen to be indubitable that could account for their having this status apart from the fact that he has clearly and distinctly perceived them.

Armed with this rule, Descartes proceeds in the Third Meditation to validate several additional matters as certain, and to deploy these as premises in an argument for the existence of a being other than himself, a being who is, moreover, infinite and perfect. This being Descartes identifies with God, the very God whose existence he has heretofore accepted on faith, but who now becomes, by the argument of the Third Meditation, an object of scientific knowledge, whose existence is absolutely certain. Descartes then argues, from his understanding of its necessary nature, that such a being cannot possibly deceive human beings, nor allow any evil demon to do so either.

At this point Descartes pauses to consider an objection to this last result. If God is no deceiver, how is it that human beings are ever able to make mistakes in their thinking, as everyone certainly does on occasion? Or rather, since at this stage of his inquiry Descartes has no reason to think that there are any humans other than himself, how is it that he himself is able to make mistakes, albeit he only does so when he is not thinking clearly and distinctly? Descartes answers the objection by presenting, in the Fourth Meditation, a general theory of human judgment, and thence of false judgment, a theory that allows for human error without threatening the veracity of God.

In the Fifth Meditation Descartes considers the physical world. The very existence of material things had been called into question by the method of doubt in the First Meditation; and though several portions of the new building have since been constructed, none deals with anything physical. Descartes himself, so far as his existence is certain, is only a thinking being, that is, an immaterial mind; and God certainly is not a material thing. Yet much of the scientific system that needs reconstructing is concerned with the physical world; so its existence and nature must be certified too.

Descartes begins the Fifth Meditation by specifying the nature of matter; he does this by spelling out the content of his idea of body or material being. A body, he finds, is nothing more or less than something that is extended in the three dimensions of space. So spatial extension is the whole essence of matter, in the same way that thinking is the whole essence of mind. Descartes gets no further than this in the Fifth Meditation, because the procedure he follows suggests a new argument for the existence of God, one that is simpler and easier to grasp than that of the Third Meditation. The earlier argument was of the type that Kant called "cosmological"; the new argument, by contrast, is an

"ontological" one, and Descartes devotes several pages to stating and defending it.

In the Sixth Meditation, finally, he returns to his discussion of the physical world. He first presents an argument designed to establish definitively what was only suggested in the Second Meditation, namely, that if he does have a body then he himself is really distinct from it, and thence that mind and matter in general are distinct kinds of being. This accomplished, Descartes turns to the task of establishing the existence of material things, which he does, or claims to do, by producing an argument for that conclusion from premises all of which either have already been certified or else can be seen to be true and certain by the clarity and distinctness with which they are perceived. In the rest of the Sixth Meditation, Descartes considers various ways in which minds and bodies interact with one another in whole human beings.

Descartes does not, in the *Meditations*, complete the new epistemic structure that he envisages at the outset of his inquiry. Some of the remaining work he carries on in other writings, in particular those dealing with matters of mathematics and physics and biology. But the *Meditations* itself is confined to the building's most basic stories, comprising its metaphysical part: as its title says, its subject matter is "first philosophy."

Although the basic plot of the *Meditations*, summarized in the foregoing synopsis, seems clear, no serious reader can be satisfied with knowing that and nothing more about this rich and influential work. Questions are bound to arise, even with respect to Descartes's objectives in the *Meditations* and the methods he employs to achieve them: are they really such, or are they only such, as our synopsis represents them to be? Even if it is accurate, the synopsis excludes much that is of interest in the work itself; and there is much about its finer structure and content that is missed or left unexplained. Anyone who cares at all about the philosophical issues that are dealt with, since these are issues of general and perennial concern, this includes general readers as well as students and professors of philosophy cannot help being curious about the precise meaning of particular passages in the text, Descartes's specific motivations for various steps in his inquiry, and above all the details of the logical arguments he employs to justify and recommend his views.

Besides questions of this sort, which concern the work itself, there are two kinds of external questions that are apt to be raised. The first is historical. Given the historical importance of the *Meditations*, it is natural to wonder just

wherein and to what extent Descartes's doctrines differ from those of his predecessors, especially the scholastic thinkers of the late Middle Ages, whose terminology he often uses even while he is criticiz-

ing them. One also wants to know about the contemporary intellectual context in which Descartes worked, and the ways in which his thinking actually influenced the positions of later philosophers.

The other sort of external question is critical. Descartes was first and foremost a philosopher, and like all philosophers he was seeking less to impress or inform his readers than to attain their assent, to convince them that the positions he defends are true. And it is not only appropriate for but incumbent upon readers to consider whether these positions are true, to put them to critical tests and decide on their truth. Are Descartes's claims in the *Meditations* logically consistent with each other? If so, to what extent do they cohere and mutually support one another: to what extent do they constitute an intellectual system? How successful are the arguments he presents to support his conclusions? Are they valid? Are their premises true? And what justification can be found for accepting the things that he does not explicitly argue for? These are some of the critical questions that philosophically oriented readers will ask themselves.

Since it is the purpose of this volume to help readers, especially new readers of Descartes, to broaden and deepen their understanding of the *Meditations* in every way possible, the essays comprising it are addressed to questions of all of these sorts: internal, historical, and critical. Nine of the essays focus on topics that are fairly specific: these are arranged in the order in which the topics are discussed in the *Meditations*. Thus John Carriero's essay, dealing with the method of doubt in the First Meditation, comes first. This is followed by the essays by Peter Markie on the cogito and Stephen Schiffer on Descartes's essence, both of which are treated in the Second Meditation; by Robert Delahunty and Frederick O'Toole on (different aspects of) the cosmological argument for God's existence in the Third Meditation; by David Rosenthal on Descartes's theory of judgment and Anthony Kenny on the ontological argument, presented in the Fourth and Fifth Meditations, respectively; and finally by Margaret Wilson and John Cottingham on arguments and issues discussed in the Sixth Meditation.

In addition to these nine essays, there are two essays dealing with matters Descartes himself does not discuss in the *Meditations* but which nonetheless are pertinent to it. One is Fred Feldman's essay on the so-called Cartesian Circle. This phrase is the customary name of a well-known criticism of Descartes's procedure in the Third and Fourth Meditations. The criticism, first

formulated by Descartes's contemporary Antoine Arnauld and often repeated since, is that a crucial argu-

ment occurring in these two Meditations is circular, and that the whole project of the work is thereby vitiated. Feldman considers whether this criticism is justified; his verdict is that it is not. Since it is not until the end of the Fourth Meditation that Descartes completes the argument in question, I have placed Feldman's paper after Rosenthal's, which deals with the main topic of that Meditation.

The other additional essay is Jonathan Bennett's "Truth and Stability in Descartes' Meditations." Bennett articulates a view of Descartes's intentions and accomplishment that is somewhat at odds with conventional views, but that whether in spite of or because of that fact does a great deal to illuminate them. Since Bennett deals with the *Meditations* as a whole, and refers to nearly all of its parts, I have placed his essay at the end of the volume.

A brief account of the circumstances in which the *Meditations* was written and published may be of use to readers approaching it for the first time. Descartes first conceived the project of reconstructing scientific knowledge quite early in his life as the result, he tells us, of a series of dreams he had in the year 1619. But he did not begin work on the *Meditations* itself until some years later, after he had settled in Holland. Upon completing a draft of the text in 1640, he sent copies around to various friends and acquaintances, soliciting their comments. The result was several sets of written "Objections," to each of which Descartes composed a set of "Replies." These Objections and Replies were published along with the *Meditations*; six sets accompanied the first edition in 1641, and a seventh was added when the second edition came out a year later. The authors of the Objections include some of the most eminent thinkers of the day: Antoine Arnauld, Pierre Gassendi, Marin Mersenne, and Thomas Hobbes as well as several lesser (or unknown) writers. Their criticisms are often astute and illuminating, but even more helpful for understanding the *Meditations* are Descartes's Replies. Reference is made to one or more of these Replies in each of the essays comprising this volume. The essays can thus serve as guides for readers who wish to explore what is in effect Descartes's own commentary on the text of the *Meditations*.