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Introduction

Karen Detlefsen

It is difficult to overestimate the importance to the history of western thought of René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. It is the most widely read and best-known text of a crucial figure working in a time of extraordinary intellectual ferment in Europe, a time which included transformations in philosophy, natural sciences, religion, art, and more. Indeed, among those we now characterize as philosophers, Descartes is widely considered *the* key figure in the break from the past and in the birth of modern philosophy; the *Meditations* is seen to capture much of Descartes' new philosophy.

Given the tremendous scholarly attention that has been paid to the *Meditations* over the last centuries, it may seem difficult to write anything new about the text. One way of characterizing the innovative nature of the chapters in this volume is to note the historiographical trends that have marked scholarship on early modern philosophy in recent decades, and to further note the way this volume fits into those trends. For much of the twentieth century, at least in the Anglo-America tradition, scholars tended to take an internalist, analytic approach to philosophy of the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, analyzing arguments within texts, often with an eye to illuminating problems of contemporary, and not necessarily historical, interest. Recently, the contextualist approach has increased in importance, and texts have thus been read in terms of the intellectual, political, theological, scientific, and other contexts of their own time. This trend has greatly increased the role of *history* in our histories of philosophy, and has sometimes downplayed the role of *philosophy* (taken here as critical engagement with arguments) in studies of the past. This volume draws on both these approaches, showing that taking a contextualist approach to the history of philosophy is not at odds with an analytic approach to that history, and that the two approaches enrich each other. (This will come as no surprise to many scholars of the early modern period, including the authors in this volume, some of whom have been practicing the history of

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philosophy in precisely this vein for decades.) This commitment to a methodology drawing upon both contextualism and analysis allows the authors new ways of thinking about Descartes' *Meditations*, sometimes offering highly innovative readings of old themes.

The eleven chapters in this volume are grouped in four sections: skepticism; substance and cause (the foundations of metaphysics); the sensations (which deals with aspects of Descartes' new theory of sense perception in light of his theory of substance and mechanism); and the human being (which deals with dualism and the unity of the human, to be sure, but also with normative issues surrounding human freedom and the will, the human's relation with God, and her moral development and self). However, in providing a brief sketch of them, I will treat these chapters in terms of the context upon which they draw.

Some chapters locate the *Meditations* within the context of Descartes' own developing philosophy, drawing upon important Cartesian texts beyond the *Meditations*, and drawing on Descartes' own evolving thoughts on various topics, to elucidate under-appreciated features of the text. Gary Hatfield deals with a number of unresolved issues in Descartes surrounding sensory perception. Among these issues is that of resemblance, and Hatfield concludes that for Descartes, all ideas – even sensory ideas such as color – represent by resembling their objects in the world. Drawing upon Descartes' account of material falsity, and elements from Descartes' broader philosophy, including his physiological work, Hatfield further argues that sensory ideas represent their objects only obscurely. Lilli Alanen discusses Descartes' account of judgment in the Fourth Meditation, with special focus on the will, to argue that the will contributes to belief formation, which in turn has consequences for Descartes' account of the self. Examining Descartes' account of freedom of the will throughout Descartes' broader corpus, and two senses of indifference to be found in Descartes' account of freedom, Alanen argues that we can have self-determining control over our volitions, though in the case of willing to assent to the true and the good clearly perceived, our self-determining control is indirect, namely in making the prior choice whether to pursue knowledge of the true and the good in the first place. Jorge Secada's chapter challenges a standard approach to the *Meditations*, an approach that claims it is a treatise that relies exclusively, or even primarily, upon rational argument. Rather, Secada makes the case that we must take the meditative nature of the text much more seriously than is typical, and that if we do so, we see that the text provides treatment for "a cognitive illness inherent in human beings, resulting

from the embodiment of the mind.” Secada focuses specifically on the meditation upon God, his nature and existence. Moreover, Secada argues that these exercises are crucial for the transformation of the self that can be brought about by meditation. We can thus read Secada’s chapter as one focusing on Descartes’ broader – arguably lifelong – project of the human’s care for herself. In her contribution to the volume, Lisa Shapiro examines the standard reading of the nature of the Cartesian self as soul, arguing that this conception cannot account for important features of the *Meditations*, including the meditator’s “psychological continuity afforded by memory” and her development of epistemic virtue throughout the six meditations. Memory is crucial to the meditator’s intellectual progress throughout the *Meditations*. Cultivating virtuous epistemic habits is crucial to moral progress, and on this point, Shapiro draws our attention to the role of the passions and control of the passion in this work, long before Descartes turns to a focused treatment of that topic. Being alert to Descartes’ later interests thus allows Shapiro to provide a much richer account of the nature of the self offered in the *Meditations* than is typically allowed by seeing it exclusively as a text in epistemology and metaphysics.

Other chapters draw upon Descartes’ interactions with the ideas of his contemporaries and near contemporaries. In his chapter on Descartes’ conception of substance and his confrontation with materialists, Daniel Garber aims to make sense of the *Meditations* on its own terms, resisting the temptation to read the conception of substance found in the *Principles* back into the earlier text (on this latter point, Garber also reads the *Meditations* within the context of Descartes’ developing philosophy). Garber argues that the well-worked-out account of substance/principal attribute/mode that is found in the *Principles* is not to be found in the *Meditations* itself, and the later text’s account of substance as that which is independent makes only a weak showing in the *Meditations*, where the dominant account of substance is rather the “ultimate subject” conception of substance (substance is the ultimate subject in which accidents and faculties inhere). What encouraged the change in the general account of substance between the two works? And what does this change entail? Garber’s answer to the first question is that the confrontation with Hobbes and other materialists made clear that Descartes could not hold on to his earlier theory of substance. His answer to the second question is that Descartes’ later conception of substance is, metaphysically, extremely thin. Martha Brandt Bolton addresses an equally fundamental question, namely what Descartes’ basic account of the

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constitution of thinking substance must be. She addresses this problem mindful of Arnauld's and others' concern that since thinking is the *nature* of mind (as substance), since passing thoughts are mere *modes*, and since thinking *qua* substantial nature cannot therefore be those passing thoughts, then Descartes must give an account of what thinking, as mind's nature, actually *is*. Turning to Descartes' and Arnauld's extended interaction on this, as well as to other seventeenth-century contexts and tools from Descartes' own philosophy, Bolton offers an interpretation of thinking as a "determinable that collects all and only the possible determinate acts of thinking ... but not causing those states." Bolton uses this solution to deal with a number of Cartesian difficulties about substances in general and mind in particular, noting that not all these difficulties can be resolved. Tad M. Schmaltz's chapter examines the three causal axioms Descartes offers in his geometrical account of the *Meditations* as found in the Second Replies. Schmaltz evaluates these axioms against a consideration of one of Descartes' immediate scholastic predecessors, Suárez, noting what remains and what changes of Suárez's accounts of these axioms in Descartes. Schmaltz thus draws our attention to the continuities and discontinuities between Descartes and the most systematic and thorough theorist of causation in the later medieval period. Schmaltz also looks at the *Meditations* within the context of Descartes' somewhat broader intellectual project, showing how the axioms as they are outlined in the Second Replies are used in the *Meditations* themselves, sometimes in ways divergent from how they are presented in the Second Replies.

Yet other chapters take a broader contextualist approach, drawing upon ancient and scholastic texts and concepts to illuminate Descartes' thought in the *Meditations*. In her chapter, Deborah Brown considers Descartes' skepticism within the long history of skepticism. While it is true that Descartes is much indebted to ancient forms of skepticism, Brown argues, she resists the interpretations that he offers nothing new and that his innovations are merely to restrict the scope of his skepticism to theoretical knowledge in order to protect the affairs of everyday life from it, thus avoiding the skeptic's problem of how to live. In contrast, Brown argues that there *is* something radically new in Descartes' skepticism, namely a skepticism with respect to the content of one's own ideas, and so Descartes' solutions to various skeptical challenges must depart notably from those offered by the ancients and medievals. Brown notes both continuities and discontinuities between Cartesian skepticism and previous forms of skepticism, and she also situates the *Meditations*

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within Descartes' overall development, arguing that only in the *Passions* do we finally find a solution to the practical challenge of how the skeptic ought to live. John Carriero – building on work in his *Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes's "Meditations"* – turns to the standard reading of Descartes as an indirect realist with respect to sensory cognition, and argues against this reading. While it is true, Carriero argues, that Descartes' conception of sensory cognition evolves from the start through to the end of the *Meditations*, and that Descartes starts with a roughly Aristotelian realist account of sensory cognition, the view that he ends up with is not as distant from his scholastic starting point as typically has been believed. One interesting line of argument Carriero pursues is his belief that Descartes' rejection of the resemblance thesis does not commit him to a "causal covariance" model of sensory representation, according to which bodies cause ideas in the mind; rather, Carriero argues, Descartes means that the reality that we sense exists in our mind, but it exists only obscurely and confusedly. In her chapter, Karen Detlefsen examines the Sixth Meditation passage on the human composite – drawing upon a conceptual apparatus developed from examining Aristotelian and Platonic approaches to teleology – to argue that the passage is first and foremost about the natures of beings, and only secondarily provides a teleological account of the role of the senses in human life. Moreover, depending upon how one interprets Descartes' account of the nature of the composite, one will have greater or lesser difficulties taking into account what appear to be teleological accounts of living beings found in Descartes' biological works. Taking this into account, Detlefsen defends a particular reading of the nature of the mind–body composite, and the teleological account that follows from this.

One chapter manages what might be the most difficult task: saying something new about the *Meditations* while focusing almost exclusively on the arguments of the text itself. This chapter, by Thomas M. Lennon and Michael W. Hickson, addresses Descartes' use of skepticism in the First Meditation, including forms of skepticism he raises only to reject, namely the madman and the evil demon. The chapter provides a fresh reading of Descartes' rejection of lunacy and the evil demon by making clear what it means for a doubt to be methodical and reasonable, and why these two forms of doubt fail to be so. Their conclusions allow Lennon and Hickson to consider anew what is unique about the Second Meditation *cogito*.

The chapters in this volume all offer new interpretations of centrally important elements of one of the most important philosophical texts of

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the western world. They do so by situating the text both within Descartes' developing intellectual projects and the astonishingly turbulent intellectual age in which he lived. Together, they touch upon many themes that animated Descartes throughout his lifetime, unsurprising given that the *Meditations* occupies such a critical place in Descartes' maturing thought, and in the history of western philosophy.

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PART I

Skepticism

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CHAPTER I

The skepticism of the First Meditation

Thomas M. Lennon and Michael W. Hickson

INTRODUCTION

Descartes seeks unshakeable certainty about truth by “the apparently opposite course” of deliberately generating uncertainty (6: 31, 1: 127). His premise is that if at some point the attempt to generate uncertainty fails, unshakeable certainty will have been found. For the project to succeed, the reasons leading Descartes to uncertainty at the outset must not be arbitrary; they must be, on the contrary, “powerful and well thought-out” (7: 22, 2: 15): the doubt must be methodic and reasonable. What it means for doubt to be methodic and reasonable rather than haphazard or gratuitous should be a central question for any interpretation of the *Meditations*. In what follows we give an account of reasonable doubt that differs from other such accounts in the literature in several important ways. First, we take the madman and evil demon objections *not* to be reasonable doubts. They are included by Descartes in the *Meditations* precisely for the purpose of contrasting them with what he takes to be reasonable doubts: the madman is contrasted with the dream argument (section I of this chapter) and the evil demon is contrasted with the deceiving God objection (section II). Getting the distinction right between reasonable and unreasonable doubt is crucial, we argue, for understanding what is unique about the particular foundation of knowledge that Descartes settles upon in Meditation Two, namely the thought or assertion that “*I am, I exist*” (section III of this chapter). As we will see, because there is no way of reasonably doubting that proposition, our knowledge of it constitutes a model for all other knowledge.

Descartes begins the *Meditations* by going “straight for the basic principles on which [his] former beliefs rested” (7: 18, 2: 12). We will present Descartes’ method of doubt as consisting of various challenges to a series of “models of knowledge” with the aim of finding one that resists every conceivable challenge. We will take M to be a model of knowledge for

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some person P if (1) P knows M, and (2) for all other things X that are identical to M in some relevant respect R, P knows X. As we will see, Descartes' method of doubt leads him to the discovery that the thought or assertion, "*I am, I exist*" (referred to in the literature and by us as the "*cogito*"¹), is a model of knowledge for him because (1) Descartes knows that the *cogito* is necessarily true whenever he perceives it, and (2) everything else that is identical to the *cogito* in the relevant respect that it too is perceived clearly and distinctly is likewise known by Descartes to be necessarily true whenever he perceives it.

The first model that comes under attack is sensory experience, which is challenged on the basis of the relativity of its deliverances. In very allusive fashion, Descartes deploys the Pyrrhonian trope that what is perceived is relative to the conditions under which it is perceived and therefore lacks the objectivity that characterizes knowledge of the truth. In particular, size and distance make such a difference: the senses at least occasionally deceive us about very small or distant objects. The prospect is better with respect to proximate, medium-sized objects, especially those belonging to Descartes' own body, such as the hands before his face; but this second model fails when challenged by the possibility that the experience is only one of dreaming. However, knowledge of simpler and more universal things such as arithmetic and geometry, the third model, can still be certain and indubitable, unimpeachable by the possibility of dreaming. But such knowledge is open to doubt on the basis that God might allow deception about such apparently certain things in *all* instances, since He allows deception about them in at least *some* instances. If certainty about them is to be achieved, therefore, proof must first be found that there exists a God who would not allow such universal deception. This proof would also eliminate such other reasons for universal deception as that we come into being through some cause less perfect than God, such as chance, fate, or "some other means" (7: 21, 2: 14).

This three-stage generation of doubt is a fairly standard reading of the First Meditation and is accurate as far as it goes. But it misses two challenges that offer refinement of Descartes' argument there. One is the lunatic, the other is the evil demon. Both tend to be ignored by the literature, or to be melded into one of the other models, lunacy into the dream

¹ In following the literature in referring to this thought or assertion as the *cogito* we are not thereby taking the *cogito* to be an inference, a performative, a simple assertion, or anything else. For our purposes, we can also ignore the distinction between the *cogito* as formulated above and the assertion that Descartes cites for his model in the Third Meditation: "I am a thinking thing" (7: 35, 2: 24).