

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19138-8 - René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies: A Latin–English Edition

Edited and Translated with Textual and Philosophical Introductions by John Cottingham

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Meditationes de prima philosophia
Meditations on First Philosophy

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19138-8 - René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies: A Latin–English Edition

Edited and Translated with Textual and Philosophical Introductions by John Cottingham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*[Epistola dedicatoria]*

AT VII

1

SAPIENTISSIMIS CLARISSIMISQUE VIRIS
SACRAE FACULTATIS THEOLOGIAE PARISIENSIS
DECANO ET DOCTORIBUS
RENATUS DES CARTES S. D.

Tam justa causa me impellit ad hoc scriptum vobis offerendum, et tam justam etiam vos habituros esse confido ad ejus defensionem suscipiendam, postquam instituti mei rationem intelligetis, ut nulla re melius illud hic possim commendare, quam si quid in eo sequutus sim paucis dicam.

Semper existimavi duas quaestiones, de Deo et de Anima, praecipuas esse ex iis quae Philosophiae potius quam Theologiae ope sunt demonstrandae: nam quamvis nobis fidelibus animam humanam cum corpore non interire, Deumque existere, fide credere sufficiat, certe infidelibus nulla religio, nec fere etiam ulla moralis virtus, videtur posse persuaderi, nisi prius illis ista duo ratione naturali probentur: cumque saepe in hac vita majora vitiis quam virtutibus praemia proponantur, pauci rectum utili praeferrent, si nec Deum timerent, nec aliam vitam expectarent. Et quamvis omnino verum sit, Dei existentiam credendam esse, quoniam in sacris scripturis docetur, et vice versa credendas sacras scripturas, quoniam habentur a Deo; quia nempe, cum fides sit donum Dei, ille idem qui dat gratiam ad reliqua credenda, potest etiam dare, ut ipsum existere credamus; non tamen hoc infidelibus proponi potest, quia circulum esse judicarent. Et quidem animadverti non modo vos omnes aliosque Theologos affirmare Dei existentiam naturali ratione posse probari, sed et ex sacra Scriptura inferri, ejus cognitionem multis, quae de rebus creatis habentur, esse faciliorem, atque omnino esse tam facilem, ut qui illam non habent sint culpandi. Patet enim Sap. 13 ex his verbis: *Nec his debet ignosci. Si enim tantum potuerunt scire, ut possent aestimare saeculum, quomodo hujus dominum non facilius invenerunt?* Et ad Rom. cap. I, dicitur

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19138-8 - René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies: A Latin–English Edition

Edited and Translated with Textual and Philosophical Introductions by John Cottingham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*[Dedicatory letter to the Sorbonne]*

AT VII

1

*To those most learned and distinguished men,
the Dean and Doctors
of the sacred Faculty of Theology at Paris,
from René Descartes*

I have a very good reason for offering this book to you, and I am confident that you will have an equally good reason for giving it your protection once you understand the principle behind my undertaking; so much so, that my best way of commending it to you will be to tell you briefly of the goal which I have aimed at in the book.

I have always thought that two topics – namely God and the soul – are prime examples of subjects where demonstrative proofs ought to be given with the aid of philosophy rather than theology. For us who are believers, it is enough to accept on faith that the human soul does not die with the body, and that God exists; but in the case of unbelievers, it seems that there is no religion, and practically no moral virtue, that they can be persuaded to adopt until these two truths are proved to them by natural reason. And since in this life the rewards offered to vice are often greater than the rewards of virtue, few people would prefer what is right to what is expedient if they did not fear God or have the expectation of an afterlife. It is of course quite true that we must believe in the existence of God because it is a doctrine of Holy Scripture, and conversely, that we must believe Holy Scripture because it comes from God; for since faith is the gift of God, he who gives us grace to believe other things can also give us grace to believe that he exists. But this argument cannot be put to unbelievers because they would judge it to be circular. Moreover, I have noticed both that you and all other theologians assert that the existence of God is capable of proof by natural reason, and also that the inference from Holy Scripture is that the knowledge of God is easier to acquire than the knowledge we have of many created things – so easy, indeed, that those who do not acquire it are at fault. This is clear from a passage in the Book of Wisdom, Chapter 13: ‘Howbeit they are not to be excused; for if their knowledge was so great that they could value this world, why did they not rather find out the Lord thereof?’ And in Romans, Chapter 1 it is said

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19138-8 - René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies: A Latin–English Edition

Edited and Translated with Textual and Philosophical Introductions by John Cottingham

Excerpt

[More information](#)

illos esse *inexcusabiles*. Atque ibidem etiam per haec verba: *Quod notum est Dei, manifestum est in illis*, videmur admoneri ea omnia quae de Deo sciri possunt, rationibus non aliunde petitis quam ab ipsamet nostra mente posse ostendi. Quod idcirco quomodo fiat, et qua via Deus facilius et certius quam res saeculi cognoscatur, non putavi a me esse alienum inquirere.

- 3 Atque quantum ad animam, etsi multi ejus naturam non facile investigari posse judicant, et nonnulli etiam dicere ausi sint rationes humanas persuadere illam simul cum corpore interire, solaque fide contrarium teneri, quia tamen hos condemnat Concilium Lateranense sub Leone 10 habitum, sessione 8, et expresse mandat Christianis Philosophis ut eorum argumenta dissolvant, et veritatem pro viribus probent, hoc etiam aggredi non dubitavi.

Praeterea, quoniam scio plerosque impios non aliam ob causam nolle credere Deum esse, mentemque humanam a corpore distingui, quam quia dicunt haec duo a nemine hactenus potuisse demonstrari: etsi nullo modo iis assentiar, sed contra rationes fere omnes, quae pro his quaestionibus a magnis viris allatae sunt, cum satis intelliguntur, vim demonstrationis habere putem, vixque ullas dari posse mihi persuadeam, quae non prius ab aliquibus aliis fuerint inventae: nihil tamen utilius in Philosophia praestare posse existimo, quam si semel omnium optimae studiose quaerantur, tamque accurate et perspicue exponantur, ut apud omnes constet in posterum eas esse demonstrationes. Ac denique, quoniam nonnulli quibus notum est me quandam excoluisse Methodum ad quaslibet difficultates in scientiis resolvendas, non quidem novam, quia nihil est veritate antiquius, sed qua me saepe in aliis non infeliciter uti viderunt, hoc a me summopere flagitarunt: ideoque officii mei esse putavi nonnihil hac in re conari.

- 4 Quicquid autem praestare potui, totum in hoc Tractatu continetur. Non quod in eo diversas omnes rationes, quae ad eadem probanda afferri possent, colligere conatus sim, neque enim hoc videtur operae pretium esse, nisi ubi nulla habetur satis certa; sed primas tantum et praecipuas

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19138-8 - René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies: A Latin–English Edition

Edited and Translated with Textual and Philosophical Introductions by John Cottingham

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Letter to the Sorbonne

5

that they are ‘without excuse’. And in the same place, in the passage ‘that which is known of God is manifest in them’, we seem to be told that everything that may be known of God can be demonstrated by reasoning which has no other source but our own mind. Hence I thought it was quite proper for me to inquire how this may be, and how God may be more easily and more certainly known than the things of this world.

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 under Leo X condemned those who take this position,¹ 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.

In addition, I know that the only reason why many irreligious people are unwilling to believe that God exists and that the human mind is distinct from the body is the alleged fact that no one has hitherto been able to demonstrate these two points. Now I completely disagree with this: I think that when properly understood almost all the arguments that have been put forward on these issues by the great men have the force of demonstrations, and I am convinced that it is scarcely possible to provide any arguments which have not already been produced by someone else. Nevertheless, I think there can be no more useful service to be rendered in philosophy than to conduct a careful search, once and for all, for the best of these arguments, and to set them out so precisely and clearly as to produce for the future a general agreement that they amount to demonstrative proofs. And finally, I was strongly pressed to undertake this task by several people who knew that I had developed a method for resolving certain difficulties in the sciences – not a new method (for nothing is older than the truth), but one which they had seen me use with some success in other areas; and I therefore thought it my duty to make some attempt to apply it to the matter in hand.

The present treatise contains everything that I have been able to accomplish in this area. Not that I have attempted to collect here all the different arguments that could be put forward to establish the same results, for this does not seem worthwhile except in cases where no single argument is regarded as sufficiently reliable. What I have done is to take merely the

¹ The Lateran Council of 1513 condemned the Averroist heresy, which denied personal immortality.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19138-8 - René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies: A Latin–English Edition

Edited and Translated with Textual and Philosophical Introductions by John Cottingham

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ita prosecutus sum, ut jam pro certissimis et evidentissimis demonstrationibus illas ausim proponere. Addamque etiam tales esse, ut non putem ullam viam humano ingenio patere, per quam meliores inveniri unquam possint: cogit enim me causae necessitas, et gloria Dei, ad quam totum hoc refertur, ut hic aliquanto liberius de meis loquar quam mea fert consuetudo. Atqui quantumvis certas et evidentes illas putem, non tamen ideo mihi persuadeo ad omnium captum esse accommodatas: sed, quemadmodum in Geometria multae sunt ab Archimede, Apollonio, Pappo, aliisque scriptae, quae, etsi pro evidentibus etiam ac certis ab omnibus habeantur, quia nempe nihil plane continent quod seorsim spectatum non sit cognitum facillimum, nihilque in quo sequentia cum antecedentibus non accurate cohaereant, quia tamen longiusculae sunt, et valde attentum lectorem desiderant, non nisi ab admodum paucis intelliguntur: ita, quamvis eas quibus hic utor, certitudine et evidentia Geometricas aequare, vel etiam superare, existimem, vereor tamen ne a multis satis percipi non possint, tum quia etiam longiusculae sunt, et aliae ab aliis pendent, tum praecipue quia requirunt mentem a praepudiciis plane liberam, et quae se ipsam a sensuum consortio facile subducatur. Nec certe plures in mundo Metaphysicis studiis quam Geometricis apti reperiuntur. Ac praeterea in eo differentia est, quod in Geometria, cum omnibus sit persuasum nihil scribi solere, de quo certa demonstratio non habeatur, saepius in eo peccant imperiti, quod falsa approbent, dum ea videri volunt intelligere, quam quod vera refutent: contra vero in Philosophia, cum credatur nihil esse de quo non possit in utramque partem disputari, pauci veritatem investigant, et multo plures, ex eo quod ausint optima quaeque impugnare, famam ingenii aucupantur.

Atque ideo, qualescunque meae rationes esse possint, quia tamen ad Philosophiam spectant, non spero me illarum ope magnum operae pretium esse facturum, nisi me patrocinio vestro adjuvetis. Sed cum tanta inhaereat omnium mentibus de vestra Facultate opinio,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19138-8 - René Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy*: With Selections from the Objections and Replies: A Latin–English Edition

Edited and Translated with Textual and Philosophical Introductions by John Cottingham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Letter to the Sorbonne*

7

principal and most important arguments and develop them in such a way that I would now venture to put them forward as very certain and evident demonstrations. I will add that these proofs are of such a kind that I reckon they leave no room for the possibility that the human mind will ever discover better ones. The vital importance of the cause and the glory of God, to which the entire undertaking is directed, here compel me to speak somewhat more freely about my own achievements than is my custom. But although I regard the proofs as quite certain and evident, I cannot therefore persuade myself that they are suitable to be grasped by everyone. In geometry there are many writings left by Archimedes, Apollonius, Pappus and others which are accepted by everyone as evident and certain because they contain absolutely nothing that is not very easy to understand when considered on its own, and each step fits in precisely with what has gone before; yet because they are somewhat long, and demand a very attentive reader, it is only comparatively few people who understand them. In the same way, although the proofs I employ here are in my view as certain and evident as the proofs of geometry, if not more so, it will, I fear, be impossible for many people to achieve an adequate perception of them, both because they are rather long and some depend on others, and also, above all, because they require a mind which is completely free from preconceived opinions and which can easily detach itself from involvement with the senses. Moreover, people who have an aptitude for metaphysical studies are certainly not to be found in the world in any greater numbers than those who have an aptitude for geometry. What is 5 more, there is the difference that in geometry everyone has been taught to accept that as a rule no proposition is put forward in a book without there being a conclusive demonstration available; so inexperienced students make the mistake of accepting what is false, in their desire to appear to understand it, more often than they make the mistake of rejecting what is true. In philosophy, by contrast, the belief is that everything can be argued either way; so few people pursue the truth, while the great majority build up their reputation for ingenuity by boldly attacking whatever is most sound.

Hence, whatever the quality of my arguments may be, because they have to do with philosophy I do not expect they will enable me to achieve any very worthwhile results unless you come to my aid by granting me your patronage.¹ The reputation of your Faculty is so firmly fixed in the

¹ Although the title page of the first edition of the *Meditations* carries the words ‘with the approval of the learned doctors’, Descartes never in fact obtained the endorsement from the Sorbonne which he sought.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19138-8 - René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies: A Latin–English Edition

Edited and Translated with Textual and Philosophical Introductions by John Cottingham

Excerpt

[More information](#)

tantaeque sit autoritatis SORBONAE nomen, ut non modo in rebus fidei nulli unquam Societati post sacra Concilia tantum creditum sit quam vestrae, sed etiam in humana Philosophia nullibi major perspicacia et soliditas, nec ad ferenda iudicia major integritas et sapientia esse existimetur; non dubito quin, si tantam huius scripti curam suscipere dignemini, *primo* quidem, ut a vobis corrigatur: memor enim, non modo humanitatis, sed maxime etiam inscitiae meae, non affirmo nullos in eo esse errores; *deinde*, ut quae vel desunt, vel non satis absoluta sunt, vel maiorem explicationem desiderant, addantur, perficiantur, illustrentur, aut a vobis ipsis, aut saltem a me, postquam a vobis ero admonitus; ac *denique*, ut postquam rationes in eo contentae, quibus Deum esse, mentemque a corpore aliam esse probatur, ad eam perspicuitatem erunt perductae, ad quam ipsas perducere posse confido, ita

6 nempe ut pro accuratissimis demonstrationibus habendae sint, hoc ipsum declarare et publice testari velitis: non dubito, inquam, quin, si hoc fiat, omnes errores, qui de his quaestionibus unquam fuerunt, brevi ex hominum mentibus deleantur. Veritas enim ipsa facile efficiet ut reliqui ingeniosi et docti vestro iudicio subscribant; et autoritas, ut Athei, qui scioli magis quam ingeniosi aut docti esse solent, contradicendi animum deponant, atque etiam ut forte rationes, quas ab omnibus ingenio praeditis pro demonstrationibus haberi scient, ipsi propugnent, ne non intelligere videantur. Ac denique caeteri omnes tot testimoniis facile credent, nemoque amplius erit in mundo, qui vel Dei existentiam, vel realem humanae animae a corpore distinctionem ausit in dubium revocare. Cujus rei quanta esset utilitas, vos ipsi, pro vestra singulari sapientia, omnium optime aestimare potestis; nec deceret me vobis, qui maximum Ecclesiae Catholicae columnen semper fuistis, Dei et Religionis causam pluribus hic commendare.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19138-8 - René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies: A Latin–English Edition

Edited and Translated with Textual and Philosophical Introductions by John Cottingham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Letter to the Sorbonne*

9

minds of all, and the name of the Sorbonne has such authority that, with the exception of the Sacred Councils, no institution carries more weight than yours in matters of faith; while as regards human philosophy, you are thought of as second to none, both for insight and soundness and also for the integrity and wisdom of your pronouncements. Because of this, the results of your careful attention to this book, if you deigned to give it, would be threefold. First, the errors in it would be corrected – for when I remember not only that I am a human being, but above all that I am an ignorant one, I cannot claim it is free of mistakes. Secondly, any passages which are defective, or insufficiently developed or requiring further explanation, would be supplemented, completed and clarified, either by yourselves or by me after you have given me your advice. And lastly, once the arguments in the book proving that God exists and that the mind is distinct from the body have been brought, as I am sure they can be, to such a pitch of clarity that they are fit to be regarded as very exact demonstrations, 6 you may be willing to declare as much, and make a public statement to that effect. If all this were to happen, I do not doubt that all the errors which have ever existed on these subjects would soon be eradicated from the minds of men. In the case of all those who share your intelligence and learning, the truth itself will readily ensure that they subscribe to your opinion. As for the atheists, who are generally posers rather than people of real intelligence or learning, your authority will induce them to lay aside the spirit of contradiction; and, since they know that the arguments are regarded as demonstrations by all who are intellectually gifted, they may even go so far as to defend them, rather than appear not to understand them. And finally, everyone else will confidently go along with so many declarations of assent, and there will be no one left in the world who will dare to call into doubt either the existence of God or the real distinction between the human soul and body. The great advantage that this would bring is something which you, in your singular wisdom, are in a better position to evaluate than anyone;¹ and it would ill become me to spend any more time commending the cause of God and religion to you, who have always been the greatest tower of strength to the Catholic Church.

¹ 'It is for you to judge the advantage that would come from establishing these beliefs firmly, since you see all the disorders which come from their being doubted' (French version).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19138-8 - René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies: A Latin–English Edition

Edited and Translated with Textual and Philosophical Introductions by John Cottingham

Excerpt

[More information](#)

7

Praefatio ad lectorem

Quaestiones de Deo et mente humana jam ante paucis attigi in *Dissertatione de Methodo recte regendae rationis et veritatis in scientiis investigandae*, gallice edita anno 1637, non quidem ut ipsas ibi accurate tractarem, sed tantum ut delibarem, et ex lectorum judiciis addiscerem qua ratione postea essent tractandae. Tanti enim momenti mihi visae sunt, ut plus una vice de ipsis agendum esse judicarem; viamque sequor ad eas explicandas tam parum tritam, atque ab usu communi tam remotam, ut non utile putarim ipsam in gallico et passim ab omnibus legendo scripto fusius docere, ne debiliora etiam ingenia credere possent eam sibi esse ingrediendam.

Cum autem ibi rogassem omnes quibus aliquid in meis scriptis reprehensione dignum occurreret, ut ejus me monere dignarentur, nulla in ea quae de his quaestionibus attigeram notatu digna objecta sunt, praeter duo, ad quae hic paucis, priusquam earumdem accuratiorem explicationem aggrediar, respondebo.

- 8 Primum est, ex eo quod mens humana in se conversa non percipiat aliud se esse quam rem cogitantem, non sequi ejus naturam sive *essentiam* in eo tantum consistere, quod sit res cogitans, ita ut vox *tantum* caetera omnia excludat quae forte etiam dici possent ad animae naturam pertinere. Cui objectioni respondeo me etiam ibi noluisse illa excludere in ordine ad ipsam rei veritatem (de qua scilicet tunc non agebam), sed dumtaxat in ordine ad meam perceptionem, adeo ut sensus esset me nihil plane cognoscere quod ad essentiam meam scirem pertinere, praeterquam quod essem res cogitans, sive res habens in se facultatem cogitandi. In sequentibus autem ostendam quo pacto, ex eo quod nihil aliud ad essentiam meam pertinere cognoscam, sequatur nihil etiam aliud revera ad illam pertinere.

Alterum est, ex eo quod ideam rei me perfectioris in me habeam, non sequi ipsam ideam esse me perfectiorem, et multo minus illud quod per istam ideam repraesentatur existere. Sed respondeo hic subesse aequivocationem in voce *ideae*: sumi