

Squaring the Circle in Descartes' *Meditations*

Descartes' *Meditations* is one of the most thoroughly analyzed of all philosophical texts. Nevertheless, central issues in Descartes' thought remain unresolved, particularly the problem of the Cartesian Circle. Most attempts to deal with that problem have weakened the force of Descartes' own doubts or weakened the goals he was seeking. In this book, Stephen I. Wagner gives Descartes' doubts their strongest force and shows how he overcomes those doubts, establishing with metaphysical certainty the existence of a non-deceiving God and the truth of his clear and distinct perceptions. Wagner's innovative and thorough reading of the text clarifies a wide range of other issues that have been left unclear by previous commentaries, including the nature of the *cogito* discovery and the relationship between Descartes' proofs of God's existence. His book will be of great interest to scholars and upper-level students of Descartes, early modern philosophy and theology.

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Squaring the Circle
in Descartes' *Meditations*
The Strong Validation of Reason

Stephen I. Wagner



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To my dear wife,
Kaarin Johnston,
who has made this, and so much more, possible.

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Preface

In this book, I offer a new account of Descartes' epistemological and meta-physical project in the *Meditations*. On my reading of the text, his project differs in its broad strokes and in many of its details from the accounts that have previously been provided.

For readers who are familiar with the long history of commentary on Descartes' text, these claims may well be met with surprise. The intensive analyses of the *Meditations*, particularly over the past several decades, convinced many commentators that there was nothing fundamentally new to say about that work. However, this conviction arose alongside the fact that analyses of the text had not clearly resolved some of the central issues in Descartes' thinking, such as the nature of the *cogito* discovery and the apparent circularity of his Meditation III proof of God's existence. We could attribute this lack of clarity to the fact that Descartes simply did not provide the resources in his text for clarifying his views. But from the beginning of my work on the *Meditations*, I rejected that idea. Rather, I believed we simply had not found an approach to the text that would make Descartes' thinking clear and rigorous.

Over a number of years, I developed a reading of the *Meditations* that, I believe, achieves this goal. The experience of working out this reading reflects the advice that Thomas Kuhn gave to his students about the "apparent absurdities" they might encounter in a text:

When reading the works of an important thinker, look first for the apparent absurdities in the text and ask yourself how a sensible person could have written them. When you find an answer, . . . when those passages make sense, then you may find that more central passages, ones you previously thought you understood, have changed their meaning.¹

The glaring apparent absurdity in Descartes' text is the circularity of his Meditation III proof of God's existence. In my earliest work on Descartes, I proposed a resolution of this problem and showed that the text of Meditation III supported that view. As I followed out the implications of that proposal in the rest of the *Meditations*, Kuhn's insight proved true. I was led to a reading of Meditation II

¹ Kuhn (1977), xii.

that suggested a new view of the *cogito* and of the wax investigation. And I found other changes in meaning in working through Descartes' Meditation III theory of ideas and the remaining steps in his project.²

This book provides an analysis of the meditator's³ progress, from Meditations I through V, showing how Descartes achieves his validation of reason without circularity.⁴ I believe that this analysis provides a more thorough consistency to the text than previous readings and resolves a number of issues left unclear by previous commentaries.

In addition, my reading offers new possibilities for understanding the tradition of thought deriving from Descartes' work. This is a significant result, since we cannot overestimate the seminal role of the *Meditations* in the history of philosophy. My analysis offers new directions for understanding the relation of Descartes' thought to the work of his contemporaries. And since "Cartesianism" is often taken as a central model for contemporary work in epistemology and philosophy of mind, the views I offer of Descartes' criterion of knowledge and of his idea of the mind can stimulate new thinking in those areas. Finally, my discussion suggests that some contemporary criticisms of Descartes' thought derive from misunderstandings of his ideas. In the Conclusion I explain these results more fully.

² A number of these views are presented in Wagner (1995, 1996).

³ I have referred to the meditator with masculine pronouns throughout my discussion, retaining the historical usage of Descartes, of standard translations and of most past commentaries. This choice primarily reflects my attempt to portray Descartes as describing his own process of discovery while leading the meditator through that same process. Recently, commentators like Catherine Wilson (2003) and Carriero (2009) have provided us with models for broadening our gender perspective in contemporary discussions of Descartes' ideas in the *Meditations*.

⁴ Since the validation project is completed in Meditation V, I do not provide a complete analysis of Meditation VI. At a number of points, I explain how my perspective offers new insights into Descartes' central claims in that meditation.

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