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Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, published in Latin in 1641, is one of the most widely studied philosophical texts of all time, and inaugurates many of the key themes that have remained central to philosophy ever since. In his original Latin text Descartes expresses himself with great lucidity and elegance, and there is enormous interest, even for those who are not fluent in Latin, in seeing how the famous concepts and arguments of his great masterpiece unfold in the original language. John Cottingham's acclaimed English translation of the work is presented here in a facing-page edition alongside the original Latin text. Students of classical philosophy have long had the benefit of dual-language editions, and the availability of such a resource for the canonical works of the early-modern period is long overdue. This volume now makes available, in an invaluable dual-language format, one of the most seminal texts of Western philosophy.

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MEDITATIONS ON FIRST
PHILOSOPHY

With Selections from the Objections and Replies

A LATIN–ENGLISH EDITION

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Philosophical introduction
The Meditations and Cartesian philosophy

Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*¹ is, indisputably, one of the greatest philosophical classics of all time. The challenge it offers is in many ways definitive of the philosophical enterprise: to leave behind the comfortable world of inherited prejudice and preconceived opinion; to take nothing for granted in the determination to achieve secure and reliable knowledge. Descartes talks of 'demolish[ing] everything completely and start[ing] again right from the foundations',² and for this purpose he famously uses doubt, stretched to its limits, as an instrument which self-destructs, impelling him forwards on the journey towards certainty and truth. These central themes are today part of every introductory course in the philosophy of knowledge: Descartes's masterpiece has achieved canonical status in that part of the philosophy syllabus we now call 'epistemology'. Yet for Descartes himself these epistemic concerns were but one part of a much wider project: the construction of a grand, all-embracing system of philosophy which would encompass metaphysics, natural science, psychology and morals, connecting all the objects within the scope of human understanding. In the words of the famous metaphor which he deployed some six years after the publication of the *Meditations*, 'the whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches . . . all the other sciences.'³

¹ The present introduction to the work, and the English translation of the *Meditations and Objections and Replies* that follows, are based, with modifications and additions, on those found in René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. and ed. J. Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, rev. edn, 1996).

² See the opening paragraph of the First Meditation, pp. 22–3 below.

³ *Principles of Philosophy*, Preface to the French Edition of 1647 (AT IXB 14: CSM I 186). Throughout the present volume, 'AT' refers to the standard Franco-Latin edition of Descartes by C. Adam and P. Tannery, *Œuvres de Descartes*, rev. edn (12 vols., Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964–76); 'CSM' refers to the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

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Descartes spent much of his career occupied with what we would nowadays call theoretical physics: he devised a radical new theory of the nature of matter, defined simply as extension in three dimensions, and formulated a number of mathematical laws describing the results of collisions of moving particles of matter. He then proposed to apply these principles to a wide variety of subjects, from cosmology and astronomy to physiology and medicine; and towards the end of his life he planned to include a science of man, which would develop prescriptions for how to understand and control the workings of our bodies, and how to live fulfilled and worthwhile lives. Examining the course of Descartes's life, and the context in which the *Meditations* was written, helps us deepen our understanding of the metaphysical and epistemological themes of his most famous book by seeing how they fit into the broader philosophical system which he devoted his life to creating.

THE SHAPING OF A PHILOSOPHER

René Descartes was born in France on 31 March 1596 in the small town of La Haye (now renamed 'Descartes'), some fifty kilometres south of Tours. Not a very great deal is known of his early life, but it seems likely that his childhood was not a particularly happy one. His health was poor, and he appears not to have got on very well with his father, Joachim, who was often away discharging his duties as Counsellor at the Parliament of Brittany. Relations between the two in later life were certainly strained, and when René sent his father a copy of his first published book the father's only reported reaction was that he was displeased to have a son 'idiotic enough to have himself bound in vellum'.⁴ Descartes's mother died, in childbirth, a year after his own birth,⁵ and he was looked after by his maternal grandmother until, at the age of ten, he was sent away as a boarding pupil to the recently founded Jesuit college of La Flèche in Anjou, where he remained for eight or nine years. During Descartes's time there the school was steadily building up a reputation for excellence (he later

1985) and 'CSMK' to vol. III, *The Correspondence*, by the same translators and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴ Cf. AT XII 7, 8, and 433–4.

⁵ Despite what the philosopher himself told a correspondent (letter to Elizabeth of May or June 1645, AT IV 220–1; CSMK 250–1), it was not René's own birth that cost his mother her life, but that of a younger brother (who lived only three days); see G. Rodis-Lewis, 'Descartes' Life and the Development of his Philosophy', in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 23.

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described it as ‘one of the most famous schools in Europe’);⁶ pupils followed a comprehensive curriculum which included classical literature and traditional classics-based subjects such as history and rhetoric, as well as, in the senior years, higher mathematics and philosophy. The approach to philosophy taken by Descartes’s teachers belonged to what we now know as the ‘scholastic’ tradition; that is to say, it was based on broadly Aristotelian principles, adapted in an attempt to make them consistent with the demands of Christian orthodoxy, and elaborated over many centuries by a host of learned commentators. Descartes’s teachers at La Flèche would have been well versed in such commentaries, and would also have made use of compendious textbooks like the *Summa philosophiae quadripartita*, a four-part treatise by a noted contemporary Scholastic, Eustachius a Sancto Paulo, which provided a complete philosophical system, including logic, metaphysics, moral philosophy and ‘natural philosophy’ or physics.⁷ Descartes was not impressed with the philosophy he learned at school, and later wrote that the subject, despite being ‘cultivated for many centuries by the most excellent minds’, contained no point which was not ‘disputed and hence doubtful’. The ‘shaky foundations’ of the traditional system meant, in his view, that all the specific sciences built on them were equally suspect.⁸

In 1610, about halfway through Descartes’s time at La Flèche, the College marked the death of its founder, Henry IV, with a series of grand observances, including the reciting of poems, one of which hailed the recent discovery by Galileo of the moons of Jupiter (which ‘brightened the gloom of the King’s death’).⁹ We do not know what part if any Descartes played in these ceremonies (though some have suggested that he was the author of the poem honouring Galileo); what is certain is that Galileo’s discovery came in due course to be widely acknowledged as strong experimental support for the new Copernican cosmology, dethroning the earth from its privileged place at the centre of the universe – a shift which, more than any other, has subsequently come to be seen as central to the philosophical and scientific revolution of the early-modern period. Descartes himself was to become a convinced if cautious adherent of the new heliocentric model, and his own scientific career was to intertwine, at a crucial point, with that of Galileo.

⁶ *Discourse on the Method*, Part One (AT VI 5: CSM I 113).

⁷ The *Summa philosophiae quadripartita* was published in 1609. For more on Eustachius, and on some of the commentaries on Aristotle which Descartes may have read at La Flèche, see R. Ariew, ‘Descartes and Scholasticism’, in Cottingham, *Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, pp. 74ff.

⁸ See *Discourse*, Part One (AT VI 8: CSM I 115).

⁹ See Rodis-Lewis, ‘Descartes’ Life’, p. 26, and AT XII 29.

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By his late thirties Descartes had produced a comprehensive treatise on cosmology and physics, *Le Monde* ('The World' or 'The Universe'), which applied reductive mechanical principles to the explanation of a wide variety of celestial and terrestrial phenomena; in the course of the work (though carefully insisting that it was an account of how things *might* have evolved in an imaginary universe) he places the sun at the centre of the planetary system.¹⁰ But on hearing of the condemnation of Galileo by the Inquisition for advocating the heliocentric hypothesis, Descartes decided to withdraw his own treatise from publication. 'I desire to live in peace', he wrote to his friend and chief correspondent, Marin Mersenne.¹¹

The cautious and reclusive attitude which became typical of Descartes's middle years was in some respects at odds with the rather more active and outgoing life he pursued in his twenties. After taking a law degree at Poitiers, at the age of twenty-two Descartes went to Holland and enrolled in the army of Prince Maurice of Nassau; this was the prelude for a series of travels in Europe, inspired by the resolve, as Descartes later put it, 'to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself or else in the great book of the world'.¹² The comment suggests that his motive for choosing the soldier's life was the prospect for travel it offered, though in later life he commented acidly that the chief attraction of a military career for the young was the opportunity it provided for 'idleness and debauchery'.¹³ At all events, the most significant result of his initial journey to Holland was the friendship Descartes formed with the Dutch mathematician Isaac Beeckman, whom he met accidentally in 1618. Beeckman made Descartes party to a number of projects on which he was working in pure and applied mathematics, and was described by Descartes in terms reminiscent of those later used by Immanuel Kant when he acknowledged Hume as the one who had roused him from his 'dogmatic slumbers'. 'You alone', Descartes wrote to Beeckman in 1619, 'roused me from my state of indolence'; in another letter, he spoke of the 'gigantic task' which, inspired by Beeckman's ideas, he had set himself: that of devising a method which would provide 'a general solution of all possible equations involving any sort of quantity'.¹⁴ Descartes continued to work on arithmetic, algebra and geometry (and the relationship between them) for much of the following decade, and it was to become a central theme of his later philosophy that mathematics possessed the kind of precision

¹⁰ See *Le Monde*, ch. 10 (AT XI 69–70). ¹¹ Letter of April 1634 (AT I 285–6; CSMK 43).

¹² *Discourse*, Part One (AT VI 9; CSM I 115).

¹³ Letter to Pollot of 1648 (AT V 557; CSMK 359).

¹⁴ Letters of 23 April and 26 March 1619 (AT X 163, 157–8; CSMK 4, 2–3).

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and certainty which the traditional philosophy he had learnt at school conspicuously lacked. Mathematics was a paradigm of what Descartes came to call *scientia* – genuine and systematic knowledge based on reliable principles.

Descartes's earliest work, the *Compendium musicae*, written in 1618 and dedicated to Beeckman, applied quantitative principles to the study of musical harmony and dissonance. But the wider significance which mathematical reasoning later came to have for Descartes consisted in its being a model for all human understanding: 'Those long chains composed of very simple and easy reasonings, which geometers customarily use to arrive at their most difficult demonstrations, had given me occasion to suppose that all the things which fall within the scope of human knowledge are interconnected in the same way.'¹⁵ This ambitious vision of a new model for the sciences was probably shaped and nurtured over a number of years, but according to Descartes himself it took root in his mind after an extraordinary experience which occurred during his European travels.

On 10 November 1619 Descartes found himself closeted in a 'stove-heated room' (*poêle*) in a town in southern Germany, where, after a day of intense meditation, he fell asleep and had a series of three strikingly vivid dreams. In the first, he was assailed by phantoms and a violent whirlwind, took refuge in a college, where he tried to reach the chapel, and was greeted by a friend who gave him a present which he took to be a 'melon brought from a foreign country'. As he woke up he felt a sharp pain in his side which made him fear that an 'evil demon was trying to deceive' him; such was the sense of dread produced by the dream that he lay awake for several hours. In the second dream he heard a terrible noise like a thunderclap, and saw a shower of bright sparks, whereupon he awoke at once, still in a state of terror. The last and most complex dream involved the appearance and disappearance of various books on a table: first an encyclopaedia, which he thought might be 'very useful' to him; then an anthology of poetry containing the Pythagorean motto for truth and falsity, *Est et non*, and an ode of Ausonius beginning *Quod vitae sectabor iter?* ('What road in life shall I follow?'); and finally (after a long dialogue with a stranger about the contents of the books) the encyclopaedia again, this time incomplete. As he began to wake up, he immediately started interpreting the dream, the most significant feature being the encyclopaedia, which he took for a symbol of 'how the sciences are linked together'. The upshot of this

¹⁵ *Discourse*, Part Two (AT VI 19; CSM I 120).

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night of troubled visions was that Descartes became convinced that his own life's journey should be devoted to completing the 'encyclopaedia': his mission was to found a new and comprehensive philosophical and scientific system.¹⁶

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DESCARTES'S METHODOLOGY

Returning to Paris after his travels, Descartes began work on a treatise in Latin entitled *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, the *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence*. Though never completed (and never published during his lifetime), the *Regulae* inaugurates the project, glimpsed in Descartes's dream, of founding a universal scientific system. The inspiration, as with so much of his work (particularly so during this early period), is mathematical, and much of the book is concerned with devising of 'rules' or methods for the solution of problems in arithmetic and geometry. But Descartes pointedly observes that he 'would not value these Rules so highly if they were good only for solving those pointless problems with which arithmeticians and geometers are inclined to while away their time'. He goes on to speak of a general discipline that contains the 'rudiments of human reason' and can 'extend to the discovery of truths in any field whatever': 'there must be a general science which explains all the points that can be raised concerning order and measure irrespective of the subject-matter'.¹⁷ The tool for the discovery of such truths would not be a study of traditional methods and authorities, but, instead, the ordinary 'native intelligence' of each individual: the simple and clear perceptions of the intellect, uncluttered by considerations of 'what other people have thought or what we ourselves conjecture'.¹⁸

This vision of how to proceed in philosophy remained Descartes's guiding principle when he came to write the *Meditations*, over ten years later. In the *Regulae*, Descartes uses the term 'intuition' (in Latin *intuitus*) for the kind of reliable cognition he is seeking – a word which suggests looking directly at something, a kind of straightforward inspection or vision (though of a purely intellectual, not an ocular, kind):

¹⁶ The dreams are described in some detail by A. Baillet (*La Vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes*, Paris: Horthemels, 1691; photographic reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1972, vol. I, pp. 81ff.), but some of his embellishments are almost certainly apocryphal; see Rodis-Lewis, 'Descartes' Life' (pp. 30–2). Fragments which have survived from Descartes's own early notebooks provide more reliable, if somewhat sparse, information. See CSM I 2ff.

¹⁷ *Regulae*, Rule Four (AT X 374, 378; CSM I 17, 19).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Rule Three (AT X 366; CSM I 13).

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By ‘intuition’ I do not mean the fluctuating testimony of the senses or the deceptive judgement of the imagination as it botches things together, but the conception of a clear and attentive mind, which is so easy and distinct that there can be no room for doubt about what we are understanding. Alternatively, and this comes to the same thing, intuition is the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason.¹⁹

The ‘light of reason’ (*lux rationis*) which is invoked in this passage (and which reappears in the *Meditations* and elsewhere as the ‘natural light’) has a long ancestry. Plato, in the *Republic* (c. 380 BC), had used the simile of the sun to describe the Form of the Good which makes manifest the objects of abstract intellectual cognition (just as the sun sheds light on ordinary visible objects). In St John’s Gospel (c. AD 100), the *Logos*, the ‘Word’ or divine creative intelligence, is identified with ‘the Light that lighteth every man coming into the world’ (1:9). And Augustine, in the *De Trinitate* (c. 410), welding together Platonic and Christian ideas, asserts that ‘the mind, when directed to intelligible things in the natural order, according to the disposition of the Creator, sees them in a certain incorporeal light which has a nature all of its own, just as the body’s eye sees nearby objects in the ordinary light’.²⁰ Descartes certainly shares with Platonic and Augustinian ‘rationalism’ a distrust of the ‘fluctuating testimony’ of the senses, and a belief in the pure inner light of the intellect as a vastly more reliable source of knowledge than anything which is received from the external world via the sensory organs.²¹ This rationalist perspective remains strikingly present in the way the argument of the *Meditations* was later developed. And beyond this there is the deeper theological dimension (though this aspect tends to be played down by many modern commentators): Descartes’s faith in the reliability of the intellectual light comes to be closely linked, in his later metaphysics, with the fact that it is bestowed on us by God, the source of all truth. Our own route to secure knowledge is, ultimately, illuminated by the ‘immense light’ proceeding from the perfect divine nature, and shining, albeit with diminished scope, in each individual mind.²²

Back in the late 1620s, however, the relationship between the divine nature and the attainment of reliable human knowledge was an issue that

¹⁹ *Ibid.* (AT X 368: CSM I 14). ²⁰ *De Trinitate* XII xv 24. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 514–18.

²¹ Though he is very much *not* the caricature ‘rationalist’ who holds that there is no role whatever for the senses in the development of science: see *Discourse*, Part Six (AT VI 65: CSM I 144).

²² For the immensity of the divine light, see the resounding final paragraph of the Third Meditation, pp. 72–3. For the limited scope of the natural light within the individual soul, see the Fourth Meditation, pp. 83–5.

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Descartes had probably not examined in any detail. Despite the underlying theological implications of the notion of the ‘light of reason’, his early work in the *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence* contains little if any metaphysical argument, and tends instead to proceed as if epistemology and methodology are relatively self-standing and self-contained disciplines capable of providing an autonomous route to ‘certain and evident cognition’.²³ We know, however, that Descartes had at least begun to work on metaphysics around this time, since a letter to Marin Mersenne mentions a ‘little treatise’ started in 1629, soon after he had decided to leave France to take up permanent residence in Holland. The ‘little treatise’ (now lost) aimed to prove ‘the existence of God and of our souls when they are separate from the body’;²⁴ but the work was laid aside, and Descartes did not come back to a full treatment of these issues until the late 1630s.

The reasons for Descartes’s self-imposed exile from his native land have been much disputed. He certainly complained of the ‘innumerable distractions’ of Paris,²⁵ but though many of his residences in Holland were in secluded country locations, he was not wholly averse to town life (soon after arriving he took lodgings in the bustling city of Amsterdam). It has been suggested that he hoped the Netherlands would provide a more tolerant and free-thinking atmosphere for the reception of his ‘modern’ views on physics and cosmology; but in the event his philosophical views provoked as much controversy and hostility from Protestant Dutch academics as any he might have expected from Catholic scholars in France. Most likely, Descartes experienced (at least at first) that sense of freedom and release which many expatriates discover on moving away from the culture in which they were born and brought up; the ‘masked man’, as Descartes had earlier called himself, spoke in his first (anonymously) published work of his pleasure at living amidst a mass of busy people ‘more concerned with their own affairs than curious about those of others’.²⁶

The main preoccupations of Descartes during the early and middle 1630s were scientific. His treatise on physics, *Le Monde* (already mentioned above), was completed by 1633. It contained a complete description of the origins and workings of the physical universe in accordance with the ‘laws

²³ AT X 362: CSM I 10. ²⁴ AT I 182: CSMK 29.

²⁵ Letter to Mersenne of 27 May 1638 (AT II 151–2).

²⁶ *Discourse*, Part Three (AT VI 31: CSM I 126). The image of the ‘masked man’ (*larvatus*) occurs in one of Descartes’s early notebooks probably composed during his travels in Europe during the years 1619–22: ‘Actors, taught not to let any embarrassment show on their faces, put on a mask. I will do the same. So far, I have been a spectator in this theatre which is the world, but I am now about to mount the stage, and I come forward masked’ (AT X 213: CSM I 2).

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of mechanics', and a concluding section, known as the *Traité de l'homme* (*Treatise on Man*), supplied an account of human physiology employing the self-same mechanical principles. Descartes had a keen interest in physiology (which stayed with him all his life), and when he lived in Kalverstraat ('Calf Street') in Amsterdam he made a habit of collecting carcasses from the butcher for dissection. His approach to the processes and functions of the living human body was strongly reductionistic: the body was essentially a 'machine', which, like 'clocks, artificial fountains and mills', has the power to operate purely in accordance with its own internal principles, depending 'solely on the disposition of our organs'.²⁷ Cartesian physiology and biology entirely dispenses with the traditional Scholastic apparatus that had tried to explain such functions as movement, digestion and sensation by appeal to the operation of the so-called locomotive, nutritive and sensory 'souls'. In Descartes's programme for science, mechanism replaces psychism, and the workings of the animal, and indeed human, organism become no different, in principle, from the workings of any other material structure in the universe; all is to be explained purely in terms of size, shape and motion of the component parts. Only in the case of *thought* does Descartes find it necessary to have recourse to a 'rational soul' (*âme raisonnable*), specially created by God and 'united' to the complex machinery of the human body.²⁸

By 1637, Descartes was ready to publish three 'specimen essays' illustrating his new scientific method. The first was the *Optics* (*La Dioptrique*), which applied mathematical and mechanical principles to the explanation of 'refraction and the manufacture of lenses, . . . of the eye, of light, of vision, and of everything belonging to catoptrics and optics'.²⁹ The achievement was a considerable one: in the course of the work, Descartes accurately sets out, in precise mathematical terms, a version of what is now known as Snell's law of refraction. The second essay, the *Meteorology* (*Les Météores*), applies the reductionistic mechanical approach to a wide variety of phenomena including 'vapours and exhalations, salt, winds, clouds, snow, rain and hail, storms and lightning, and the rainbow'.³⁰ The guiding principle here is one that remains dominant throughout Cartesian science:

²⁷ *Treatise on Man* (AT XI 120: CSM I 99). ²⁸ *Ibid.*, AT XI 143: CSM I 102.

²⁹ Letter to Mersenne of March 1636 (AT I 339–40: CSMK 51). The scope of Descartes's essay was thus wider than its original French title *La Dioptrique* (literally 'Dioptrics') suggests. ('Dioptrics' was the traditional name given to the study of refracted light; 'catoptrics' to reflected light.)

³⁰ AT VI 231 ff.: CSM I 175.

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differences in the size, shape and motion of constituent particles are sufficient to explain all the phenomena we observe in the world around us and the sky above us, without the need to posit any of the traditional ‘substantial forms’, or indeed any qualitative differences between supposedly different ‘kinds’ of matter. ‘I regard [these particles] as all being composed of one single kind of matter,’ Descartes observes in the *Meteorology*, ‘and believe that each of them could be divided repeatedly in infinitely many ways, and that there is no more difference between them than there is between stones of various different shapes cut from the same rock’.³¹ Finally, in the published trio of specimen essays, comes the *Geometry* (*La Géométrie*), an accomplished work, reflecting Descartes’s long-standing interest in pure mathematics, which laid down the foundations for what we now know as coordinate geometry.

THE CORE OF DESCARTES’S PHILOSOPHY

Prefaced to the three essays just mentioned was an extended introduction in six parts, the *Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting one’s reason and seeking the truth in the sciences* (*Discours de la Méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*). The whole volume consisting of the *Discourse* and *Essays* was published anonymously in Leiden in June 1637; in an earlier letter to Mersenne, Descartes had compared himself to the painter who wished to ‘hide behind the picture in order to hear what people will say about it’.³² The *Discourse*, which next to the *Meditations* is nowadays Descartes’s best known and most widely read work, provides a remarkably clear and accessible overview of his philosophical and scientific ideas, though it is very different both in tone and content from the *Meditations*, published four years later. The latter work was composed in Latin, the international language of scholarship in the seventeenth century, whereas Descartes chose to write the *Discourse* in French, precisely in order to present his views more informally, and to a wider audience. Though the author’s name did not appear on the title page, the *Discourse* is an intensely personal work, a kind of intellectual autobiography which describes (in Part One) the influences on Descartes’s early development and his dissatisfaction with the traditional philosophical curriculum, and (in Part Two) his determination to establish a new, clear and orderly method, modelled on the reasoning found in mathematics: ‘provided we refrain from accepting anything as true which is not, and always keep to the order required for

³¹ AT VI 239; CSM II 173, n. 2. ³² Letter of 8 October 1629 (AT I 23; CSMK 6).

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deducing one thing from another, there can be nothing too remote to be reached in the end or too well hidden to be discovered'.³³ The project is nothing less than the construction of a new system of knowledge, starting from scratch – a complete 'rebuilding of the house' as Descartes puts it.³⁴

Part Three of the *Discourse* then goes on to set out a 'provisional moral code',³⁵ which will provide a reliable practical shelter while the edifice of knowledge is being reconstructed; and Part Four (to be discussed below) gives a compelling account of how the metaphysical foundations of the new edifice are to be laid down. Part Five provides a discussion of some of Descartes's scientific work, and is by way of being a summary of the cosmology, physics and physiology covered in the earlier suppressed treatise on the universe and man (*Le Monde* and the *Traité de l'homme*). It includes a detailed account of the circulation of the blood,³⁶ as well as a series of arguments designed to show that the mechanistic schema which suffices to explain all observed functions in animals totally breaks down when it comes to explaining the capacity for thought and language in human beings. 'It is not conceivable', Descartes argues, that 'a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence, as the dullest of men can do'. This leads to the idea of a radical difference between animals and men. The former are simply mechanical automata – natural machines (albeit highly complex ones) made, 'by the hand of God', out of the same material ingredients which compose the rest of the physical universe. But human beings, whose conceptual and linguistic abilities cannot be explained in this way, must possess a rational soul which 'cannot be derived in any way from the potentiality of matter, but must be specially created'.³⁷ Finally, in Part Six of the *Discourse*, Descartes says something of his plans for future research, and underlines the need for empirical observation to establish which hypotheses, of the several alternatives consistent with the general principles of his science, are in fact correct:

the power of nature is so ample and so vast, and these principles so simple and so general, that I notice hardly any particular effect of which I do not know at once that it can be deduced from the principles in many different ways; and my greatest

³³ AT VI 19: CSM I 120. ³⁴ *Discourse*, Part Three (AT VI 22: CSM I 122). ³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ In supporting the idea of the circulation of the blood, Descartes praises the 'English physician, who . . . [broke] the ice on this subject', referring to William Harvey, whose *De motu cordis* was published in 1628. But Descartes takes the cause of circulation to be expansion caused by the 'heat of the heart', a view which led him to insist that the blood gushes from heart to arteries during the diastole phase, not (as Harvey had correctly maintained) during the systole (contraction) phase (AT VI 50, 52: CSM I 136, 137).

³⁷ AT VI 55–9: CSM I 139–41.

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difficulty is usually to discover in which of these ways it depends on them. I know no other means to discover this than by seeking further observations whose outcomes vary according to which of these ways provides the correct explanation.³⁸

Interesting though these scientific and methodological issues are, it is Part Four of the *Discourse*, the metaphysical core of the work, which has called forth the greatest discussion and commentary. For students of the *Meditations* it is of particular interest, since, in the space of eight paragraphs, it anticipates, if only in outline, many of the more complex and extended arguments of the later work. Descartes begins Part Four of the *Discourse* by stressing the need to make sure the foundations of his new science are sufficiently firm and secure. The way to achieve this is to ‘reject as if absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see if I was left believing anything that was entirely indubitable’. He continues:

Thus, because our senses sometimes deceive us, I decided to suppose that nothing was such as they led us to imagine. And since there are people who make mistakes in reasoning, committing logical fallacies concerning the simplest questions in geometry, and because I judged that I was as prone to error as anyone else, I rejected as unsound all the arguments I had previously taken as demonstrative proofs. Lastly, considering that the very thoughts we have while awake may also occur while we sleep without any of them being at that time true, I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately I noticed that even while I was endeavouring in this way to think that everything was false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth *I am thinking, therefore I exist* was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.³⁹

Here we have the same technique for systematically ‘leading the mind away from the senses’ which is later found in the First Meditation (below, p. 25). The unreliability of the senses is underscored by appeal to the fact that they ‘sometimes deceive us’; the celebrated dreaming argument is deployed, first to cast doubt on our ability to distinguish between waking and sleeping experience, and then to raise more radical doubts about the existence of anything external to the mind. The possibility of error even with regard to the simple propositions of geometry is also raised, though without the appeal, found in the *Meditations*, to the possible existence of an all-powerful God who might bring it about that ‘I . . . go wrong every time

³⁸ AT VI 64–5; CSM I 144. ³⁹ AT VI 32; CSM I 127.

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I . . . count the sides of a square' (p. 27).⁴⁰ And finally, the successive waves of doubt collapse on an immovable rock of certainty, as the doubter arrives at the indubitable awareness of his own existence: 'I am thinking, therefore I exist.' The original French phrase in the *Discourse* is *je pense donc je suis*, but the argument has come to be known as 'the Cogito' (from the Latin version *Cogito ergo sum* found in Descartes's later work, the *Principles of Philosophy*, as well as in the subsequent Latin edition of the *Discourse*). It is notable that the celebrated phrase does not appear in the *Meditations*, although there is a closely similar argument: despite the most extravagant doubts that can be raised, '*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind' (p. 35).

The argument of the *Discourse* now proceeds to a new phase. The narrator, having achieved certainty of his own existence, turns next to examining what *kind* of being he is. And here the methodical doubts just canvassed are taken to yield a remarkable result:

I saw that while I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist . . . From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is only to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly this 'I' – that is, the soul by which I am what I am – is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist.⁴¹

Descartes is thus led to propound one of his most controversial theses, that the thinking self is essentially incorporeal. What makes me *me* is, by nature, entirely independent of the body and could exist without it. Though consistent with Descartes's earlier arguments in the *Treatise on Man*, that humans consist of a mechanical body plus an immaterial 'rational soul', it is a thesis that is harshly out of tune with the dominant approach to the philosophy of mind in our own time; the majority of modern philosophers have entirely rejected what has scathingly been called the Cartesian doctrine of the 'ghost in the machine'.⁴² But even among Descartes's contemporaries there was serious criticism of the argument he offered in the *Discourse*. From

⁴⁰ The 'deceiving God' argument in the First Meditation takes the form of a dilemma: either God exists, in which case he has the power to make me go astray in the manner suggested, or there is no God, in which case I owe my origins to some less perfect cause, with the result that I have even less reason to suppose myself free of error in these matters. Neither this argument, nor the later scenario of a 'malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning' who 'employ[s] all his energies in order to deceive me' (p. 29) makes any appearance in the *Discourse*.

⁴¹ Part Four (AT VI 31–3; CSM I 127).

⁴² The phrase is Gilbert Ryle's (*The Concept of Mind*, London: Hutchinson, 1949).

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what looks like a purely epistemological point, that I can doubt my body's existence, or that I am less certain of it than I am of my own thinking, how is it supposed to follow that the essential 'me' is, in reality, distinct from and independent of the body? How can we move so swiftly from epistemology to ontology, from questions about what we are capable of knowing, doubting or imagining to answers about the real and essential truth of things? Readers of the *Discourse* were quick to fasten on this difficulty, and when Descartes came to write the *Meditations*, although he refused to abandon the reasoning (it reappears in more elaborate form in the Second Meditation, pp. 35–7), he did undertake to clarify his position and to strengthen his arguments. The clarification is offered in the Preface to the *Meditations* (p. 11), and the strengthening is offered in the Sixth Meditation (pp. 109, 119). It is for the reader to judge the merits of what appears in these passages, together with Descartes's attempts to defend his view against the powerful criticisms offered by the author of the Fourth Objections, Antoine Arnauld (below, pp. 221ff.). What is unmistakably clear is that Descartes continues to insist on the independence of the mind, *qua* 'thinking thing', from anything bodily: 'if a foot or arm or any other part of the body is cut off, nothing has thereby been taken away from the mind' (p. 119). The claim is revealed in its full starkness, and (to most philosophers nowadays) its overwhelming implausibility, when we remember that the *brain*, being a purely bodily organ, must, for Descartes, be as inessential to the mind's continued functioning as foot or arm.

The remainder of Part Four of the *Discourse* is concerned with the celebrated Cartesian 'truth rule' ('Whatever is very clearly and distinctly conceived is true'),⁴³ and with the proofs of the existence of a perfect God, which enable us to be sure that 'our ideas or notions, being real things and coming from God, cannot be anything but true, in every respect in which they are clear and distinct'.⁴⁴ This opens the gateway to the construction of a reliable science, based not on the deliverances of the senses, but on the divinely implanted truths of mathematics which give us clear and distinct knowledge of the material world. Making the transition from metaphysics to science at the start of Part Five of the *Discourse*, Descartes resoundingly

⁴³ Cf. AT VI 33; CSM I 127. The invoking of God as the guarantor of the reliability of our clear and distinct ideas, which is even more prominent in the *Meditations*, gives rise to the notorious problem of the 'Cartesian Circle': if we can be sure of the reliability of such ideas only after we have proved the existence of a perfect God who created us, how can we, without circularity, rely on the ideas which we need to prove his existence in the first place? For more on this, see the detailed exchange between Descartes and his contemporary critics (below, pp. 211–19).

⁴⁴ AT VI 38; CSM I 130.

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declares: ‘I have noticed certain laws which God has so established in nature, and of which he has implanted such notions in our minds, that after adequate reflection we cannot doubt that they are exactly observed in everything which exists or occurs in the world.’⁴⁵

When Descartes came to write the *Meditations*, which he began to compose not long after the publication of the *Discourse*, his aim was to provide a richer and more detailed elaboration of these metaphysical themes, and thus ensure a firm and unshakable base for his new philosophical system. We have already drawn attention to a number of themes in the *Meditations* which had been prefigured in his earlier writings. The ‘rationalistic’ move away from the senses towards the inner light of the intellect – a movement which is steadily developed from the barrage of doubt which opens the First Meditation, through to the articulation of the mind’s innate ideas in the Third – had been anticipated in the *Discourse*, and, much earlier, if less explicitly, in the *Regulae*. The Cogito argument set out in the *Discourse* provides the bones for the fuller and more sophisticated treatment in the Second Meditation. The notion of the thinking self as essentially incorporeal, tentatively explored in the Second Meditation, and defended at length in the Sixth, was also a development of earlier reflections in the *Discourse*. And the central role of God as guarantor of the possibility of knowledge, a thread that runs right through the *Meditations*, has its roots in the doctrine of the ‘light of reason’ appearing in the *Regulae*, and the more direct appeal, in the *Discourse*, to divine perfection as the source of all truth in our ideas.

The theocentric character of Descartes’s thinking here is underlined by the language of the *Meditations*, which, especially in the original Latin, is often strongly reminiscent of the patristic and medieval world that shaped the intellectual culture Descartes inherited. We often read the *Meditations* nowadays as a work of epistemology, as if Descartes’s sole aim was to refute scepticism. But Descartes observes in the Preface to the *Meditations* that his aim is not to prove ‘that there really is a world, and that human beings have bodies and so on – *since no sane person has ever seriously doubted these things*’ (below, p. 21, emphasis added). The Cartesian quest did not spring into existence as a set of intellectual puzzles or diversions, but fits into a long tradition (going back to Augustine and beyond), which sees the philosopher as using doubt and self-discovery as the first step in the search for objective truth. The point of his arguments establishing the external world, says Descartes, is that ‘in considering [them] we come to realize that

⁴⁵ AT VI 41: CSM I 131.

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they are not as solid or as transparent as the arguments which lead us to knowledge of our own minds and of God' (ibid.). For Descartes himself the primary significance of the self-awareness he achieves is that it is the first step on the road to awareness of God.

Descartes's conception of himself as a thinking being immediately leads him to reflect on his finitude and imperfection; and this in turn leads him directly forward to contemplate the 'immense light' of the Godhead, the infinite incorporeal being whose image is reflected, albeit dimly, in the finite created intellect of the meditator.⁴⁶ Like Bonaventure before him, whose own *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (*The Journey of the Mind towards God*) was profoundly conditioned by the contemplative and immaterialist tradition of Plato and Augustine, Descartes has a conception of ultimate truth that required an *aversio* – a turning of the mind away from the world of the senses – in order to prepare it for glimpsing the reality that lies beyond the phenomenal world. Both Bonaventure and Descartes, following Augustine's famous slogan *In interiore homine habitat veritas* ('The truth dwells within the inner man'),⁴⁷ undertake an interior journey. 'Go back into yourself', says Augustine; 'let us return to ourselves, into our mind', says Bonaventure, that we may search for the *lux veritatis in facie nostrae mentis* – 'the light of truth shining in our minds, as through a glass, in which the image of the Blessed Trinity shines forth'.⁴⁸ 'I turn my mind's eye upon myself', says Descartes, and find the idea of God stamped there, like the 'mark the craftsman has set on his work'.⁴⁹

There is a paradox here which lies at the heart of Descartes's philosophy. On the one hand, it is clearly motivated by the desire of the independent-mind researcher to shake off the shackles of preconceived opinion and stride forward in search of the truth: this is the image of Descartes as inaugurator of the modern scientific age, and the champion of human autonomy and independence. But on the other hand, the path to truth is conditioned, in Descartes's conception, by the traditional religious idea of

⁴⁶ Third Meditation, below, p. 73.

⁴⁷ 'Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas' ('Go not outside, but return within thyself; in the inward man dwelleth the truth'). Augustine, *De vera religione* [391] XXXIX 72.

⁴⁸ 'Ad nos reintremus, in mentem scilicet nostram, in qua divina relucet imago; hinc . . . conari debemus per speculum videre Deum, ubi ad modum candelabri relucet lux veritatis in facie nostrae mentis, in qua scilicet resplendet imago beatissimae Trinitatis.' Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* [1259] III 1. For more on the theocentric character of Descartes's philosophy, see J. Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), chs. 13 and 14.

⁴⁹ Third Meditation below, p. 73.

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our creatureliness – the idea that we are sustained at every moment of our existence by a creative power who is the source of all truth and goodness, and without whom we would remain adrift in the darkness, bereft of that ‘light of reason’ which, for Descartes, is the divine gift to each human soul.

The tension between independence and creatureliness pervades the entire structure of the *Meditations*. ‘I am here quite alone’, the meditator announces in the opening paragraph (p. 23). There follows, in vividly dramatic detail, a compelling account of the journey of discovery taken by the isolated thinker as he⁵⁰ searches for secure foundations for knowledge. A series of progressively more radical and extreme doubts are employed to question all preconceived opinions (First Meditation), but (soon after the start of the Second) an ‘Archimedean point’ of unshakable certainty is reached with the meditator’s indubitable awareness of his own existence (pp. 33–5). The meditator then reflects on his essence or nature as a ‘thinking thing’, and reasons that the mind is better known than the body (pp. 35–47). The Third Meditation begins by laying down the rule that ‘whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true’ (p. 49); but there remain doubts about the reliability of the mind that can only be allayed by establishing ‘whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver’ (p. 51). The meditator proceeds to reflect on the innate ideas he finds within himself, and reasons that the representational content (or ‘objective reality’)⁵¹ of one of these ideas, that of a supremely perfect being, is so great that it cannot have been constructed from the resources of the meditator’s own finite mind; the conclusion is that God must really exist, and that ‘in creating me, [he] . . . placed this idea in me to be, as it were, the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work’ (p. 73). The Fourth Meditation tackles the problem of truth and falsity, and argues that the way for humans to avoid error is to restrain their (infinite) will, so as to make judgements only when the perceptions of the (finite) intellect are clear and distinct. The intellect, though limited, is created by a perfect God, and what it *does* clearly perceive can therefore be guaranteed to be true.⁵² The

⁵⁰ A genderless pronoun would be more appropriate here, since the meditator is identified purely as a ‘thinking thing’; the existence of the body is at this stage still in doubt, and the subject is considered entirely in abstraction from the bodily attributes that make one male or female. Modern writers often use the plural ‘they’ and ‘their’ when a neutral pronoun is required, but unfortunately this useful convention would be highly misleading in the present context, since it is a crucial part of Descartes’s argument that the meditator is a *singular* isolated individual (at this stage I cannot know whether anyone else exists apart from myself).

⁵¹ For the meaning of this technical term, see pp. 57, n. 1, and 173–5.

⁵² The problem of the ‘Cartesian Circle’ is never far beneath the surface here and in many other crucial stages of the argument of the *Meditations*. See n. 43, above.

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effect of the argument is to provide a kind of Cartesian theodicy, which parallels traditional attempts to vindicate the goodness of God notwithstanding the existence of evil; in this case, Descartes aims to show that error is not to be laid at God's door, but is the result of an improper use of the gift of free will (by assenting to what is not clearly perceived). The Fifth Meditation prepares the way for Cartesian science by establishing the nature of matter as something extended and divisible, which can be accurately and correctly described in mathematical language (pp. 89, 99). We are also offered a second proof for God's existence, namely that the concept of a supremely perfect being (one who is the sum of all perfections) implies that such a being cannot lack the perfection of existence, and hence that such a being must, by its very nature, exist (pp. 91–5).⁵³ Lastly, in the Sixth Meditation, the actual existence of the external world (called into doubt in the First Meditation) is finally re-established (p. 111), and we are offered a series of arguments which purport to demonstrate the 'real' distinction between mind and body: they are mutually independent substances, each of which can exist without the other. But having used philosophical reason to establish the distinction, the Sixth Meditation closes by invoking our everyday experience of the sensations 'of hunger, thirst, pain and so on' as showing that mind and body, though distinct, are closely 'intermingled' or 'united' (p. 113). The final paragraphs return to the problem of truth and error, and continue the theodicy of the Fourth Meditation, arguing that 'notwithstanding the immense goodness of God, the nature of man as a combination of mind and body is such that it is bound to mislead him from time to time' (p. 123).⁵⁴ Descartes himself provided a tolerably informative *Synopsis* of the argument which is not only worth consulting as a summary, but also contains some interesting additional reflections by the author on his work (pp. 17–21). For detailed discussion of some of the chief philosophical difficulties arising from the argument of the *Meditations*, an invaluable starting point is the published *Objections* of Descartes's

⁵³ This is Descartes's version of the so-called 'ontological' argument, first invented by St Anselm of Canterbury. Descartes was at pains to distinguish it from the *causal* argument of the Third Meditation, which proceeds from effect (the idea of God found in the meditator's mind) to cause (the God who placed it there, like a trademark). The Fifth Meditation argument, by contrast, is purely a priori, and depends merely on reflecting on the defining *essence* of a supremely perfect being. For criticism of the argument, and Descartes's replies, see pp. 195ff.

⁵⁴ The naturally ordained patterns of psycho-physical response in human beings (for example, a sensation of dryness when the nerves in the tongue and throat are in a certain state) are such as to conduce in general to the health of the mind–body composite. But because nature's laws are constant, there are bound to be occasions when such correlations will produce a desire to drink even in those rare and exceptional morbid conditions where fluid intake is not beneficial; see below, p. 123.

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distinguished contemporaries, and the author's own *Replies* (extracts from some of the most important of these exchanges are provided in the present volume, pp. 127ff.).⁵⁵

Descartes hoped that the arguments of the *Meditations*, in particular those purporting to demonstrate the existence of God and the 'real distinction' between soul and body, would find favour with the theologians, and he prefixed to the work a dedicatory letter to the members of the Theology Faculty at the Sorbonne, asking for their approval in his battle for the cause of religion against the atheists (pp. 3–9). The approbation of the Sorbonne was not, however, forthcoming, and the years following the publication of the *Meditations* saw Descartes embroiled in a series of bitter debates with a variety of theological and philosophical critics.⁵⁶ One may see some of these debates prefigured in some of the extracts from the *Objections and Replies* included in the present volume, which give an idea of the sensitivity of the questions about God and the soul tackled by Descartes in the *Meditations*, lying as they do at the very interface between philosophy and theology.

THE CARTESIAN SYSTEM AND THE HUMAN BEING

Notwithstanding the controversies and disputes that plagued him, Descartes's reputation continued to grow, particularly after the publication, in 1644, of the *Principia philosophiae*, a grand exposition of the Cartesian system in four parts. Unlike Descartes's earlier writings, the *Principles of Philosophy* was explicitly planned as a university textbook, and like the traditional handbooks it was divided up into a series of small sections or 'articles' (there are 504 in all). Part One ('The Principles of Human Knowledge') covers much the same metaphysical ground as the *Meditations*, though the exposition is much more formal and impersonal; Part Two ('The Principles of Material Things') presents a complete account of Cartesian physics and the laws of matter in motion; Part Three ('The Visible Universe') describes the structure and workings of the solar system; and Part Four ('The Earth') offers explanations of a wide variety of terrestrial phenomena, as well as giving a brief account, in the closing articles, of Descartes's plans for future work on animals and man, with special

⁵⁵ For publication details relating to the *Meditations* and *Objections and Replies*, and information about the authors of the *Objections*, see Editorial Introduction, p. xxxi below.

⁵⁶ Particularly savage were the attacks of the Dutch theologian Gisbertus Voetius, which led to the publication by Descartes of a lengthy defence of his views, the *Epistola ad Voetium* (1643). (Cf. AT VIII B 25; CSMK 220.)

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reference to the explanation of sense perception and sensory awareness. A French version of the original Latin text was issued three years later, in 1647, by which time the Cartesian philosophy, despite strong opposition from many parts of the academic establishment, was beginning to gain widespread support.

Descartes's programme for establishing a fully comprehensive philosophical system was, however, still incomplete in at least one important respect: he had as yet provided little indication of how his philosophy would deal with the psychological and ethical realms. In the preface to the 1647 French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy* he referred to the project of constructing a 'perfect morality' – *la plus parfaite morale* – which was to be the crowning achievement of his philosophical endeavours. The traditional goal of moral philosophy was to articulate 'the good for human-kind';⁵⁷ but the concept of a *human being*, an embodied creature of flesh and blood, had been left rather in limbo by the results of the *Meditations*. His metaphysical arguments, as we have seen, had led Descartes to the conclusion that the thinking subject was an essentially incorporeal entity whose nature was utterly distinct and alien from the body. And the implication of this was that a human being was an amalgam of seemingly incompatible elements, an immaterial spirit and a mechanical assemblage of bodily organs. Taking his cue from this, Descartes's zealous disciple Regius had insistently proclaimed that the Cartesian doctrine was that man was nothing more than an 'accidental entity' – in the jargon, an *ens per accidens*, as opposed to an *ens per se* (a genuine entity in its own right). Descartes, in correspondence, had angrily dissociated himself from this interpretation, insisting that his view was that 'the mind is united in a real and substantial manner to the body'.⁵⁸ But although the Sixth Meditation had called attention to how mind and body were 'very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled' (below, p. 113), it must have left most readers puzzled as to how such intermingling of incommensurable elements could come about.

One of those who were puzzled was the young Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, only twenty-four years of age when, in 1643, she began a long and fruitful correspondence with Descartes, largely devoted to the topic of the mind–body union. Her initial question to the philosopher was about the possibility of interaction between 'thinking' and 'extended' substances: how can the soul, or thinking substance, causally influence the behaviour of the body to bring about voluntary actions? In his reply, Descartes acknowledged

⁵⁷ The phrase is Aristotle's (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, ch. 7).

⁵⁸ Letter to Regius of January 1642 (AT III 493: CSMK 206).

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that this question was ‘the one which can most properly be put to me in view of my published writings’. He went on to introduce a distinction between three ‘primitive notions’, which are ‘the patterns on the basis of which we form all our other conceptions’:

... as regards body we have only the notion of extension, which entails the notions of shape and motion. As regards the soul on its own, we have only the notion of thought, which includes the perceptions of the intellect and the inclinations of the will. Lastly, as regards the soul and body together, we have only the notion of their union, on which depend our notions of the soul’s power to move the body, and the body’s power to act on the soul and cause its sensations and passions.⁵⁹

This third ‘primitive notion’ comprises, in effect, whatever is attributable to an embodied human being. The *Meditations* had mentioned ‘pain, hunger, thirst’ in this connection, while the *Principles of Philosophy* had provided a rather fuller list: ‘first, appetites like hunger and thirst; secondly, the emotions or passions of the mind which do not consist of thought alone, such as the emotions of anger, joy, sadness and love; and finally, all the sensations, such as those of pain, pleasure, light, colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat, hardness and the other tactile qualities’.⁶⁰

Our life on this earth, as Descartes came increasingly to underline, involves far more than the intellectual and volitional activities that belong to our essence as immaterial ‘thinking things’. If we were like angels (pure thinking beings), Descartes once observed, our existence would be entirely devoid of sensation;⁶¹ we would lack the manifold and varied sensory awareness that is an inescapable part of our everyday human experience. And it is this sensory and affective dimension, with all the vivid phenomenal quality of the various feelings involved, that gives colour and richness to our lives as human beings. Of particular importance here is the category of the passions, which in his last work, *Les Passions de l’âme* (*The Passions of the Soul*, 1649), Descartes grouped under six basic kinds: wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness. Dissociating himself from earlier intellectualist approaches to ethics which had often attempted to suppress the passions as inimical to the good life, Descartes declared: ‘The philosophy I cultivate is not so savage or grim as to outlaw the operation of the passions; on the contrary, it is here, in my view, that the entire sweetness and joy of life is to be found’.⁶² Descartes’s final project was to ground his ethics, his recipe for how humans could achieve fulfilling and worthwhile lives,

⁵⁹ Letter of 21 May 1643 (AT III 664, 665: CSMK 217, 218); cf. AT III 660.

⁶⁰ Part One, article 48 (AT VIII A 23: CSM I 209).

⁶¹ Letter to Regius of January 1642 (AT III 493: CSMK 206).

⁶² Letter to Silhon, March or April 1648 (AT V 135).

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in a systematic understanding of the operation of the passions, both on a physiological and on a psychological level. Here he hoped that his new method for science would yield a rich harvest. A detailed grasp of the bodily mechanisms which give rise to our emotional responses would, he envisaged, enable us to modify those responses where appropriate, and thus channel our feelings and emotions in such a way as to generate a harmonious human life, lived in accordance with our best perceptions of the good for mankind. Cartesian science, pressed into the service of ethics, would allow us to fulfil the dream first announced in the *Discourse on the Method* and reiterated in the *Principles of Philosophy*: instead of the abstract speculative philosophy of the past, we would have at our disposal a new and genuinely practical philosophy, one that would make us the ‘lords and masters of nature’, and bring us closer to achieving ‘perfection and felicity of life’.⁶³

THE CARTESIAN LEGACY

Descartes’s ambitious programme was cut short by his own untimely death, in Stockholm, where, after much hesitation, he had taken up residence at the invitation of Queen Christina of Sweden in 1649. His vitality sapped by the rigours of the Swedish winter, and the need to rise early in the morning to give philosophy tutorials to the queen, he succumbed to pneumonia and died on 11 February 1650, just under two months short of his fifty-fourth birthday. But although he died leaving his philosophical system not fully complete, the remarkably wide range of what he had achieved, and the clarity and precision of its execution, meant that Cartesian ideas dominated the scientific and philosophical thinking of Europe for a long time to come.⁶⁴ The writings of the philosophical giants of the early-modern period, Spinoza, Malebranche and Leibniz, on the Continent, and Locke, Berkeley and Hume, in the British Isles, all, in different ways, bear the unmistakable imprint of Descartes’s thought concerning the structure of human knowledge, the nature of the mind and the relationship between mind and matter. It is impossible to examine the arguments and conceptual apparatus of any of the canonical philosophers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century without seeing the irresistible aptness of

⁶³ *Discourse*, Part Six (AT VI 62: CSM I 142–3); Preface to the French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy* (AT IXB 20: CSM I 190).

⁶⁴ Cartesian physics, however, was by the end of the century to come under increasing pressure from the vastly more sophisticated (and accurate) Newtonian system.

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the traditional accolade which is so often bestowed on Descartes: he is, indubitably, the true ‘father of modern philosophy’.

The story in our own era has been very different. Much twentieth-century philosophy has developed along tracks that diverge sharply from those which Descartes laid down. In the theory of knowledge, what has come to be known as ‘foundationalism’ – the Cartesian project of trying to build a reliable belief system from scratch, starting from a supposedly self-standing and indubitably certain base – has come to be seen as radically misguided. In the philosophy of mind, Descartes’s notion of an immaterial thinking substance has been derided as an explanatory dead-end, powerless to account in any illuminating way for the phenomenon of consciousness and its relationship to the physical world. And, perhaps most devastating of all, the very starting point of Cartesian metaphysics, with its focus on the private reflections of the isolated thinker, has been attacked as incoherent: in the aftermath of Wittgenstein, it has become a ruling orthodoxy that thought and language are inescapably public, socially mediated phenomena, and hence that there is something deeply wrong with the very idea of ‘Cartesian privacy’ – of solitary, introspective access to the truth. But for all that, the enduring influence of Descartes’s ideas remains. It is of the nature of philosophy that its advances are always achieved by means of a continuing dialogue with the great thinkers of the past. The very fact that so much contemporary philosophy defines its goals and methods in stark opposition to Cartesian paradigms itself bears witness to the powerful pressures which Descartes’s approach to philosophy still continues to exert. What is called ‘common sense’ in any age frequently turns out to be the half-digested remains of earlier philosophical theories. Many people’s supposedly ‘pre-philosophical’ intuitions about knowledge, the mind and the nature of certainty, the very intuitions which the philosophers of the twentieth century have struggled to dismantle, have been conditioned by the long-standing dominance of ways of thinking which Descartes helped create.

But there is a final point to be made. Though philosophers sometimes like to think of themselves as belonging to a quasi-scientific, progressive discipline, with steady ‘advances’ in research, the actual history of the subject shows that it does not, and cannot, proceed in this rectilinear way. Rather, it is a matter of currents and counter-currents, of theses conquered by antitheses which themselves then fall victim to newer and reinvigorated incarnations of earlier rejected ideas. For this reason alone, it is plausible to think that the anti-Cartesian thrust of contemporary philosophizing is destined, in some areas at least, to overreach itself. As far as Descartes’s

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general conception of philosophy is concerned, philosophers nowadays live in a cautiously specialized world which is wary of grand systems; but just as the dominant Scholasticism prior to Descartes ran out of energy, so it is conceivable that today's compartmentalized approach to philosophy may lose its appeal, and give way to a faintly recognizable successor to the Cartesian vision of a comprehensive philosophy that strives to integrate the disparate areas of human cognition.⁶⁵ Such speculations aside, one thing is certain, that over three and a half centuries after they were written, the *Meditations* have lost none of their power to fascinate. The vividly dramatic narrative in which Descartes presents the metaphysical core of his philosophy still exerts an extraordinary spell, whether as a specimen of a splendid but doomed enterprise, or as an inspiring exemplar of what the individual intellect can achieve when it casts off the bonds of authority and convention and sets out on the long search for security and truth. In his Preface to the first edition, Descartes observed that he did not expect his *Meditations* to attract 'any great crowd of readers' (p. 13). History has proved him wrong, and will surely continue to do so for a very long time to come.

⁶⁵ For more on this, see 'Descartes the Synoptic Philosopher', in Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections*.