DAVID CUNNING

# Introduction

## THE MEDITATIONS AND ITS RECEPTION

*Meditations on First Philosophy* was first published in 1641, and Descartes certainly knew that it would generate controversy. He introduces a number of radical ideas in the course of laying out his views and arguments – for example, that God might be a thoroughgoing deceiver or that He might not exist; that what we know best about bodies is not known through the senses at all and that, for example, our mathematical and non-sensory idea of the sun might be a more accurate rendition of the sun than the idea that presents it as yellow and hot; that God exists, and His will is the eternal and immutable and supremely independent cause of all reality and truth; and that the external world that surrounds us is best understood as being devoid of light and sound and sensory qualities altogether.[1] Descartes dedicates the *Meditations* to "those most learned and distinguished men, the Dean and Doctors of the sacred Faculty of Theology at Paris" (AT 7: 1). He does so in part to increase the odds that he will be heard:

> 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 anything very worthwhile unless you come to my aid by granting me your patronage. The reputation of your Faculty is so firmly fixed in the 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. ("Dedicatory Letter to the Sorbonne," AT 7: 5)

As we will see, Descartes spends a lot of time outside of the *Meditations* articulating the ways in which tradition and authority

can keep a mind from registering the force of a rigorous argument. But tradition and authority might also be harnessed in the other direction, and Descartes is hoping that an endorsement from the Sorbonne will hold the objections of his readers at bay, at least until the arguments of the *Meditations* are able finally to get through.

Descartes had already expressed some of the controversial elements of his philosophical system earlier in *The World* and *Treatise on Man*, written from 1629 to 1633, but he decided to withhold these texts from publication when he learned that Galileo had been condemned for saying in print that the earth moves (in *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, 1632). Descartes explains,

> I must admit that if the view is false, so too are the entire foundations of my philosophy, for it can be demonstrated from them quite clearly . . . But for all the world I did not want to publish a discourse in which a single word could be found that the Church would have disapproved of; so I preferred to suppress it rather than to publish it in a mutilated form.[2]

The *Meditations* does not explicitly articulate the view that the earth moves, but nor does it fully articulate many other components of Descartes' philosophical system. In large part, it lays out philosophical foundations. It defends arguments that sometimes suggest or even entail a controversial position, even if the position itself goes unstated. Descartes went to great lengths to avoid the fate of Galileo, but in the end he was reprimanded as well. In 1663, thirteen years after he died, the Church put the *Meditations* and many of Descartes' other works on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, or *List of Prohibited Books*.

Descartes is famous for his work as a philosopher, but he was also a renowned mathematician, geometer, and scientist. The x-y coordinate system in geometry is one of his many legacies, and indeed Descartes' achievements in mathematics and geometry are connected to his work in philosophy. One of the common fruits of math and geometry is a method that begins with results that are utterly clear and perspicuous and that leads in a step-by-step procedure to results that are clear and perspicuous themselves. Like a lot of philosophers of the early modern period, Descartes looked forward to a moment in which the claims of philosophy would achieve the level of certitude and finality that was warranted by its subject matter, so that all three disciplines would be similarly demonstrative. In his

early *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, he offers guidelines for getting as clear as possible on mathematical and geometrical concepts, and he tries to expose exactly what it is about these that allows their respective disciplines to have such certitude and stature. He says a number of things, but one is that, in both, concepts are broken down into their very simplest elements and then built back up as a function of their conceptual inter-connections.[3] This way, simple elements that go together stay together, and elements that are different are sorted in ways that appropriately reflect their differences. Descartes suggests that we take the same approach in dealing with philosophical matters,[4] and that approach will be especially prominent in the *Meditations*. As we will see, Descartes assumes that his readers are beset with numerous prejudices at the start of inquiry,[5] and these prejudices will need to be shattered if the simpler elements of our thinking are to be uncovered and viewed without obstruction. Descartes appears to hold that at bottom what it is for something to be an idea is not just for it to be a mental item, but a mental item that is intentional and that represents reality. Our most unanalyzable ideas are true and conform to the way that things are,[6] and if so, it is only composite ideas that have a chance of being fictional. True ideas inform us about the structure of reality, if only we can settle on which these are.

## CHAPTERS

This volume is a companion to Descartes' philosophy, but it is a companion to the *Meditations* in particular. The distinction is very important just because the *Meditations* is a text in which Descartes has a meditator diving into inquiry from a not-yet-Cartesian (or at least not-yet-fully-Cartesian) standpoint and then gradually moving to a more considered position of reflection and clarity. The *Meditations* will present many of Descartes' views and arguments, but it will also reflect the judgments and concerns of his meditator along the way. The chapters that follow are meant to shed light on the details of Descartes' philosophical thinking, but also to highlight how the *Meditations* is literally a meditation. There will be an enormous amount of disagreement about what exactly is being argued at each point in the *Meditations*, and about when the meditator is reflecting Descartes' considered position and when the meditator is

still working to get confusion out of his system, but this disagreement will be instructive.

In the first chapter, Christia Mercer discusses some of the larger historical background to the practice of philosophical meditation and how it was part of the context that informed Descartes' *Meditations* in particular. She calls attention to important philosophical meditators like Augustine, Teresa of Ávila, and Philipp Camerarius, and she notes some of the changes and developments in the practice of meditation over time – for example, a move from meditation that is seen as requiring the inspiration and assistance of God to meditation that is more individualistic. Mercer points out how Descartes incorporates a number of different influences in crafting his own meditational approach – Christian, Platonist, anti-Aristotelian, and skeptical – to best meet his specific needs and concerns.

Chapters two and three are on the First Meditation. Charles Larmore argues that the First Meditation is in effect a kind of dialogue between a commonsense empiricist meditator who subscribes to the view that all knowledge is acquired through the senses, and a skeptic who is highlighting the tensions that are internal to that view. Larmore emphasizes that no theses are positively advanced in the First Meditation, but instead the meditator is pitting aspects of his own belief system against each other. Larmore draws important connections between the skeptical project of the *Meditations* and the skeptical arguments of Descartes' predecessors, and he underscores the significance and value of the radical and ground-clearing method of the First Meditation, even if that method results in less certainty than might be desired. David Cunning focuses on discrepancies between the views and arguments that are advanced in the First Meditation and views and arguments that are defended in Descartes' larger corpus. Cunning considers in particular the way in which the deliverances of the First Meditation run counter to results that (Descartes would identify) as non-sensory and a priori – results of the sort that (he would say) are the bread and butter of philosophical investigation. It is these results that take precedence in philosophical inquiry – for example, that God is a necessary existent, that He is the eternal and immutable author of all reality, and that He would not allow us to be deceived about matters that are most evident to us. If so, there does not exist the First Meditation possibility that God does not exist, or that He created us with defective minds, or that we evolved by chance, or that

our minds are constantly tricked by an evil demon. These possibilities are entertained by the First Meditation meditator, but the First Meditation meditator is not yet a Cartesian. Cunning is worried in part about explaining away the notorious problem of the Cartesian Circle – how we can effectively demonstrate that God exists and has created us with minds that are trustworthy, if all the while there exists the possibility that our minds are defective. Cunning also considers the question of whether or not the non-sensory tenets of Descartes' considered metaphysics leave room for finite minds to have libertarian independence and freedom, or if (in the First Meditation and elsewhere) he is only positing an experience of independence and freedom.

The next two chapters are on the Second Meditation. Lilli Alanen argues that in the Second Meditation Descartes is attempting to do justice to all of the cognitive faculties of a human being, but that he breaks with his predecessors and elevates many of these faculties to the level of the *I* or pure intellect. In the tradition, faculties like sensing and imagining were attributed to a lesser soul – for example the animal soul – but Descartes offers systematic reasons for discarding these and retaining the notion of the intellectual soul or mind alone. Alanen also argues that part of the Sixth Meditation argument for the view that minds are immaterial consists in the fact that the meditator in Meditations Two through Five has the first-hand experience of exercising all the cognitive faculties that are isolated in Meditation Two – especially the faculties of will and judgment – and comes to see that they are sufficiently exalted that there is no way that they could be understood to be modifications of extension or body. Katherine Morris focuses on the wax digression that appears at the end of the Second Meditation. It is clear that the discussion is meant to show that what we know best about bodies is not known through the senses, and more generally that our knowledge of non-sensory things is of the highest order, but there remain a number of important questions about the details of the wax digression. For example, there is a question about what Descartes means in saying that a feature does or does not pertain to wax, and about what it means to say that a piece of wax is capable of countless permutations, and about what it means to say that mind is known better than body. Morris offers almost a line-by-line reading of the second half of the Second Meditation, and concludes with a discussion of some of the pedagogical doctrines that might be at work behind the scenes.

The next two chapters treat issues in the Third Meditation. Descartes famously argues here that God exists, and he does so by way of some claims about the representationality of ideas. Lawrence Nolan argues that one of the reasons that Descartes' argumentation has been regarded as implausible is that he is taken too literally in his use of scholastic terminology. Descartes uses that terminology for strategic purposes, Nolan argues, and if we understand the underlying concepts that Descartes himself endorses, his argumentation is quite compelling. Nolan takes a similar approach in addressing the question of whether or not there are two separate arguments for the existence of God in the Third Meditation, and the question of what it means for Descartes to say that God is self-caused. Amy Schmitter focuses on one of the underpinnings of Descartes' Third Meditation argumentation – the notion of objective reality or representational content. Schmitter argues that in the Third Meditation discussion Descartes is making use of different elements of views of representation that were proposed by his medieval predecessors, but she argues in addition that Descartes does not assemble all of these into a final considered position in the Third Meditation. The meditator has only meditated so far, and is not yet in a position to offer a final view of objective reality. The understanding of representation that is proposed in the Third Meditation is just enough to get up and running the argument for God's existence from objective reality, and only later is Descartes able to appeal to a full-fledged theory of the content of ideas to demonstrate results about their objects. Schmitter proposes the controversial view that, in the final analysis, Descartes is a kind of externalist.

Chapters eight and nine are about the Fourth Meditation and the Cartesian tenet that minds are free to affirm truth and avoid error. Descartes subscribes to this tenet – there is no doubt – but the question is what exactly it amounts to. Thomas Lennon considers the Fourth Meditation assertion that the will consists in the ability to do or not do and argues that the assertion is simply reporting that affirming and not affirming are among the capacities of the will. The will's ability to affirm or not affirm is not a two-way contra-causal power, Lennon argues: Descartes subscribes to the view that the will is always guided by reasons that are presented to the intellect, and this is a view that was commonly assumed in the tradition. Cecilia Wee argues that for Descartes the will is free in the libertarian sense that all circumstances

being identical, it has a two-way power to affirm or not to affirm. Wee considers texts that are strongly suggestive of the libertarian interpretation, and she offers a way of making sense of apparently conflicting passages as well. She concludes with a discussion of systematic Cartesian principles that might seem to run counter to the libertarian reading and argues that in fact they are fully consistent with it.

The next two chapters focus on the Fifth Meditation and Descartes' doctrine of true and immutable natures. Tad Schmaltz considers a number of different interpretations in the literature – that true and immutable natures are conceptual entities, that they are third-realm Platonic entities, and that they are identical to the things that have the natures themselves. Schmaltz points to problems for all of these interpretations and suggests that in the end there is no reading of the ontological status of true and immutable natures that squares with all of the things that Descartes says about them. But even if Schmaltz does not aim to settle the question of the ontological status of true and immutable natures, he does attempt to reconcile all of the different claims that Descartes makes about the criteria by which we identify something as a true and immutable nature. Schmaltz argues that in the end the criteria that Descartes offers are much more complementary than has been thought. Schmaltz concludes with an illuminating discussion of Kant's critique of Descartes' Fifth Meditation (ontological) argument for the existence of God. Olli Koistinen argues that the central work that is done by the notion of a true and immutable nature is to fix the externality or reference of ideas. Koistinen first offers a summary of earlier moments in the *Meditations* in which Descartes attempts to fix a notion of externality or mind-independence, but fails. In effect, Koistinen locates a continuous thread in which Descartes is seeking to make sense of how ideas can be directed at objects, and argues that it is not until the Fifth Meditation that he is finally successful. According to Koistinen, true and immutable natures are similar to formal natures in the philosophy of Spinoza, where these are part of the structure of the reality to which our ideas refer. Koistinen then argues that Descartes' Fifth Meditation ontological argument is fairly plausible if the true and immutable nature of God is not a conceptual entity but a being whose existence and externality are secured by the fact that we have true thoughts about it.

Chapters twelve and thirteen focus on the Sixth Meditation and the issue of embodiment. Thus far, the meditator of the *Meditations*

has worked very hard to be a detached *I* and thereby secure the fruits of non-sensory philosophical reflection, but embodiment is integral to what we are, and the constant attempt at detachment is not sustainable. Deborah Brown separates two different questions that are being addressed in the Sixth Meditation (and in the *Meditations* more generally) – "What am I?" and "Who am I?" The questions are similar, and Descartes does not distinguish them as explicitly as he might. Sometimes Descartes fleshes out the nature of the self in terms of its thinking, willing, understanding, affirming, etc. – in short, all of those aspects of the *I* that are divorced from its embodiment. In these cases, Brown argues, Descartes is addressing the question *What am I?* In other passages he fleshes out the nature of the *I* in ways that highlight that it is not just a mind, but an embodied person and human being. Brown points to passages outside the *Meditations* in which Descartes emphasizes the intimate union of a person's mind and body, and how this union reflects our everyday default condition. For example, Descartes remarks in one of his letters that philosophical reflection is something in which it is appropriate to engage only a few hours per year,[7] and he says in the opening paragraph of the First Meditation itself that the wholesale examination of his opinions is something that he will undertake *semel in vita*, or once in life. Brown also explores the details of Descartes' view that a human being or mind–body union is more than just the sum of its mental and physical parts. Alison Simmons discusses the ways in which the second half of the Sixth Meditation works to rehabilitate the senses given that they were treated as an impediment to philosophical inquiry earlier on. In the first five Meditations, and the first half of the Sixth, the meditator goes to great lengths to detach from the senses and arrive at non-sensory clear and distinct perceptions, but in the second half of the Sixth Meditation the senses are heralded for their ability to secure truth. Their role is not to secure truth about how reality is in itself – that is the province of detached philosophical reflection – but instead they provide us with signals and prompts that are essential for navigating our environment and preserving our mind–body union. According to Simmons, the senses present us with a narcissistic picture of our surroundings that makes prominent what is relevant to us and our well-being – where we traffic in things like "empty" space, hot and cold, color, sound, tastes, joy and fear. Sensations make possible a view of the world by which we can know what to

seek or avoid, and how to seek or avoid it. They are also a source of (timely) motivation. If we ended the *Meditations* thinking that only non-sensory perceptions are truth-conducive, we might overemphasize our status as thinking things, and we might fail to appreciate all of the cues that sensations afford to assist us in our role as human beings.

In chapter fourteen, Alan Nelson enters into a comprehensive discussion of Descartes' dualism and its influence. Nelson also considers parallels with Spinoza and argues that for all the distance that Spinoza would put between his system and the system of Descartes, they are in surprising respects similar on the question of substance dualism. Descartes is not a Spinozist, and Spinoza is not a substance dualist, but he is borrowing machinery from Descartes' theory of distinction in a way that exhibits Descartes' pervasive influence. Nelson also discusses some of the ways in which Cartesian dualism had an impact on later figures, for example Locke and Berkeley. In the final chapter, Annette Baier argues that Descartes' considered conception of God is extremely unorthodox and that Descartes is not especially shy about hiding this conception, even in the *Meditations* itself. She points to passages in which Descartes suggests that, for example, God has an imagination (which would have to involve extension), and that God is to be identified with Nature.

## THE METHOD OF THE MEDITATIONS AND ITS APPLICATION

In the second set of objections to the *Meditations* Descartes is asked to put the arguments of the *Meditations* into a deductive syllogistic order.[8] There would certainly be some benefit in seeing the premises of Descartes' metaphysical system laid out explicitly, and seeing how they are supposed to entail its central tenets. At the very least there would be full disclosure: it would be clear which of the claims of the *Meditations* was a result that Descartes was advancing, and it would be clear when and where the support in their favor was lacking. Euclid was not shy about showing his hand, and left very little to the imagination. Descartes himself appreciates the payoff of the syllogistic method, but at the same time he has reservations. He thinks that it is quite suitable in the case of geometry:

The difference is that the primary notions which are presupposed for the demonstration of geometrical truths are readily accepted by anyone, since they accord with the use of our senses. Hence there is no difficulty there, except in the proper deduction of the consequences, which can be done even by the less attentive, provided they remember what has gone before . . . In metaphysics by contrast there is nothing which causes so much effort as making our perceptions of the primary notions clear and distinct. Admittedly, they are by their nature as evident as, or even more evident than, the primary notions which the geometers study; but they conflict with many preconceived opinions derived from the senses which we have got into the habit of holding from our earliest years, and so only those who concentrate and meditate and withdraw their minds from corporeal things, so far as is possible, will achieve perfect knowledge of them. (*Second Replies*, AT 7: 156–57)

It is fairly easy to see the force of the argument that when two parallel lines are bisected by a third line, "corresponding angles" are equal. But Descartes thinks that metaphysical arguments are much different. They would be just as straightforward as geometrical arguments if we had a clear grasp of the primary notions of metaphysics, but there is the rub. Descartes can present the arguments of the *Meditations* in the order of premises and conclusions, but if we are not in a position to grasp the premises, and if in some cases we are inclined to reject them, the venture will be short-lived. We would be better off to concentrate and meditate and to clear away the obstacles that make metaphysical premises come off as dubious.

The ideal scenario would be one in which we could just assemble all of the metaphysical premises that are true and then draw the implications that fall out of them. So Descartes writes that in order "to philosophize seriously," we must

give our attention in an orderly way to the notions that we have within us and we must judge to be true all and only those whose truth we clearly and distinctly recognize. (*Principles* II.75, AT 8A: 38)

He adds however that, before we are able to do that, we have to "lay aside" our unexamined opinions and take steps to make sure that they are kept at bay. After we concentrate and meditate,

we contrast all this knowledge with the confused thoughts we had before, [and] we will acquire the habit of forming clear and distinct concepts of all the things that can be known. (Ibid.)