



DESCARTES

BLAISE PASCAL

MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY

PASCAL'S PENSÉES

Philosophy

RENÉ DESCARTES

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FIRST PHILOSOPHY

TRANSLATED BY
JOHN COTTINGHAM
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
BERNARD WILLIAMS

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MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY

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RENÉ DESCARTES

MEDITATIONS

ON

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TRANSLATED BY
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RENÉ DESCARTES
Meditations on First Philosophy

WITH SELECTIONS FROM THE
Objections and Replies

The *Meditations*, one of the key texts of Western philosophy, is the most widely studied of all Descartes' writings. This authoritative new translation is taken from the recently published and much acclaimed *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch. As well as the complete text of the *Meditations*, the student will find a thematic abridgement of the *Objections and Replies* (which were originally published with the *Meditations*) containing Descartes' replies to his critics. The selection of extracts from the *Objections and Replies* has been made specially for the present volume, and is designed to assist the student in coming to terms with the subtle reasoning of the *Meditations* by indicating the main philosophical difficulties which occurred to Descartes' contemporaries, and showing how Descartes developed and clarified his arguments in response.

The translation, based on the best available original texts, presents Descartes' central metaphysical writings in clear, readable, modern English. Also included is a concise introduction to Descartes' thought written specially for the volume by Bernard Williams.

Introduction

'I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me', Descartes says to his readers in the Preface (p. 8, below), and he makes it clear that he means the *Meditations* not to be a treatise, a mere exposition of philosophical reasons and conclusions, but rather an exercise in thinking, presented as an encouragement and a guide to readers who will think philosophically themselves. Its thoughts, correspondingly, are presented as they might be conducted by its author – or rather, as though they were being conducted at the very moment at which you 'read them. Indeed, the 'I' who is having these thoughts may be yourself. Although we are conscious, in reading the *Meditations*, that they were written by a particular person, René Descartes, and at a particular time, about 1640, the 'I' that appears throughout them from the first sentence on does not specifically represent that person: it represents anyone who will step into the position it marks, the position of the thinker who is prepared to reconsider and recast his or her beliefs, as Descartes supposed we might, from the ground up.

This 'I' is different, then, from the 'I' that occurs in the *Replies* to the *Objections* (Extracts from both of these also appear in this volume; how they came to be written is explained by the translator in his Preface, p. xxii.) In the *Replies*, Descartes speaks straightforwardly for himself, and the 'I' represents the author of the *Meditations*. The 'I' in the *Meditations* themselves represents their narrator or protagonist, whom we may call 'the thinker'. Of course the author has to take responsibility for the thinker's reflections. He takes responsibility both for the conduct of them and for their outcome, where that includes the beliefs to which we shall have been led if we are persuaded by the arguments, and also the improved states of mind that the author expects us to reach by following his work. But the author is not answerable for every notion entertained by the thinker and for every turn that the reflection takes on the way. The series of thoughts has an upshot or culmination, reached in the *Sixth Meditation*, and some of the thinker's earlier thoughts have been overcome and left behind in the process of reaching that final point.

Some of those who submitted the *Objections* found it hard to follow the

working out of this idea, and to see how far the thinker had got at various points in the process of reflection. It is still hard today, and commentators' discussions of the *Meditations* often take the form of asking how much at a given stage Descartes takes himself to have established. In such discussions, it is *Descartes* and his intentions that come into question; the modern objectors address themselves, if less directly than the objectors whose texts appear in this volume, to the author. It was, after all, Descartes who gave the thinker the directions he follows. There is a suggestion implicit in the beginning of the work that the thinker does not know how it will all turn out: but that is a fiction.

To say that it is a fiction is not necessarily to say that in terms of the work itself it is untrue. This might have been a work in which the thinker's fictional ignorance of how his reflections would turn out was convincingly sustained. To some extent it is so, and to that extent, one of the gifts offered to the reader by this extraordinary work is a freedom to write it differently, to set out with the thinker and end up in a different place. The rewriting of Descartes' story in that way has constituted a good deal of modern philosophy.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that the *Meditations* offers no more than an invitation to philosophical reflection, by asking some questions and showing one way in which they might be answered. We are expected, rather, to sense the author's guiding hand throughout. Modern readers may take this for granted too easily, because they underestimate Descartes' intention to engage the reader in the argument. They may think of the *Meditations* as just a device that Descartes chose to get across the opinions that we now find ascribed to him in histories of philosophy. It is, certainly, a device for convincing us, but it is more than that, because it aims to convince us by making us conduct the argument ourselves.

The first readers of the *Meditations* may have felt the author's guiding presence for a different reason, that they were conscious of a kind of writing that it resembled. It was, and remains, a very unusual work, and there had never been a work of philosophy presented in such a form before. But there did exist, familiarly, works of religious meditation, and Descartes' book self-consciously resembles them. Like many of them, it is ostensibly divided between days of contemplation and, again like them, it encourages and helps the reader to overcome and get rid of misleading and seductive states of the soul, so as to arrive at an understanding of his or her own nature and of a created being's relations with God.

Those who wrote religious meditations were acting as guides to a spiritual discipline. Descartes' work gives his readers guidance in an intellectual discipline, and helps them to discover in themselves pure intellectual conceptions – of matter, of mind, and of God – from which they will be

able to form a true and unclouded understanding of the world. The inquiry in which he leads them does indeed yield a conviction of the existence of God. There is no reason at all to suppose that Descartes was insincere in these religious affirmations (though theories that ascribe to him complex strategies of deceit have a strange capacity to survive.) What is true is that the thoughts that lead to these conclusions are not in the least religious in spirit, and God's existence is established as a purely metaphysical conclusion. Anything to do with a religious life or, indeed, with any distinctively religious aspects of life, will have to come in after Descartes' reflections are over. The *Meditations*, though they have an analogy to traditional meditations that belong to the religious life, assuredly do not belong to it themselves.

A still greater difference lies in the authority with which the two kinds of works were offered. The authors of religious meditations claimed authority from their own experience, but also, most often, from a religious office. Descartes does not suppose that his right to claim a reader's attention lies in any sacramental, traditional or professional position. His authority to show us how to think lies only in this, that he has himself, as he supposes, uncovered methods of simple, clear-headed and rational inquiry which all reasonable people can conduct if they clear their minds of prejudice and address themselves in a straightforward way to the questions. No special training, no religious discipline, no knowledge of texts or of history is needed in order to do this. He was disposed to think, in fact, that such things could be an actual obstacle.

His justification for believing that his readers had these powers, if only they could use them, is to be found in the *Meditations* themselves. If we follow Descartes to the end of them and accept his considerations, we shall have come to a conception of ourselves as rational, immaterial selves born with pure intellectual ideas and a capacity for reasoning which enable us to grasp in basic respects the nature of the world. Each of us does indeed exist in some kind of union with a particular physical body. 'My body', one says; and Descartes took this phrase to register a profound truth, that what one truly is, is a mind 'really distinct' from the body. We need sensory information provided through the body not only to survive in the material world, but to find out particular scientific laws. But our own nature, the existence of God, and indeed the most abstract structural features of the physical world itself can be discovered, Descartes supposed, by directed intelligence and rational insight.

Among these things we discover, when we direct our intelligence in the right way, is that we are beings who are capable of making just such discoveries, and we gain insight into the way in which we can make them. So we discover also how the *Meditations*, a work of pure reflection aiming to

free us from error and to help us understand these basic matters, can succeed. Its end lies in its beginning, not just because its author knows how the thinker will come out, but in the philosophical sense that if we undertake to follow its method of inquiry, our doing so, Descartes supposed, is justified by our being the kind of creatures that it finally shows us to be.

The method deployed and invoked in the *Meditations* works, to an important degree, through argument, clear chains of reasoning. This tells us something of how to read the book. We are asked to argue, not merely through it, but with it. Because of this, it is specially appropriate that the book was associated, at its first publication, with *Objections* and *Replies*. Descartes had some political motives in having the *Objections* assembled, as he also did in dedicating the book to the Sorbonne. He wanted to have his work accepted by the religious authorities. For the same reason, he did not welcome all the *Objections* that were collected by his friend Mersenne, who organised the enterprise, being embarrassed in particular by those of the English sceptic and materialist Hobbes. But whatever the strategy of the publication, it was true to the spirit of the work, as Descartes clearly believed, that it should appear together with arguments attempting to refute it or defend it.

If we are to read the *Meditations* properly, we must remember that the thinker is not simply the author. We must not forget that the work is a carefully designed whole, of great literary cunning, and that it rarely lays out arguments in a complete or formal way. But this does not mean that it is not sustained by argument, or that arguing with it is inappropriate. It means only that we must read it carefully to find out what its arguments are, and what Descartes is taking for granted. If we reflect on what he is taking for granted or asking us by implication to accept, we are doing part of what he invited us to do, when he asked us to meditate with him.

A question of what he is taking for granted presents itself right at the beginning. 'Reason now leads me to think', he writes in the *First Meditation* (p. 12, below)

that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. And to do this I will not need to run through them all individually. . . . Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

Why does reason now lead him to think this? Everyone is engaged in trying to get information about matters of concern to him; some, such as Descartes, are involved in the sciences and want to arrive at systematic

and reasoned beliefs about nature. But no one ordinarily supposes that the rational way to start on these things is to throw away or lay aside all the information one thinks one already has. Descartes thinks not only that this is the right course for him, but that it is self-evidently the right course for him. Why should he think this? Why should doubt seem the path to knowledge, if there is a path to knowledge at all?

We must notice first that the approach is not supposed to be applied to the ordinary affairs of life. Descartes makes that point over and over again, saying for instance that we must distinguish between 'the actions of life' and 'the search for truth'; and in the *Synopsis* to the *Meditations* (p. 11, below) he is prepared to use such a distinction even to define what counts as serious: 'no sane person has ever seriously doubted these things'. He does not mean that the results of his reflections will not affect ordinary practice or the conduct of the sciences. On the contrary, this is what he hopes they will do, setting the sciences, for instance, on the right path. Nor does he think that these reflections are a trivial way of passing the time. They cannot be that, if eventually they could have these practical and scientific effects. He may think that it is particularly his own, the author's, use of the Doubt that will have those effects, but he also believes that it is a worthwhile exercise for any of us, once in a lifetime, to take temporarily the position of the thinker of such reflections, and this will not be a trivial undertaking, either. Indeed, he himself said that the meditation to which he invited us in the *Preface* was itself, in its own way, 'serious'.

When Descartes says that the thoughts deploying the Doubt are to be separated from practical life, and in that sense (but only in that sense) are not 'serious', he is defining a special kind of intellectual project which by its nature can be conducted only if it is separated from all other activities. In ordinary life, when we want the truth on a subject, we pursue it, necessarily, in a context of other things that we are aiming to do, including other inquiries we need to make. The pattern of our inquiries is formed by many constraints on how we can spend our time and energies, and by considerations of what we risk by failing to look into one thing or spending too long looking into another. These constant and often implicit calculations of the economics of inquiry help to shape the body of our beliefs; and they have the consequence that our beliefs, while they aim at truth, will, inevitably, only partly achieve it. Descartes conceived of a project that would be *purely* the search for truth, and would be unconstrained by any other objectives at all. Because it temporarily lays aside the demands of practical rationality, it has to be detached from practice; and because it is concerned with truth and nothing else, it has to raise its requirements to the highest conceivable level, and demand nothing less than absolute certainty.

The search has to take place out of this world, so to speak, and its nature, its internal purpose, explains why this should be. But there is still a question about its external purpose. Why should Descartes or anyone else, once in a lifetime, take time out of the world to pursue this project? Descartes can commend it to us in more than one way, but his own principal reason is that he is looking for what he calls, at the start of the *First Meditation* and in many other places, 'foundations' of knowledge. To serve this purpose, the Doubt has to be methodical. A refusal to take things for granted that might be doubtful is part of Descartes's general intellectual method, which he had introduced in his earlier work *The Discourse on the Method*; the Doubt is an extreme application of that idea, conditioned by the circumstances of the special project, the radical search for certainty. The Doubt is deployed for defined purposes, and from the start it is under control.

It was not a new idea that scepticism might be used for its beneficial effects. Sceptics in the ancient world, Pyrrhonians and others, had advocated such techniques for their own purposes; their teachings had been revived since the Reformation, and sceptical views were in the air at the time that Descartes wrote. Some of his critics complained that material he deployed, for instance about the errors of the senses, was old stuff. But Descartes could rightly reply that while scepticism was no new thing, his use of it was indeed new. When the Pyrrhonians deployed sceptical considerations, it was in order to calm and eradicate an unsatisfiable urge for knowledge; and it was rather in this spirit, sixty years before the *Meditations*, that Montaigne had written. But Descartes' aim was precisely the opposite, to use scepticism to help in acquiring knowledge, and to bring out from a sceptical inquiry the result that knowledge was, after all, possible. The Doubt served that purpose by eliminating false conceptions; and the fact that it was possible to use it in this way and then overcome it gave the fundamental reassurance that a proper science would have nothing to fear from the doubts of the sceptics. Descartes's Doubt was to be both revelatory and pre-emptive.

'Foundations of knowledge' can mean more than one thing. Descartes has often been thought to be searching for foundations in the sense of axioms from which the whole of knowledge or, more particularly, the whole of science, might be deduced, as in a geometrical system. In fact, this is rarely his concern, and it does not represent his understanding of what a completed science would be like. Historians classify Descartes as a 'rationalist', but this should not be taken to mean that he supposed mere rational reflection to be enough to establish scientific conclusions. He was a rationalist, rather, in his views about the origins of scientific *concepts*. He thought that the terms in which physics should describe the world

were given to rational reflection, and he supposed them to be, in fact, purely mathematical. It was only by empirical investigation and experiment, however, that we could discover which descriptions, expressed in those terms, were true of the actual world.

Basically, the Doubt provides foundations for knowledge because it helps to eliminate error. Descartes' aim was not so much to find truths from which all scientific knowledge could be deduced, but rather to identify false or doubtful propositions which were implied by our everyday beliefs and so made those beliefs themselves unreliable. One belief of this kind was that objects in the external world had just the qualities that they seem to have, such as colour. The Doubt helped in eliminating this very general error, which could then be replaced by the sound conviction that objects, in themselves, had only the properties ascribed to them by mathematical physics. Once this corrected view had been laid bare and found indubitable in the process of orderly reflection, it could from then on serve as a sound foundation of our understanding of the world.

Proceeding in this way, Descartes could indeed 'go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested'. The workings of the Doubt are adjusted to these aims. In its most extreme, 'hyperbolic', form, the Doubt is embodied in the fiction (p. 15) that a malicious demon, 'of the utmost power and cunning, has employed all his energies in order to deceive me'. This device provides Descartes with a thought-experiment that can be generally applied: if there were an indefinitely powerful agency who was misleading me to the greatest conceivable extent, would *this* kind of belief or experience be correct? Thinking in these terms, Descartes is led to identify whole tracts of his ordinary experience he may lay aside, so that he suspends belief in the whole of the material world, including his own body.

It is significant, however, and characteristic of the way in which the *Meditations* unfolds, that Descartes does not start his sceptical inquiry with this extreme device. We are invited to get used to sceptical thinking gradually, by considering first more familiar and realistic occasions of error. He starts with illusions of the senses, in which we mistake the shape of a distant tower, for instance, or suppose a straight stick, partly in water, to be bent. Such examples remind us that we can be mistaken, and that even by everyday canons the world need not really be as it presents itself to our perception. There is little in these cases, however, to encourage the more generally sceptical idea that on any given occasion when we take ourselves to be perceiving something, we may be mistaken. He thinks that we are led to that further and more radical idea by reflection on the 'errors of our dreams'. The phenomenon of dreaming creates a more general and more puzzling scepticism because, first, it is true (or at least the

sceptic pretends that it is true) that anything we can perceive we can dream we perceive; and, second, there is no way of telling at the time of dreaming whether we are dreaming or not. So it seems that at any moment I can ask 'how do I know that I am not dreaming now?', and find it hard to give an answer. But what I can do, at any rate, if the question has occurred to me, is to 'bracket' these experiences, and not commit myself on the question of whether they are waking experiences which are reliable, or dreams which are delusive.

Once I am prepared to do this, I am well started on the sceptical journey. So far I have reached only the distributive doubt, *on any occasion I may be mistaken*, but reflecting on the possibility that I can have a set of experiences that do not correspond to anything real, I am nearly ready to take the step, with the help of the malicious demon, to the final and collective doubt, *I may be mistaken all the time*. In his description of what dreams are Descartes already lays the ground for what is to come. In the *Sixth Meditation* (p. 53) he says that he did not believe that what he seemed to perceive when he was dreaming came 'from things located outside me'. In an everyday sense, certainly, that description of a dream must be correct. But the description has acquired some large implications by the time I reach the last *Meditation*, and, having accepted the 'real distinction' between mind and body, understand that my body is itself something 'outside me'.

Every step in the sceptical progress should be questioned. It is at the beginning that all the seeds are sown of the philosophical system that has come to life by the end of the *Meditations*. To take just one example of questions that the thinker's reflections invite, do these facts about dreaming, even if we accept them, really lead to the conclusion that I can never know whether I am awake? Why, in particular, does the thinker take dreaming so seriously for his purposes, and not madness? He simply dismisses the deranged people who think that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass (p. 13). Perhaps Bourdin, the author of the *Seventh Objections*, makes a good point in suggesting that the two conditions should be treated together (p. 66). There is of course this difference, that the mad are assumed unable to conduct the meditation at all: the thinker turns away from them, treats them in the third person, because they cannot join him and the reader in thinking through these things, whereas we who are the readers have dreams, as the thinker has. But is this enough of a difference? Descartes and his thinker cannot speak to us *when we are dreaming*. Descartes seemingly thinks that if we are sane, we can be sure that we are, even though mad people cannot tell that they are mad. So why should the fact that when we are dreaming, we cannot tell that we are, imply that we cannot be sure we are

awake when we are awake? There may be an answer to that question; but we should not let the argument from dreams go by until we have considered what it might be.

The *Meditations* use the Doubt to lead out of the Doubt into knowledge and a correct conception of things. In doing that, they do not merely provide a sounder conception: they show that we can reach such a conception, and demonstrate that knowledge is to be had. The foundations that Descartes believes himself at the end to have discovered are also foundations of the *possibility* of knowledge. That is why the scepticism of the *Meditations* is pre-emptive. Descartes claimed that he had taken the doubts of the sceptics farther than the sceptics had taken them, and had been able to come out the other side.

The rebuttal of scepticism depends on the existence of a God who has created us and who is 'no deceiver'. If we do our own part in clarifying our thoughts (as thinker does in the *Meditations*) and we seek the truth as seriously as we can, God will not allow us to be systematically mistaken. However hard we think about these matters, however much we clarify our understanding of what an 'external' world might be, we are left with a conviction that there is such a world – a conviction so powerful that it needed the extreme device of the malicious demon temporarily to displace it. It would be contrary to the benevolence and the trustworthiness of God that this conviction should be untrue.

It is essential that we should have done our own part. God cannot be expected to underwrite confused conceptions which have not been carefully examined. If we do not accept a sound intellectual discipline, we deceive ourselves and are responsible for our errors. (This is one way in which Descartes thinks that the will is involved in belief.) Equally, God's benevolence does not guarantee us against every error, but only against general and systematic error. We remain liable to occasional mistakes, such as those of defective perception and also those of dreams, which before these reassurances seemed to offer a sceptical threat. Particular errors are caused by our bodily constitution, and it is not surprising that we should be subject to them. The sceptics' threat was that our entire picture of things might be wrong: now we have an assurance, because God is no deceiver, that this cannot be so.

But have we? Those who offered *Objections* were only the first among many to doubt whether Descartes' argument succeeds, even in its own terms. In the course of the *Meditations*, the sceptic has been allowed to cast doubt, it seems, even on the convictions that ground the belief in God. This doubt must be resisted, but how, in resisting it, can we appeal to the existence and nature of God, without arguing in a circle? Descartes' answer to this objection emphasises that a doubt about the proofs of God,

and their implications for the validation of our thoughts, can be entertained only when one is not actually considering them. At the time they are clearly considered, these proofs are supposed to be as compelling as any other basic certainty – that I cannot think without existing, for instance, or that twice two is four. So when the sceptic professes to doubt the proofs of God, or any other such certainty, it can be only because he is not actually considering them at that time. All one can do is to refer him back to them; if he does properly consider them, he will, then, be convinced.

All this Descartes clearly says, but it is a little less clear what he expects us, and the sceptic, to make of it. His idea may be this, that if the sceptic reverts to his doubts when he has stopped thinking clearly about the proofs, we have earned the right by then simply to forget about him. He is merely insisting that we go on giving the answer – an answer we indeed have – to one question, his question, instead of getting on with our scientific inquiries or other practical activities, rather as though we were required to spend all our time out of the world with the thinker. We have offered all the justifications we could in principle offer, and now have the right to see the dispute as one about how to spend our time. If the sceptic were still to offer some basis for his doubts, it seems that it could now lie only in the idea that intellectual concentration was itself the enemy of truth: that you are more likely to be right about these matters if you do not think carefully about them than if you do. This idea is denied by the procedures of the sceptic, as well as by those of Descartes' thinker; in starting on the *Meditations* themselves, or any other inquiry, we implicitly reject it.

Modern readers will want to consider how exactly Descartes answers the problem of the 'Cartesian Circle', and whether his answer, in his own terms, is a good one. Few of them, however, will accept those terms, or agree that the theological foundation he offers for science and everyday belief is convincing. Descartes was very insistent that science itself should be thoroughly mechanistic and should not offer explanations in terms of God's purposes or any kind of teleology. In this, he was one of the major prophets of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. Yet his justification of the possibility of such a science itself lay in God, and in a kind of teleology, a conviction that the world cannot be such that our desire to know must be ultimately misguided or frustrated. Perhaps we still have some version of that conviction, but if so, it is not for those reasons, and it could not be used to provide foundations for science.

To Descartes' contemporaries, it seemed much more obvious that God existed and was no deceiver than that natural science was possible. Neither the successes nor the institutions of modern science yet existed.