

Descartes

Margaret Dauler Wilson

The Arguments of the Philosophers



DESCARTES

The Arguments of the Philosophers

EDITOR: TED HONDERICH

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Preface

There are already more books on Descartes's philosophy than anyone other than a near-maniacal specialist could assimilate in a single lifetime. A very large number of these are good books. Quite a few are—by any reasonable standard of historical philosophical writing—both erudite and brilliant. Apart from the specific intentions of the series in which it appears, the present volume can hardly claim to fill some painful 'gap' in the existing philosophical literature.

My reason for writing a book on Descartes is that I believe I have a somewhat different over-all reading of his philosophy, and particularly of the *Meditations*, from other commentators—especially those writing in English. Also, I believe the interpretations I have developed of certain aspects of his system, or particular arguments, are either novel or overly neglected. It will probably be clear to the reader that I have been especially strongly influenced by two English-language commentaries—the books on Descartes by Frankfurt and Kenny. For all I have learned from them, I have ended up disagreeing with Frankfurt and Kenny on very many issues of criticism and interpretation.

My interpretation is presented in the form of a sort of semi-commentary on Descartes's *Meditations Concerning First Philosophy*. I follow the general line of argument of the *Meditations*, introducing material from other works where appropriate. The analysis is in some cases very detailed. However, I do not attempt to comment on every feature—or even every major feature—of the *Meditations* argument.

In view of the contemporary orientation of the series, readers may be disappointed that this book is not more systematically oriented toward evaluating Descartes's system in relation to the powerful anti-Cartesian currents in recent philosophical writing. But these

PREFACE

currents are both so powerful and so various that it's difficult to imagine dealing with them in any organized way, while also producing anything like a coherent interpretation of Descartes's thought. I have been more concerned with the latter task. It is certain, I think, that Descartes had virtually no sense of the problems of 'privacy' and meaning, of identity and reference that have occupied many philosophers in recent decades, and have come to seem increasingly fundamental to epistemological and metaphysical issues. He had little understanding of, or respect for, the concept of formalization. His quaint physiological theories led him to some strange and naïve accounts of what goes on when we perceive, imagine or understand. He had very little notion of 'conceptual change' or the possibility of historical evolution of the categories of scientific understanding. (He consistently explained his own 'conceptual revolution' in terms of the 'removal of prejudice'!) In these and many other respects Descartes's philosophical system could fairly be called old-fashioned. There would even be little *point* in solemnly wondering what Descartes might have to say about the private language argument, or the Freudian unconscious, or the problem of 'individuating' 'pure Cartesian egos.'

Despite these limitations, I believe, Descartes ranks among the very greatest philosophical intelligences in history, and the careful study of his thought remains overwhelmingly interesting. (That's the *reason*, of course, for all those books mentioned above.) In the first place, he had an extraordinarily powerful, disciplined and well-organized mind. His arguments are usually thought out in great detail, and he responds tirelessly (if often irritably) to criticisms, objections and simple questions. He is, in effect, his own best commentator. As a result one can often obtain a complex and well-rounded conception of the 'logic' of his philosophical claims. More important, Descartes somehow grasped in a very deep way the relations between modern scientific concepts and certain fundamental philosophical problems, especially those having to do with knowledge and the self. The spare yet relaxed Latin of the *Meditations* presents us with a tightly-constructed problematic that has proved pervasive, durable, and very hard to shake or completely dissolve, however much we may try. It is the sole aim of the present volume to offer some slight advance in our understanding of this strong position, which still troubles (at least) our philosophical unconscious.

Acknowledgments

Students, colleagues, colloquia participants and others have contributed more to the formation and improvement of ideas and arguments in this book than I could possibly acknowledge individually. They have also contributed immensely to the pleasure I've had in the work—for which I'm equally grateful. I would like to express special thanks, though, to those who have offered detailed criticisms of parts of the book in earlier versions, and to those who have made available unpublished bibliographies, papers, or longer works (from which I've often profited). I am particularly indebted, in these respects, to the following: Willis Doney, Harry Frankfurt, Michael Hooker, Robert Sleigh, Ruth Mattern, Janet Broughton, Peter DeVos, Norman Malcolm, Edwin Curley, Jean-Marie Beyssade, Alan Donagan, Mark Sagoff, Eric Rosen, Richard Watson, Nancy Newman† and David Lachterman. Whatever its remaining deficiencies, the book would have been poorer, less informed and more erroneous without the contributions of these individuals.

Christopher Mogil, Lawrence Rimmel and Jay Behmke have provided most valuable and reliable assistance in preparing the manuscript. Laura Bell produced a beautifully typed penultimate draft with great efficiency, and Helen Wright did a superbly accurate job with the final version, catching numerous mistakes that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. I also wish to thank Lee Ritins, Beverley Juhl and other past and present members of the Princeton Philosophy Department secretarial staff for miscellaneous clerical assistance in connection with the project. A grant from the Humanities Research Council of Princeton University helped cover typing and other expenses. A significant part of the remaining clerical expenses was borne by the Philosophy Department.

I am grateful to Princeton University for giving me a crucial year of

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leave with partial support, and to the Institute for Advanced Study, under the Directorship of Carl Kaysen, for the haven of a peaceful office and other facilities and support during that year. I'm especially grateful to my former teacher, Morton White, for his immensely thoughtful and generous assistance in this connection. Together with his earlier instruction and guidance, it constitutes a debt that could never be repaid.

Before making final revisions on the manuscript, I was privileged to have a chance to talk with a number of outstanding Descartes scholars in France. I own thanks to the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères of the French Government, to Professor Jules Vuillemin, and once again to Princeton, which gave me a short leave, for this marvelous opportunity. I am also grateful to Professors L. Guillermit, J.-M. and M. Beyssade, Y. Belaval, H. Gouhier, G. Rodis-Lewis, J. Vuillemin, and their families and colleagues, for their hospitality and courteous availability.

Most of section 3 of Chapter VI consists of material previously published in *Noûs* under the title, 'Descartes: The Epistemological Argument for Mind-Body Distinctness' (vol. X (1976), pp. 3-17); it is reprinted by kind permission of the Editor. A version of section 2 of Chapter VI, 'Cartesian Dualism,' is to appear in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, edited by Michael Hooker.

Both Professor Honderich and the editors at Routledge also deserve thanks, for bearing with me without remonstrance through a formidable series of delays.

My friend Jim Ross has discussed and criticized my ideas on Descartes with unfailing insight and patience, over a period of several years. He has also read and criticized parts of the manuscript. He has not only saved me from countless logical and stylistic mistakes, but has provided encouragement, interest—and occasional skepticism—just when these were most needed. Discussions with him have especially affected my treatments of the *cogito*, the Dreaming Argument and the creation of the eternal truths doctrine—though I have no reason to suppose he would be sympathetic to the final versions.

Finally, my husband Emmett has sustained far more inconvenience and trouble in connection with this book than anyone else, in matters both large and small. The only reward for him is having the Descartes books finally out of the living room (but this may be sufficient). I am very deeply grateful for his patience, understanding and kindness.

I dedicate this book to my parents and maternal grandparents.

A Note on the Texts

I follow almost exclusively the Latin, rather than the French texts of the *Meditations*, *Objections and Replies* and *Principles*. There are two main reasons for this policy. The more interesting is that—particularly with respect to the *Meditations*—the Latin text seems to me philosophically much more lucid and coherent. Where the French text departs from the Latin the result, in my judgment, is far more often difficulties and confusion than illumination or improvement. The more obvious reason—which one might have thought would be sufficient—is that the Latin texts were written by Descartes himself, whereas the French is the work of translators. I am aware, of course, that Descartes ‘approved’ the French translations (but what exactly does that mean?), and that he is supposed himself to have introduced some changes in the French versions, to improve the argument or make his meaning clearer. There are even a few places where I personally would guess that this has occurred. The problem though, is that we generally have no way of knowing for sure whether a given change is Descartes’s or his translator’s. And here the consideration mentioned first is relevant.

Like most English-speaking students of Descartes, I have greatly profited from the very convenient two-volume edition of his works translated and edited by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross. Their contribution to Descartes studies in English-speaking countries has been immense. But I think it is time for the limitations of these translations to be more widely recognized. First, Haldane and Ross almost always follow the French translation of the *Meditations*, *Objections and Replies* and *Principles*, rather than the Latin original. Second, they do occasionally contribute errors of their own. Third, the language of their translation is by now rather archaic, whereas (for some reason I do not fully understand) Descartes’s Latin usually

A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

seems as direct and immediate as good contemporary journalism. (I realize my own translations do not preserve this quality; for purposes of philosophical analysis and commentary I've been perhaps excessively concerned to achieve 'literalness.') As a result, when one turns from the Haldane and Ross translations to the Cartesian originals one seems to come across almost a different mind. Descartes's Latin, for all its elegance, is not especially difficult. I hope serious students of Descartes, and especially publishing scholars, will begin to study it more—and become perhaps a little less trusting of the authority of 'H & R.'

I add a brief note on Descartes's life and works that should aid in following the text. (For more detailed accounts—and for the references—see the commentaries by Kemp Smith, Boyce Gibson, Beck and M. Beyssade listed in the Bibliography.).

Errors and misprints in the first printing have been pointed out to me by several people, some of whom have generously provided lists of needed corrections. I wish to thank Vere Chappell, E. M. Curley, Willis Doney, Thomas M. Lennon, Hoke Robinson, J. W. Smith, Richard Watson, and above all Roger Montague for valuable assistance in this regard.

A Note on Descartes's Life and Works

Descartes was born in 1596 in Touraine. His father was a provincial government official and a landholder. His mother died when he was one year old. He was educated primarily at the leading Jesuit academy La Flèche, where he received a grounding in traditional Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophy and developed a profound admiration for the 'clarity and distinctness' of mathematical knowledge. He later studied law at the University of Poitiers. After leaving the University in 1616 he traveled extensively in Europe as a volunteer in first a Dutch, and then a Bavarian army. In 1618 he became friendly with a Dutch scientist, Isaac Beeckman, under whose influence he began to do a good deal of creative work in mathematics and physics. In 1619 he arrived at the great ambition that was to guide his life's work: that of producing a complete or universal science of nature according to modern mathematical and mechanical principles. A dramatic series of dreams on the evening of 10 November 1619 seemed to Descartes to indicate divine approval of his project.

Subsequently Descartes spent a number of years in Paris, where he became acquainted with the intellectual leaders of the time. Among his friends were certain theologians of Augustinian bent—rivals of the Jesuits—whose views concerning God and the will he seems to have found especially congenial. In 1628 he moved to Holland where he lived with only brief interruptions until 1649, when Queen Christina of Sweden persuaded him to come to Stockholm to grace her court. He died there in February 1650.

Descartes's major philosophical and scientific works were written in Holland. As the present study will stress, Descartes conceived his scientific system as the successor and replacement of the great Aristotelian-Scholastic synthesis that had dominated European

thought for centuries. His philosophy (or 'metaphysics') was conceived as the 'foundation' of this science.

Throughout his career Descartes and his work were surrounded by controversy. He used many strategies to try to win approval and acceptance for his views—especially among the theological authorities of the day. He withheld publication of his heliocentric world system (*Le Monde*) in response to the condemnation of Galileo. His first published work, consisting of the *Discourse on Method* and three scientific essays, was written in French rather than Latin—apparently in the hope of gaining popular support and recognition. He repeatedly asked his well-connected friend Mersenne to obtain soundings on the likely reception of specific views, or to collect systematic criticisms from leading thinkers so that Descartes could reply to them. He dedicated the *Meditations* to the theological faculty of the Sorbonne, addressing to them several pages of hopeful and flattering remarks. When he finally published a version of his complete system—metaphysics plus 'universal physics'—it was in the form of a Jesuit school text (*Principles of Philosophy*). From the theologico-political point of view, this campaign was largely unsuccessful. It did not spare him official hostility, rejection and censure during his lifetime—and has left him open to charges of hypocrisy, cowardice and 'guile' by scholars writing in a more enlightened age. His works were placed on the Index in 1663. From another point of view, however—that of the history of thought—it is hard to imagine a more formidable triumph. Quite simply, Descartes's 'principles' *did* overcome and replace the Aristotelian ones—despite Leibniz's rather desperate efforts to retain some of the more 'spiritual' features of the latter. Although Descartes's specific contributions to mathematics and physics were soon dated by the work of Leibniz, Huygens and (above all) Newton, among others, the Western philosophical outlook had been permanently revised—as Descartes himself might say—from the foundations.

The chronology of his major works is as follows:

- 1628–9 (?) *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*
A methodological treatise, written in Latin and never completed; published posthumously.
- 1634 *The World*
Scientific system; published posthumously.
- 1637 *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, Meteorology*
Published in French. The *Discourse* contains a sketch of Descartes's life and education, together with a sort of summary of his philosophical and scientific position. The

scientific essays are presented as samples of what his method can accomplish.

- 1641 *Meditations Concerning First Philosophy and Objections and Replies*

Published in Latin; the Objections were collected by Mersenne from various philosophers and theologians at Descartes's request.

- 1644 *Principles of Philosophy*

Written in Latin. Part I expounds Descartes's general philosophical position; Parts II, III, and IV are largely concerned with explaining 'all the phenomena of nature.'

- 1647 *Notes Against a Certain Program*

Response to anti-Cartesian views published by a former disciple, Regius. While not really a 'major work,' the '*Notae*' contains important and frequently cited statements on the mind-body relation and other central topics.

- 1649 *The Passions of the Soul*

Written in French. Primarily concerned with the physiology of emotion, and the possibility of rational control of the passions.

Two additional important sources on Descartes's philosophy are *The Search for Truth* and the *Conversation with Burman*. The former is an unfinished dialogue in French, published posthumously. Scholars disagree on the probable date of its composition (a substantial portion of this work has been preserved only in Latin translation). The *Conversation* consists of Frans Burman's notes on his long philosophical interview with Descartes that took place in 1648.

Editions and Abbreviations

The standard edition of Descartes's work is:

- AT *Oeuvres de Descartes*, publiées par Ch. Adam et P. Tannery, Paris, Cerf, 1897–1913; reprinted Paris, J. Vrin, 1957– ; 12 vols.

For most Cartesian texts cited I follow convention and provide a reference to the widely used English edition:

- HR *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, edited and translated by Elizabeth Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1911; reprinted 1969; 2 vols.

Haldane and Ross translated hardly any of Descartes's immense correspondence, despite its philosophical importance. Fortunately, we now have Anthony Kenny's valuable edition.

- PL *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, translated and edited by Anthony Kenny, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970.

Also omitted from HR are Burman's notes on his conversation with Descartes (originally published in Latin). These have now been translated also:

- B *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, translated with introduction and commentary by John Cottingham, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976.

The English translation of the 'Optics' cited is by Paul Olscamp:

- Ols. Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, translated with introduction by Paul J. Olscamp, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill (Library of Liberal Arts), 1965.

EDITIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are employed in the notes for frequently cited secondary works:

- CS R. J. Butler, editor, *Cartesian Studies*, New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1972.
- DDM Harry G. Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: The defense of reason in Descartes's 'Meditations,'* Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.
- Doney Willis Doney, editor, *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday (Anchor Books), 1967.
- Kenny Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy*, New York, Random House, 1968.

Other editions, commentaries, etc., are listed in the Bibliography.

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I

General Doubt

1 *Cartesian doubt and Cartesian revolution*

Meditation I is dedicated to the 'overthrow' of present opinions. The first sentence of the Meditation introduces this project as a necessary condition of establishing 'something firm and lasting in the sciences'—and seems to offer an explanation of why it *is* necessary:

It has already been some years since I noticed how many false things I accepted as true when I was young, and how doubtful is whatever I erected afterwards on these, and thus that once in my life everything ought to be overturned completely, and begun again from the first foundations, if I desire to establish anything firm and enduring [*firmum et mansurum*] in the sciences. . . .
(AT VII, 17; HR I, 144)

This enterprise, Descartes continues, had seemed to him 'enormous'; but circumstances of leisure and comfort, together with increased maturity, now make the time opportune to 'apply' himself 'seriously and freely to the general overthrow of my present opinions.' To do this, he says, it will be sufficient to find in them 'any reason for doubt,' since 'reason already persuades me, that assent should be withheld from those that are not completely certain and indubitable, no less carefully than from those that are obviously false' (AT VII, 18; HR I, 145). The foundations metaphor is carried on in the further remark that since 'if the foundations are undermined, whatever is built on top of them automatically collapses,' it is not necessary to consider our beliefs one by one, which would be 'an infinite task.' Rather, Descartes says, he will directly attack the principles on which all that he formerly believed is based: '*aggrediar statim ipsa principia, quibus illud omne quod olim credidi nitebatur*' (*ibid.*).

GENERAL DOUBT

Subsequently, Descartes finds increasingly powerful 'reasons for doubting' his beliefs, in arguments based on the consideration of normal sensory illusion, on the experience of dreaming and on the possibility that God is a deceiver (who systematically causes his creature to make erroneous judgments even on such basic matters as that there exist physical objects or that $2 + 3 = 5$). By the end of the Meditation Descartes has concluded that he has 'nothing to reply' to these arguments,

but at last I am compelled to admit there is nothing among those things that I formerly thought to be true which it is not possible to doubt, not through lack of consideration, or levity, but for sound and considered reasons. (AT VII, 21; HR I, 147–8)

In this chapter I will explore certain problems of interpretation of the First Meditation. Most of the problems I will discuss are connected with the question of how the work as a whole is to be understood. I believe that Descartes's arguments, in the first and in later Meditations, have very often been misunderstood and miscriticized, because we have given insufficient attention to the question of what the work as a whole was meant to accomplish, and to the interrelations of its various arguments.¹ In this connection, some preliminary comments are in order.

In the first sentence of the First Meditation Descartes gives, as the underlying motive for bringing in question his 'present opinions,' the desire to establish something 'firm and enduring in the sciences.' This remark should be read in connection with his famous statement in the introduction to the French translation of the *Principles of Philosophy* that metaphysics provides the roots for the tree of science.² (As already noted, the structure of the *Principles* exemplifies this notion: the scientific parts follow on the presentation of Descartes's metaphysics in Part I.) Even more illuminating in this connection is a letter to Mersenne of 28 January 1641, which is also rather frequently quoted. Descartes comments to Mersenne that the titles of individual Meditations should call attention to the points he particularly wants people to notice, and these have to do with the nature and knowledge of mind, its distinctness from body, the existence of God and the essence and existence of matter (AT III, 297; PL 94). But, he continues,

I think I have put in many other things; and I will tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my Physics. But please don't say so; because those who favor Aristotle would perhaps make more difficulty about approving them; and I hope those who read them will accustom

themselves insensibly to my principles, and recognize their truth, before noticing that they destroy those of Aristotle. (AT III, 297-8; PL 94)

Now, we do know, independently of the *Meditations*, that Descartes was one of the most original and successful mathematicians who had lived up to his time, and also a phenomenally dedicated and systematic physical scientist. We know too that Cartesian physics—for all the embarrassments of its particular formulations and accounts—*was* in fact highly instrumental in ‘overthrowing the principles of Aristotle’—in establishing the concept of a universal science of matter that seeks to explain all phenomena in terms of basic quantifiable properties and simple laws governing change. There is, then, reason to take very seriously the idea that Descartes thinks his philosophy, as presented in the *Meditations*, is fundamentally connected with his projected revolution in science.

There is, on the other hand, no good reason to suppose that Descartes’s *sole* concern in the *Meditations* is the introduction of a certain scientific perspective—at least as we understand the term ‘scientific’ today. With all due acknowledgment of Descartes’s powers as an ironist, it would be extreme to doubt the sincerity of his repeated self-congratulation for having proved, in the *Meditations*, the immateriality of the soul and the existence of God—and that both are ‘better known’ than either the truths of geometry or the existence of matter.³ (It is unlikely Descartes would have impugned his geometry by insisting his proofs of God’s existence were ‘more certain,’ when he was in reality an agnostic or atheist.⁴) In correspondence and in other works, Descartes repeatedly insists on the great importance of establishing his own conception of God as strictly infinite and omnipotent; he implies that other, ‘unworthy’ conceptions are prevalent among his contemporaries.⁵ And, while he eventually surrendered his original claim to have proved the ‘immortality’ of the soul,⁶ his concern with proving its ‘distinctness from matter’ is already prominent in the Second Meditation (and is a dominant theme in the Replies to Objections). Descartes’s treatments of God and the soul certainly have important *relevance* to his conceptions of universal science—as I shall argue repeatedly below. But this is no reason to deny that the proofs of God’s existence and of the soul’s immateriality have intrinsic importance in his thinking. The ‘skeptical’ arguments of the First Meditation, and also the assertion of the indubitability of the *cogito* which begins the Second, cannot be fully understood in isolation from such stated or indicated objectives of the work.

In a letter to Mersenne of 30 September 1640 (AT III, 192; PL 79), Descartes asserts: 'The principal aim of my metaphysics is to make clear which are the things that can be distinctly conceived.' Distinct conception provides the foundations at once of science, of theory of mind and of theology. The 'doubts' of the First Meditation lead ultimately to the conclusion that what we can distinctly conceive are, in reverse order, matter as represented by *Cartesian* science, the mind as an immaterial substance, and the omnipotence, existence, infinity and non-deceiving benevolence of God.

None of the points I have just stated is in the least novel. But I think contemporary Descartes criticism too often loses sight of them. For example, one still finds Descartes's arguments approached as if his concerns and attitudes were almost the same as classical (or Renaissance) skepticism, or of British academic philosophers of the mid-twentieth century. For example, the Dreaming Argument and the *cogito* have both been almost consistently 'interpreted' by English-speaking analytical philosophers, as if they were self-standing arguments, without place in a larger strategy. I hope to persuade the reader that a more systematic approach is preferable—beginning with the subject of Cartesian doubt.

2 *The 'I' of the Meditations*

First, a very preliminary, almost incidental point of interpretation should be considered. The first sentence of the *Meditations* has already made clear that Descartes's exposition of his mature philosophy will be presented in the style of colloquial autobiographical narrative. This style can lead to the assumption that Descartes is directly concerned in the *Meditations* with the facts of his own intellectual development, his private mental history. It seems to me, however, that we should guard against such an assumption. While perhaps the order of arguments presented in the *Meditations* does reflect Descartes's own progress in philosophical inquiry, it is not obvious that this is so, and not in the least relevant to the philosophical purpose of the *Meditations* whether or not it is so.⁷ In this connection, one should bear in mind that in works other than the *Meditations* Descartes uses different pronouns to set forth essentially the same ideas. In *The Search After Truth* he makes heavy use of the second person. In the general philosophical parts of the *Principles*, 'we' and 'it' (i.e., 'the mind') predominate. To note these points is not, of course, to deny that Descartes's system in some sense presupposes the availability of the concept of subject or self—or the form of the first person singular. (It does, in fact, make this

presupposition, and for this very reason—a philosophical, not an historical reason—the first person form probably does provide the most effective mode of exposition.) The main point is just that the work must be read primarily as the presentation of a philosophical position having some claim to general relevance, and not as history or autobiography at all.

There is, I believe, a rhetorical, as well as a philosophical reason for Descartes's reliance on the first person in the most important exposition of his philosophy. As already noted, Descartes indicates in correspondence that the *Meditations* were intended to gain 'acceptance' for his physical theory—in other words to change people's minds, to overthrow preconceptions, though in a rather insidious manner. And elsewhere he implies that the work is intended as a set of Meditations in something like the traditional religious sense: the reader is supposed to 'give months, or at least weeks, to [thinking over the matter of which the First Meditation treats], before going further . . .' (AT VII, 130; HR II, 31).⁸ Descartes's use of the first person, then, may very well be intended to promote *identification* on the part of the reader—thereby smoothing his transition from darkness and vain philosophy into the new light of modern, anti-Aristotelian, philosophy and science.

On the other hand, it is rather difficult to expound the argument of the *Meditations* without sliding into such improbable assertions as 'Descartes notes that he had little by little lost all faith in his senses by finding that towers which looked round from a distance looked square close-up.' I will not try to avoid this mode of expression completely, but will try to avoid what seem to me the more serious pitfalls associated with it.

3 *Assumptions and aims of methodic doubt*

The beginning of the First Meditation introduces, as well, some substantive problems in interpreting and evaluating Descartes's endeavor. In the first place, Descartes indicates very casually that he will attack his opinions by attacking the 'principles' on which they are based. He gives no explanation or justification of the notion that his beliefs are 'based on principles,' and no clarification of what he means by 'principle.' The initial remarks about the false things accepted in youth suggest a rather commonsensical conception of how our beliefs are founded on principles. Descartes at first seems to be implying that (a) opinions acquired later in life are, in general, 'founded on' opinions acquired earlier; and (b) all the 'many false opinions' acquired earlier are counted among the 'principles' on

which later opinions may be founded. (In this way, it seems, my present opinion that your dog is dangerous might be founded on the opinion, acquired from my nurse in childhood, that all dogs are dangerous.) It immediately emerges, however, that Descartes has in mind something more special than this. For the statement that he will avoid an infinite task by attacking 'principles' seems to imply that the principles in question are few in number. But he doesn't explain this assumption. Nor does one find, as the argument proceeds, that any principles are stated explicitly. It does emerge that 'trust in the senses' figures basically in the early, suspect 'foundation' of our opinions. One possibility, then, is that the 'principles' in question should be construed as rules of sensory evidence. Later in the chapter I will discuss this proposal and offer what seems to me a better alternative.⁹

Second, the beginning of the *Meditations* raises in a quite clear-cut way the question of the *point* or *objective* of Cartesian doubt. Taken literally, Descartes seems to be saying that science must be established on a base of certainty, that presently formed opinions are 'founded' on opinions acquired earlier, and that merely because he has discovered that some beliefs acquired in his early years are false, he must get rid of *all* his earlier beliefs in order to make sure that only true opinions will be included among the foundations to be provided for his science. It is almost as if, having come to acknowledge the utter innocuousness of most of my friends' dogs, and having found myself in the wrong on a number of other points as well, I make up my mind to get rid of *all* my beliefs, and 'reinstate' only those that are in some sense completely beyond question. When Descartes's project is thus interpreted in terms of his initial statement, certain objections fairly naturally arise. It has, for example, been objected that there is no justification offered (or available) for throwing out *all* one's former beliefs, even in pursuit of certainty: the rational procedure is to examine them one by one and discard the bad ones only.¹⁰ And it has been objected that in any case the only possible path to intellectual progress is to criticize one's opinions in piecemeal fashion, using other opinions as a basis while doing so (i.e., Descartes has failed to grasp the nature of criticism and the growth of knowledge).¹¹

I believe that these objections are basically quite misguided. Roughly, the problem is this. The first sentence, or first paragraph, of Meditation I provides a picture of Descartes's undertaking which, while it may invite such objections, does not in fact represent his intentions adequately. This colloquial beginning seems to imply that the *Meditations* are generated by a rather commonsensical desire to

bring one's beliefs into accord with the facts—or more precisely by a scientist's desire to assure himself, so far as possible, that he has avoided false presuppositions, in the ordinary sense. Viewed from this perspective, the rest of the First Meditation, from the announcement that opinions in the most tenuous sense doubtful must be rejected as false, to the final preoccupation with the hypothesis of an all-powerful deceiver, may well take on the aspect of a baffling *tour de force*. But the beginning of the Meditation does not need to be read so literally. It can and should be viewed as principally a device for initiating a constructive philosophical inquiry—one that will conclude by enunciating a rationalist epistemology and a non-commonsensical theory of mind and nature—at a point as close as possible to common sense assumptions.

In the 'Synopsis' to the *Meditations* Descartes had provided a more complete and more suggestive explanation of methodic doubt:¹²

In the first [Meditation], I put forward the reasons for which we can doubt generally of all things, and particularly of material things, at least as long as we have no other foundations in the sciences than those which we have had up to now. And, although the utility of a doubt so general may not at first be apparent, it is nevertheless very great, in that [such doubt] delivers us from all sorts of prejudices, and prepares for us a very easy way of accustoming our mind to detaching itself from the senses, and finally, in that it brings it about that it is no longer possible that we can have any doubt about that which we afterwards discover to be true. (AT VII, 12; HR I, 140)

The First Meditation is concerned to set forth some skeptical arguments relating, especially, to sense experience—and also, ultimately, to issues about mathematical knowledge. As Descartes says in the passage just cited, the aim of these arguments is, in large degree, to promote 'detachment from sense.' In addition, the views that emerge as unshaken in the face of these arguments will be such that we can have no doubts about them.

But why 'detachment from sense'? Because from the point of view of Descartes as scientist, the beliefs imposed on all of us by uncriticized sense experience, together with the claims of the relatively empiricistic Aristotelian tradition, are nothing but false though very deeply implanted 'prejudices.' These prejudices can only interfere with our acceptance of the true scientific and philosophic image of reality.

Descartes's concern with 'certainty' in the early parts of the *Meditations* must partly be understood in light of this objective.

What he will first note against sense-dependent beliefs about the world and about the mind is that they are not incorrigible and hence as a class they are not 'certain' beyond the shadow of a doubt. But in the course of the *Meditations* the (apparently marginal) unreliability of the senses with respect to particular states of affairs (over there is a round tower; I am sitting by the fire) becomes gradually converted into a doctrine of the mere subjectivity of much of the sensory image of reality. While Descartes is, no doubt, concerned with the problem of certainty—of traditional skepticism—in its own right, he is also concerned to *use* this problem to present convincingly an anti-empiricist metaphysics, a form of (rationalist) 'scientific realism.'¹³ Thus, in seeking to produce 'detachment from sense' Descartes is making way for a doctrine of physical reality that depends on supposedly innate, partly mathematical concepts, and a doctrine of mind that is both anti-materialistic and anti-empiricistic. The 'quest for certainty' is not sharply distinguished within Descartes's framework from the mere quest for philosophical and scientific truth. And 'methodic doubt' is not a barren exercise, which ultimately results in adding some fastidious bit of super-certainty to the normal assurance one already had about things seen, felt or calculated. Nor is it a bizarrely misguided way of speedily recategorizing the commonsensical beliefs and scientific hypotheses of a pre-philosophical mind as true or false. It is nothing less than a strategy for shaking and ultimately revising nearly universal conceptions of the true image of reality.

There is, then, a danger of confusion when gradualist or holistic conceptions of scientific progress are brought against Descartes's enterprise of categorical doubt, as in the objections mentioned above. Consider for instance the following:

Since one can only criticize one's opinions in piecemeal fashion, using other opinions as a base while doing so, Descartes's plan of doubting all his opinions and 'starting over again from the foundations' is thoroughly misconceived.

Up to a point, this objection depends on taking Descartes too much at his word in the first statements of the *Meditations*. For the objection assumes that Descartes's objective is to bring his own particular beliefs into accord with the facts as much as possible—to determine, for example, whether or not all dogs are really dangerous. Once we consider that Descartes is really playing a deeper game—is in effect trying to *overthrow* prevailing conceptions and opinions—the objection emerges as rather naïve. Whether or not there really is a cogent way of philosophically criticizing commonsense assumptions

about reality—or the ‘deliverances of the senses’ in general—it seems clear enough that piecemeal criticism of particular commonsense or ‘scientific’ beliefs, on the grounds of other things one happens to think, commonsensically or scientifically, would not be a very promising approach to the problem. Similarly, it is misguided to announce that Descartes is unjustified in ‘overthrowing’ all opinions in order to get rid of the bad ones (he should just get rid of the bad ones); or that he is unjustified in ‘discarding’ all opinions in which he finds ‘the least reason for doubt’ (he should just discard those that he finds, on reflection, to be inadequately supported according to reasonable standards of evidence). The ‘prejudices of our youth’ have a strong hold, both psychologically and epistemically. A concerted onslaught is the *only* justifiable approach for the sort of intellectual revolution Descartes intends to bring about.

But, I suppose, we cannot quite leave the matter here. There is, after all, an element of truth in the objections I have just been disputing. It does seem, at times, as if Descartes regards his system as springing forth from the bed-rock of Truth, independently of *any* preconception or historically conditioned commitment. Similarly, Descartes does seem to be concerned with presenting the metaphysical foundations of his science, and its basic concepts, as intrinsically and completely beyond reasonable doubt—as incorrigible deliverances of ‘the light of nature.’ Thus, to the deceptiveness of the senses will ultimately be opposed the absolute *data* of certain deliverances of reason. Such notions are, of course, subject to criticism on logical grounds (how could one ever get started philosophically, if he seriously resolved to accept *no* uncriticized assumptions?). In addition, they appear naïvely absolutistic in several senses, from the point of view of the historical relativism characteristic of our century. (As will emerge later, Descartes goes so far as to hold that the laws of nature and the true concept of matter, as well as of mind and God, are innate in the human mind, where they can be ‘discovered’ once the prejudices of the senses have been set behind us.) However, these concessions must not obscure the primary point: that through methodic doubt Descartes is attempting to bring about a radical and systematic revision in the contemporary world view. His procedure cannot be comprehended or criticized in abstraction from this goal.

A similar misunderstanding is reflected in another critic’s claim that the first sentence of the *Meditations* already provides Descartes with a reason for regarding all his opinions as suspect, and hence the ‘reasons for doubt’ that he will spend the rest of the Meditation expounding are in an important respect gratuitous.¹⁴ (This claim is