

Descartes' Meditations—A Critical Guide

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The Cambridge *Descartes' Meditations—A Critical Guide*, a recent addition to the numerous companion texts, guidebooks, introductions and commentaries already available, aims to provide novel approaches to important themes of Descartes' *Meditations* by combining contextualism and analysis (of arguments). Organized in four parts (Skepticism, Substance and Cause, Sensations, and The Human Being), the volume contains contributions from (mainly) established scholars of Early Modern Philosophy. Due to space constraints, I will focus on one chapter from each part of the book.

Opening the volume is Thomas M. Lennon's and Michael W. Hickson's "The skepticism of the first meditation". Lennon and Hickson draw a distinction between reasonable and unreasonable doubt and claim that only the former leads to the kind of unshakeable certainty that Descartes is seeking. Doubts based on the relativity of perception, dreaming, and the deceiving God arguments involve reasons and thus fit under the reasonable variety while the lunacy and the evil demon scenarios fall under the unreasonable category. Lennon and Hickson contend that a skeptical scenario counts as unreasonable if it is possible but so unlikely as to deserve to be immediately dropped (as in the case of lunacy) or due to sheer strength of will (e.g., the willful self-deceit of the evil demon challenge).

The first item of knowledge exhibiting the kind of unshakeable certainty Descartes is seeking is the *cogito*. For Lennon and Hickson, the *cogito* is not more certain than other propositions; rather it provides a template applicable to other cognitive situations. The *cogito* is dependent for its certainty on the existence of an omnipotent, veracious God. Lennon and Hickson take Descartes' truth to be a *thing*, not a relation, so, for the *cogito* to be true, the meditator must exist; for the meditator to exist, he must have been created by God.

In the economy of the *Meditations*, the *cogito* constitutes the first step in the meditator's establishing that he is a thinking *substance*; and substance is one of the main topics of Part II of this volume. In "Descartes against the materialists: how Descartes' confrontation with materialism shaped his metaphysics", Daniel Garber proposes a developmental reading of Descartes' notion of substance, arguing that several changes in Descartes' notion of substance were at least in part due to his confrontation with materialism in the form of Hobbes's (and to a certain extent Gassendi's) objections.

Garber reads Hobbes's objections to the *Meditations* as uncovering a gap in the real distinction argument of *Meditation VI*; to the extent to which substance is the ultimate subject of predication and *Meditation VI* only proves that mind and body can exist apart from one another, this conclusion is not incompatible with the mind and the body sharing the same underlying (material according to Hobbes) substratum, while

able to exist independently from one another. In other words, the desired conclusion that mind and body are really distinct *substances* has yet to be proven.

According to Garber, the main stages of the development of the Cartesian notion of substance are: the implicit view of substance as that which can exist independently (in *Meditation III*), followed by the definition of substance as ultimate subject of properties (in the *Geometrical Exposition*). Then, in an attempt to answer Hobbes's (and Arnauld's) objections, Descartes revises his notion in the *Fourth Replies* and goes back to the *Meditation III* independence view. Finally, the mature view is that of the *Principles*: substance is that which can exist independently of anything else and possesses a principal attribute only conceptually distinct from itself.

In "Sensation and knowledge of body in Descartes' *Meditations*", John Carriero argues it is a mistake to interpret Descartes as having radically revised his view about sensation from a naïve, pre-critical direct realism to a considered and philosophically grounded indirect realism. Carriero takes Descartes to have only modified his initial position while remaining within the confines of a broadly Aristotelian direct realist framework of sense perception.

According to Carriero, direct realism involves a lack of mediation, a sharing of form between cognizer and cognized (105). Indirect realism, on the other hand, is exemplified by causal covariance (114). To support what we might call his "modification without change of framework" reading, Carriero points to the similarities between Descartes' two positions: the "spontaneous impulse" of *Meditation III* is very close to *Meditation VI*; and in both cases, sensations come to the mediator willy-nilly. Moreover, Carriero contends that apparent dissimilarities between Descartes' naïve and his considered views can be accounted for in terms of a stretching of the direct realist framework. Carriero makes a case for interpreting Descartes' concept of sensation in terms of shared structure, as opposed to the Aristotelians' identity of form (119).

Lilli Alanen's paper "The role of the will in Descartes' account of judgment" uncovers the tight connection between Descartes' theories of mind, freedom and responsibility, respectively and his views of the self. Building on her previous work on Descartes' passions and will, Alanen claims that only a substantial individual self, conceived as a core self which has as its main powers the intellect and the (two-way power) will serves Descartes' purposes of assigning praise and blame to human epistemic agents and at the same time exonerates God from any blame for error.

The author tracks the development of Descartes' notion of a core, purely mental and disembodied self by showing first how Descartes renders the intellect a purely passive power of the mind, stripped of any activity. All the motive tendencies of the mind are then molded into a single center of activity, the Cartesian will which has both theoretical and practical functions. Alanen proceeds to show that only a libertarian will does justice to Descartes' remarks about the greatness of the human will which is the one aspect of ourselves in which we resemble God. Being a two-way power, able to determine itself to any of two contraries, constitutes, according to Alanen, the very essence of the Cartesian will. Nothing above and beyond the will determines whether and which inclination is elicited although the control over cognitive good (the truth) is indirect and dependent on whether the practical will made truth one of the agent's goals.

This book brings to light once more the richness of Descartes' *Meditations* as a

cornerstone text of western philosophy. It shows that after more than 350 years of scholarship, the *Meditations* not only allow for but invite fresh and novel approaches. It is even more interesting that the originality that the editor mentioned as one of the goals of this volume is achieved, in true Cartesian spirit, by means of properly employing a method suitable for the task, in this case a combination of contextualism and analysis. The Cambridge *Descartes' Meditations—A Critical Guide* will be of interest to all historians of early modern philosophy and represents a welcome addition to the literature on the early modern period.

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