

DESCARTES' "MEDITATIONS & OTHER WRITINGS"

Folio Society, London, 2011

INTRODUCTION by Nicholas Humphrey

There is nothing modest about the contents of this book. In two short, overlapping, essays that are his pivotal contribution to philosophy, René Descartes undertakes to establish the nature of the human soul, the existence of God, and the reality of the material world. And he aims to do it by reasoning from first principles, without appeal to scholarly authority or scientific facts or indeed to anything other than what emerges clearly from his own mind. He writes unashamedly as a first-person, laying bare his private intellectual struggles for all to share, while assuring us that what he himself discovers through pure introspection are truths we can discover for ourselves. Descartes is the first major philosopher who sets out to write for the lay public in a style designed to entice them in. He is the first since Plato, to *do* philosophy in front of his readers, rather than *teach* it. Descartes' art is to make the reader herself feel wonderfully clever (and two of his most avid readers, as it turned out, were crown princesses). No wonder the *Discourse on Method*, written in easy French, and the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, written originally in Latin but soon translated to the vernacular, were such an immediate hit when first published and that they have remained so ever since.

There is nothing modest about the man either. Descartes was born in 1596 into a wealthy French provincial family, and was sent at an early age to the Jesuit college of La Flèche, where he impressed everyone including himself with his brilliance. By the time he left the college at age sixteen he was already convinced he was bound for glory (not to mention, as his father kindly put it, destined to be "bound in calf".) His philosophical revelations, he was sure, would transform people's sense of themselves and their place in nature, while his experimental researches into physics and biology would bring untold benefits to mankind.

Clearly genius of this order needed to be properly nurtured. And so the young Descartes decided to take things slowly. Throughout his life in fact he made a habit of lying low, trying not to work too hard, nor to read too much, nor to get out of bed too early, nor to become distracted by seeing too many friends. But, now at the end of his studies, he made a surprising choice: he enlisted in the army, first in Holland then in Germany, foreseeing that the life of gentleman soldier (strictly non-combatant, it seems) could give him cover to pursue his

thoughts in isolation and at the same time widen his experience of the world. It was during a break from military duties in the winter of 1619, at age twenty three, that, holed up in a well-heated chamber, he embarked on the thought-experiment that he would describe years later as having been the springboard for everything that followed: he decided to *doubt everything he had previously taken for granted* – and to see what if anything remained that he could truly know.

In the 1600's, scepticism about whether there is any such thing as certain knowledge was already much in vogue among the intelligentsia, fuelled especially by the playful cynicism of Montaigne. But “Cartesian doubt”, as Descartes’ method came to be known, is both more radical, more serious and more optimistic. Descartes is looking for a fixed point at the end of the process of doubting, a place where doubt itself will meet its match with an undoubtable truth, and so from which he can lever himself back to a secure understanding of the world. And he finds it – as everyone now knows, even those who have never read a word of the original -- in his famous conclusion: “I think therefore I am” (later translated back to Latin as *Cogito ergo sum*). He has found bottom at last, and now can set about the job of reconstruction.

The whole argument that follows is so beautifully simple, it could be written on a postcard. Descartes has begun by taking an axe to all his cherished certainties. His body? It may be an illusion. The external world? He may be lost in a dream. The truths of geometry? He may be being deceived by an evil demon. And yet surely there still remains one thing he can be absolutely certain of, and this is that *he*, the subject of these mental experiences, must *be there* in the first place. For it stands to reason that even if he is deceived as a thinker, he can only be deceived if he *is* a thinker. His own mind – his soul – has to exist, whatever else.

His next move is to show, somewhat cheekily, how the existence of his own mind guarantees the existence of God. How so? Because he finds that he himself has in mind a clear and distinct idea of God as a *perfect being*. And, from this, God’s existence can be deduced in two ways. First, if God is perfect, then not-to-exist would obviously be a blot on his perfection. Second, if Descartes’ own mind can conceive of there being such a perfect being, then, since his mind cannot possibly be perfect in its own right, this idea of perfection can only have been planted there by a higher power. In short, only God could be the *sufficient cause* of the idea of God.

His final move is to show how God’s existence as a perfect being guarantees that the material world, as he has always thought of it, must really exist. How so, again? The reason is

that, if God were to have tricked him into believing the outside world exists when it does not, this would amount to deception, and a perfect being would not of course stoop to being a deceiver. (As Albert Einstein would remark later: “God is subtle, but he is not malicious.”)

Descartes sets all this out, step by step, as a quasi-mathematical proof: *Q.E.D.* He presents his arguments as a model of what we might today call “critical thinking” (along the lines he later summarised in his *Rules for Guiding One’s Intelligence*, included in this volume). However any modern reader is likely to surmise that there are other currents at work here: hidden passions channelling the direction of the argument. And in fact in later correspondence Descartes tells how, on the very night of his first meditation, he has a wonderful dream. He sees before him two books: one is a dictionary, the other a volume of poems. And the interpretation? It dawns on him that the dictionary must stand for dry philosophical argument, while the poems stand for wisdom arrived at through artistic inspiration. So, in a road to Damascus moment, he realises God has chosen him to bring the truth to light, in the manner not so much of a cool-headed scientist as of an inspired poet to whom divine truth is revealed, as he puts it, like a spark struck from a stone.

There is evidently a touch of madness in this method. Perhaps we may even detect hints of psychosis. Descartes may not think he is Napoleon, but he does think he is God’s mouthpiece, and a saviour of mankind. He may not be paranoid, but he certainly has a degree of persecution mania. He may honestly believe himself to be an open-minded seeker for the truth, but it’s clear he knows exactly what has to be true before he sets out: for a surety, that God exists, that humans but not animals have immaterial immortal souls. But, in any case, perhaps this is just what we should expect of a man with Descartes’ education. Not for nothing was he a star pupil at the Jesuit academy. “Give me a child until the age of seven and I will give you the man” was the boast of the Jesuit fathers. Without our going too far into the dark area of psycho-historical explanation, we can hardly avoid the impression that Descartes is more concerned with *justifying* the pillars of his metaphysics, than in genuinely *discovering* them. The mathematical analogy is even more apposite than he intended: *Quod erat demonstrandum*, What was to be proved.

C’est magnifique, mais ce n’est pas la science. Indeed it soon becomes all too obvious that the edifice Descartes builds, so plausibly, is a castle in the air. And it is a rather dangerous and unbalanced one, at that. True, on the plus side, his method – questioning all facts, and authority, including his own; prioritising proofs and argument over received wisdom – can be said to have laid the basis for the genuine scientific revolution that was soon to take

European thought by storm: *Nullius in verba* – “On the words of no one” – as the motto of the new Royal Society of London would proclaim. Yet, on the minus side, in order to square his method with his entrenched beliefs, he has written into the very fabric of reality the non-negotiable *dualism* of mind and matter.

Now, dualism is certainly nothing new. Most human beings have always been dualists of a sort. An easy-going “natural dualism” dominates our speech and culture. However, Descartes’ version of the doctrine is much more severe. On the one hand, his conception of the mind is considerably more ethereal than most of us would ever have imagined: Descartes’ minds can exist and flourish quite independently of matter and need no body whatever to sustain them. On the other hand, his conception of the body is considerably more mechanical: Descartes’ bodies are capable of functioning quite autonomously and need no minds to keep them on course. In fact, as he graphically explains, when it comes to non-human animals, their bodies should be considered *unconscious automata*, as thoughtless and feelingless as the mechanical dolls that can be found in fairgrounds; and even the behaviour of human bodies is purely mechanical much of the time.

We may well ask whether Descartes himself – or anybody else – could really have believed in the extreme form of dualism he was propounding. Yet, with regard to the possibility of mindless bodies, the answer was clearly yes: among his disciples there were some who took so seriously the idea that non-human animals are mere machines that they had no compunction about dissecting animals alive – for, after all, as Descartes had explained, the monkey merely cries out reflexly “as if in pain”.

Moreover there were some who soon wanted to follow Descartes in extending the idea of unconscious automatism to human beings themselves. If humans could function without the involvement of mind some of the time, why not all the time? There were rumours that Descartes himself secretly went that way. Descartes had a much-loved illegitimate daughter, Francine, who died at five years. Not long after Descartes’ own relatively early death in 1650 the story was circulating that he had reconstructed Francine as a walking talking living doll, which he took with him everywhere in a satin lined box. On a sea voyage, the captain became suspicious of the contents of the box and decided to have a look inside. The Francine-machine rose up with a howl and grabbed the captain, who had to struggle with the doll before finally throwing it into the sea. The story is presumably apocryphal. But it goes to show how radically Descartes’ ideas were changing the landscape of science fiction as well as science.

For all his quirks and weaknesses, Descartes is often called the father of modern

philosophy. He certainly fathered debate, to right and left. He invited his contemporaries to write to tell him if they could find any fault with his arguments, and many of Europe's best thinkers obliged – with several correspondents providing what would seem to be knock-down objections, notably Princess Elisabeth, the niece of Charles I. (A selection of *Objections and Replies*, are included in this volume). Yet, while the debate did not go all his way, his fame as a scientist and polymath ensured that the ideas of his two short philosophical books would set the agenda for discussing the big issues for years to come.

By the late 18th century, however, the tide had turned. Descartes had become in some quarters a figure of fun. Thus Denis Diderot could write in 1783: "A tolerably clever man began his book with these words: '*Man is composed of two distinct substances, the soul and the body.*' . . . I nearly shut the book. Oh! ridiculous writer, if I once admit these two distinct substances, you have nothing more to teach me. For you do not know what it is that you call soul, less still how they are united, nor how they act reciprocally on one another." And a hundred years later Friedrich Nietzsche was still more forthright: "'I am body and soul' - so speaks the child. And why should one not speak like children? But the awakened, the enlightened man says: I am body entirely, and nothing beside; and soul is only a word for something in the body... You say 'I' and you are proud of this word. But greater than this - although you will not believe in it - is your body and its great intelligence, which does not say 'I' but performs 'I'"

Now, in the 21st century, mind-body dualism is nowhere taken seriously by scholars. As Nietzsche predicted, ideas about the "embodied mind" have swept through psychology and neuroscience. Descartes' legacy as a metaphysician is in tatters. Why then should we bother to read him today? The answer is in these pages. Descartes makes us *think*: new thoughts, uncomfortable thoughts, and yes crazy thoughts too. And if his answers take a wrong direction, they do so on such interesting and seductive grounds. True to his dream, the *Discourse* and the *Meditations* are lasting philosophical poetry.

Fifty years before Descartes had his epiphany beside the stove, Sir Philip Sidney wrote in his *Defence of Poetry* a description that might have been meant to fit Descartes to a tee: "He [the poet] doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it. . . He beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blur the margin with interpretations and must load the memory with doubtfulness; but he cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion. . . and with a tale, forsooth, he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner."