



Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy)

René Descartes, John Cottingham (Translator), Bernard Williams (Introduction)

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This authoritative translation by John Cottingham of the *Meditations* is taken from the much acclaimed three-volume Cambridge edition of the *Philosophical Writings* of Descartes. It is based on the best available texts and presents Descartes' central metaphysical writings in clear, readable modern English.

Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy) Details

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From Reader Review Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy) for online ebook

Gregory says

About 25 pages from the end of my first reading, will prob reread this within the season. Funny how this book for me, is understood better through the objections and the replies. Also funny, how a short book reads like a long book, Would love to read this in French, if I only knew French: Delicately Strong, and Strongly Delicate, A book to really get lost in, I am certainly pleasantly lost in this book. Such eloquence- - -.

I did finish and my only regret is That I do not know how to read French or the language. I can only imagine the beauty of his expressions in the homelanguage of this books orginal writing...

Blake says

His proof that God exists leaves me unconvinced, but his intent to "destroy all my former opinions" in order to build a real knowledge based on careful thought and your own intellect (and not a blind acceptance of preconceptions etc.) is a terribly ballsy move.

And the Objections and Replies are well worth the read. They help put Descartes thought in cultural and intellectual context... and he gets pretty pissed off with some of his objectors whom he feels are completely misreading him. An original thinker.

Dylan Popowicz says

Ultimately disappointing. After years of referring to Descrates principle motto, "Je pense donc je suis", it is disheartening to realise that what came from this radical base, what was built upon it, was simply the same and common version of reality--Renee just reworded it under the pretence of doubt.

To be fair, the historical importance of this work is not to be take for granted. Here we have the moment in which Modern Philosophy is said to be born. If with the frail corner-stone of God's (unproven) existence the arguments tend to fall apart at a rapid pace, it does not mean that the work as a whole is not worth a read.

Yet, there are more important philosophical works to take into account, and the initial importance of Descartes work can be basely characterised in his (afore mentioned) motto. Doubt, that pessimistic beginning, is the relevant charm of this work--everything that follows is a poor attempt to reconcile doubt's difference with accepted reality.

Jonathan Terrington says

René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* is a book I picked up for two reasons. The first is that a friend had been reading and enjoying his work, the second is that I have developed an interest in philosophy due to my university units. I am currently undertaking one literature unit on the 'Philosophies of Hell and Heaven' which is rather fascinating (though I disagree with many points). I figure that if I wish to understand a wide variety of views, I must read about those opinions and philosophers are often a key to understanding theories and ideas.

Descartes' work here is slightly different to any other philosophy work I have touched in the last while however. It is broken up into a series of 'meditations' each one touching on a particular thought and following a logical sequence. He attempts to begin by intellectually breaking down anything he has claimed to believe in the past, in order to address the ideas of 'the reality of God' and everything associated with such. He then concludes with a series of objections to his philosophical conclusions and the replies to these objections, making it a work that rebuts as much as it discusses.

It is hard to follow Descartes at times. Much of this is likely due to translation. But what is easily grasped is that he believes we all need to come to our own conclusions about God through thought and not mere theology - that the nature of the spiritual, of God and religion is as much connected to the intellectual as anything else. To some degree it's a similar conclusion as that reached by Nietzsche, only Nietzsche rejects spirituality and religion altogether.

So, if you want an older staple of philosophy, I recommend reading this. I will no doubt be delving back into Descartes' mind time to time in order to better understand the concept of intellectually thinking about my own revelations of God and humanity. But in the meantime I shall move on to other works and see what they consider.

Zach says

i hope to come back and read the the objections and replies soon, for i enjoyed reading Meditations.
here are a few thoughts i wrote out about them.

Doubting Descartes

The method of doubt used in Meditations brings the text to such proximity to doubt that doubting the text's veracity readily suggests itself as an approach for understanding the text. This would likely have vexed Descartes, who suggested that the methods employed in Meditations would eventually be considered by all who could closely attend to them to be absolutely rigorous demonstrations that would erase erroneous views on truth and God (6). But perhaps Descartes would understand the need to doubt his book, for, as he notes, "prudence dictates that we should never fully trust those who have deceived us even once" (18), and patient readers we all may be, yet there are none who have not been fooled at least once by a book containing articulate thoughts published by those who hoped to say something true. In doubting the veracity of

Meditations, the most efficient approach would seem to be to question Descartes' doubt, but before proceeding to this it may prove useful to first briefly examine what this doubt is.

Descartes describes his doubt as initially achieving an unrelenting darkness of difficulties (23) because he has stripped away the foundations of all his former beliefs (18). What his initial doubt then achieves is a systematic eradication of trust in the presupposed notions of body and feeling (18), which also means an eradication of the trust in the ideas that once defined existence. Stranded in darkness, Descartes next surmises that the only truth remaining is the truth of an exhaustive uncertainty (24), but his very thoughts help to remind him that he had not found sufficient ground to doubt his own existence (25), which allows him to do away with exhaustive uncertainty and know that "this proposition, 'I am, I exist, whenever it is uttered by me [. . .] is necessarily true" (25). With this modicum of doubt assuaged, he then explains that this expresses a general rule, which can be understood as the sought for Archimedean Point (24), that everything very clearly and distinctly perceived is true (35). Although Descartes further refines his truth as the meditating continues in the book, his handling of doubt just described provides sufficient places for doubting the foundations of *Meditations*, which, following Descartes' example, is the most expedient manner to apply the method of doubt and clarify our perspective on the book.

The quality of Descartes' doubt must be doubted because his manner of eliminating all notions possibly touched by doubt provides the foundation to the Archimedean Point that allows Descartes' ultimate grasp on truth and God. If it is true that Descartes destroys all his former beliefs (18) at the start of his meditating, then only new truths, built upon only what is clearly and distinctly perceived as true, shall be found as his thoughts progress in *Meditations*. That Descartes is unable to destroy all his former beliefs by attacking their very foundations (18) is most clearly seen in the near effortless correlation he makes between deception and imperfection. Positing that deception is a shortcoming and therefore not belonging to the perfection of God (52) is problematic because it is not something that has been clearly and distinctly perceived or established as true, but is instead an attempt to specify an attribute (in a negative manner) to the perfection of God and in which the ability of the finite thinker to specify an attribute to the perfect, incomprehensible, infinite God (46) is nowhere explained. Descartes seems to ground his ability to understand deception as an imperfection in God by attributing all perfections to God with the understanding that there must be as much in the cause as in the effect (49-50), and, since Descartes has an idea of a supremely perfect God and Descartes cannot account for all perfections, God exists as all perfections (51). The reason this does not actually allow Descartes the ability to have a clear and distinct perception of what might be a shortcoming (deception) in God is that to understand that God contains all perfections does not imply that one understands what all of those perfections are (46), nor what they might exclude, unless one is already conceiving the perfection of God as something more specific and exclusive.

What is revealed is that there seems to be an attempt by Descartes (it is unimportant to the present purpose whether it is intentional or not) to create a correlation between the ability to know that everything clearly perceived involves some perfection of God and the notion that the truest and clearest idea one can have is of God (46). The aim of this correlation is to set up an association between the conception of truth, as we are able to clearly and distinctly perceive it, with the perfection of God that suggests that the perfection of God is truth, which then allows for the claim that deception would be a shortcoming (52) because God is truth. What this ultimately implies and what Descartes is never fully able to doubt is that the perfection of God is goodness. It is true that Descartes more than once sincerely asks if God might be a deceiver (22-23, 26, 29) and therefore not goodness. He poses such a question before examining how God is the sum of all perfections (described above), "I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver" (36), but his answer to the question, to equate deception with imperfection is based upon the undoubted, preconceived notion of goodness in the perfection of God, which undoubtedly is a noble hope, but, in a meditation where everything has been doubted, it is has no more grounds for being true than the

notion that deception is a perfection in God that simply remains incomprehensible to the finite thinker. I imagine that the objection that Descartes would offer here is that the former is clearly and distinctly perceived as true and the latter cannot be, but this objection (the Archimedean Point) is based on the foundation that was built securely by first doubting everything, which just has been shown was not in fact done. For Descartes, the way to complete doubt was halted by goodness, but is this true for everyone who might employ his methods? This question becomes of the highest importance when it is recalled, as mentioned in the introduction, that Descartes thought that his methods should eventually be considered by all who could closely attend to his methods to be absolutely rigorous demonstrations that would erase erroneous views on truth and God (6).

It seems highly probable that a person employing Descartes' method would be able to obtain a complete doubt and be able to consider the idea of goodness as just one more uncertainty. For the complete doubter, the problem with the way goodness is handled in Descartes' Meditations is that when the proof of God is given (in either the 3rd or 6th meditation) goodness is not expressed as an essential part of God, and Descartes' aim seems to be to imply goodness with the use of the all encompassing form of perfection in God, but assuming goodness (no shortcomings like deception) to be in what is understood tentatively as an incomprehensible perfection (46) is not something the complete doubter would allow himself to do. The complete doubter, who is not secretly or accidentally still holding to goodness, would follow very much in Descartes' manner in the beginning meditations with this crucial difference: when he pondered whether or not God was a deceiver he would not solely think of God as deceiving in an all or nothing manner. Descartes consistently conceives of deception in this manner (22-23, 26, 29) because goodness is still guiding his thoughts and goodness can only conceive of deception as wholly wrong—he finally openly acknowledges the latter of these near the end of Meditations when he states that it seems “contrary to the goodness of God that his nature should be deceptive” (84), which is the first direct mention of goodness. The complete doubter would not have the corrective quality of goodness within himself and could speculate that God was truthful enough to him so to as be able to allow him to establish his general rule, that everything that is clearly and distinctly perceived is true, similar to Descartes', but the complete doubter could not safely be assured that God might not be lying to him in greater ways than this. Thus the general rule for the complete doubter could not be a true Archimedean Point that lifts the all encompassing darkness as it does for Descartes, but is instead a small candle in the vast darkness, lighting up clearly and distinctly objects only immediately in front of it. This end for the complete doubter can hardly be what Descartes intended by the erasure of erroneous views of truth and God.

The danger of Descartes' method of doubt, then, is one that assumes goodness as undoubtable and ever present, even when unmentioned and unexplained. This may have been a safe assumption for Descartes, who somewhat jovially admits in the synopsis to the Sixth Meditation that he never truly but only speculatively doubted everything (16), but, for those who earnestly follow the method of doubt, it cannot be safely assumed that goodness shall halt the progress of darkness and doubt.

David S. T. says

I've read two editions of the Meditations now, first this one and later the Hackett version from Cress. Overall while both were adequate and understandable, this was overall superior. It contains a great translation, an excellent 50ish page introduction, numerous footnotes (including many instances where the french version differed from the Latin one) and then about 60 pages from the Objections and Replies (while I've not read all of the Objections, for a non-philosopher such as myself this selection was good and probably all I needed).

Meditations further explains Descartes's ideas first explained in his Discourse on Method. He rejects everything he was taught and arrives at the fact that he exists, god exists, finally that other things exist and that the body is separate from the soul. It seems his god argument in this one slightly expands to a slightly different argument, namely that something can not come out of nothing and since imperfect things can only come from something more perfect than themselves, if you go up the line of perfection the most perfect thing or God. I guess to me all of these years later, I don't see how this proves god. Secondly I'm curious if the idea of god is natural, meaning if someone was born and never hear the idea of god mentioned would he arrive at the same conclusions of a perfect being or was Descartes influenced by his opinions found from a lifetime of learning from "the great book of the world". For the material things he realizes that for god to be perfect he wouldn't deceive him by making everything around him an illusion, therefore since God is not a deceiver, matter is real. My initial thought is that if an insane person perceives things as existing which do not, then they're not real and therefore would god then become a deceiver using this reasoning? Anyways regardless of one agrees with Descartes, these works are pretty interesting and for their importance to philosophy alone they are essential reads.

Victoria Rose says

I definitely need my philosophy professor to help explain this book to me. But once i understand what he is saying it's fine. I liked Plato's Phaedo better.

Sara says

Oh Descartes, we have an interesting relationship, you and I. You are a necessary step in Philosophy classes, and yet I abhor you. So you get 3 stars.

Toby Garcia Vega says

"Boo hoo I had to read this in phil 101"

Get over yourselves, this thing is great.

Brandon Montgomery says

At this point, *Meditations* is more of a curio than a convincing philosophical argument.

Kyle van Oosterum says

This is certainly a fundamental work for philosophy in terms of its epistemological and metaphysical implications, which can be simply summarised in that timeless proposition: "cogito ergo sum." Descartes can be seen as an explorer, navigating mathematics (having invented the Cartesian coordinate system) and

freeing philosophy from religious institutions. Even though this work is largely centred around God, it does not necessarily invoke the Christian God in any way whatsoever.

Descartes points out that for him to be able to describe a being who is omnipotent and supremely good, there must exist a being to whom he can attribute such a description. This seems a bit flawed, I think, since his conception and words have absolutely no influence on reality. This is a common objection to Descartes' work since language is the only way in which he can communicate these doubts and without language does he really have this power? *Cogito ergo sum* or 'I think, therefore I am' does not necessarily have to be true. Descartes himself states that his thoughts and words do not impose necessity on anything, so why would his thoughts or doubts impose a necessity on existence for that matter?

Beyond that, he raises an excellent point about how our sensory perceptions are not the only true way in which we can come to know things. Descartes proposed that we get wax from a honeycomb. From this wax we can derive the relevant gustatory, visual, olfactory information, but once we burn the wax all of these qualities change. It is not with the senses that we recognise that the burnt wax and the unburnt wax are the same thing, but rather with the intellect, which allows us to conclude that they are in fact the same thing.

Totally worth the read: brief, concise and essential.

Adeline says

Descartes presents very interesting arguments to convince us of the existence of God. To be fair, he tries to demonstrate some balance by starting off as a sceptic, deconstructing all his prior beliefs and trying to rebuild his ideas of the world from scratch in the meditations.

Reading wise, it was not easy to follow Descartes's line of thought throughout his meditations. Perhaps it is the translation or just his writing style that I take issue with. The tendency to write long convoluted sentences (and this sentence is not even close to its level) makes it hard to latch on to the main point of each sentence. Would recommend a good dose of energy and good spirit to get through.

Kim Annabella says

I sleepwalked through this, not a fan. cartesian dualism you go to hell and you die...well for anyone dumb enough to believe that mind body interactions require the direct intervention of "god" when your god is sd;lkgfhfdlgh;sdfh I am not getting into an argument with myself about this, thus endeth the review.

Empty says

Groundbreaking, and mostly awful. Read the introductions for context and Meditations 1 & 2 for a 5 star experience, and let the rest be an intimately connected historical curiosity. God help the poor philosophy student who has read all the replies and objections, which amounted to endless semantic circlejerking.

Libyrinths says

Descartes attempts to prove that mind exists, therefore he exists, therefore God exists -- in far more detail than he did in the Discourse.

I really liked this particular edition, translated and annotated by Michael Moriarty. I found the Objections and Replies section invaluable for getting a better understanding of what Descartes had laid out. And Moriarty gives selections, for which I was grateful after getting into some of them. He did a superb job of selecting, noting whether one of Descartes' replies referred to something he hadn't selected and explaining it, and showing the foundation of an objection. It was almost like having a teacher there with you as you read.

One of the things I found fascinating about the Objections was to see how even well-respected philosophers and thinkers of the time rarely saw exactly what Descartes was saying, or gave it enough time to question their own reactions and reread to be sure they were correct, but often simply saw things through their own lenses, failing to see or address what Descartes actually said or meant. Some were better than others; some you wondered what planet they were on. Apparently Descartes wondered something similar in some of his replies.

Descartes didn't convince me he'd proved what he said he proved, at least on a purely logical level. I say that because one of the things Descartes insists on is that one has to use his method, which is basically a meditative method with similarities to some basic Buddhist meditation methods -- without the breathing or such. As such, some subjective observations become axiomatic in his proofs when he tries to put them into a logical framework. He urges the reader to do the same exercise he has done, and then look at his arguments. That's fair enough, but most people, and most philosophers won't do that. And most Western philosophy relies on a logical structure in which at least the core of an argument is available to all, and not reliant on highly subjective experience and its interpretation.

Nevertheless, Descartes redefined the mind and in the process, the soul as well. Today, the study of the mind is separate from the study of the soul. Both are constructs, and who knows whether that separation of constructs has been to our benefit or detriment? I'm not sure we know any more about the "mind" than they did 400 years ago or 3000 years ago. But thanks to Descartes, we do know more about the physical world, and may some day find out just what the mind is.
