

DESCARTES AGAINST THE SKEPTICS

itself; others, that he did, but that the argument was complex enough that its circularity was not obvious, so that Descartes' failure to see it is not a mark against his intelligence.

In the eyes of some knowledgeable interpreters of Descartes all of this effort is rather comic.¹ They would hold that not only is the argument of the *Meditations* circular, it is known by Descartes to be circular and is part of an elaborate deception on his part. On this view, the arguments for the existence of God and the apparent attempt to justify reliance on reason on their basis are intended only to give a patina of piety to a work whose true implications are radically subversive of religion. They are "a lightning rod against ecclesiastical thunderbolts." But the circularity of the argument is only one of many indications to the book's true audience that they must read between the lines. If they do, they will find that Descartes is not the theist and dualist he appears to be, but an atheist and materialist.

An approach as radical as this, as contrary to the general tendency of modern scholarship, is apt to be dismissed without a proper hearing. So it is worth saying that a good deal of evidence can be adduced in its favor. That Descartes engaged—to some extent—in dissimulation cannot be denied. He certainly suppressed work which he feared would get him in trouble and was less than candid about expressing his disagreement with orthodox views. His advice to Regius in the controversy with Voetius surely should give cause for concern to those who think Descartes' sincerity can be taken for granted:

I agree entirely [with M. Alphonse] that you should take care not to arouse people against you by words that are too hard. I would also wish, indeed, that you had not advanced any new opinions, but had nominally retained the old, contenting yourself with giving new reasons, which no one can find fault with. Those who grasped

1. The principal contemporary exponent of this approach is Hiram Caton, in his book, *The Origin of Subjectivity*, and in numerous articles, of which "The Problem of Descartes' Sincerity" (*Philosophical Forum*, 2 [1971], 355-370) is the most relevant. But as Caton emphasizes, skepticism about Descartes' sincerity has a long history and many distinguished adherents (e.g., More, Leibniz, La Mettrie, d'Holbach, and Adam). And Caton is not its only contemporary exponent. See also Kenneth Dorter's "Science and Religion in Descartes' *Meditations*," *Thomist*, 37 (1973), 313-340.

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your reasons properly would have drawn their own conclusions about what you wanted them to understand. For example, why was it necessary to reject, openly, substantial forms and real qualities? (January 1642 (?); Alquié, *Oeuvres* II, 913)

And he goes on ^{to} contrast Regius' practice with his own in the *Meteors*, where he said expressly that he did not deny substantial forms, that he merely did not find them necessary to explain the things he wanted to explain.

Once one takes the dissimulation hypothesis really seriously, one is apt to see evidence for it everywhere. The passage we cited at the beginning of this chapter, from the dedication to the Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne, will take on an entirely different meaning. Descartes' rejection of the circular argument from Scripture will not be just an ironic anticipation of a widespread objection to his own work but a broad hint to the critical reader not to take the apparently central contentions of that work too seriously.

This interpretation will be further confirmed by other paradoxes. For example, the title page and the dedication to the Sorbonne announce a work whose two main themes are the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. But though the dedication claims that knowledge of God is so easy that atheists are inexcusable and claims that Descartes' own proofs of God are peculiarly clear and evident, it also concedes that few people will be able to follow them and begs the theology faculty to lend the weight of its authority to these arguments, so that the atheists may—on that ground—be persuaded to grant the adequacy of proofs they do not understand.

As for the other supposedly central theme of the *Meditations*, Mersenne had already objected, before the *Meditations* were published, that Descartes had not said a word in them about the immortality of the soul (Letter to Mersenne, 24 December 1640; Alquié, *Oeuvres* II, 300). And though the title page was altered for the second edition, so that it claimed only a proof that the soul is distinct from the body, one might well wonder why the apparently stronger claim was ever made.

This is the kind of argument which can be mounted in favor of the dissimulation thesis, and I think enough has been said to give some idea why some interpreters find it so persuasive. It is not part of my project to give a point for point rebuttal of such arguments.