

The Cambridge Companion to Descartes' Meditations

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Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014; xviii + 320 pp.; \$30.95 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-107-63048-2

In early 2014, Descartes' *Meditations* joined the short but select list of Western Philosophy texts that have an entire Cambridge Companion dedicated to them. (The list includes Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Locke's *Essay*, Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, Plato's *Republic*, and Spinoza's *Ethics*. Hume's *Treatise* is also expected to be added to the list before the end of the year.) To set itself apart from the many existing volumes that offer guidance and clarification to the *Meditations*, this new collection of essays aims to prove that the *Meditations* is not a repository of considered, fully-articulated and spelled-out Cartesian views but rather the exposition of the process, the sequence of steps for arriving at such views. To that end, the rhetorical aspects of the *Meditations* are especially emphasized: who is speaking, who is spoken to, the manner in which things are phrased, the setting as well as the intended goal of (the speaker of) the *Meditations* are carefully scrutinized. Let us look at each of these elements, starting with the speaker.

Several contributors (David Cunning, Christia Mercer, Charles Larmore, Alison Simmons, Annette Baier, etc.) note that the meditator narrating in the first person is neither the historical Descartes of 1640 nor the authoritative author of the text, but rather a persona introduced to facilitate the reception of the text by means of enlisting the reader's engagement. The identity of the speaker of the *Meditations* is an important consideration because, as other commentators have already observed, Descartes' *Meditations* are not composed exclusively of (deductive) arguments. In fact, the credibility of the speaker plays a significant role. *Qua* author Descartes attempted to establish credibility not only by seeking the approval of the Sorbonne, which (he thinks) would have lent more weight to the views presented in the *Meditations* (especially in the eyes of certain people, such as the atheists) but also by stressing the elements that his readers might have in common with the meditator, the fictional character who speaks in the first person throughout the text.

And this brings us to the audience for which the *Meditations* were intended. The editor claims that Descartes cast his arguments in ways appealing to his anticipated audience which "would appear to include mechanists and Aristotelians, theists who do not have a clear idea of God, skeptics and atheists ... These would also be readers who lack a fully articulated worldview but incline toward a commonsense empiricism that assumes that reality is pretty much as we sense it" (17). The chapters by Mercer and Larmore nicely illustrate the way in which Descartes engages in market segmentation strategies, targeting specific groups in ways likely to resonate with them. While looking at these two papers, I will also touch on the relevance of the style and setting the *Meditations* employ.

Mercer shows how presenting this work in meditative garb was intended to 'hook' that portion of XVIIth century readership fond of religious meditation manuals. To make his readers feel on familiar ground, Descartes keeps the main steps of traditional

meditative exercises. Take the example of Descartes' evil demon. This would have struck a chord with a XVIIth century audience since the references to demons, including thought-controlling ones, was widespread at the time. "For some readers, this possibility must have sent chills up their spine" (35). However, Descartes also transforms traditional meditation to suit his own needs. He substitutes an epistemic goal for the traditional goal of meditative exercises, *viz.* finding God within ourselves. Still other elements are discarded completely (e.g., the need for divine assistance for the meditator to reach her goal). The result, claims Mercer, is something both old and revolutionary.

A similar strategy is used in *Meditation I*, according to Larmore. The skeptical arguments used here will likely have aroused fellow feelings in those coming to Descartes' text with their own skeptical leanings (but, Larmore warns, they are in for a surprise!) and initial interest followed by stiff opposition on the part of commonsense empiricists (i.e., most of the readers of the *Meditations*). According to Larmore, most of *Meditation I* consists of a dialogue between precisely these two opposing voices *within* the meditating 'I': an empiricist (who could be the regular person and/or the Aristotelian) and a skeptic. Larmore argues that the subtlety of Descartes' approach consists in using 'internal demolition,' i.e., undermining long-held beliefs from within by making the empiricist realize that her own commitments lead to inconsistencies and therefore must be abandoned. This does not, however, mean that the skeptic has prevailed: the same internal demolition strategy spells the undoing of the skeptic and results in the emergence of the *cogito*. The *cogito* is the beginning of a journey that will end in *Meditation VI* with the meditator's coming to speak in Descartes' own voice (53). Furthermore, where the *Meditations* 'end' is connected with the goal the *Meditations* were planned to have.

The goal of Descartes' meditating 'I' is to achieve certainty; Descartes' own goal, as author, is to give his meditator (and by extension his readers) the tools to get there. That is why, to properly understand the text, it is important to distinguish between merely provisional views advanced by the meditator (the tools) and definitive Cartesian theses (the hoped-for and sought-after fruits of the meditative labour). An interesting and noteworthy case is that of 'God' who plays both the role of tool and that of definitive Cartesian thesis. For Baier and Cunning, despite the fact that the same name is used, the notion the name covers has been radically changed between the beginning and the completion of the meditating process. According to these philosophers, Descartes' considered view of God shares much with Spinoza's. Not widely shared by Descartes scholars, this claim warrants further consideration.

Baier contends that the meditator starts out with a traditional, catholic concept of God (an omni-God). However, starting with *Meditation IV*, she encounters clues which eventually will amount to a non-traditional, quite unorthodox view of God. In *Meditation IV*, both a parallel and a contrast are drawn between herself as a finite being endowed with intellect, will, imagination and memory and a perfect, infinite God who also possesses *all* of these faculties. Baier argues that since imagination and memory require some sort of body and since the body underwriting divine imagination and memory cannot be a limited, particular body, only extension itself (indivisible and indefinitely large) is not unworthy of God's perfection. Moreover, *Meditation VI* explicitly

states that one of the meanings of 'nature' is God (AT VII, 80; CSM II, 56). That the same statement is made in the *Principles* (AT VIII A, 15; CSM I, 202) suggests that its appearance in the *Meditations* was not a slip.

A God equated with Nature, and having indefinite extension as one of its characteristics sounds very close to Spinoza's God. This same conclusion is drawn by Cunning but on different grounds (i.e., taking seriously Descartes' commitment to God's immutability and simplicity) and relying mostly on texts other than the *Meditations* (the correspondence and *Conversation with Burman*).

To conclude, the *Cambridge Companion to Descartes' Meditations* is an interesting collection of thought-provoking articles by leading scholars in the field, who stress the subtle ways in which argument, ethos and pathos are intertwined in one of the most famous texts of Western philosophy. Although the rhetorical features of Descartes' writings have been noted before (e.g., Gaukroger 1997; Bicknell 2003; Cunning 2010, Schuster 2012, etc.), so far they have received much less attention than the content of his full-blown arguments. This anthology takes steps towards remedying this situation and, just as the editor hoped, encourages further study.

One avenue of inquiry that future studies might pursue concerns the reactions of present-day readers of the *Meditations*. If Descartes, the author, was indeed as careful as this collection claims about the choice of his target audience and about the language, assumptions and background information this audience was likely to share, one cannot help but wonder how the appeal and relevance of the *Meditations* are affected by the fact that current readers are likely to be so far removed from the XVIIth century and its intellectual context.

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