

*A Commentary on*  
*Prof. H. M. Curtler*  
*on Descartes\**

FOR US, in the twentieth century, the most interesting and crucial problems in pre-Hegelian philosophical speculation are: how genuine was Descartes' affirmation of God's existence as the basis of our knowledge of the extra-mental world?—and—did Kant's epistemology affect his moral philosophy?

Professor Curtler addresses himself, in his review of Hiram Caton's book on Descartes, to the first question and goes to the heart of the problem. This problem, briefly restated, is whether Descartes included God's existence in his reasoning (mainly in the *Meditations*) in order to avoid the inquisitors' suspicion, or because God's existence is a necessary postulate in his system. Well known is Descartes' own statement—"larvatus prodeo"—according to which, at least in his published works, he exercised the utmost prudence in thought and expression. This is, however, insufficient evidence when we try to decide the above dilemma.

Sartre has recently argued that Descartes was a convinced atheist: if we substitute the word (demythologized) "man" for "god" in the *Meditations*, suggests Sartre, we find that Descartes had no religious belief but that he smuggled the scientifically enlightened man into his system as a potentially omniscient and omnipotent being. Gilson, certainly a more thorough student of Descartes, argues differently. Descartes was a believing Christian, he says, who used God as a supreme although abstract guarantee for the existence of the extra-mental world, but dropped him as soon as this statement was established. Pascal had already accused Descartes of the same thing: Descartes' God, he wrote, contented himself with giving an initial flick (*chique-naude*) to the universe, then withdrew into passivity.

It seems to me, upon reading and re-reading the *Meditations* (and listening to my students' immediate comments after their first contact with the work) that Sartre's interpretation rests on flimsy evidence, whereas Gilson's position is somewhat unjust. Rather, I propose the following interpretation:

Descartes, as an early seventeenth-century man, shared to a large extent the current ideas. And these ideas were still imperfectly disengaged from scholastic philosophy, as it can be seen from several of Descartes' arguments which are in the scholastic tradition. It took almost another century after Descartes until Aristotelianism was dislodged from the universities (as distinct from scientific circles) and replaced by the scientific system. Hence also Descartes' "dry" treatment of the problem of God's existence. On the other hand, the influence of the Italian universities, for example Padua, with their focus on Epicurus, the Stoics, and the Skeptics, cannot be overestimated. Descartes came after almost two centuries of speculative effort to reserve reason for profane science and to limit the discourse of God to the domain of faith and Church authority. This fideism (since Ockham and later, more subtly, Cusanus) threatened philosophy proper with extinction—as neo-fideism does in our own days. Descartes, both a believing Christian and an anti-skeptic, anti-materialist, tried the then impossible synthesis: to "save" God and science. In the process he assumed, like Gassendi, Charron, and others that God can take care of himself and that the more urgent task was to save science from its devastating skeptical critics. Let us bear in mind the enormous popularity of Montaigne at the time, a man who did more to revive Lucretius, Pyrrho and the Stoics than the Italian universities combined. In an intellectual milieu dominated by Montaigne and the Libertines, Descartes made commendable efforts at a synthesis, even if he did not succeed.

Of what did his failure consist? Descartes "used" God to prove that he (the mind)

exists, and to prove, subsequently, that the extra-mental world exists. In the second Meditation he finds, however, that even if there is no God but only an all-powerful Deceiver, the fact that the mind can be deceived proves at least that it exists. Thus God's existence is not necessary for Descartes' *central objective*, namely to prove that as a thinking substance he, Descartes, exists. (It is another matter that without a creator he admits that he would not *be* existentially. But this is for him a side issue.)

How about the extra-mental world? In spite of valiant efforts, Descartes did not prove its existence in a satisfactory manner. The arguments he uses when proceeding from God as cause to the world as effect are scholastic ones, not his own. The misery of modern philosophy, its subjectivism, dates from Descartes' failure.

But whether successful or not, Descartes' metaphysics shows a tremendous speculative effort. Thus it seems to me that Professor Curtler is fully justified when he concludes that we should not play down the metaphysical dimension of the *Meditations* and Descartes as a metaphysician.

THOMAS MOLNAR

\**The Origin of Subjectivity: An Essay on Descartes*, by Hiram Caton (New Haven: The Yale University Press, 1973), reviewed by H. M. Curtler in *Modern Age*, Spring 1974.