

## Descartes's Method of Doubt

By Janet Broughton

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Simply put, this is a superb book. It provides a deep, learned, and philosophically engaging reading of the method of doubt as laid out in the first three meditations of Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. It is not a commentary on the *Meditations* as a whole, but a focused discussion of the way Descartes raises radical doubts in order to undermine the authority of common sense and the way in which Descartes employs radical doubts to yield the central tenets of First Philosophy. Like the *Meditations* itself, the book is both destructive and constructive. On the one hand, Broughton wants to disembarass contemporary philosophers from their habit of projecting modern assumptions onto the meditator, particularly the idea that the meditator is just anyone and so representative of common sense. On the other, Broughton wants to suggest that Descartes's method of doubt provides a set of connections between philosophizing, skeptical thinking and ordinary life that often diverges in striking ways from modern attitudes to these things.

Part One is concerned to bring out the strategy of the First Meditation. Chs. 1 and 3 concern the relation between the meditator's rationale for suspending judgment on the basis of radical doubts and our ordinary assessment of the rational credentials of belief. Chs. 2 and 5 involve a careful discussion of the similarities and dissimilarities between ancient and Cartesian skepticism. Ch. 4 argues that skeptical scenarios are causal hypotheses designed to explain how we could have systematically false beliefs.

Part Two discusses the way in which Descartes uses radical doubts to establish the principles of First Philosophy. Ch. 6 is concerned with the important idea that doubting has conditions which Descartes sets out in what Broughton calls "dependence arguments". It by way of such arguments that Descartes aims to show that he is certain that he exists, that he thinks (ch. 7), that various causal principles are true and (partly on that basis) that God exists (ch.8). Ch. 9 explains how the conditions of doubt provide the basis for

addressing the Cartesian Circle, namely, that one can be absolutely certain of *some* clear and distinct ideas on the basis of dependence arguments prior to the proof of God's guarantee that *all* such ideas are true. Broughton also illuminates dependence arguments by usefully distinguishing them from transcendental arguments.

There is a great deal of subtle and nuanced interpretation that demands detailed discussion but let me focus briefly on two questions: 1) what is the nature of the skepticism that the mediator raises? and 2) what is the relation between the mediator and common sense? Broughton argues that the mediator's radical doubts are strategically employed to suspend judgment about all things despite the fact, which she acknowledges, that such "slight", "metaphysical" and "hyperbolic" doubts would ordinarily be dismissed as too far-fetched and ridiculous to disrupt our ordinary beliefs e.g. core perceptual beliefs. The skepticism at issue is a radical skepticism that includes within its scope all of our beliefs about the external world.

Broughton argues that despite sharing certain features of the perspective of common sense, and surreptitiously engaging Scholastic philosophy, the mediator does not have a fully coherent set of intellectual motivations for suspending judgment about all things. Only by breaking the rules of progressive meditating does the mediator have a rationale for accepting the very strong maxim according to which we should *only* assent to what is "completely certain and indubitable" (AT VII 18). Since this rationale depends upon retrojecting from the Sixth Meditation Descartes's account of human cognitive development into the figure of the mediator, he cannot be the figure of common sense that Descartes' presents him as being. Thus we are quite within our rights as ordinary believers to hold that the radical grounds for doubt provide no good reason at all to suspend judgment. According to Broughton, this "serious internal flaw" (p. 32) is one that Descartes simply did not recognize.

Apart from convicting Descartes of this incoherence, Broughton's reading runs into trouble with Descartes' insulation of practice from skeptical doubt. Descartes was well aware that action requires belief and he is explicit that the doubts in the First Meditation will have no bearing on action [elsewhere he

adds: morality and faith]. I was left unsure about how Broughton would respond to this challenge. On the one hand she plays up the artificiality, the strategic and make-believe qualities, of the radical grounds for doubt. So perhaps Descartes is not *really* suspending judgment. But on her view Descartes is to be taken quite seriously when he says that he will demolish all of his previous opinions: by an act of the will he manages to suspend judgment about all things. But if that is so, how is action (morality, faith) possible?

Broughton's treatment of certainty also seems to me questionable. She sees certainty as a *consequence* of the method of doubt but resists seeing Descartes as aiming at certainty from the beginning. But there are many indications in the *Meditations* and *Replies* that Descartes does indeed aim for a metaphysically robust conception of certain knowledge ("scientia") which will establish stable and lasting foundations for the sciences. On this alternative reading, Descartes's aim from the start is a very demanding kind of knowledge, which he carefully distinguishes from knowledge for practical purposes. That would provide a coherent rationale for the meditator's strong maxim of assent and it would also explain the practical insulation of belief. If the radical grounds for doubt can be read as directed specifically at preconceived certainties, then we can understand the setting aside of beliefs that are not certain but are, nonetheless, more reasonable than not, as a kind of bracketing for the special purposes of this inquiry. This reading fits well with the meditator's talk of deceiving himself and "pretending for a time" that his former opinions are false (AT VII 22).

Despite being well aware of the grounds for this reading, Broughton expends a great deal of ingenuity in resisting it and yet, at the same time, trying to do justice to its strengths. Whether we are convinced by Broughton's reading or not, there can be no doubt that it is quite exemplary in its capacity to seamlessly combine scholarly debate, history of ideas and original philosophizing in a clear and lively prose style. The book will be an essential reference in future discussions of Descartes and his method of doubt. But it will also prove of great benefit to those who, like Broughton, have a sense that contemporary philosophy has not done justice to the intimacy of the relation

between philosophy and skepticism and the light that thinking about radical doubts (and their conditions) may yet shed on the perspective of common sense.

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