

David Cunning

Argument and Persuasion in Descartes' Meditations.

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David Cunning's *Argument and Persuasion in Descartes' Meditations* is an ambitious book, offering interpretations of and solutions to a wide range of interpretive issues in the *Meditations*. Indeed, in the 'Introduction', Cunning lists twenty-two such issues on which he says he will defend original views.

A guiding principle of Cunning's meticulously argued interpretation is that Descartes' aim in writing the *Meditations* was to guide readers out of philosophical confusion. Thus, in the First Meditation, Cunning argues, the meditator himself is utterly confused, but as the work proceeds, many of these confusions are laid to rest. This itself is not a novel premise for interpreting the *Meditations*; as Cunning acknowledges, scholars such as Edwin Curley, Daniel Garber, and Gary Hatfield have read this work in this way. However, Cunning goes further, arguing that the meditator is not a 'full-blown Cartesian' even at the end of the *Meditations*. Moreover, Cunning reads the *Meditations* as designed to respond to the philosophical confusions of a wide range of readers—Aristotelians, mechanists, theists, atheists, skeptics, and those with no clearly articulated intellectual commitments at all. This premise guides many of Cunning's interpretations of particular aspects of the *Meditations*. Yet the effect is that the meditator himself (or perhaps herself) represents no single position at all; Cunning says that the meditator is working from a 'bad paradigm' (35), but it is perhaps more accurate to say that the meditator is working from multiple bad paradigms at once. On this reading, the arguments of the *Meditations* appear as scattershot efforts to hit as many different types of confusion as possible, and the work as a whole loses much of its sense of unity and order. 'So much the worse for the *Meditations*,' one might reply; yet Descartes himself emphasizes (e.g., in the 'Preface to the Reader') the special importance of the order and connection of the *Meditations'* arguments.

One example of this loss of a sense of order is the role Cunning attributes to the First Meditation. It is surely right that, from Descartes' own perspective, the meditator is philosophically confused at the beginning of the *Meditations*; after all, Descartes himself does not agree with various claims made in the First Meditation, such as that all his beliefs have come from or through the senses. Cunning seems to conclude from this that the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation are not especially important, writing that 'it makes no sense to attempt precise reconstructions of the arguments of the First Meditation, or to evaluate them for soundness or validity, for by Descartes' own admission they are not fully rigorous' (59). As Cunning sees it, Descartes 'is not really overcoming hyperbolic doubt in the *Meditations* because it never was anything to begin with' (123). Indeed, he claims that Descartes thought the skeptical arguments 'idiotic' (10). According to Cunning, the purpose of the First Meditation is to make thinkers of various types believe that 'it is possible that our minds have been created in such a way

that we might be wrong about matters that are most evident to us' (9). Some readers will come to believe this on the basis of their confused belief in a deceptive God, others on the basis of their mistaken belief that they exist because of chance, and others because they believe (again, mistakenly) that the concept of an evil genius is actually intelligible. In the Third Meditation, Cuning suggests, thinkers can then realize that that earlier belief that we might be wrong about the most evident things was actually based on 'primitive and unclear reasoning' (107).

But what remains unclear in Cuning's account is why Descartes would have thought that it was important to begin doing philosophy with skepticism. One common view is that the hyperbolic doubt of the First Meditation sets up the *cogito* argument of the Second Meditation; that is, that the meditator perceives the truth of 'I am, I exist' by realizing that this claim is self-verifying, even in the face of hyperbolic doubt. Cuning maintains, in contrast, that 'Descartes thinks there are multiple ways to grasp that we exist, and that he is not particularly concerned with which route his different readers take' (75). If this is right, then presumably some thinkers could come to have a clear and distinct perception of their existence even without having engaged in hyperbolic doubt, and thus the hyperbolic doubt of the First Meditation would not really be a necessary step for all thinkers to take. Yet Descartes himself seems to think that it is: in the opening section of the *Principles of Philosophy*, for example, he recommends that *anyone* who seeks truth should adopt skepticism as a first step. Cuning's interpretation diminishes the role of skepticism rather than treating it as an integral part of Cartesian method, for all thinkers.

Cuning's insistence that Descartes took his reading audience to include readers with different kinds of intellectual commitments thinkers does lead him to an interesting interpretation of why the *Meditations* includes more than one argument for the existence of God. Taking the Third Meditation to include two proofs, Cuning argues that each of the three proofs is pitched at a different kind of thinker, and that each is a freestanding argument. Again, though, Cuning offers no explanation for why the arguments appear in the order that they do.

Cuning also dispenses too quickly with the so-called Cartesian Circle. Maintaining that Descartes is an 'intuitionist in the sense that he holds that finite minds have a faculty for recognizing judgments to be true' (3), Cuning argues that the Third and Fifth Meditation proofs for the existence of God depend on premises which, Descartes thought, anyone who is thinking clearly would accept as obvious. On this reading, the 'truth rule' that we can identify what is true from our clear and distinct perceptions actually plays no role for Descartes. He argues that if it weren't for Descartes' concern to guide confused readers out of their confusion and ensure that they are able to perceive clearly and distinctly, Descartes could have begun the *Meditations* with the Third Meditation. Cuning's reading, however, leaves the role of the truth rule unclear. I am also not convinced that Cuning's account eliminates the threat of circularity from Descartes' project, for it leaves Descartes with the unjustified claim that we can simply recognize certain things as true. Even on Cuning's reading, Descartes is still begging the question.

In what is perhaps the most interesting part of the book, Cunning defends the unusual interpretation that Descartes was a necessitarian. His view is that passages in the *Principles* and the correspondence with Elizabeth which affirm divine foreordination of all events should be taken as Descartes' own considered opinion, and that passages in the Fourth Meditation which suggest that humans have free will represent only the reasoning of a still-confused meditator, someone 'who has an experience of independence but who does not recognize all of the implications of the result that God exists' (130). The *Meditations* itself cannot be taken as an exposition of Descartes' own views, according to Cunning. Certainly, Descartes' accounts of divine foreordination and free will deserve more scholarly attention than they have received, and Cunning's discussion here is a valuable contribution to the literature.

One slightly odd feature of Cunning's reading is a view he takes to follow from Descartes' belief that some readers might not grasp his arguments from the *Meditations* alone. While it seems reasonable to ascribe that belief to Descartes, it seems peculiar to read Descartes as having decided, while writing the *Meditations*, to clarify certain points 'later' rather than in the *Meditations* (105). Cunning makes this claim in a discussion of the various ways in which Descartes clarified God's existence, suggesting that Descartes saved some points of clarification for the Objections (to the *Meditations*) and Replies to Objections rather than making them in the *Meditations* itself. But this suggests, rather implausibly, that Descartes already had a fairly definite plan about what to write in his Replies even before receiving any of the Objections.

If Cunning is right, the *Meditations* is the wrong place to find many of Descartes' own views. The Objections and Replies, the *Principles*, and the correspondence have to be read in order to fill in the picture. This is presumably not to say that newcomers to Descartes' philosophy—undergraduates, for example—should not read the *Meditations*; on the contrary, newcomers to Cartesian philosophy are precisely the intended audience of that work, according to Cunning. But, if this is correct, a number of views typically taught in undergraduate courses—that skepticism is central to Descartes' project, that Descartes is a libertarian, that Descartes appeals to the 'truth rule'—turn out to be misguided. Even if Cunning does not succeed in overturning these and other standard views, this is a fascinating book.

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