

Preface

DESCARTES' FIRST *Meditation* was the first philosophical text I ever read and I credit it, more than anything else, with making a philosopher out of me. My initial reaction on finishing the text was one of amazement at how quickly and easily Descartes appeared to be able to completely undermine the common-sense picture of the world that all of us take for granted in everyday life, using compelling and seemingly unanswerable arguments. The condition of giddiness described by Descartes at the beginning of the second *Meditation* certainly described my state of mind after having read the first, and led me to the continued reflection on the questions of epistemology that, after the space of nearly forty years, has finally produced this book.

The path I traveled during those years was hardly a straight and narrow one, however. I eagerly investigated and tried out every position that offered any hope of providing a way to evade the Cartesian problematic—neo-Thomism, direct realism, perspective realism, ordinary language philosophy, and even the early versions of externalist epistemology—all to no avail. A number of influences, including personal contact with Laurence Bonjour during my years as a graduate student at the University of Washington (with whom I did a tutorial on the philosophy of perception) and the writings of Barry Stroud¹ persuaded me that I could not honestly evade the Cartesian problematic. More than this, I became convinced that the only possible solution to the challenge of skepticism was the very one that Descartes had attempted in the *Meditations*; however, like everyone else, I was equally convinced that the Cartesian strategy to rescue knowledge from the jaws of skepticism simply could not be made to work.

Although my interest in epistemological issues continued unabated, a parallel interest in the philosophy of religion led to my discovery of the writings of Austin Farrer and to my dissertation, *Transcendence and Image*:

1. Especially his *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1984.

*Austin Farrer on the Existence of God.*² Although Farrer is not entirely unknown, even to analytic philosophers, he remains a very minor figure in twentieth century thought; perhaps his sole distinction is his contention (shared with many English religious thinkers of the 1940's who were reeling under the onslaught of logical positivism) that God's existence is apprehended rather than inferred and that the traditional arguments for God's existence, while all defective as demonstrations for God's existence, may nevertheless serve as the catalyst for an intellectual intuition of God mediated by creatures, most directly by reflection on my own nature. I was fascinated by the novelty of this approach to the question of our knowledge of God's existence and did my best to make sense of Farrer's complex and difficult thoughts. I was only partially successful in my own eyes and left my study of his major work—*Finite and Infinite*³—less than fully convinced that Farrer's approach would work. I was soon looking into other, more mainstream defenses of theism, such as those initiated in the 1970s and '80s by Swinburne and Plantinga.

A few years ago, I began lecturing on the *Meditations* once again, after a space of some years. My conviction that Descartes had hit upon the only possible strategy to defeat skepticism—in particular, the skepticism of the “egocentric predicament” that gives rise to the problem of the external world—was, if anything, deepened by my reading of the text; more than this, it seemed to me that I was beginning to see a glimmer of how the Cartesian project might be made to work. I recalled something about *Finite and Infinite* that had struck me as odd at the time I was first reading it. Although Farrer was generally classified as a neo-Thomist—he himself stated that when he wrote *Finite and Infinite* he was “imbued with the Thomist vision and could not think it false”—when he initially turns to his characterization of the basic elements of theism as a metaphysical system, it is not to Thomas Aquinas that he turns, but rather to Descartes.⁴ Indeed, Farrer explicitly rejects the traditional Thomist proofs for God's existence that arrive at God only as a transcendent theoretical entity posited to explain some otherwise mysterious feature of the observable world, on the ground that the notion of “cause” employed in such proofs is equivocal and, as such, cannot be brought under any common principle of causal explanation. It remains, then, that God's existence must be some-

2. University of Washington, 1987, Thesis 34772.

3. London, Dacre Press, 1943; reprinted by Seabury, 1979.

4. See *Finite and Infinite*, 6–8.

how apprehended rather than inferred; Farrer turns to the *Meditations* for a simple sketch or outline of the approach he recommends.

The plan I adopted was to reconstruct the project of the *Meditations* along the lines suggested by Farrer, placing Descartes squarely in the medieval *itineram mentis* tradition pioneered by Augustine of Hippo. God is to be found, not by contemplation of the created world, but instead by turning inward and discovering Him in oneself by discovering one's self as the image and likeness of God through which God reveals Himself to us as that upon which we immediately depend for our existence and as the infinite expression of being to which our finite essence aspires. In so doing, I hope also to complete Descartes' project by establishing one of the most controverted claims made by Descartes, i.e. that I have a clear and distinct innate idea of God as a perfect being, a claim both necessary for his proofs for God's existence (and which, having been apprehended, makes those proofs largely superfluous) and for his subsequent proof of the existence of the external world.

In saying that I hope to complete Descartes' project through construing it in a particular way, I do not necessarily mean to be attributing the views I shall here defend to Descartes himself. I am not a Descartes scholar. Since I read neither Latin nor French, I am disqualified from discussing exegetical questions concerning either Descartes' texts or his intentions; despite this fact, I have not found it entirely possible to avoid taking stands on some controversial issues within Descartes scholarship. However, I have consulted what I regard to be the best available translations and have endeavored to acquaint myself with the major works on Descartes available in English.⁵ Although I have learned a great deal from these scholars, I have not, of course, been able to read everything on Descartes which I might have read, nor have I been able to make use of everything that I did read in what follows. No doubt there are many worthy scholars whose works I have not read and from whom I would have profited; to those scholars I can but tend my sincere regrets and plead the shortness of human life that bids us make an end to every project at some point on pain of never finishing it at all. Nor do I even wish to suggest that Descartes would agree with every claim I have made here, or ought to have done so. As it turns out, I myself disagree with a number of claims that I am persuaded Descartes accepted or was committed to. To the extent that I deviate from or am indifferent to Descartes' views, it is only because I think the truth is to be found elsewhere; that does not prevent me from thinking—or being right in thinking—that in Descartes we find important and substantial truths.

5. See my bibliography.

Preface

This project has, like the *Meditations* themselves, been a largely solitary venture; my only conversation partners have been the aforementioned scholars who have helped me grasp Descartes' texts. While I do not regard solitary meditation as a profitable way of doing philosophy in general, it is perhaps more excusable in this context than others; at any rate, I do not have any objections and replies to append to the text I have written. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of my mother, Lydia Duncan, and Mitchell Erickson of Philosophers on Holiday, in proof-reading my manuscript. They managed to save me from many serious errors and infelicities; no doubt many more remain for which they bear no responsibility. It is to my mother that this book is dedicated.

SAMPLE