Meditating With Descartes

James Hill

Introduction

René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* of 1641 is an extraordinary work. The metaphysical perspective presented in it marks, for many, the end of scholasticism and the beginning of modern philosophy. The radical doubts raised, the first principle of *the cogito*, the definition of the mind as a 'thinking thing', and the arguments for the existence of God, have all been treated as groundbreaking. But here I wish to draw attention to another extraordinary aspect of the *Meditations*, that of its form. Descartes presents his philosophy as a series of meditations, narrated in the first person, and this, as we shall see, is a highly original move. Indeed, to understand the project of the *Meditations* I believe we must ask ourselves the question as to why Descartes uses this meditational form.[1]

Some philosophers might become sceptical at hearing this. They might say that this form of presentation, while it may be of interest to literary theorists, is irrelevant to the philosophy that the *Meditations* is concerned to expound. A philosopher should be judged by his arguments, they would say, and literary form should be set to one side in any proper analysis of the validity of those arguments. What I shall say here is designed to challenge such a neat separation of form and content in the *Meditations*. If we try to reach the content by abstracting from the form of Descartes' work, I shall argue, we will often end up distorting that content and missing much of significance.

The Meditational Genre

Let us begin by asking what the title 'meditations' might be meant to signify. The term has various specific uses today, most often referring to a Buddhist spiritual discipline. But in the seventeenth century, when Descartes was writing, it referred to a genre of Catholic devotional writing. This literature offered training designed to bring about certain intense religious experiences that might be broadly characterised as mystical. Meditational writings had two important characteristics. First of all, they were not primarily theoretical works, but were concerned with teaching and guiding a practice. They were not so much textbooks as manuals. They were meant to train the reader in a spiritual practice that would be exercised over a certain period of time, sometimes a matter of years. One would be reading them in the wrong way if one sought only to glean from them facts or doctrine. The second important aspect of the meditational writings is that they were concerned with transforming the self. The exercises were meant to change the individuals who followed them; to make them perceive themselves differently, to achieve a different way of being. They were not activities that had an external social or material significance, but concentrated instead on the inner life of the individual.

This tradition of meditational writing was one that, arguably, had its roots in antiquity with the Stoics. But in the seventeenth century, when Descartes was writing, the most influential meditational writer was St Ignatius of Loyola. Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit movement, wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* which were promulgated in the Jesuit

schools and churches. Descartes, who studied at the Jesuit college of La Flèche would have known them well. In fact, while at La Flèche, he would have gone on retreats in which students retired to the countryside to practise the devotional exercises that Loyola recommended. A second meditational writer we might mention was the Spanish mystic San Juan de la Cruz, or St John of the Cross. His meditational exercises were presented in the form of poems, written with great compression and beauty, to which he appended extensive commentaries. In his most famous poem, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, the poet describes a journey of the soul through a state of extreme desolation and hardship—'the dark night'—to arrive at a mystical union with Christ. Descartes' use of radical doubt has sometimes been compared with the dark night motif.[2]

There is one noteworthy difference between the two meditational writers that we have mentioned. The first, Loyola, wrote in the third person. He recommended certain practices to the reader, that they should follow over a number of weeks. St John of the Cross, on the other hand—in his poetry if not in his commentaries—used the *first* person. He described the process of self-transformation from the point of view of one who undergoes the experience. As we know, Descartes' *Meditations* too are written in the first person. They have a narrator. How we should treat the utterances of this narrating 'I' is an important question that we will come back to. It would certainly be rash to assume that the narrator of the *Meditations* can, in any straightforward way, be identified with René Descartes himself.

Meditating About Philosophy

The meditational genre was traditionally not a vehicle for purely intellectual reflections, certainly not for philosophy. It was concerned, as we have said, with guiding spiritual exercises, not with imparting information or persuading the reader to accept certain doctrines. One would not expect to find refined argument or metaphysical theses in a meditational work. Loyola was, himself, hardly the intellectual. He wrote in his native Spanish, rather than in Latin, in a style that was unpolished and immediate. Meditational writings contrasted sharply with literature used in the Schools for the presentation of Scholastic philosophy. The Scholastics typically presented their metaphysics in treatises or 'summa'. The viewpoint would be a resolutely impersonal one. Definitions of important terms would be offered, and then chains of arguments, involving formal syllogistic inference, might be presented, arriving at conclusions. Treatises were textbooks *par excellence*, and they were designed to be taught to classes of students.

Now, the originality of Descartes' *Meditations* is that they present the central points of a metaphysical system in a form traditionally regarded as suited to devotional exercises. In appreciating why Descartes made this provocative departure from tradition we might bear in mind the two distinctive features of the meditational genre that we outlined earlier. Firstly, we said that meditational literature was meant to guide a practice. Descartes intends his *Meditations*, we may infer, as a guide to an *intellectual* practice. The philosophy here is more than just a chain of arguments, that might be analysed and assessed in a purely detached and neutral way. Instead it asks us to get involved in a more active way: to exercise, to train. This is perhaps why, in the Preface to the Reader, Descartes writes 'I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me'. Secondly, we

should remember that the meditational literature was concerned with inner, *self*-transformation. Descartes, we may infer, was aiming not just to relate to us his metaphysics, but also to progressively transform our minds to make that metaphysics more acceptable to us. We might expect his *Meditations* to help us develop certain faculties, and to turn away from faculties that we have habitually relied on. We must be ready to think differently.

Leading The Mind Away From The Senses

In what way are the *Meditations* meant to train our minds? The answer to this question must begin with the method of doubt, which is advanced at the beginning of the work in the First Meditation. What goes on here is actually, on one level, quite straightforward. Sceptical doubts are raised which have a sweeping significance. The arguments are relatively easy to understand: we are reminded that our senses sometimes deceive us, we are presented with the impossibility of finding 'sure signs' to distinguish dreaming from waking, and we are asked to entertain the hypothesis that we are mad, or that an evil demon might systematically plant thoughts and perceptions in our minds that are illusory. There does not seem to be anything difficult to *understand* here. It is surely surprising, then, that Descartes asks the reader (in his replies to objections to the *Meditations*) to spend weeks, or even *several months*, just meditating on the First Meditation.[3] Why spend all that time, one might reasonably ask, when the arguments, with their general conclusion that all our previous beliefs should be doubted, are crystal clear? True, we may need to critically analyse the arguments, spot potential flaws in them, ask whether they lead to the general sceptical conclusions that they purport to—but why months of meditation?

An answer to this is suggested by Descartes' remarks in the synopsis of the *Meditations* that he gives at the beginning of the book. Here he writes that:

> Although the usefulness of such extensive doubt is not apparent at first sight, its greatest benefit lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses.[4]

He presumably means that the doubts themselves form a kind of discipline. By entertaining them and making them vivid to ourselves Descartes hopes that we may prepare our minds for the metaphysics that is to come. In particular he means us to reduce our susceptibility to prejudice and to make us use our minds independently of what he calls 'the senses'.

Leading the mind away from the senses is a central theme of the *Meditations*, so let us try to understand what Descartes has in mind. In one superficial way, it is clear the senses are troublesome because they interfere with our thinking. Just as someone who has the television on may be less able to concentrate on a problem in geometry, so Descartes thinks that the senses drown out our intellectual abilities. We need to learn a technique to quieten the influence of senses if we are to make headway in intellectual matters.

But there is a deeper point here too. When Descartes talks of leading the mind away from the senses, he means a detachment from all *image-based* thought, whether of

direct sense-experience, or of memory and imagination. What does image mean here? The term is being employed in the broadest sense, not just referring to the visual, but to all sensory presentation. An image is a kind of picture: a representation of physical things in space. Now for Descartes imagination is also a faculty that pictures. When we imagine something we paint to ourselves, in one of the sense modalities, a thing that occupies space. Imagination, on this view, repeats to the mind the basic forms of sense: of seeing, feeling, hearing, tasting or smelling. So when Descartes is asking us to lead our minds away from the senses, he means generally that we should learn to think without the sensory pictures that the mind produces when it imagines.

It is in metaphysics that Descartes thinks use of images is particularly pernicious. He accuses one of the objectors to his *Meditations*—Pierre Gassendi—as having a mind 'so immersed in the senses that [it] shrinks from all metaphysical thoughts'.[5] To understand why images disenable metaphysical reflection in Descartes' view, let us take the example of a central metaphysical interest in the *Meditations*—the concept of the self (of the mind or soul that is subject to experience). To try to conceive of what the self is by using the imagination is hopelessly misguided in Descartes' view. If I try to imagine myself, or my soul, Descartes is convinced that I will end up with a crude form of physical representation, a picture of a material state. In fact this is exactly what the narrator confesses to having done, before he started his meditating. We are told that in the past, when he reflected on the nature of the soul, he '*imagined* it to be something tenuous, like a wind or a fire or ether, which permeated my more solid parts'.[6] Clearly not only was this picture wrong, the narrator was wrong to be *imagining* the self at all, he was using the wrong faculty. The result was just the kind of materialism that Descartes wishes to resist.

So the habit of using images in our thinking about metaphysics must be broken and one function of the method of doubt is to do precisely this. But a habit is not to be broken by a simple intention. (If this was possible giving up smoking would be easy.) What we need is a method, that may be applied over time. We need to gradually wean ourselves off our ingrained habits of thinking. In the case of dependence on the senses, we need to return, repeatedly, to the sceptical reflections—to meditate on them. Only thus can we break the spell of sense and start to do serious metaphysics.

Dreaming

But how might the doubts of the First Meditation lead us away from the senses and from image-based thinking. Let us take the case of the dreaming-hypothesis. This sceptical thought is never actually refuted until the final paragraph of the *Meditations*, it is therefore alive and active in the later meditations when, for example, the hypothesis of the evil demon has long been put to rest (with the proof of a good God in the Third Meditation). The whole work, it might be said, is played out in the shadow of the sceptical thought about dreaming, and the central metaphysical conclusions of the *Meditations*—about the self, God and the extended physical world—are all developed before the narrator can be sure that he is not in fact asleep dreaming.

Now, what exactly the sceptical point about dreaming seeks to show has often been differently interpreted. Some commentators argue that the conclusion is that the whole of life might be a coherent dream. Others argue that the scope of the argument is more

narrow, restricted only to the present moment. Again some commentators treat the argument as based on the psychological reality of sleeping and dreaming, while others treat this as incidental to the argument, and they see the concept of dreaming as equivalent to illusion in the broadest sense.

These questions of interpretation are important ones and should not be underestimated. However in one sense their solution is not vital. From the point of view of the role of the dreaming hypothesis in training our minds, the point being made is fairly clear. Treating sensory data as (quite possibly) part of a dream will be an effective way of relaxing the hold of the senses on our thoughts.

It should at once be emphasised that a dream for Descartes is essentially a matter of sense-experience. Certain basic non-picturing faculties are immune to the illusions of dreams and it is precisely these faculties that Descartes wishes to encourage in the mental training he is putting forward:

> … whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false.[7]

Later in the *Meditations*, near the end of the Fifth, Descartes' narrator will reaffirm that:

> even though I might be dreaming, if there is anything which is evident to my intellect, then it is wholly true.[8]

The clearest deliverances of the intellect, then, crucial not only to maths and geometry, but also to metaphysics, remain unaffected even in a dream. The discipline of reflecting and meditating on the fact that one may be dreaming will, therefore, on the one hand, make us distrustful of the veracity of images from the senses while, on the other hand, it will help us nurture the utterly non-pictorial truths of the intellect. We are therefore given a method for drawing the mind away from the senses, and Descartes can, with some reason, boast to one of his objectors that while 'many people had previously said that in order to understand metaphysical matters the mind must be drawn away from the senses … no one, so far as I know, had shown how this could be done.'[9]

The Narrator

Let us now return to the question of the narrator of the *Meditations*. We have noticed that the work is presented in the first person, but we have cautioned against any simple identification of this 'I' with Descartes himself. Often we find such an identification being unthinkingly made. We are told, for example, that Descartes asserts this or that, when in fact only the narrator does so. The narrator is, to be sure, Descartes' creation, but there are many functions that the narrator may have aside from simply revealing Descartes' own intellectual biography. What is the function of the narrator in the *Meditations*?

The narrator is perhaps best seen as a figure who shows us how the meditations should be conducted. He is a guide. But not a detached, didactic one, rather a fellow-

meditator, whose problems and breakthroughs will typify those encountered by anyone on the same intellectual journey. To play this role the narrator must be a kind of everyman. He cannot bring with him any specific biographical baggage, because that might conflict with the reader's own story and thus obstruct the exemplary role of the narrating voice.

The facts that we learn about the narrator are generally facts that might be true of anyone. For example, we learn that the narrator has accepted a large number of falsehoods learnt in childhood, we learn that the narrator sleeps and dreams, we learn that the narrator has 'firmly rooted in my mind' the concept of a creator God, and so on. Almost all Descartes' readers can be expected to identify with such characterisations. The narrator, on considering the Bedlamite-like characters who 'maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass' refuses to imagine he is among their number as 'such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.'[10] Clearly madness would be too extravagant a characteristic for our everyman guide whom all readers must identify with.

But the narrator does have one rather peculiar thing to say about himself. That is, he desires to establish something 'stable and likely to last' in the sciences. It is only this ambition that marks the narrator out as someone special. And this ambition is perhaps true of anyone seriously engaged in philosophy. The narrator is, then, perhaps best described as the archetypal philosopher.

But why, one might ask, do we need this everyman at all? Why is it not enough to just present the considerations that the narrator presents and leave them to the reader to adopt or refuse? I believe there are two important functions that the narrative voice has, and these are again closely tied up with the meditational character of the work as a whole.

The first point is that the narrator, however abstract and 'unfilled-in' a character he is, acts as a paradigm of how Descartes thinks the process of self-transformation will unfold. The narrator is a self, developing in time, that displays how the meditations will change the initiate who partakes in them. Thus, when the narrator experiences problems and resistances, all meditators might be expected to experience these. One problem he has is with a kind of inertia that prevents him from entertaining the doubts of the First Meditation for any length of time:

> My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom.

It is because of these natural obstacles to the method of doubt that a new technique is suggested for coping, and aiding the process of doubting:

> I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary. I shall do this until the weight of

> preconceived opinion is counterbalanced and the distorting influence of habit no longer prevents my judgement from perceiving things correctly.[11]

This technique involves the hypothesis of the evil demon. Here we see another good example of how what is usually considered simply as an argument is really a meditational technique designed to influence and train the mind of the meditator.

But there is a second reason why the narrator is indispensable. This has to do with Descartes' first principle, the *cogito*. There is much debate as to whether this amounts to a deductive proof—perhaps a species of syllogism— or not. Some prefer to see it as a kind of performance which is self-validating, in some way parallel to saying 'I do' in a marriage ceremony, which renders actual the bond of wedlock. One thing is clear, though— the cogito relies for its power on its first-person form.

> … this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.[12]

The cogito-type thought would not work in the same way if it was presented in the third person: 'He thinks, therefore he exists'. In this form one would be able to deny the proposition that he thinks (perhaps I am just imagining that he thinks, perhaps I am imagining him altogether). But in the first person, doubts about whether I am really thinking simply reaffirm that I am thinking, because my doubting is my thinking. So the undeniability of the cogito relies on it being presented by an I, and for this Descartes' narrator is the perfect literary device.

Form And Content: An Overview

What we have said here amounts to a number of suggestions of how the form of the text—in particular its use of the meditational genre—may have significance for our understanding the philosophical ideas in Descartes' Meditations. What has been remarked on here is really only a beginning. There are may other points that might have been developed. Our attention has been restricted to the First, and occasionally the Second, Meditation.

But a note of caution should also be sounded. The *Meditations* remain a text replete with argument. There is no reason to think that the details of this argument can always be illuminated or re-understood in the light of the form of presentation. For example it is unlikely that the ontological argument for God's existence in the Fifth Meditation can be helpfully analysed in the way we have been suggesting. What is being proposed here is only this: we should not assume that the form of Descartes' *Meditations* is always just an accidental feature which can be safely ignored.

James Hill
Charles University
Prague

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[1] Attention has been given to the meditational form in recent commentary on Descartes. See for example the first three articles in Amélie Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Descartes'* Meditations, University of

California Press, 1986. Perhaps the most important piece—and one that I am deeply in debt to here— is by Gary Hatfield, 'The Senses and the Fleshless Eye: The Meditations as Cognitive Exercises', included in the Rorty volume, pp. 45-80.

[2] Jacques Chevalier in his *Descartes*, Paris: Libraire Plon, 1921, drew attention to the analogy here. 'Le doute méthodique', he writes (p. 212), 'est quelque chose d'analogue à la *Via purgativa* des mystiques, à cette *nuit obscure de l'âme* dont parle saint Jean de la Croix, par laquelle il faut passer pour parvenir à la lumière éternelle du vrai.'

[3] AT VII 130; CSM II 94. Here AT refers to the Adam and Tannery (ed.) French edition of Descartes collected works, the Roman number refers to the volume and the page number follows (*Oeuvres de Descartes*, revised edition, Vrin, 1964-76). CSM refers to the Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch translation of Descartes works into English, with volume and page numbers again following in that order (*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[4] AT VII 12

[5] AT VII 348; CSM II 241. Generally the objections made by Gassendi are interesting as they are made by a philosopher who, in stark contrast to Descartes, thinks that all reflection and thought is ultimately based on sense-experience.

[6] AT VII 26; CSM II 17. My emphasis.

[7] AT VII 2O; CSM II 13.

[8] AT VII 71; CSM II 49.

[9] AT VII 131; CSM II 94.

[10] AT VII 18-19; CSM II 13.

[11] AT VII 22; CSM II 15.

[12] AT VII 25; CSM II 17.