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*The*  
G R E A T B O O K S  
R E A D E R

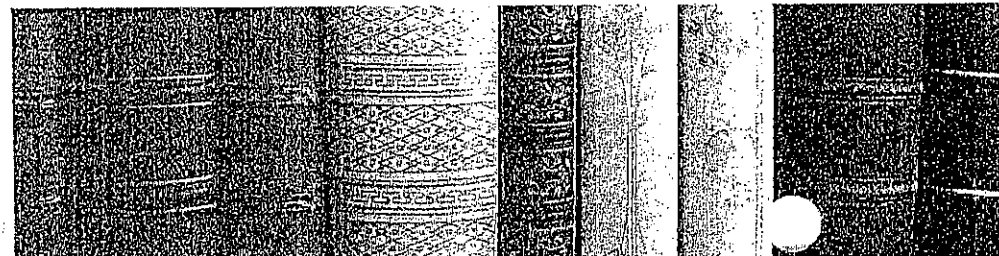
EXCERPTS AND ESSAYS *on the* MOST  
INFLUENTIAL BOOKS *in* WESTERN CIVILIZATION



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were created. But these properties are so great and excellent, that the more attentively I consider them the less I feel persuaded that the idea I have of them owes its origin to myself alone. And thus it is absolutely necessary to conclude, from all that I have before said, that God exists.

...

26. But perhaps I am something more than I suppose myself to be, and it may be that all those perfections which I attribute to God, in some way exist potentially in me, although they do not yet show themselves, and are not reduced to act. Indeed, I am already conscious that my knowledge is being increased [and perfected] by degrees; and I see nothing to prevent it from thus gradually increasing to infinity, nor any reason why, after such increase and perfection, I should not be able thereby to acquire all the other perfections of the Divine nature; nor, in fine, why the power I possess of acquiring those perfections, if it really now exist in me, should not be sufficient to produce the ideas of them.

27. Yet, on looking more closely into the matter, I discover that this cannot be; for, in the first place, although it were true that my knowledge daily acquired new degrees of perfection, and although there were potentially in my nature much that was not as yet actually in it, still all these excellences make not the slightest approach to the idea I have of the Deity, in whom there is no perfection merely potentially [but all actually] existent; for it is even an unmistakable token of imperfection in my knowledge, that it is augmented by degrees. Further, although my knowledge increase more and more, nevertheless I am not, therefore, induced to think that it will ever be actually infinite, since it can never reach that point beyond which it shall be incapable of further increase. But I conceive God as actually infinite, so that nothing can be added to his perfection. And, in fine, I readily perceive that the objective being of an idea cannot be produced by a being that is merely potentially existent, which, properly speaking, is nothing, but only by a being existing formally or actually.

...

39. But before I examine this with more attention, and pass on to the consideration of other truths that may be evolved out of it, I think it proper to remain here for some time in the contemplation of God himself—that

I may ponder at leisure his marvelous attributes—and behold, admire, and adore the beauty of this light so unspeakably great, as far, at least, as the strength of my mind, which is to some degree dazzled by the sight, will permit. For just as we learn by faith that the supreme felicity of another life consists in the contemplation of the Divine majesty alone, so even now we learn from experience that a like meditation, though incomparably less perfect, is the source of the highest satisfaction of which we are susceptible in this life.

*Translated by John Veitch, 1901*

## “THE BEAUTY OF THIS IMMENSE LIGHT”

THE PLACE OF GOD IN THE MEDITATIONS

Thomas Ward

**T**he *Meditations* of René Descartes is probably the most widely read philosophical text in the Western world. Not only is it rich and challenging, but it's also a work of literary brilliance. Not since Augustine's *Confessions* had there been a philosophical work so *personal*.

Written in the first-person singular, in a nontechnical idiom (for the most part), any reader can approach the work and begin immediately to grapple with weighty problems. But its brilliance as a piece of literature is most clearly evident in the way its ideas are reinforced through its literary form. In a first-person *meditation*, Descartes is articulating a philosophical position that places the individual thinker—the *meditator*—at the logical foundations of philosophical inquiry.

Descartes reserves a prominent role for God in his philosophy, but it might seem that the pride of place is actually reserved for the individual thinker attempting to reason his way out of his solitude, with God introduced

merely to ensure that the reconstruction of knowledge can proceed. Indeed, the subsequent philosophical tradition has tended to characterize Descartes's philosophy in just this way, with him as a reluctant theist. Many echo the sentiments of his contemporary Blaise Pascal, who said, "I cannot forgive Descartes; in all his philosophy he did his best to dispense with God."

Like the *Confessions*, however, *Meditations* is a God-infused book. Most readers these days overlook this fact, tending to write off the more theological aspects and to focus on the meditator's skeptical arguments and subjective outlook. This is unfair. A proper appreciation of Descartes demands we take his theological thought seriously.

So, how does God enter the philosophical picture? Descartes's fundamental philosophical goal was to discover an absolutely certain foundation of knowledge, and he thought he'd made this discovery in one three-word Latin sentence:

*Cogito, ergo sum*; I think, therefore I am.

(Roughly the same thought is expressed in different terms in the *Meditations*; this version is found in *Principles of Philosophy*.) The idea is that you cannot doubt your own existence, because the act of doubting presupposes that there's something doing the doubting—the doubter.

Dissatisfied with what he'd been taught at school, Descartes set out to question everything, rejecting each belief that wasn't certain. In the First Meditation, he walks us through a gauntlet of skeptical arguments, offering reasons for doubting our beliefs in even the most ordinary and obvious things: that there's a physical world, that you have a body, that other people exist, that God exists, and that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . By the close, it seems skepticism has swept everything aside, that there is nothing but "inextricable darkness."

However, in the Second Meditation, Descartes realizes there is one thing that simply cannot be doubted: that he exists.

From this single foundation of certainty, Descartes attempts a reconstruction of all our knowledge of the world and of God. Certain at least that he *is*, he wonders how, if he were the only existing thing, he should have an idea of a supremely perfect, infinite Being.

He first reasons that there is no way he himself could be the source of his idea of God, that God Himself must *be* and must have given Descartes the idea of Himself; in his beautiful portrayal, the idea of God is "the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work."

So, Descartes's world has gone from one to two; first him alone in the darkness, and now him together with God. From here he reflects on God's nature, in particular His goodness. He reasons it would be inconsistent with God's goodness that nearly all his beliefs should be utterly false; God, he says, is not a deceiver.

If we're sufficiently careful in our pursuit of knowledge, then, we can be assured we will reach it. With this argument, Descartes reopens the door to the external world. If we restrict ourselves to believing only those things that we can "clearly and distinctly" perceive, we will not err in our judgment.

Perhaps now we can see, minimally, why Pascal's critique may not be sufficiently charitable. There definitely is a sense in which the self comes before God in Descartes's system, but there is equally, and arguably more importantly, a sense in which God is before everything else. Let me explain.

For Descartes, the *knowledge* of oneself comes before the knowledge of God. I don't mean "before" in a temporal sense, the way we might think of a child gaining self-awareness before she becomes aware of God: I do mean that in an explanation of the justification of our beliefs, knowledge of God (and of the world God has created) follows knowledge of oneself.

In the course of writing Descartes not only uses the *Cogito, ergo sum* argument to support his other beliefs, he also discovers some of the external conditions that make possible the activity of meditating in the first place. Most significantly, he discovers that his existence and activity must be sustained from moment to moment by God's continual conservation. Thus, for Descartes, the *existence* of oneself comes after the existence of God.

We might say that Descartes set out alone to discover God but learned that God was with him in the search.