

**“Descartes showed there was no need for God in philosophy.”**

**With reference to Descartes' key philosophical ideas and with particular reference to Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* and related metaphysical works, discuss and critically assess this statement.**

Descartes marked a pivotal moment in Western philosophy with respect to the role of reason in both philosophy and theology. The controversy surrounding Descartes' application of his “first principle of philosophy”<sup>1</sup>, the *cognito* (“I am thinking, therefore I am”), resulted in his work being put on the Catholic Index of the Inquisition shortly after his death. To Catholic apologists and theologians today, it is still a strongly emotive subject:

*“[In] response to a question about the pervasive ideologies that had swept Europe during the past couple of centuries, and which had resulted in the slaughter of millions, [Pope John Paul II] contended that in order to explain all this, we have to go back to the ...revolution brought about by the philosophical thought of Descartes.”<sup>2</sup>*

Pope John-Paul II's dialogue referred to above is found in his book “Memory and Identity” which divided philosophy at Descartes:

*“The **cognito, ergo sum** (I think, therefore I am) radically changed the way of doing philosophy. In the pre-Cartesian period, philosophy, that is to say the **cognito**, or rather the *cognosco*, was subordinate to **esse**, which was considered prior...it marked the decisive abandonment of what philosophy had been hitherto, particularly the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and namely the philosophy of *esse* [being].”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, Ian Maclean (trans), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p28

<sup>2</sup> James Matthew Wilson, ‘The Treasonous Clerk: “See, I Am Doing Something New”: John Paul II's Summons to Secular Being’, <http://www.firstprinciplesjournal.com/articles.aspx?article=1394>, 6<sup>th</sup> Jan 2013

<sup>3</sup> James Matthew Wilson, ‘The Treasonous Clerk: “See, I Am Doing Something New”: John Paul II's Summons to Secular Being’, <http://www.firstprinciplesjournal.com/articles.aspx?article=1394>, 6<sup>th</sup> Jan 2013

The controversy was also found within Protestant Holland where Descartes had lived for a large portion of his working life. At the height of disputations in the 1640s, his philosophy was described as “blasphemous and atheistic”<sup>4</sup> by Leiden professor of theology Jacob Trigland. This essay examines whether it really was Descartes’ intention to facilitate the “*removal of God from philosophy*”<sup>5</sup> by “[*setting*] up reason, everyone’s own rational faculty, as the sole authority and criterion of truth”<sup>6</sup>. The approach of this essay is first to set his personal context and those of his seminal *Discourses* to his other metaphysical writings. In the author’s view, only then can Descartes’ thought be interpreted and a realistic assessment of the charge against him made.

The following words of Descartes in his *Meditations* are immediately pertinent to establishing the place of the *Discourse* in Descartes’ metaphysics:

*“I have already briefly discussed questions about God and the human mind in the Discourse...I did not intend to discuss them in detail in that book..but...to learn from readers’ reactions how they should be **presented thoroughly**”<sup>7</sup> (emphasis added).*

In the commentaries of Cottingham<sup>8</sup> and Sorell, similar thoughts are found on the brevity of the *Discourse* “as part of [*a maturing*] integrated system of knowledge”<sup>9</sup>.

There is also fragmentary evidence from his early writings that suggest the core of

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Hatfield, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp27-29

<sup>5</sup> Peter A. Schouls, *Descartes and the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: McGill-Queens Press, 1989), pp60-61

<sup>6</sup> Marcus Weigelt, ‘Introductory Essay’ in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Marcus Weigelt (trans) (London: Penguin, 2007), p.xxix

<sup>7</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, Michael Clarke(trans), (London: Penguin, 2003), p12

<sup>8</sup> John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume 1)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p4nn

<sup>9</sup> Tom Sorell, *Descartes – A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p1

the metaphysical component was ready for publishing as early as 1620<sup>10</sup>. It has been the subject of much scholarly discussion<sup>11</sup> as to how truthful Descartes is in his representation of the development and in the presentation of his thought within the *Discourse*. What seems to be the consensus is that, though the *Discourse* has a final tone and autobiographical form, it is an abridged and idealised account<sup>12</sup> of the development of his thought to reinforce the integrity of the thesis he wishes his readers to consider elsewhere, “it was...a fable<sup>13</sup> that Descartes presented the book to his readers”<sup>14</sup>. One popular thesis for his unusual publication pattern and his self-imposed exile in Protestant Holland was to avoid the possibility of suffering the recent fate of Galileo who in 1633 had been censured by the Inquisition and imprisoned. He had lamented, ‘truth by itself is so little respected’<sup>15</sup>. However, although Descartes was concerned about the judgment<sup>16</sup>, it is probably an over-simplification.

In his own commentary on the move, all that is suggested is that he enjoyed Holland itself beyond anywhere in Europe and felt the intellectual climate to be of “total freedom”<sup>17</sup>. He had deliberately withdrawn from the French *bourgeoisie* to develop his work<sup>18</sup> and not to hide from the Church. This interpretation is reinforced by his friendship and lifelong working relationship with Mersenne. Mersenne was

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<sup>10</sup> John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume 1)*, pp2-5

<sup>11</sup> Gary Hatfield, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations* (London: Routledge, 2003), p45, pp66-67

<sup>12</sup> There is some recent scholarly dispute of this asserting it was strongly autobiographical, see Hatfield, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*, p34

<sup>13</sup> René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, Ian Maclean (trans), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p6

<sup>14</sup> Sorell, *Descartes – A Very Short Introduction*, p22

<sup>15</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method*, p.xxiii

<sup>16</sup> Cottingham, *Descartes*, p21 n18

<sup>17</sup> John Cottingham et al (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume III – The Correspondence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp31-32

<sup>18</sup> Cottingham, *Descartes*, pp11,21

based in Paris, his publicist, fellow scientist and priest of substantial standing within the French Catholic church: “[he] was...a well published author on theology and its relation to natural philosophy, an implacable enemy of [the atheist] free-thinkers”<sup>19</sup>.

Descartes’ philosophical project famously started with his “dreams” in the night of 10th November 1619 which he interpreted as a divine commission to introduce a completely new scientific and mathematical system<sup>20</sup>. In his words it was to “destroy”<sup>21</sup> first the Aristotelian Scholasticism (*Thomism*<sup>22</sup>) of the Roman church which defined objects in terms of their function rather than speculating about their real nature.<sup>23</sup> It was to propose Copernican heliocentricity rather than geocentric Neo-Platonic metaphysics that had made man and his abode the locus of Creation about which all else revolves. However, it was also to sweep away the atheism of the “free-thinkers” for at the very advent of his project he had written on his notebook “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”<sup>24</sup>. He also rejected the radical empiricism of the sceptic philosophers who had been heavily influence by Montaigne at the opening of the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>25</sup>. He did not accept their sceptical conclusion that it was impossible to be certain about any truth and passionately rejected the resulting proposition that knowledge of reality was to be limited to what could be discerned from sensory information<sup>26</sup>. In contrast, absolute certainty in natural philosophy was the goal of his entire philosophical project. This required

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<sup>19</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method* (2008), p.ix

<sup>20</sup> John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume 1)*, p4, p4n

<sup>21</sup> John Cottingham et al (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume III – The Correspondence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p173

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Law, *Philosophy* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2007), pp248-9

<sup>23</sup> Hatfield, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*, p67

<sup>24</sup> John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume 1)*, p1

<sup>25</sup> Law, *Philosophy*, p35

<sup>26</sup> Sorell, *Descartes – A Very Short Introduction*, p3

metaphysics and in particular God, to be at the centre of the foundations of Descartes' philosophy. Thus, the *Discourse* was added as the metaphysical component of his first major publication of 1637 with treatises on geometry, meteorology and optics but at a very late stage (after the publication run had begun), probably because of the complications resulting from the Galileo affair. This is supported by his correspondence with Mersenne who was intimately aware of the details of the censure of Galileo, having published a detailed report and analysis of the Inquisitional judgment, its implications and possible mitigation for loyal Catholic scientists<sup>27</sup>. Descartes himself had been critical of Galileo's lack of metaphysical underpinnings for his theory "*he built without a foundation...without considering the primary cause of nature, he has sought only the reasons for some particular effect*"<sup>28</sup>. Descartes refers to the *Discourse* as the fulfilment of a promise to him and his fellow Parisian intellectuals to not repeat Galileo's epistemological error and to not publish without the metaphysical components of his theory.

The most elaborate and nuanced development of his metaphysical arguments found in the *Discourse* was in the *Meditations*. It was in the scholarly language of Latin rather than his vernacular French of the *Discourse* and included by the second Utrecht edition of 1642<sup>29</sup>, *Objections and Replies* to the *Discourse*. Whereas Descartes refers explicitly to the *Discourse* as a "fable"<sup>30</sup>, the *Meditations* have the literary form of serious theological writing as associated with the medieval Scholastic practices. It represented his fullest engagement with the theological problems as the

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<sup>27</sup> *Questions inouyes* (new questions) and *Les Questions théologiques, physiques, morales et mathématiques* (Theological, Physical, Ethical and Mathematical Questions)

<sup>28</sup> Sorell, *Descartes – A Very Short Introduction*, p3

<sup>29</sup> John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume 1)*, p.xi

<sup>30</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method*, p6

*Objections* demonstrated his understanding of the considerable unease within theological circles of the ramifications for theology of his philosophy. Descartes was always careful to avoid prescription and polemic instead frequently writing as a narrator that invited the reader to become the “I” in the text and heir to the conclusions he had arrived at<sup>31</sup>. What seems clear is that the *Meditations* were both a clarification and “correction” of his metaphysics for theology using a “synthetic method of exposition”<sup>32</sup> but later in his *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) he formalised the arguments for philosophy using an “analytic method of exposition”<sup>33</sup>. However, as Hatfield rightly points out, the “basic ideas” remained constant, Descartes would rather not (and did not) publish than change them<sup>34</sup>.

The *Discourse* is to introduce the reader to how Descartes changed his way of thinking that he may arrive at certainty and truth. Paradoxically, in attempting to then decide what could be certain, Descartes had started with the procedure of “methodical doubt” associated with the sceptic philosophers but he was later to emphasise that he was only using the method as an analytical tool to invalidate what had gone before and to present his own philosophy<sup>35</sup>. He decided “[to] reject as completely false everything in which I could detect the least doubt”<sup>36</sup> but his key conclusion was a non-sceptical one in that he “could accept...without scruple”<sup>37</sup> that it was only in the realm of thought that he could be certain of the boundaries of an autonomous self, personified in the aphorism for which he is most famous, “*Cognito*,

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<sup>31</sup> Hatfield, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*, pp49-51

<sup>32</sup> Peter A. Schouls, *Descartes and the Possibility of Science* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), p75

<sup>33</sup> Schouls, *Descartes and the Possibility of Science*, p75

<sup>34</sup> Hatfield, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*, p17

<sup>35</sup> Sorell, *Descartes – A Very Short Introduction*, pp70ff

<sup>36</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method*, p28

<sup>37</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method*, p28

*ergo sum*” – I am thinking, therefore I exist<sup>38</sup>. The self was discerned because of its ability to use the faculty of *reason*. For even if we were under the influence of deception, the fact that we can *think* it is possible that we are deceived, shows we are not completely deceived as the deceiving agent was not able to deceive us into thinking a thought that would conceal the deception. Thus, what remains that cannot be doubted as evidence of independent existence, is thought itself, “*I judged that I could accept [the Cognito] as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking*”<sup>39</sup>.

The “deception” thesis then led him directly on to the second proposition of his philosophy that sought to guarantee the integrity of reason to discern the true nature of the Universe. The idea of God implied God’s existence: *God exists and exists necessarily*<sup>40</sup>. He began with the innate idea of God that he found within himself which he concluded must have come from the perfect being of God as it could not have originated in his imperfect mind subject as it was, to habitual error from sensory perception of lower substantial reality:

*“there remained only the possibility that [the idea] had been put into me by a nature which was truly more perfect than mine, and one which even had in itself all the perfections of which I could have any idea, that is...God”*<sup>41</sup>

God is thus considered an “infinite substance” more real than the “finite” substance whose category or degree of reality cannot be exceeded<sup>42</sup> and so requires, uniquely, its own existence, “*I found that existence was part of that idea...in consequence, it is at least as certain as any geometric proof that God, who is that perfect being, is or exists*”<sup>43</sup>. So, in summary, the perfection of the idea of God was unique and

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<sup>38</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method*, p28

<sup>39</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method*, p28

<sup>40</sup> Clarke (trans), *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, p43

<sup>41</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method*, p30

<sup>42</sup> Sorell, *Descartes – A Very Short Introduction*, p69

<sup>43</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method*, p32

necessarily implied his existence. This is, of course, Descartes version of the *ontological argument* first associated with St Anselm (1033-1109).

He then pondered the question, what if he was under the influence of a powerful deceiver. He answered, the fact, that he, as a thinking being could entertain the thesis of a deceiver was evidence that the *idea* of his possible deception was placed within his mind witnessed to the benevolence of the perfect Self. This Self was perfect in every respect and worthy of adoration: "*I should pause here for a brief while to contemplate God himself, to consider his attributes and to contemplate and adore the beauty of this immense light insofar as the eye of my darkened mind can tolerate it.*"<sup>44</sup> He then continues that considering God does not want us to be deceived and as we are made in His image, God must have placed within our reasoning faculty a mechanism that allows us to establish truth *a priori* in our thinking processes. Our reason can resolve what is true apart from our senses because God has placed within it an innate function that allows us clear and distinct perception. This innate function is "inner light"<sup>45</sup> in the *Discourse*, *intuition* in his *Regulae* by which we can be certain of that which is true when it is plain and evident to our mind, "*the conception of a clear and attentive mind, which is so easy and distinct that there can be no room for doubt about what we are understanding*"<sup>46</sup>.

With these foundations laid, there are important contingent but abstract causal principles that Descartes uses to establish as the link between his metaphysics and physics. All physics is derived from this "infinite substance", this primary, absolute

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<sup>44</sup> Clarke (trans), *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, p43

<sup>45</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method*, p24

<sup>46</sup> John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume 1)*, p14



substance of God. Rules 5, 6 and 7 from the *Regulae* in the *Discourse* form the central components of the practical application by logical deduction of what was conceived *a priori*. Rule 5 tells the enquirer to ‘*reduce complicated and obscure propositions step by step to simpler ones, and then starting with the intuition of the simplest ones of all, try to ascend through the same steps to the knowledge of all the rest*’. Rule 6 attempts to define what was “simple” and Rule 7 gives a technique for ascension. Fundamentally to Descartes, that which is simple and self-evident, correspond to the truths of pure mathematics, entirely divorced from the perception of the senses. The complex problem is resolved by breaking it into the most basic components that must yield to mathematical analysis and so “ascend” from what is self-evident to what is not necessarily self-evident, “*for Descartes, all soluble problems could be expressed in terms of equations between knowns and unknowns abstracted from the data*”<sup>47</sup>. He was later to describe that the “secret” of his method was this ability to arrange problems in this serial fashion<sup>48</sup>. Descartes’ second argument for the existence of God, the “Trademark Argument”<sup>49</sup>, proceeds directly from the idea that a series has a preceding term which produces the successive term and so must be of at least the same order of perfection. For the “perfect” idea of God, God must exist to create that idea.

So, in summary, to Descartes, when we distil away all the pollution of our senses, we return to that which is absolute, simple or basic that is, what can be expressed generally and abstractly in the mathematics of geometry and motion. By a direct, but abstract causality, he demonstrates that God gave rise to the processes

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<sup>47</sup> Sorell, *Descartes – A Very Short Introduction*, p16

<sup>48</sup> John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume 1)*, p21

<sup>49</sup> Cottingham, *Descartes*, pp48-57

of the natural world which could be expressed by pure mathematics. This metaphysical foundation of all his physics explains why the *Discourse* and its expanded version in the *Meditations* cannot be considered an anachronistic appendage to the scientific Treatises to appease the religious authorities but their foundation. It is knowledge from self-evident principles and so God represents “First Cause” but in a sense radically different from Aquinas and the scholasticism derived from his reading of Aristotle that discussed matter and phenomena contingently. Aquinas’ causality is synthetic and *a posteriori*. Descartes’ causality to Descartes’ is analytic, abstract and deductive intuited *a priori*. Consequently, errors result when we rely on the *a posteriori* evidence of our physical senses rather than discern the “true” or simple nature of something, amenable only to the objectivity of mathematics. Descartes defined *objective reality* as that which can be described by pure mathematics, separated from the sensory world with its faulty intellectual perception<sup>50</sup>. Thus, reason can be trusted to lead us to truth about the physical world *only* when we apply it consistently with God’s thought revealed to us in the “objective reality” of mathematics. If God does not exist, we cannot be certain of what we perceive because we may be deceived. Human intellect was only capable of a subjective or sense driven view of reality unless we re-train our minds according to this serial method of the *Discourse*. The critical theological feature here is that God is required as the arbiter of systematic knowledge: “[the atheist, strictly speaking] cannot have systematic knowledge unless he has been created by the true God, a God who has no intention to deceive”<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Sorell, *Descartes – A Very Short Introduction*, p97

<sup>51</sup> Clarke (trans), *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, pp99-104

It is now appropriate to consider the criticism of his philosophy and the charge that he was in fact removing God from philosophy. Firstly, as shown above, Descartes identifies that the “idea” of God implies the necessary existence of God. Descartes defines God into existence using reason alone with no recourse, by his method of the *Discourse*, to any theological concept. It is by reason alone, on an *a priori* basis. This is Descartes’ version of the ontological argument and it is precisely Descartes’ version of the ontological argument<sup>52</sup> that Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* is seen to have successfully critiqued with his famous summary “existence is not a predicate”<sup>53</sup>.

Kant’s critique was simple – there is no difference in the *concept* of £100 whether or not it exists or does not exist. The predicates simply supply additional information as to what it is predicating: if we should find £100 we will know more accurately what we are looking for. “Existence” does not supply any additional information and so is not a “predicate” in the same way that colour or texture would be. Descartes was critiqued a second time by Russell in his “theory of descriptions”<sup>54</sup> who rather more helpfully identifies for us the semantic difference between the “is” of predication that describes an object (whether or not it exists) and the “is” of existence. In Russell’s decoding of what we actually *mean* when we talk of “existence”, the question for Descartes then becomes “is the concept of God as the greatest conceivable being and most perfect being instantiated in reality?” Descartes then falls unceremoniously between the logical stools because his argument is no longer *a priori* but contingent on finding an instance of God to verify that God exists. In other words, the result of logical analysis reveals that Kant tells

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Palmer, *The Question of God* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp9-10

<sup>53</sup> Palmer, *The Question of God*, p11

<sup>54</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1991), p785

us “existence” gives no further information about this perfect being called God and Russell adds that all that remains is an unproven *hypothesis* of God. “Existence” cannot be proved *a priori* but must always be verified by external reference<sup>55</sup>.

Russell is even quicker to dismiss Descartes’ second argument for the existence of God (the “Trademark argument”) by citing the simple mathematical axiom that there are many series of numbers, e.g. negative numbers and prime fractions, that either have no first term (negative numbers) or a fixed number of terms.

Of course, these arguments were logical objections to Descartes and primarily philosophical. Theologians took greater exception to Descartes’ because of the apparent redundancy of God in Descartes’ model. Descartes’ linked Man’s reason with God in the sense that God had created the reason of Man and had created “natural laws” that Descartes demonstrates are discoverable by this reason. However, Man’s reason in discovering these laws essentially becomes autonomous – the process of reasoning requires no direct involvement of God. This was indeed the position of the French *deist* philosophers (the *Philosophes*), who though not Cartesian, followed in Descartes’ wake in the following century to dismiss God from any active involvement with the world. Descartes thought that he had avoided this by requiring God as the arbiter of true knowledge – an atheist could never be sure he was not being deceived by the perfect deceiver. However, it is apparently a straightforward analysis to demonstrate that Descartes’ system can be slightly modified into a non-theistic form.

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<sup>55</sup> Palmer, *The Question of God*, p13

The atheist Cartesian can in thought maintain a *hypothesis* of a perfect deceiver but if it was a perfect deceiver then by Descartes' rule the perfect deceiver must exist and would be God because God alone has necessary existence. However, the concept of God is then self-contradictory because Descartes himself asserted that "*the will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness, and so cannot apply to God*"<sup>56</sup> and the atheist Cartesian following Descartes own rules can safely assert God cannot exist and can trust his reason with no fear of contradiction. This is the position taken by Schouls<sup>57</sup> where he categorically states that Descartes' contemporary Pascal was referring to this logical conclusion in his criticism of Descartes:

*"I cannot forgive Descartes. In all his philosophy he would have been quite willing to dispense of God. But he could not help granting him a flick of the forefinger to start the world in motion; beyond this he has no further need of God."*<sup>58</sup>

Schouls then distinguishes Descartes the spiritual man who would write the *Meditations* from Descartes the 'free thinker' that is the herald of "God-free" thinking "that characterised the rebellion against Christianity and the new thinking of the Enlightenment"<sup>59</sup>. He argues that Descartes may have even been aware of the implications of his theory when he writes in 1644 in his *Principles of Philosophy*:

*"But meanwhile whoever turns out to have created us, and even should he prove to be all-powerful and deceitful, we still experience a freedom through which we may abstain from accepting true and indisputable those thing of which we have not certain knowledge, and thus obviate our ever being deceived."*<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume II)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p37

<sup>57</sup> Schouls, *Descartes and the Enlightenment*, pp62-63

<sup>58</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Section 2, pensée 77. This is the traditional numbering as in most public domain translations, not the critical numbering and organisation as adopted in Honor Levi (see bibliography)

<sup>59</sup> Schouls, *Descartes and the Enlightenment*, pp60, 60n

<sup>60</sup> John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume 1)*, p194

Here he seems to have dropped his central reason to maintain God as the centre of his epistemology conceding that an autonomous omnipotence to reason apart from any dependence on God. This is illustrated further by the problem for Descartes is the circularity of his reasoning in some of his premises:

*“[He] has to use premises that are supposed to be true in virtue of their clarity and distinctiveness, but it is not until God’s existence is proved that anyone can be sure that clear and distinct perceptions are true.”<sup>61</sup>*

This reinforces the idea that God adds no strength to his reasoning beyond which the atheist Cartesian would have. When he tries to give Rules for applying his method, it is evident that Cartesian deduction is not formal logical deduction. It is not inference from premise to conclusion but a process that enumerates and types that “straddles the *a priori/a posteriori* distinction”<sup>62</sup>. Specific phenomena need to be explained by experiments and observation and are thus firmly *a posteriori*. His method is thus equally valid for the atheist or theist Cartesian.

Thus, at this juncture it would seem that Descartes really had laid the foundations for the removal of God from natural philosophy. His method described in the *Discourse* would remain valid for true science without needing God as arbiter of knowledge. Descartes accidentally deleted God from philosophy by following the argument, in the spirit of Socratic discourse, to its logical conclusion. However, such a conclusion is a narrow interpretation of Descartes. It neglects that Descartes frequently employed what he called an “analytical method” that would not be entirely sequential. If it would not render to certainty or a conclusion from doubt contradicted what he considered self-evident, even from faith or in the domain of morals, he would reject it as seen in his *Meditations* where the end of extreme doubt was a call

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<sup>61</sup> Sorell, *Descartes – A Very Short Introduction*, p68

<sup>62</sup> Sorell, *Descartes – A Very Short Introduction*, p92

to contemplation. It is important also that Descartes emphatically assigned *necessary* existence to God alone and considered the *Cognito* as an intuited logical unit rather than as a syllogism<sup>63</sup>. The logical limitations of a particular argument type in *generality* do not necessarily negate Descartes position for Descartes was considering a *specific* application and so would not permit Schouls inversion of the argument. This point is made by Plantinga discussing the ontological argument where he seeks to demonstrate that the argument maintains its rationality but is not an absolute proof. To the non-believer, it simply becomes an argument that they accept or reject<sup>64</sup>. The proof aspect is provided by its combination with faith and it is certain that Descartes' faith was his constant companion. In his travels, he took only the Bible and Aquinas' *Summae*<sup>65</sup> and it is unreasonable to judge his work when neglecting the key place of his theology.

It seems to have been given insufficient attention that when discussing Descartes' philosophy that though he had a strong distaste for the contemporary "theological" disputes of the Aristotelian scholastics that did not necessarily mean that he was theologically ignorant. In the letter of Dedication that prefaces the *Meditations* it clearly shows a man of deep and intense faith and profound understanding of the differences between philosophical arguments for God's existence and the experience of God as a believer. He presents the metaphysical aspect of his philosophical project as an apologetic:

*"Although for those of us who are believers, it is enough to accept on faith that the human soul does not die with the body and that God exists, it certainly seems impossible in the case of non-believers to convince them of any religion or any moral virtue unless they are first convinced by natural*

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<sup>63</sup> John Cottingham, *Descartes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p36

<sup>64</sup> Alvin Plantinga, 'The Ontological Argument' in *The Analytic Theist – an Alvin Plantinga reader*, James F. Sennett(ed) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p71.

<sup>65</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method*, px

*reason...It is perfectly true that we should believe in God's existence because it is taught by Sacred Scripture because it comes from God, for faith is a gift of God and the same person who gives us grace to believe other things can also provide the grace to believe that he exists. However, that is not something that can be proposed to non-believers, because they would think it circular."*<sup>66</sup>

He then quotes a ruling of the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-17) that had set out the agenda of the Roman Church for the response to Luther and the challenge to Christian philosophers from Pope Leo X to demonstrate the necessity for God's existence by *philosophy* rather than theology<sup>67</sup>. It seems that Descartes was more knowledgeable than many of his ecclesiastical critics of the position of the Lateran and Trent councils with the regard to the Church position regarding the status of human knowledge:

*"Descartes addressed questions about the scope of human knowledge and the competence of our cognitive faculties by asking whether our minds, independently of what may be taught by the Bible, can provide convincing arguments in favour of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. His answer was unambiguously in the affirmative and he was directly in line with the counter-Reformation councils."*<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, it is true that some of the correspondence with Mersenne was obviously drafted with the view that it would be seen by the Jesuit and Church authorities that had abstained from condemning his work. However, this is easily explained in that Mersenne as a priest was intimately politic and understood the delicacy with which Descartes needed to manage his work. For example, Maclean makes the point that Descartes rewrote a personal letter in 1634 to Mersenne using an unusual formal greeting and impersonal tone but as if he was "ignorant" of the details of the Galileo affair which he clearly was not, having previously quoted at length to Mersenne<sup>69</sup>. Rather skilfully he highlights the case of Jesuit Father Scheiner of Innsbruck for his part alignment with Galileo who in Descartes' words

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<sup>66</sup> Clarke (trans), *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, p8

<sup>67</sup> Clarke (trans), *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, p8-11

<sup>68</sup> Clarke (trans), *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, p.xxii

<sup>69</sup> Maclean (trans), *A Discourse on the Method*, p.xxxvi



“[his] entire book [*Rosa Ursina* (1626)] shows that they [the Roman Inquisitors] are no friends of his”<sup>70</sup>.

It is emphatically clear that Descartes seemed to have had a great sincerity of faith and a deference for the Catholic Church that remained throughout his life, “*I would not wish, for anything in the world, to maintain [my opinions] against the authority of the Church.*”<sup>71</sup> Descartes’ deference for the Church reflected his desire that his complete philosophical program might replace Aristotle within the Jesuit schools of the Catholic Church. He viewed his *Principles of Philosophy* as a “new text book” for the Schools: “*the best way of proving the falsity of Aristotle’s [dialectical] principles is to point out that they have not enabled any progress to be made in all the many centuries in which they have been followed.*”<sup>72</sup> The dialectic method used within scholasticism meant discussions were polemical and frequently led to extreme hostility between the parties and entrenched, polarised positions as was seen between the Jesuits and Dominicans a few decades earlier over Molin’s counter-reformation treatise on grace and free will<sup>73</sup> that despite a papal bull for them to be silent on the matter, continued to cause schisms over the next century<sup>74</sup>. Thus, his frustration with theological disputes was because of their irrationality and inability to resolve theological problems rather than with theology generally<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>70</sup> Cottingham et al (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume III – The Correspondence*, pp41-2

<sup>71</sup> Cottingham et al (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume III – The Correspondence*, pp42-3

<sup>72</sup> Cottingham John, Stoothoff Robert, Murdoch Dugald (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume 1)*, p189

<sup>73</sup> Luis de Molina, *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis* (Lisbon, 1588)

<sup>74</sup> Pohle, J. (1909). ‘Controversies on Grace’ in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06710a.htm>, 24<sup>th</sup> Dec 2013

<sup>75</sup> Cottingham, *Descartes*, p19

Thus, in final conclusion, even though it is possible to admit that many commentators had discerned within Descartes that his philosophy permitted people, in Descartes' words "of reason without the light of faith to come to the knowledge of truth through its first causes"<sup>76</sup> rather than predicated on knowledge of God first, Descartes still clearly maintained a distinction between the theological domain of knowledge that is the "gift of faith" from God and knowledge discerned through the correct application of reason alone<sup>77</sup>. Schouls, quoted above and representative of a number of commentators<sup>78</sup> seeking to use Descartes' work to justify their own atheistic thesis, was particularly guilty of isolating a single statement from *Principles* as if it was a perfect synthesis of all his thought or the end term of an epistemological series. Even Williams writing as an atheist highlights the inadequacy of interpreting Descartes' in this way<sup>79</sup>. Though it may be shown Descartes' premise that God is the guarantor of knowledge is vulnerable and his system can be applied with apparently equal confidence by the atheist, this is only because of the epistemological assumptions and exclusions of the atheist<sup>80</sup>. It ignores the preceding and following items within the *Principles*. His statement asserting Descartes no longer required God in philosophy is syntactically accurate as an isolated unit but semantically incomplete, lacking the proper context. Whilst it is in the author's view, never possible to *prove* faith as Pascal rightly discerned "it is the heart that feels God, not reason: that is what faith is. God felt by the heart, not by

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<sup>76</sup> Cottingham John, Stoothoff Robert, Murdoch Dugald (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume 1)*, p181

<sup>77</sup> Hatfield, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*, p46

<sup>78</sup> Hatfield, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*, p45

<sup>79</sup> Bernard Williams, 'Introductory Essay' in *Meditations on First Philosophy – with selections from the Objections and Replies*, John Cottingham (ed), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), px "[he] rarely lays out arguments in a complete or formal way"

<sup>80</sup> Bernard Williams, 'Introductory Essay' in *Meditations on First Philosophy – with selections from the Objections and Replies*, John Cottingham (ed), pxvi, "we may feel happier to live without foundations of knowledge"

reason”<sup>81</sup> that does not negate the validity of Descartes to investigate what it is of God that is within the grasp of reason and where that could lead. Descartes was not seeking to rewrite theology but as a philosopher was, in his words of Dedication of his *Meditations*, seeking to do something philosophically for theology. Descartes’ concepts of the innate functions of the mind and the “inner light” of intuition and his view of thought demonstrate the tense interface between theology and philosophy, between spiritual thinking and naturalism. In the words of Williams, “we may feel happier to live without foundations of knowledge [but Descartes did not]”<sup>82</sup> and it is well to remember the first division in his notebook “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Pro 9:10, KJV) as the fundamental principle of interpreting his work.

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<sup>81</sup> Pascal, ed Levi (2008), p157 (part of *Pensées* 680). This is an edition based on a critical text and the numbering system and organisation is different from the traditional numbering and organisation.

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