

Interpretation

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Descartes Contra Averroes?

The Problem of Faith and Reason in the Letter of Dedication to the *Meditations*

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What is the purpose of Descartes' *Meditations*?¹ Is it a Christian work, or at any rate a work written in support of Christianity? Or is its intention rather to justify the new science, and Descartes' assertion of submission and devotion to the Church a piece of hypocrisy? Even if that claim is not a mere piece of hypocrisy, is the *Meditations* nevertheless primarily an attempt to make Cartesian science theologically respectable? Or (a third possibility) does Descartes' treatment of natural theology and of the relation between soul and body have some other and perhaps more philosophical intention, so that it is neither merely Christian apologetics nor simply a means of making the new science acceptable to the Church? To answer this question, it may be useful to consider the letter of dedication with which Descartes introduces the *Meditations*, and which is directed to the Dean and Doctors of Theology of the Sorbonne. In this letter, Descartes asks the theologians' support for his enterprise. So righteous is the cause which impels him to offer his work to them, he says—and he is confident that they too will regard it as so righteous as to take up its defense, once they have understood the plan of his undertaking—that “there is here no better means of commending it than to state briefly what I have sought to achieve in this work.”

First, Descartes states that it is with the aid of philosophy, rather than of theology, that the questions of God and of the soul should be demonstrated. For although it suffices for believers to believe on the basis of faith, “no unbeliever seems capable of being persuaded of any religion or even any moral virtue, unless these two are first proven to him by natural reason. And since in this life there are often more rewards for vices than for virtues, few would prefer what is right to what is useful, if they neither feared God nor hoped for an afterlife.”

Descartes' reason for “demonstrating the questions”² of God and the soul, in other words—the reason which the theologians will regard as so righteous that they will take up its defense—is political: human beings must be persuaded that there is a God and an afterlife so that they will observe moral virtue, or abstain from crime.

Faith, Descartes reiterates, is a sufficient basis of belief for believers; God's

existence is to be believed in because Scripture testifies to it, and Scripture is to be believed because God is its source. But unbelievers would take this proof to be a circle.

In saying this Descartes seems to be speaking from a sense that the attempt to prove the existence of God is a problematical business, which needs justification before the authorities and perhaps the people. For really, from the point of view of the theologians, one ought to believe (or at least laymen ought to believe) simply on the basis of authority. But unfortunately, he seems to imply, it is not possible to found religion only on faith or on authority, for there are some who will not be convinced by authority.

Thus after first giving us a political reason for proving the existence of God—it is necessary to sustain religion so as to prevent crime and perhaps disobedience generally—Descartes here gives us a logical reason why unbelievers must be addressed through reason: they are not subject to the intellectual authority of religion. That, of course, is why they must be persuaded.

But the religious authorities have a difficulty when confronted by the unbelievers; properly speaking, their authority should be founded on faith—it is only faith which licenses the authorities' ability to threaten and demand obedience. But the necessity of persuading the unbelievers requires that the Church seek to found faith on reason. But to found faith on reason is to subvert the primacy of faith, to grant a kind of recognition and intellectual authority to unbelief, for one who believes only on the basis of reason cannot be said to be subject to the authority of faith, or the authority licensed by faith; he continues to be an "unbeliever" insofar as his assent to the existence of God is not founded on belief but on reason or knowledge.

The Church, we might put it, would prefer an assent founded on the will, on unreasoned submission to authority.³ It is only such an assent that satisfies the political aim of securing obedience to law; for someone who believes only insofar as his reason tells him to, will not be morally or politically obedient simply because of the dictates of authority either. He will not be afraid of God, since his assent to the existence of God will not be based on fear and trembling, but on free reasoning; the God to whose existence he assents will be the conclusion of his own process of reasoning rather than a being who overwhelms his independent use of his reason and direction of his will.

In fact this preference of the Church's is actually embodied in philosophical doctrine or at least in philosophical tendency, in the attraction of important sections of the French Church, in the sixteenth and into the seventeenth centuries, to skepticism. Many theologians, and particularly many Jesuits, found it useful to attack human reason, in matters of moral theology, of scriptural interpretation, of natural theology, and in general, with a view to encouraging the submission of human reason to the authority of the Church and of the Catholic State. In the case of many of the relevant thinkers it is possible to doubt the sincerity of their religious belief, and possible to interpret them as regarding

religion not just as without cognitive content, but as important above all as a political device and a support for moral and political authority: a matter for the temple, and not for the schools, as Hume's Philo was to put it. These skeptical views never, of course, supplanted Thomist scholasticism, or its Augustinian rivals, among the theologians of the Sorbonne, but they, and those who held them, were important elements on the scene, and in particular for Descartes' early admirer, the Cardinal Bérulle.⁴ And of course Descartes had been familiar with such skeptical views from the time of his education with the Jesuits at La Fleche. His own account of faith and its relation to reason and to institutions in the beginning of the *Discourse* is filled with echoes of the views of the skeptics, of Montaigne, and perhaps of other politique authors, views adapted by skeptical Counter-Reformers to their own purposes (as Descartes' account of the *morale provisoire* and his remarks on custom are much colored by the skeptical [Academic] notion of the probable, a notion with a great deal of influence on Jesuit moral theology and dogmatics). Some of Descartes' most determined critics were to be skeptical Jesuits or other skeptical allies of absolutist order, like Gassendi.⁵

Still, the Church is compelled to permit demonstrations with regard to God and the soul, because otherwise there will be no way of persuading the unbelievers; the unbelievers, that is, give Descartes license for the public exercise of reason on these subjects.

And truly I have noticed that you, along with all other theologians, affirm not only that the existence of God can be proven by natural reason, but also that one may infer from the Holy Scriptures that the knowledge of him is so much easier than the manifold knowledge that we have of created things, and is so utterly easy that those without this knowledge are worthy of blame. For this is clear from Wisdom, Chapter 13 where it is said: "They are not to be excused, for if their capacity for knowing were so great that they could appraise the world, how is it that they did not find the Lord of it even more easily?" And in Romans, Chapter 1, it is said that they are "without excuse". And again in the same text we seem to be warned by these words: "What is known of God is manifest in them": everything that can be known about God can be made manifest by reason drawn from a source none other than our own mind. For this reason I have not thought it unbecoming for me to inquire how it is that this is the case, and by what path God may be known more easily and with greater certainty than the things of this world.⁶

The theologians affirm that the existence of God can be proven by natural reason. Descartes does not say that they *prove* that the existence of God can be proven by natural reason, nor that they prove the existence of God. Does faith require one to believe that it is possible to prove the existence of God by reason?⁷ Descartes himself tells us in the following paragraph that the Lateran Council held under Leo X, in Session 8, condemned those who hold that "human reasoning convinces them that the soul dies with the body and that the contrary to be held on faith alone," and "explicitly enjoined Christian philoso-

phers to refute their arguments and to use all their abilities to make the truth known,” which seems to make it an article of faith that the immortality of the soul can be shown by human reason, or at least that human reason does not oppose it.⁸

The difficulty with such declarations, of course, is that they emphasize the very problem they are meant to solve. If it is necessary to make it an *article of faith* that there exists a rational proof of the existence of God, that suggests that the existence of such a proof is not very obvious or very easy to demonstrate. For if it were obvious, or easy to demonstrate, that there is such a proof, why not simply do so, rather than make it an article of faith that it is possible to do so? The latter proceeding is especially odd when no example of a valid proof is provided, although of course it is the very fact that the validity of the existing proofs is subject to dispute, even among the most orthodox, which made it necessary to make it a dogma that there was such a proof.

This dogma has another aspect to it, however: it points to the distinction made by the Counter-Reformation Catholic Church between laymen and priests, especially theologians, in their epistemic relation to religion. Priests, and more particularly theologians, were charged with using their reason to combat unbelief and heresy; they therefore had license to consider arguments for and against all the dogmas of the faith, including the existence of God. Laymen were on the whole discouraged from prying too deeply into these matters—even from reading the Scriptures without permission. Their faith was to be founded on submission to authority.

The theologians affirm not only that the existence of God can be proven by natural reason, but also that one can infer from Holy Scriptures that the knowledge of him is much easier than the manifold knowledge we have of created things. That is, they make it an article of faith that reason allows us to infer from revelation that the rational knowledge of God is easier than the knowledge of created things; they declare, by their authority, that reason, reflecting on the writings which they hold to be authoritative, can infer from those writings that those writings declare, by divine authority, that reason can more easily know God than created things.

This is an odd and paradoxical nesting of assertions. Here the capacity of reason to know God is made a matter of faith and authority, and what is more, of a second-order sort of authority. Authority has to declare that reason can infer from authority that reason can know God. Here is further license for Descartes to offer his demonstrations, but also further demonstration of the embarrassing and paradoxical situation authority finds itself in when it tries to found itself through an appeal to reason, or to make reason a guarantor for authority.

The knowledge of God is so utterly easy that those without this knowledge are worthy of blame, the theologians say. And indeed, how could one blame

anyone for doubting the dogmas of the Church unless they were obviously true? It is not clear that our assent is subject to our will, and yet, if the knowledge of God is so easy, if God's existence is so obvious, why blame those who do not perceive it? Surely they deserve pity and instruction rather than blame.

But this alternative places the Church in a cleft stick, for Christianity as an established Church—and perhaps any human society, but established Christianity in a particularly marked way—depends on being able to require human beings to believe certain things, to hold them as true, on its being possible to be angry with them for not doing so. But how can one be angry with someone for making a mistake in reasoning, or for not perceiving something?

The authority of the Church, in other words, depends on certain things being discernably and obviously true, and in order to maintain this authority, the Church has to be able to demand that people hold these things true. But if it has to demand that people hold these things true, then surely they are not obviously true.

The tension this difficulty points towards is a tension within the nature of opinion itself, as Socrates often indicated. On the one hand, opinion claims the status of truth, and thereby exposes itself to the demand for justification; on the other hand, opinion claims the status of the obvious, and must therefore repel the demand for justification on the grounds that it subverts that claim. Further, opinion claims the status of the obligatory, since it founds and is necessary to moral obligation; but how can assent to a theoretical proposition be obligatory? To suppose that it is is to suppose that the true is reducible to the just; but it is not just to suppose this—because it is not true.

“‘What is known in God is manifest in them’: everything that can be known about God can be made manifest by reason drawn from a source none other than our own mind.” Descartes takes this assertion from Romans as a license for assuming that the knowledge of God is founded simply in our own minds, or in the knowledge of our own minds, and not in that of outer things; “For this reason I have not thought it unbecoming for me to inquire how it is that this is the case, and by what path God may be known more easily and with greater certainty than the things of outer sense.” The meaning of the assertion that God is manifest is not itself manifest; Descartes takes license from its mysteriousness to seek for a way in which God may be known more easily than outer things; this will require him to attack common sense, and the certainty of the things of common sense.

In so doing, he is surely playing off the passage from Romans against the passage from Wisdom; for if according to Wisdom “the knowledge of him is much easier than the manifold knowledge we have of created things,” this is presumably because the wonders of his works refer us to their maker without our having to understand those works; our wonder at the world, in fact, naturally precedes our understanding of it, and may perhaps be diminished by our

understanding of it. Descartes, in rendering doubtful the existence of outer things, will also be subverting the movement by which common sense arrives at God.⁹

And as to the soul: although many have regarded its nature as incapable of easy inquiry, and some have gone so far as to say that human reasoning convinces them that the soul dies with the body, and that the contrary is to be held on faith alone; nevertheless, because the Lateran Council under Leo X, in Session 8, condemned these people and explicitly enjoined Christian philosophers to refute their arguments and to use all their abilities to make the truth known, I too have not hesitated to go forward with this.

What does Descartes mean? Would he not have dared to attempt to refute the arguments of the Averroists if the Lateran Council had not enjoined Christian philosophers to do so? Would he otherwise have accepted the assertion that the nature of the soul is not capable of easy inquiry, or that human reasoning shows that the soul dies with the body? When he says that “some have gone so far as to say” the latter, whereas he had only said that many have held the former, does he mean that the daring thing they have done is not to think that the soul is mortal, but to say it? Does he mean, in other words, that while it is not surprising that someone would hold that human reasoning shows that the soul is mortal, it is audacious to say it? If so, what is his own view? Insofar as (according to his own declaration) he only dares to reject the assertion that human reason shows that the soul is mortal, and that only faith requires us to believe it immortal, because of a decision of a Council, does he not accept and implicitly confirm the doctrine he is undertaking to refute? In other words, is not he himself saying that, while human reason would have led him to regard the soul as mortal, or not to dare to answer those who say this, faith, which asserts that the soul is immortal, requires him to use reason to show that this is so?

The confusing nature of the latter possibility reveals the confusing situation in which the Church finds itself when it is compelled to rely on faith to ground the assertion that reason, and not merely faith, licenses the assertion that the soul is immortal.

“Moreover, I know that there are many irreligious people who refuse to believe that God exists and that the soul is distinct from the body, for no other reason than that they say that these two doctrines have up to this time not been able to be proved by anybody” (AT 3). Irreligion, like the religion propagated by the Council, is founded on belief or opinion; in the case of irreligion, on the opinion that nobody has advanced a proof. These “many irreligious people” seem to be distinct from those people, referred to in the preceding paragraph, who claim that human reason shows that the soul dies with the body, and that the contrary is to be held by faith alone. The latter people are not moved by opinion or report about what others have proven, but by their own reason; and

they are not said to be “irreligious.” Even those who say that they are convinced by human reason that the soul does not survive the body, and that the contrary is to be held on faith alone, do not perhaps go so far as to say that they reject faith and adhere to their own convictions; they are reasonable enough to bow to the proclamation of the Council that the soul is immortal, even if they do not say that reason convinces them of this.

The task which these irreligious people set the philosopher is not that of proving that God exists, but of setting forth arguments for God’s existence and the distinction between soul and body in such a light that they will believe that someone has demonstrated these things. In other words, the task they set him is one of managing opinion or belief about the accomplishments of reason.

Descartes believes that he has provided the best possible proofs, “so that I now dare to propose these as most certain and evident demonstrations” (AT 4). “But although I believe my arguments to be certain and obvious, still I am not therefore convinced that they have been accommodated to everyone’s power of apprehension.” As in geometry, proofs that are obvious and certain in themselves may not be so to everyone, “both because they are quite lengthy, one thing depending on another, and also because they particularly demand a mind quite free from prejudices—a mind that can easily withdraw itself from commerce with the senses.”

This seems like a stiff requirement; Descartes’ proofs, which are supposed to sway the opinion of those who believe no one has offered adequate proofs as well as to convince the unbelievers who rely on reason, can only be apprehended by a mind both attentive and capable of seeing the things of the intellect.

Certainly one is less apt to find people competent to study metaphysics than to study geometry. Moreover, there is a difference that in geometry everyone is convinced that nothing is customarily written without there being a certain demonstration for it, so that the inexperienced err on the side of assenting to what is false, wanting as they do to give the appearance of understanding it, more often than of denying what is true. But it is the reverse in philosophy: since nothing is believed concerning which there cannot be a dispute regarding at least one part, few look for truth, and many more, eager to have a reputation for profundity, dare to challenge whatever is the best.¹⁰

There is thus a problem about Descartes’ proofs: people do not have faith in such proofs, and are more afraid to appear foolish for accepting than for denying them.

And therefore, however forceful my proofs might be, nevertheless—because they belong to philosophy—I do not expect what I have accomplished through them will be very significant unless you assist me with your patronage. . . . I do not doubt, I say, that if this should come to pass, all the errors that have ever been entertained

regarding these questions will in a short time be erased from the minds of men. For the truth itself easily brings it about that the remaining men of intelligence and learning subscribe to your judgment; and your authority will bring it about that the atheists, who are more accustomed to being dilettantes than brilliant or learned men, shall put aside their spirit of contrariness, and also that perhaps they will defend the arguments which they will know are taken to be demonstrations by men of intelligence, lest they seem not to understand them. And finally, all the others will easily believe in so many testimonies, and there will be no one who would dare call into doubt either the existence of God or the real distinction of the soul from the body. Just how great the usefulness of this thing is, you yourselves can best of all be the judge, in virtue of your singular wisdom; nor does it behoove me to commend the cause of God and religion to you at any greater length, you who have always been the greatest pillar of the Catholic Church” (AT 5–6).

The force of Descartes’ proofs will not accomplish much unless assisted by the prestige of the Sorbonne, whose support will lead men to believe that the proofs are valid. If it does, “all the errors that have ever been entertained regarding these questions will in a short time be erased from the minds of men.” But the sort of errors in question are not errors of reason, but errors at the level of opinion; for the effect of the Sorbonne’s support will not be to make the proofs more perspicuous to those capable of evaluating them—who are fewer than those competent at geometry—but to make those incapable of doing this, and accustomed to accepting the judgment of others, believe that the proofs are valid. And it is, indeed, of errors of opinion, rather than of errors of reason, that it is most appropriate to say that they will be “erased from the minds of men”; for the errors of reason are not erased from the minds of those who reason, but only resolved; one who reasons must remember, understand, and meditate on the errors of reason, insofar as there can be such things. The errors of opinion, on the other hand, are the sort of thing that can be “erased,” for these errors are merely impressions, habits, or remembered strings of words; these can be “erased” in the measure that new opinions can be implanted in men’s souls.¹¹

“The truth easily brings it about that the remaining men of intelligence and authority subscribe to your judgment”—that is, presumably, the unbelievers, or those of them who are competent to evaluate the arguments; and along with them, those who are “intelligent” in a political, rather than speculative sense—and those who are men of authority rather than, or as well as, men of intelligence—and who follow the Sorbonne for political reasons. “Your authority will bring it about that the atheists, who are more accustomed to being dilettantes than brilliant or learned men, shall put aside their spirit of contrariness, and also that perhaps they will defend the arguments which they will know are taken to be demonstrations by men of intelligence. lest they seem not to understand them.”¹² “They will put aside their spirit of contrariness”: that is, they will become politically submissive. Will they do this because, like Naude or La

Mothe le Vayer, they believe in the necessity of political and theological deception on the part of the authorities, out of a Machiavellian pleasure in being among the knowing liars? “And finally, all the others will easily believe in so many testimonies, and there will be no one who would dare call into doubt either the existence of God or the real distinction of the soul from the body.” The result of Descartes’ collaboration, in other words, will be a success, not with regard to the thoughts of those who reason, but with regard to what men “dare to say,” which of course is precisely the starting point for Descartes’ project, since it was inspired by those who “dare to say” that human reason convinces them that the soul depends on the body, and that the opposite is to be held by faith alone—a daring which was condemned by the Lateran Council.

“Just how great the usefulness of this thing is, you yourselves can best of all be the judge, in virtue of your singular wisdom.” The “usefulness” of a situation in which no one dares call into question the dogmas of the Church; what can that be but a political usefulness, of the sort Descartes spoke of at the beginning of the Letter? The theologians of the Sorbonne can “best of all be the judge” of such a usefulness, “in virtue of your singular wisdom”: a political wisdom? It is surely political wisdom that is the judge of political usefulness. “Nor does it behoove me to commend the cause of God and religion to you at any greater length, you who have always been the greatest pillar of the Catholic Church”: who more than a “pillar of the Catholic Church” would more clearly see the usefulness of conserving the authority of the Catholic Church?

This question is perhaps not merely ironical. It can be taken as involving an allusion to what I have spoken of earlier, the view defended or implied by skeptical Counter-Reformer and politique authors, that religious belief, at least that of the many, is without cognitive content, or is simply an act of the will, and that this sort of faith is necessary for political reasons, to prevent the anarchy promised by the Protestant assertion of the right to examine the truths of theology by the light of individual reason.

It is not at all clear that Descartes rejects this claim,¹³ and much that he says in the *Discourse* seems to confirm that he shares the view of popular religion or belief as a matter of custom, without cognitive content (“above reason”), whose chief importance is political, but which is, politically, quite important, although it is not so clear from the *Discourse* that he wishes simply to retain the existing theology, since the best commonwealths are those governed by a single plan and religion is an essential part of commonwealths. In the *Discourse* he seems to give up the idea of reforming the commonwealth—and therefore perhaps the religion—simply on grounds of difficulty and risk, not because it would not be desirable to do these things.¹⁴ I have suggested that he may be undertaking to do indirectly, by encouraging imitation and founding what one might call the religion of science and the society associated with it, what he does not do overtly and explicitly.

It is thus not clear that Descartes simply rejects the skepticism either of

Montaigne or of skeptical Counter-Reformers about popular religion or the possibility of founding political order in reason or theological truth; indeed, it could be argued that skepticism will be of considerable importance for Descartes beyond its bearing on religion and popular opinion, in informing his departure from Averroism, with its Aristotelian-Platonic view of the cosmos.¹⁵

NOTES

1. A full consideration of the relation between faith and reason in the *Meditations* would have to consider many things besides the Letter of Dedication, in particular, the discussions of faith in the Replies to the Second Set of Objections AT 142–43 and 147–49, as well as many other passages in the Replies to Objections. (AT numbers refer to the page on which a passage occurs in the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes' works.) A full consideration of the relation between faith and reason in Descartes would require careful attention to the *Discourse on Method* as a whole as well as to the *Principles* and the correspondence. The purpose of this paper is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of this sort, but merely to open the question.

2. A striking turn of phrase. What is it to demonstrate a question—except perhaps to demonstrate that there is a question, to display a difficulty?

3. It is this preference that especially characterized the Catholic Church, in the view of Protestant theologians, in contrast to their own; and it is because Descartes treated faith as a mere matter of will, rather than as a product of understanding illuminated by grace, that Voetius accused him of being a friend of the Jesuits and an enemy of ecclesiastical and political liberty. The view of faith as unreasoning submission was of course allied to the Jesuit conception of Church government as the spiritual rule of the priesthood (and of Catholic monarchs) over the laity. (That is why the Jesuits, as I observe below, were particularly attracted to philosophical skepticism: they thought it served their conception of religion as a matter of rule by priests.) A Protestant, and especially a Calvinist church necessarily depended for its unity on the educated consensus of the faithful in a sound understanding of doctrine and Scripture. For the clash between Descartes and Voetius see Thomas J. McGahagan, "Cartesianism in the Dutch Universities" Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, University of Pennsylvania, 1976, index under "Voetius." I thank Ernestine van der Wall for making me aware of this work.

4. On Jesuits and skepticism, see Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), index under Huet, Maldonat, etc.; Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, translated by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), index under Arriaga, etc. On Bérulle's response to skepticism see Popkin, pp. 175–76.

5. See Pascal's attack in the *Provincial Letters*, passim, on the Jesuit rule of the "probable" in moral theology. See also Descartes, letter to Mersenne, 5 October 1637, AT1 450: "I consider almost as false whatever is only a matter of probability"; compare *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule Two. Consider in the light of this Descartes' remark at *Discourse* AT45 that it is far more probable that the world was created as the Bible says than as the method tells us; compare Letter to Mersenne, End May 1637, AT1367 (beginning of page). Faith belongs to the level of the probable, from the point of view of human reason; that is, not to the level of clear and distinct ideas. Consider Descartes' following remark for the light it sheds on the question of whether he was a Christian or a believer.

Descartes' rival at the court of Christina, Gabriel Naude, was a "*libertin erudit*" allied with the skeptic La Mothe le Vayer as well as with Gassendi. Naude's philosophical thought is absolutist Machiavellian political doctrine rather than epistemological skepticism, but his advocacy of political lying seems to presuppose a radical criticism of the truth-claims of religion, a criticism which could find support in skepticism even if not skeptical itself. La Mothe is generally supposed to have shared Naude's political views and intentions.

Compare Descartes' remark on the circularity of which the unbelievers would accuse the faithful if they were simply to defend belief in God from Scripture, and Scripture from belief in God, with Montaigne's famous remarks about the circle of judgment in the "Apologie de Raimond Sebond."

6. ATVII p.2. Quoted from the translation of Donald A. Cress from Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), as reprinted in Steven M. Cahn, editor, *Classics of Western Philosophy*, 3d ed., (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), p. 405. The use of Cress's translation does not express a dislike of the Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch edition, on which I have relied for my references to the correspondence and *Rules* in note 3 and for the quotation from the *Rules* in note 9, below (*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985]).

7. That the existence of God can be proved by natural reason was not clearly announced as dogma, to judge from Denzinger, until the nineteenth century (though as Descartes points out in the Letter it seems to be asserted by Romans and Wisdom): see nos. 2751, 3004, and other passages cited as relevant to "*Exsistentia dei*" in the index. See Henricus Denzinger, Adolphus Schoenmetzer S. I., *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 32d ed. (Barcelona: Herder, 1963).

8. See Denzinger, no. 1440, and for the full text, *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, Centro di Documentazione Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, Bologna (Basel: Herder, 1962).

9. See Averroes, *The Decisive Treatise*, where he seeks to defend the philosophical study of nature through the injunction to praise the Lord for his works, thereby indicating the tension between the pious attitude, which has an immediate experience of the Deity through the wonder at his creation, and the philosophical or scientific attitude, which knows God not through humble wonder at the marvels of creation, whose nature and possibility surpasses our understanding, but through the understanding of those works, an enterprise which implies the overcoming of the submission which is a natural companion to pious wonder and reverence.

To the earlier remarks in this paragraph, compare the remark by Pamphilus in the introduction to Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: "Any point of doctrine which is so *obvious* that it scarcely admits of dispute, but at the same time so *important* that it cannot be too often inculcated, seems to require some such method of handling it; where the novelty of the manner may compensate the triteness of the subject, where the vivacity of conversation may enforce the precept, and where the variety of lights, presented by various personages and characters, may appear neither tedious nor redundant.

"Any question of philosophy, on the other hand, which is so *obscure* and *uncertain* that human reason can reach no fixed determination with regard to it—if it should be treated at all—seems to lead us naturally into the style of dialogue and conversation. Reasonable men may be allowed to differ where no one can reasonably be positive: Opposite sentiments, even without any decision, afford an agreeable amusement; and if the subject be curious and interesting, the book carries us, in a manner, into company, and unites the two greatest and purest pleasures of human life—study and society.

"Happily, these circumstances are all to be found in the subject of *natural religion*. What truth so obvious, so certain, as the *being* of a God, which the most ignorant ages have acknowledged, for which the most refined geniuses have ambitiously striven to produce new proofs and arguments?" See David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited, with an introduction by Norman Kemp Smith (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1947), pp. 127–28.

10. AT 5. It would be worth comparing the different occurrences of the verb "dare" in the Letter. They might also be compared with the different occurrences of "presumption" in the *Discourse*, and with the first sentence of that work which comes from Montaigne's "De la présomption." See also *Rules*, Rule Two, AT363: "Therefore, concerning all such matters of probable opinion we can, I think, acquire no perfect knowledge, for it would be presumptuous to hope that we could gain more knowledge than others have managed to achieve" (Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch translation, vol. 1, p. 11).

11. Compare the language of *Republic* 429d–e on true opinion as a sort of dye which can be made to color men's souls. One is tempted to ask, what are the errors in question? Are they the opinions the Sorbonne opposes, or the ones it supports? If the Sorbonne supports Descartes, will it

gain victory for the opinions it supports, or will it be accepting a Trojan horse? See Replies to the Second Set of Objections to the *Meditations*, AT 142–43 and 147–49; compare letter to Mersenne, End May 1637, cited in n. 5.

12. Implied in this passage, as the reader will have noticed, as well as in the rest of the Letter of Dedication, is the view that there are three sorts of minds. There are those who are capable of thinking things out for themselves and who are unwilling to accept the truth of philosophical assertions on the basis of appeals to authority. This class is referred to when Descartes speaks of that small number who are capable of following proofs in metaphysics, when he speaks of the unbelievers, and when he speaks of the wise. There are those who are concerned with their reputation for wisdom. This class is referred to when Descartes speaks of the atheists and libertines, and may also include the theologians to whom he speaks in an apparently flattering manner. There are also those who go along with what others believe, or what authority tells them.

The view that humanity breaks down into these three orders of men seems to correspond rather well to the Averroist grouping of human beings into philosophers, prophets and other men who make use of their imaginations to gain authority among others, and believers. Further, it clearly corresponds to the distinction Descartes makes in *Discourse* Part Two, AT 15–16, between three sorts of minds. The world, he says there, “is largely composed of two sorts of minds for whom [the doubt] is quite unsuitable. First, there are those who, believing themselves cleverer than they are, cannot avoid precipitate judgements and never have the patience to direct all their thoughts in an orderly manner; consequently, if they once took the liberty of doubting the principles they accepted and of straying from the common path, they could never stick to the track that must be taken as a short-cut, and they would remain lost all their lives. Secondly, there are those who have enough reason or modesty to recognize that they are less capable of distinguishing the true from the false than certain others by whom they can be taught; such people should be content to follow the opinions of these others rather than seek better opinions themselves.

“For myself, I would undoubtedly have been counted among the latter if I had had only one teacher or if I had never known the differences that have always existed among the opinions of the most learned” (Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch translation).

The third class, that is, consists of those who are capable of thinking for themselves or who are compelled to attempt this by their discovery of the actual incompetence or lack of unanimity of their teachers. (Descartes’ assertion that he would have been among the mere followers had he not been exposed to disagreements among the learned can be taken both as an ironical gesture of deference to the Jesuit principle that laymen ought not to engage in theological speculation, and as an indication that his departure from this principle derived from his own education at the hands of the Jesuits.)

This typology is of course far older than Averroes. One finds a typology related to it in Plato’s *Apology*, where Socrates distinguishes three types: the poets, politicians, and Sophists, who think that they know a great deal about many things, but who in fact know nothing; the craftsmen, who do know something about their craft but suppose that they know more than they do in knowing this; and himself, who alone knows that he knows nothing. Here the craftsmen, which is to say the men of the people, are not praised for their modesty and submission to the authority of religious teachers and custom, as those who follow the opinions of others are praised by Descartes. But that there is a close relation between Socrates’ poets, politicians, and Sophists, and Descartes’ class of those who think they are cleverer than they are, seems clear enough (see also *Discourse* Part One AT 9 and *passim*). And there is much in the *Apology* to imply that Socrates thinks that the craftsman class is characterized by its moral and religious conventionality or acceptance of tradition. For Descartes’ agreement with Socrates that craftsmen know more than those with more elevated claims to wisdom, see AT 9–10 together with AT 5–9.

13. Certainly he accepts the view that faith is a matter of the will rather than of the intellect; see e.g. Rule Three AT 370, *Principles* I, No. 76, Letter to Father Dinet, AT 598, etc. As to the political indispensability of preserving established beliefs, consider *Discourse* Part Two, AT 14–15, as well as Part Three AT 24 and Part Two AT 12.

14. See *Discourse* Part Two, AT 24: “For these reasons I thought I would be sinning against good sense if I were to take my previous approval of something as obliging me to regard it as good

later on, when it had perhaps ceased to be good or I no longer regarded it as such.” This seems to suggest that Descartes’ adherence to Christianity as one among the “laws and customs of my country” (AT 23), an adherence which is merely provisional insofar as it is part of a “*morale*” that is merely provisional, may have to be abrogated if he finds that this custom has ceased to be good or that he no longer regards it as such. The suggestion is confirmed by AT 27–28: “Besides, the sole basis of the foregoing three maxims [which include the maxim of obedience to Christianity and other “laws and customs”] was the plan I had to continue my self-instruction. For since God has given each of us a light to distinguish truth from falsehood, I should not have thought myself obliged to rest content with the opinions of others for a single moment if I had not intended in due course to examine them using my own judgement; and I could not have avoided having scruples about following these opinions, if I had not hoped to lose no opportunity to discover better ones, in case there were any. Lastly, I could not have limited my desires, or been happy, had I not been following a path by which I thought I was sure to acquire all the knowledge of which I was capable and in this way all the true goods within my reach” (Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch translation). Note the anti-ascetic implications of the last remark.

15. Epicureanism too may have been important for him. Cyrano de Bergerac goes so far as to call Descartes an Epicurean, adding that he differed from other Epicureans because he had the vanity to wish to give to Epicureanism a new founding principle. See Cyrano de Bergerac, *Les Oeuvres Libertines de Cyrano de Bergerac, Parisien* (1619–1655), introduction by Frédéric Lachèvre (Geneva: Slabkin Reprints, 1968), vol. 1, *Les Etats et Empires du Soleil*, p. 184.