Book Review


This book presents an original view of the nature and role of Descartes’s method of doubt. It should be of great interest and value to both Descartes specialists as well as contemporary epistemologists, especially those working on skepticism.

The book has two parts. The first looks at the destructive use to which Descartes puts the method of doubt. But this is just half the story since, according to Broughton, Descartes also uses the method of doubt constructively. The second part of the book takes up the constructive use. Both uses fit into an overarching claim that is set out in the introduction. According to this claim, Descartes employs the method of doubt in order to establish fundamental metaphysical claims – or, as he says, claims of first philosophy (recall Descartes’s title: Meditations on First Philosophy). These include: God exists, we ought to assent only to what we clearly and distinctly perceive, the essential attribute of matter is extension, the essential attribute of the human mind is thought, and sense experience allows us to know the primary qualities of material objects. This metaphysical interpretation of the method’s aim is contrasted with others: that the aim is to secure some form of high-grade knowledge, to clear the way for Descartes’s mechanistic physics, to refute the skepticism of the day, and to free the mind from the senses so we can think better about supersensible entities. Broughton cites passages in support of each interpretation. As her survey shows, there is (at least) decent textual support for each interpretation. Perhaps then the method of doubt is multi-purposed. After all, there is no obvious incompatibility between any two or more of the aims – so why take the various interpretations as competing with one another? Unfortunately, Broughton doesn’t say.

Broughton’s view of the aim emphasizes the metaphysical subject-matter of the beliefs that we come away with. Still, Broughton agrees that Descartes aims to secure a high-grade epistemic status for some of our beliefs. It is by showing that these metaphysical claims can have such a status that Broughton thinks Descartes establishes them. In Part One, Raising Doubt, she argues that Descartes employs the method of doubt because he adopts a maxim of assent that instructs him to withhold assent from all opinions that he can doubt. This maxim is adopted for reasons that are quite foreign to our ordinary outlook on things – it is adopted to overthrow the principles that inform our habits of judgment and to establish something firm and lasting in the sciences. The claims that are central to the metaphysical interpretation are then construed as principles that are fit to underlie the sciences.
To Descartes’s project so construed, Broughton makes two “retrojection objections.” Both objections pinpoint flaws that prevent us from fully understanding the sequence of arguments in the Meditations. The first says that from the First Meditation alone, we cannot make sense of why the meditator goes on to suspend judgment about what he has found dubitable, especially given the meditator’s claim that much of what he has found dubitable remains quite probable. According to Broughton, we can only make sense of the move to suspending judgment once we have identified the troublesome principle that leads us to judge that material objects have secondary qualities. The second retrojection charge says that it only makes sense to adopt the strong maxim and the method of doubt if we know ahead of time that something will emerge with the status of being firm and lasting in the sciences. But at least as of the First Meditation, we have no reason to think that anything will emerge with this status. In response to both charges, one might wonder how much damage they inflict if they are successful. After all, the fact that we cannot make complete sense of what is motivating the meditator early on has no obvious bearing on the soundness of the meditator’s arguments. It is not clear what follows in terms of damage assessment.

The highlight of Part One is Chapter Four. Here, we get a worked out interpretation of what is crucial in the skeptical scenarios deployed in the First Meditation. This interpretation provides support for the overarching claim that the aim of the method is to establish key metaphysical claims. Broughton proposes that each of the skeptical scenarios that the meditator offers has three crucial features:

(F1) I cannot rule out the possibility that I am in the scenario,
(F2) in the scenario, all my beliefs of the relevant class (e.g. external world beliefs, mathematical beliefs, etc.) are false,
(F3) the scenario provides a causal explanation of why my beliefs are false.

Though initially I am in no position to know that I am not in these scenarios (F1), the rest of the Meditations consists in a series of arguments that give me such knowledge. In particular, the metaphysical claims that are arrived at in the constructive phase allow me to know that the causal history of my beliefs is not defective. Hence, I can know that I am not in a situation in which F3 holds. This vindication consists in the proofs for a benevolent God, the fundamental nature of the external world, the nature of my experience, and the connections between the world and my experience.

According to Broughton, the meditator offers four skeptical scenarios: the lunacy scenario, the dreaming scenario, the deceiving God scenario, and the fate-or-chance scenario. There is, however, a serious problem for Broughton’s interpretation that she does not address. It concerns the deceiving God scenario and the fate-or-chance scenario. As Broughton points out, with each scenario, the meditator highlights that the target beliefs are false (this is F2). But as long as any effective scenario must be coherently conceivable, there is trouble. For while I can easily conceive of a scenario in which my beliefs about the external world are false, I cannot so easily conceive of a scenario in which I make a mistake when I add two and three or when I count the sides of a square. This means that when it comes to constructing skeptical scenarios that target my belief that 2+3=5, there is a real problem getting feature F2 in place. This I can do: I can construct a scenario that I cannot rule out (again, F1) in which the process by which I sum two and three is itself the product of something which fails to inspire trust – for example, a deceiving God or a flawed natural order.
Perhaps, this means the resulting belief would, therefore, lack warrant. Charity might then require ascribing to Descartes the view that when it comes to the deceiving God and fate-or-chance scenarios, we are dealing with a view on which an effective skeptical scenario has feature F1 and in place of F2 and F3:

(F2*) in the scenario, all my beliefs of the relevant class lack warrant,
(F3*) the scenario provides a causal explanation of why my beliefs lack warrant.

This suggests an alternative interpretation, one on which false belief is central to the earlier skeptical scenarios; while unwarranted belief is central to the last two skeptical scenarios.

Unfortunately, this is not a plausible piece of interpretation. Descartes’s language of going wrong, going astray, and deception makes it clear that in the deceiving God and fate-or-chance scenarios, the epistemic shortcoming that we are to imagine is false belief, not lack of warrant. This gives Descartes a unified account of effective skeptical scenarios – all of them have at their center, false belief. But it leaves him with a real problem, since it is far from obvious that we can conceive of a scenario in which our simple arithmetical beliefs are false. If this is right and if false belief is central to the effectiveness of a skeptical scenario, the deceiving God and fate-or-chance scenarios are not effective at casting doubt on beliefs like my belief that 3+2=5. We need an interpretation of Descartes’s use of skeptical scenarios that fits the text and renders the deceiving God scenario and the fate-or-chance scenario effective at casting doubt on beliefs in necessary truths.

Part One contains other important discussions: Broughton contrasts the meditator’s stance with common sense; she also contrasts the skeptical considerations of the First and Second Meditation with Academic skepticism as well as Pyrrhonian skepticism. At times, though, some readers might find it difficult to discern a thread that runs through these discussions.

By contrast, Part Two is a highly unified tour de force. Here Broughton details the constructive use to which Descartes puts the method of doubt. The basic idea is found in a passage in Search for Truth, a passage Broughton quotes repeatedly. There Descartes has Eudoxus say “if you simply know how to make proper use of your own doubt, you can use it to deduce facts which are known with complete certainty.” (AT 10: 522) The way this is done, according to Broughton, involves recognizing that some things are needed for constructing a skeptical scenario. Since the method of doubt proceeds via the construction of such scenarios, if the very possibility of constructing a scenario requires some claim, that claim is certain. Recognizing that doubting a claim entails that it is true confers indubitability and certainty on one’s belief in that claim.

The nature of the connection whereby doubting p entails p is captured in what Broughton calls “dependence arguments.” These arguments are initially introduced as conforming to this schema:

(1) If I raise a doubt whether (B), I must grant that (A) is true.
(2) If (A) then (B).
(3) If I raise a doubt whether (B), I must grant that (B) is true.

These arguments uncover conditions that make doubt possible. However, they are not to be confused with transcendental arguments. Transcendental arguments typically start from a belief about one’s own mentality that is certain (or has some other positive epistemic status) and argue to
some claim about the external world, and thereby confer certainty (or the other epistemic status) on one’s beliefs in the external world claim. By contrast, dependence arguments do not start from certain beliefs about one domain and extend this certainty to some other domain. In an important respect, dependence arguments are more ambitious: they attempt to confer certainty on one belief without starting from some other belief that is just given as certain. Instead, the certainty of one’s belief that p is conferred by the fact that it is impossible to rationally doubt p, where this means it is not possible to construct a skeptical scenario that effectively casts doubt on one’s belief that p.

Broughton divides the conditions for doubt that are uncovered into two kinds: inner conditions and outer conditions. She devotes a chapter to each. Among the inner conditions are I exist, claims that I think in various ways, and claims that various perceptual seemings apply to me. Among the outer conditions are claims that function as premises in Descartes’s causal argument for the existence of God.

The first inner condition is I exist. The dependence argument that confers certainty is one in which in the above schema the (B) position is occupied by I exist and the (A) position is occupied by I am doubting something. (1) then points out that in raising a doubt about whether I exist, I must be doubting something (or at least, I must be attempting to doubt something), and this requires, if the scenario is to be effective, that it involve a situation in which I exist. This is needed to ensure that F2 is in place. All of this now allows me to see that (3) If I raise a doubt about whether I exist, I must grant that I exist.

In this case, Broughton has Descartes extracting a condition on doubt from the content of any possible effective skeptical scenario. But other dependence arguments work differently. Elsewhere, she suggests that I exist is also arrived at by a dependence argument which centers on the claim that I exist is a condition on the process of constructing a skeptical scenario. Later, Broughton adds a third way in which doubting p can entail p when she discusses inner conditions that lie not in the process of constructing skeptical scenarios per se, but in the attendant motivations and goals of the meditator constructing the scenarios. These inner conditions consist in mental states that Descartes assigns to I: I doubt almost everything, I understand some things, I affirm this one thing is true, I deny other things, I desire to know more, and I am unwilling to be deceived. This is followed by yet another variation on the idea of a dependence argument. A condition on doubting whether I see a light (where seeing is a success notion captured by I see x entails x exists) is that I seem to see a light (where I seem to see x does not entail x exists). This is because in a skeptical scenario that effectively targets my belief that I see a light I must seem to see a light. The latter is needed for ensuring that F1 and F3 are in place. This means that seeming to see x is a condition on doubting that I see x. Broughton notes that this fails to fit the original schema for dependence arguments, since the final claim at (3) involves different claims in the (B) slots. Still it is a virtue of Broughton’s interpretation that Descartes provides us with an argument for that part of his transparency doctrine that says we can be certain about our perceptual seemings. However, besides failing to fit the dependence argument form, this route to the transparency claim faces another problem. Even if I need to presuppose that I seem to see x if I am going to cast doubt on my belief that I see x, it does not follow that I cannot construct a skeptical scenario that casts doubt on my belief that I seem to see x. Moreover, it is plausible that the following sort of scenario might be effectively used to cast beliefs about seemings into doubt: my power of introspection is unreliable and as a result sometimes when I don’t seem to see x, I introspect and firmly believe that I do seem
to see $x$. More would need to be said to cash out this kind of skeptical scenario, especially to address those who think that the acquisition of false beliefs can only be explained by some prior non-veridical appearance. This much, however, is clear: pointing out that I must presuppose that I seem to see $x$ whenever I try to cast doubt on whether I see $x$ is not enough to confer certainty on my belief that I seem to see $x$.

Quite apart from that, if Broughton is right, Descartes arrives at the inner conditions in importantly different ways. Though the specimen dependence arguments turn out to be quite heterogenous, this may not count against her thesis that arguments of this kind are central to how the meditator arrives at positive claims. Still, such an interpretation owes us an account of why Descartes thinks we should take seriously the possibility that we go wrong when we count the sides of a square, but not take seriously the possibility that we go wrong when we try to determine what is indispensable to the content of an effective skeptical scenario; or for that matter, the possibility that we go wrong when we try to determine what is essential to the process of constructing scenarios, or when we try to determine what is essential to the motives and goals that accompany this process. To focus on two particular cases, Broughton’s Descartes has it that the construction of skeptical scenarios does not require taking squares to have any particular number of sides, though it does require taking the subject of deception to exist. But why should we think we are any better at recognizing what is indispensable to constructing effective skeptical scenarios than we are at counting how many sides a square has? It is far from clear what the basis for the differential assessment might be.

The chapter on outer conditions is largely devoted to the role of dependence arguments in yielding the premises of Descartes’s causal argument for the existence of God. Broughton interprets the argument as having three premises: (P1) I have an idea of God; (P2) I am not the cause of my idea of God; and (P3) only God can be the cause of my idea of God. While Broughton points to texts that suggest dependence arguments that yield (P1) and (P2), she contends that Descartes was lead to (P3) by his unquestioned adoption of the principle of sufficient reason. From that principle, he inferred that there must be as much formal reality in the cause of an idea as there is objective reality in that idea; then, from this, he inferred (P3).

The final chapter takes up three matters: how Broughton’s view of Descartes’s method provides a solution to the Cartesian circle; how dependence arguments contrast with transcendental arguments; and the changes in the meditator’s view of his mathematical beliefs and his beliefs about material objects between the beginning of the Meditations and the position occupied at the end of the Meditations.

Descartes’s Method of Doubt breaks important new ground, particularly in developing the constructive dimension of Descartes’s use of the method of doubt. It is an important and challenging contribution that will be of value to anyone interested in understanding the Meditations or anyone who wants to understand the anatomy of skeptical arguments that employ skeptical scenarios. I highly recommend it.*

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