

Descartes and Scholasticism: An Analysis

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Descartes' relationship with scholasticism is somewhat puzzling. Many who are familiar with Descartes' life and works suppose that his relationship with the scholastics was one of mutual resentment. Scholars who espouse this view often point to the *Discourse on Method* where Descartes openly expresses dissatisfaction with his scholastic education. In speaking about his scholastic training at La Flèche, Descartes famously writes, "I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance. And yet I was at one of the most famous schools in Europe, where I thought there must be learned men if they existed anywhere on earth" (Descartes V.I 113). From this statement alone, it is easy to see why many conclude that Descartes held scholasticism in contempt. However, through a closer analysis of Descartes' works, one can find that his relationship with scholasticism was not quite as one-dimensional as his statement from the *Discourse* suggests. Throughout his life, Descartes remained fiercely loyal to the Roman Catholic church and its core theological doctrines; implementing portions of scholastic training into his own philosophy. In this paper, I will seek to better understand to what degree Descartes disregarded and abandoned his scholastic training,

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and to what degree he valued and implemented it into his own philosophy. To accomplish this, I will first present some essential background information concerning Descartes' life, and his interactions with the scholastics. Then, by drawing on textual examples from Descartes' major works (especially his *Meditations*), I will argue that Descartes was ultimately respectful of the scholastics because of their shared theological values; however, he was disenchanted and perhaps annoyed by their conservative views toward philosophy and science.

I. Descartes' Scholastic Training and Major Philosophical Works

Descartes attended a Jesuit school called La Flèche, where he was taught in the ways of scholasticism. Stephen Gaukroger, a scholarly authority on Descartes states, "In 1606, when he was ten years old, Descartes left the house of his maternal grandmother, Jeanne Sain, to go the Jesuit college of La Flèche" (38). Whatever conclusions may be drawn about Descartes' attitude toward his experience at La Flèche, it cannot be doubted that his time spent there was incredibly influential both on a personal and a philosophical level. Descartes remained at La Flèche until 1614, when he left at the age of eighteen. Having spent eight formative years at La Flèche, Descartes received a proper scholastic education. As such, his studies in philosophy were mostly focused on Aristotle, while the studies in theology were centered on the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. Roger Ariew (author of *Descartes Among the Scholastics*) notes that a typical day during the last three years at La Flèche "would have consisted of lectures, twice a day in sessions lasting two hours each, from a set curriculum based primarily on Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas" (15). Specifically, studies were devoted to "Aristotle's *Categories*, *On Interpretation*, *Prior Analytics*, *Topics*, *Posterior Analytics*, and *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Second year was devoted to physics and metaphysics, based primarily on Aristotle's *Physics*, *De Caelo*, *On Generation and Corruption* Book I, and *Metaphysics* Books 1, 2, and 11" (Ariew 15). Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologia* was of central importance as well. Other topics included mathematics, geography, astronomy, history, and optics.

A year after completing his studies at La Flèche, Descartes went to the university of Poitiers to further his education. There he studied law for a year and received his "license in civil and canon law" (Gaukroger xiv). It was after his time at Poitiers that Descartes began to write and publish various scientific and philosophical works. In 1618, Descartes went to the Netherlands and joined the Protestant army under the direction of Maurice of Nassau, briefly participating in the Thirty Years' War. While there, on the 10th of November, 1619, Descartes experienced his famous

night of dreams. After this experience, Descartes was inspired to write *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, also known as the *Regulae*.

During the next decade, Descartes considered pursuing a legal career, but his work and focus was primarily aimed at scientific projects. It wasn't until 1637 that the *Discourse on Method* was published. After publishing the *Discourse*, Descartes spent the next several years working on the *Meditations* which were published in 1641. While the *Meditations* were a relative commercial success, they were not well received by Catholic authorities. As a result, Descartes was brought before the council of Utrecht in 1643 and was "threatened with expulsion and the public burning of his books" (Gaukroger xvii) for teaching doctrines contrary to Roman Catholicism. Before his death from pneumonia in 1650, Descartes spent much of the 1640s avoiding condemnation from the church for his somewhat unorthodox writings. In what follows, I will examine Descartes' major philosophical works, and analyze the degree to which he departed from or agreed with his scholastic training.

II. Descartes and Scholasticism: An Analysis

It was on the 10th of November, 1619, at Ulm, that Descartes had three dreams that would affect him profoundly. To Descartes, these dreams came to him as a sort of metaphor representing his past, and also his future. He understood the first two dreams as a chastisement of his old life (represented by ghosts and a fierce wind) and the third as giving him a positive direction for his future. Upon waking, Descartes committed himself to making a religious pilgrimage to Austria; he seems to have interpreted the dreams as a divine mandate to write a philosophical text which would later be published as the *Regulae*. Unfortunately, this book was never finished during Descartes' lifetime, and the partial text was published posthumously.

Several months after his night of dreams, Descartes finally began working on the *Regulae*. The contents of the *Regulae* are largely focused on developing a new system of logic. This work marked a sharp departure from scholasticism which wholly endorsed Aristotle's syllogistic logic.

In the *Regulae*, Descartes introduces the idea of what he terms "natural logic." In his own words, "The pronouncements of the learned can be reduced to a very small number of general rules" (Descartes V.I 5). He defines intuitions as the most basic function of the mind; they are simple and immediately available to the mind. Descartes goes on to speak of "deduction" and "induction" which, according to Boyce Gibson, are essentially synonymous terms within Descartes' system of natural logic (151). Each of these terms refers to the connections that exist between intuitions.

Over time, with repetition and practice, deductions and inductions become as readily available to the mind as intuitions. Finally, Descartes defines enumerations as those collections of deductions/inductions that form the most complex functions of the mind. Descartes calls these abilities ‘natural logic’ and claims that it is a kind of innate and infallible logical system. Thus, he concludes that no extended set of logical rules of inference is necessary. Descartes was confident enough in his ‘natural logic,’ to believe that the syllogistic logic of the scholastics was essentially useless. According to Gibson, “the *Regulae* undoubtedly remain[s] the best exposition we have of that natural logic, under the guidance of which Descartes’ whole thought lived and moved” (149).

I find it significant that Descartes, as a practicing Roman Catholic, was willing to depart explicitly from the logic taught by the scholastics. While the church did not specifically condemn ideas for being non-scholastic, Descartes’ approach was certainly unorthodox. Ariew points out that “the reasons why Jesuits followed Thomist theology (and Thomist interpretations of Aristotelean philosophy) and avoided novelties in theology and in philosophy were not dogmatic, but prudential” (25). It is also clear that while Descartes disagreed with the logical system of the Jesuit scholastics, he still remained faithful to the church and its core doctrines. In his early writings Descartes declared that “The Lord has made three marvels: something out of nothing; free will; and God in man” (Descartes V.I 5). This claim appears to be intentionally harmonious with the doctrines of Roman Catholicism.

On the one hand, Descartes is critical of scholastic institutions. He claims that “students of [philosophy] first of all are not content to acknowledge what is clear and certain, but on the basis of merely probable conjectures venture also to make assertions on obscure matters about which nothing is known; they then gradually come to have complete faith in these assertions, indiscriminately mixing them up with others that are true and evident” (Descartes V.I 14). On the other hand though, as seen in the *Discourse on Method* and the *Meditations*, Descartes is quick to defend Roman Catholic doctrines and argue for the existence of God.

In 1637, Descartes published the *Discourse on Method*. In this text, Descartes is in pursuit of a method of obtaining truth. Before his method is introduced though, he voices his most well-known critiques of his formal education at La Flèche: “I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance. And yet I was at one of the most famous schools in Europe, where I thought there must be learned men if they existed anywhere on earth” (Descartes V.I 113). He continues, “as soon as I was old enough to emerge from the control

of my teachers, I entirely abandoned the study of letters” (Descartes V.1 115). While Descartes admits that he benefitted from reading good books, overall he was inspired to go obtain knowledge from the world itself rather than through a formal scholastic education.

Interestingly, Descartes expresses strict loyalty to the Catholic church soon after articulating his dissatisfaction with scholastic institutions. Using a metaphor, Descartes says that when one is building a new house, one still needs another place to stay. Similarly, while he is trying to develop a proper methodology for obtaining truth, he decides to hold fast to four moral principles. The first is as follows: “obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God’s grace I had been instructed from my childhood, governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions” (Descartes V.I 122). Here, it is clear that Descartes thought it important to adhere to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. While at the beginning of the *Discourse*, Descartes states that he was not particularly satisfied with his education at La Flèche, it is clear that he still held fast to at least some of the values he was taught there.

Although Descartes was a social conservative, I argue that Descartes’ main problem with the scholastics was their conservative views toward philosophy and science. He didn’t think that their philosophy offered adequate grounds to practice science. He viewed scholastic thought as stagnant, with little or no room for progress. Ultimately, it is clear from Descartes’ writings that he agreed with the theological values of the scholastics; however, he thought that their philosophy was too close-minded, conservative, and unfruitful.

III. The *Meditations* and Scholasticism

The *Meditations*, perhaps more than any of Descartes’ other works, embody his complicated relationship with scholasticism. The project of the *Meditations* was to discover a standard of truth. Such a standard would ultimately allow Descartes to establish the credibility of the senses, and thus the credibility of science. Widely considered to be Descartes’ greatest philosophical work, the *Meditations* have often been read by students of philosophy since their original publication in 1641. As a scientist, Descartes recognized that the trustworthiness of science rested on the reliability of the senses. Descartes believed that scholastic logic and philosophy had not adequately established a standard of truth or proven that the senses could be trusted. So, the overarching project of the *Meditations* was to (1) identify a standard of truth, (2) use this standard to prove that God exists

and is no deceiver, and (3) thus determine that our senses and science are trustworthy means of obtaining truth. The *Meditations* shed considerable light on Descartes' relationship with scholasticism. He agrees with the core convictions of the scholastics, borrows their arguments for the existence of God, but ultimately believes their conservative approach to science and philosophy to be limiting and insufficient. In what follows, I will briefly reconstruct the main arguments from the meditations relevant to my thesis, and then analyze their connection with scholasticism.

In Meditation One, Descartes sets out to find a standard of truth that is not subject to doubt. He begins by questioning his sense experience, arguing that sometimes dreams are so much like waking experiences that they are indistinguishable from actual waking experiences. This, he concludes, shows that our senses deceive us at times. However, he determines that some *a priori* truths seem to be true regardless of experience. He uses the example of $2 + 3 = 5$, and argues that all mathematical statements can be included in this category of truth. He concludes that all sense experience can be doubted, yet certain *a priori* truths (like arithmetic) can be known independent of sense perception.

In Meditation Two, Descartes determines that he exists as a thinking thing. He also uses the example of bees' wax to establish that our minds add something supplementary to our sense experience. In his own words, "I now know that even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of the imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood" (Descartes V.II 22). In Meditation Three, Descartes introduces a form of skepticism even more extreme than the dreamer's doubt. He speculates that if there were an all-powerful evil demon that sought to deceive him in all judgements, then he could not be sure about *any* of his beliefs. Using this extreme form of skepticism, he doubts the *cogito*, albeit only indirectly. To save himself from this extreme skepticism, Descartes determines that he must prove that God exists, and that God is no deceiver of men.

In Meditation Three, Descartes attempts to argue for the existence of God. Descartes bases his argument on the assertion that that something cannot come from nothing. His argument for the existence of God rests on the idea that whatever exists must have a cause, and the cause must possess at least as much formal reality as the thing caused. Further, because Descartes has an idea in his mind of all perfections (such as omnipotence, omni-benevolence, omniscience, and immutability), the cause of these ideas must have at least as much formal reality as the ideas themselves. Therefore, something which actually possess these traits must exist, thus, Descartes argues, God exists.

While Descartes added his own ideas regarding formal and objective reality, his argument is reminiscent of Thomas Aquinas' five arguments for the existence of God. In Meditation Three, it is clear that Descartes borrows scholastic arguments to develop his own argument for the existence of God.

In Meditation Four, after establishing that God exists, Descartes sets out to prove that God is no deceiver. To do this, he developed his own theodicy to argue against the problem of error. Descartes once again agrees with Roman Catholic doctrine by arguing that there is an answer to the problem of error. However, his novel approach to the problem displays his progressive views toward philosophy. The problem of error can be briefly reconstructed in this way: if God has all perfections and is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, why does error occur in the world, and why does God allow humans to make errors?

To overcome this problem, rather than taking a Thomistic approach, Descartes makes an original appeal to the finite human intellect and infinite human will. He argues that because God undoubtedly has a morally sufficient reason to have created humans with the capacity to commit errors, then there is a morally sufficient reason for error. Meditation Four is essential to Descartes' project because by demonstrating that God has a morally sufficient reason for error, and is no deceiver, he believes that he has successfully overcome the extreme skepticism introduced in Meditation Three. Again, Descartes' arguments against the argument from error are reminiscent of scholastic theodicies, while taking a philosophically original approach.

In Meditation Five, Descartes makes another argument for the existence of God. This time though, Descartes uses a form of the ontological argument. The argument can be simply reconstructed this way: (1) God has all perfections, (2) existence is a perfection, (3) therefore, God exists. This argument was originally made by Anselm, and again Descartes is drawing on scholastic arguments to make his case. Toward the end of Meditation Five, Descartes summarizes his findings in the previous meditations with this statement: "I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true" (Descartes V.II 48).

Meditation Six brings to rest certain questions brought up in the earlier meditations. He determines that material things do exist, and that our clear and distinct perceptions can be trusted. Because God exists and is no deceiver, sense perception and the science are effective methods of obtaining truth. Soon after writing his *Meditations*, Descartes was anxious to send the transcript to different intellectuals to have them write their objections to which he would respond. Interestingly, several professors of

scholastic thought did not accept Descartes' work; despite the *Meditations*' endorsement of church dogma, and the existence of God and the immortal soul.

The *Meditations* highlight Descartes' complicated relationship with scholasticism. It appears that he was eager for the scholastics to accept and appreciate the *Meditations* because of his defense of scholastic doctrines. He was likely doubtful that they would be accepted though, as his logic, theodicy, and passion for science were not in keeping with the conservative and traditional ways of scholasticism.

IV. Conclusion

It is true that Descartes rejected several scholastic beliefs unapologetically. Anthony Crifasi points out that "among Rene Descartes' many criticisms of previous philosophies were some particularly stinging rebukes directed at the . . . Aristotelian-scholastic account of sensory and intellectual cognition" (141). Descartes also rejected the Aristotelian doctrines of hylo-morphism and substantial forms, the four causes, and the four elements (Ariew 22). Additionally, he dismissed syllogistic logic as inadequate and unnecessary in the *Regulae*. Furthermore, Descartes claimed that his time at La Flèche had largely only shown him the inadequacies of scholastic philosophy. From these examples, it might seem as though Descartes' attitude toward scholasticism was thoroughly critical. On further examination however, it becomes clear that Descartes also sympathized with scholasticism in some respects. In a personal correspondence for example, Descartes wrote to Jean-Baptiste Morin (a mathematician and friend of Descartes) the following, "As for my disdain for the schools that you've been told about, it can only have been imagined by people who know neither my habits nor my dispositions" (Descartes qtd. in Ariew 29).

Additionally, Descartes was a social conservative and held fast to his faith in Roman Catholicism throughout his life. He repeatedly argued for the existence of God, and largely borrowed his arguments from scholastic philosophers such as Aquinas and Anselm. Ariew notes that "he could accept all the theological and philosophical opinions concerning God, angels, and man that Jesuits were required to sustain and defend. . . . Perhaps Descartes might have thought that his orthodoxy with respect to theological matters would have led to the acceptance of his philosophical novelties, once they were seen to harmonize with Catholic theological doctrines" (Ariew 23).

It seems that Descartes' biggest problem with the scholastics was not their beliefs or values which he largely endorsed, but rather their

conservative views toward philosophy and science, and the absence of a solid standard of truth. Descartes' project in the *Meditations* was essentially meant to use philosophy to establish a clear standard of truth which scholastic philosophers had failed to identify. This, Descartes believed, could be accomplished by proving the existence of God, and would establish the credibility of science. So, while Descartes' theological positions were in harmony with the scholastics, his philosophy and method of obtaining his conclusions were too novel for the scholastics to embrace. Ariew notes, "Descartes did try to indicate that his doctrines were not dangerous to the faith; but the Jesuits defined danger to the faith as any novelty in either theology or in philosophy, especially as it concerned the axioms and common opinions of scholasticism" (Ariew 22).

Ultimately, it was the scholastic's "distaste of novelty" (Ariew 18) and their lack of a standard of truth that caused Descartes to diverge from scholasticism. Although Descartes shared theological values with the scholastics, he was disenchanted and likely annoyed by their conservative views toward philosophy and science.

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