DESCARTES AGAINST THE SKEPTICS

itself; others, that he did, but that the argument was complex
enough that its circularity was not obvious, so that Descartes' failure to see it is not a mark against his intelligence. 1

In the eyes of some knowledgeable interpreters of Descartes all
of this effort is rather comic.2 They would hold that not only is the
argument of the Meditations circular, it is known by Descartes to
be circular and is part of an elaborate deception on his part. On
this view, the arguments for the existence of God and the apparent
attempt to justify reliance on reason on their basis are intended
only to give a patina of piety to a work whose true implications are
radically subversive of religion. They are "a lightning rod against
ecclesiastical thunderbolts." But the circularity of the argument is
only one of many indications to the book's true audience that they
must read between the lines. If they do, they will find that Des­
cartes is not the theist and dualist he appears to be, but an atheist
and materialist.

An approach as radical as this, as contrary to the general ten­
dency of modern scholarship, is apt to be dismissed without a
proper hearing. So it is worth saying that a good deal of evidence
can be adduced in its favor. That Descartes engaged—to some
extent—in dissimulation cannot be denied. He certainly suppressed
work which he feared would get him in trouble and was less than
candid about expressing his disagreement with orthodox views. His
advice to Regius in the controversy with Voetius surely should
give cause for concern to those who think Descartes' sincerity can
be taken for granted:

I agree entirely [with M. Alphonse] that you should take care not
to arouse people against you by words that are too hard. I would
also wish, indeed, that you had not advanced any new opinions,
but had nominally retained the old, contenting yourself with giving
new reasons, which no one can find fault with. Those who grasped

1. The principal contemporary exponent of this approach is Hiram Caton,
in his book, The Origin of Subjectivity, and in numerous articles, of which
"The Problem of Descartes' Sincerity" (Philosophical Forum, 2 [1971], 355–
370) is the most relevant. But as Caton emphasizes, skepticism about Des­
cartes' sincerity has a long history and many distinguished adherents (e.g.,
More, Leibniz, La Mettrie, d'Holbach, and Adam). And Caton is not its only
contemporary exponent. See also Kenneth Dorner's "Science and Religion in

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your reasons properly would have drawn their own conclusions
about what you wanted them to understand. For example, why
was it necessary to reject, openly, substantial forms and real quali­
ties? (January 1642 (?); Alquié, Œuvres II, 913)

And he goes on to contrast Regius' practice with his own in the
Meteors, where he said expressly that he did not deny substantial
forms, that he merely did not find them necessary to explain the
things he wanted to explain.

Once one takes the dissimulation hypothesis really seriously,
one is apt to see evidence for it everywhere. The passage we cited
at the beginning of this chapter, from the dedication to the Faculty
of Theology at the Sorbonne, will take on an entirely different
meaning. Descartes' rejection of the circular argument from Scrip­
ture will not be just an ironic anticipation of a widespread objec­
tion to his own work but a broad hint to the critical reader not to
take the apparently central contentions of that work too seriously.

This interpretation will be further confirmed by other paradoxes.
For example, the title page and the dedication to the Sorbonne
announce a work whose two main themes are the existence of God
and the immortality of the soul. But though the dedication claims
that knowledge of God is so easy that atheists are inexcusable and
claims that Descartes' own proofs of God are peculiarly clear and
evident, it also concedes that few people will be able to follow them
and begs the theology faculty to lend the weight of its authority to
these arguments, so that the atheists may—on that ground—be
persuaded to grant the adequacy of proofs they do not understand.

As for the other supposedly central theme of the Meditations,
Mersenne had already objected, before the Meditations were pub­
lished, that Descartes had not said a word in them about the
immortality of the soul (Letter to Mersenne, 24 December 1640;
Alquié, Œuvres II, 300). And though the title page was altered for
the second edition, so that it claimed only a proof that the soul is
distinct from the body, one might well wonder why the apparently
stronger claim was ever made.

This is the kind of argument which can be mounted in favor of
the dissimulation thesis, and I think enough has been said to give
some idea why some interpreters find it so persuasive. It is not part
of my project to give a point for point rebuttal of such arguments.

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