CURLEY AND WILSON ON DESCARTES

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ABSTRACT

Comparing E.M. Curley's _Descartes Against the Skeptics_ and Margaret Dauler Wilson's _Descartes_, I point out a seeming incompatibility between the central theses of the two books and an unclarity in the development of the central thesis in each book. More particularly, I examine and criticize two of Professor Curley's "reconstructions" of arguments in the _Meditations_: the argument from dreaming in Meditation I and the ontological proof in Meditation V. In Professor Wilson's book, I raise questions about her interpretation of the passages about the wax in Meditation II and the Attribution to Descartes of a "non-Platonic" theory of mathematics on the basis of passages in _Meditations_ V and VI.
Both E.M. Curley's Descartes Against the Skeptics (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978) and Margaret Dauler Wilson's Descartes (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) are primarily about the Meditations; and, in both of these excellent books, it is contended that, to understand the Meditations, we must take account of Descartes' underlying motivation, of an idée maîtresse which lies behind many of the arguments and doctrines in the work. It is perhaps surprising in philosophers of similar background and at this late date to find that the theses which are advanced -- the "over-all readings," to use an expression of Professor Wilson's (p. vii) -- are very different and seemingly incompatible. We may be led to wonder whether, when Descartes admonishes the reader of the Principles not to be concerned about God's end but only with the means employed to reach it (I, xxviii - Alquié III, 108), he may not somewhat grandly have had himself in mind. According to Professor Curley, "it is," he says, "the problem of certainty and associated problems of methodology which preoccupy Descartes in much of his later work" (p. 8); and he argues that "much criticism of Descartes stems from a failure to see his work in the context of the late Renaissance skepticism against which it is so largely directed" (p. ix). Curley's thesis is about Descartes' "later work," Meditations and also Discourse included; and he proposes a subsidiary developmental thesis that, at a certain point in Descartes' life -- Curley says 1628 in one place (p. 38) and suggests a somewhat later date in another (p. 8) -- his primary interest shifts from arguing against the Scholastics, as in the Rules, to arguing against the skeptics, as in the Discourse and the Meditations. Shades, it seems, of Popkin's crise pyrrhonienne (Richard H. Popkin The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes, pp. 174 ff. (New York: Humanities Press, 1960)); for we find passages in the book in which "Descartes, the would-be dogmatist" is represented as battling against (also Curley's words) "his skeptical alter ego" (pp. 187-189). I shall now let Professor Wilson speak against this thesis (though she in fact names no names). On p. 4 she says, "One still finds Descartes' arguments approached as if his concerns and attitudes were almost the same as classical (or Renaissance) skepticism..." Rejecting such an

interpretation, she proceeds to formulate her own "over-all reading." Descartes' deeper concern in the Meditations is to insinuate his ontology of nature, i.e., his "scientific realism" (p. 8) or "the strange world-view of geometrical physics" (p. 104), in order to gain acceptance of his physical theory. Moreover, again apparently contradicting Curley, Wilson maintains that, in the Meditations, Descartes attacks "the world view ... of the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition" (loc. cit.). Regarding motivation, Curley and Wilson agree on one point: they both reject an hypothesis which has sometimes been conjoined with Professor Wilson's thesis, i.e. the hypothesis of "insincerity" or "dissimulation" on Descartes' part in his discussions of religious matters (Curley, p. 99; Wilson, p. 3).

About a work as complex and rich as the Meditations, it is not surprising that neither of the theses advanced -- theses which attribute to Descartes a certain single-mindedness and deviousness -- seems altogether convincing, and it is noteworthy that both authors amend the theses initially announced in the course of their books. About halfway through her book, Wilson -- rather abruptly and surprisingly in the light of what comes before -- announces a "second major generative conflict" in Descartes' philosophy (p. 127, my emphasis); and, in the last chapter of Descartes Against the Skeptics -- a chapter called "Body" (Ch. 8, pp. 207 ff.) --, Curley gives a very Wilsonian account of "how Descartes has contrived to smuggle the foundations of his physics into this treatise on first philosophy." I shall get on, however, with what I am supposed to be doing here and make some somewhat less general remarks about the two books. I begin with Curley's and then turn to Wilson's, in each case pointing out what I take to be an obscurity in the development of the central thesis and also raising questions about some more particular points of interpretation. At the end I give a short list of some unresolved problems of exegesis.

1.

In conjunction with, or as a part of, his thesis that Descartes' adversary in the Rules is scholasticism whereas his opponent in the Discourse and other later works is "the skeptic," Curley makes a seemingly very strong and controversial claim about the conception of method in the Rules and in the Discourse. In Chapter II titled "The Methods," he announces at the outset his contention that "the method of the Discourse, and of Descartes' published writings generally, makes a significant advance over the first thoughts of the Regulae..." (p. 22). The advance is
apparently so significant that he is prepared to distinguish two methods and, farther on in this chapter, he claims outright that the method of the (later) Discourse is "clearly... a different method" from the method of the (earlier) Rules (p. 35). This claim raises a problem about the well-known passage in Part Two of the Discourse in which Descartes states four precepts of his "true method" (Bridoux, pp. 137-138); but, before raising that problem, it is important to note that, although it is sometimes difficult in discussions of Descartes' "method" to determine whether the author is talking about what Descartes conceives his method to be or, alternatively, about what in fact or in practice his procedure is, I do not find such an ambiguity in Curley's discussion. His claim seems to be unequivocally about what Descartes conceives his method to be -- about Descartes' views expressly about method or, if you will, his methodological doctrine --; namely, that the methodological doctrine stated in the Rules differs so markedly from the doctrine in the Discourse and later works that we have reason to distinguish two doctrines of method.

According to Curley, there is some continuity in the change: earlier and later, Descartes lays stress on certainty in genuine knowledge, he has a "mathematical model" for the sciences, and he is hostile toward "formalism" and the doctrine of the syllogism (p. 35). But he is said to reject two parts of his earlier view: that intuition or self-evidence is a sufficient grounding of knowledge and that mathematics is paradigmatically and unquestionably certain (pp. 35 ff.). And the importantly new features of the later conception of method are taken to be the program of systematic (or "hyperbolic") doubt and the proposal of clear and distinct perception as criterion of truth, the criterion which Descartes proposes in the third Meditation and (notoriously) attempts to justify thereafter (pp. 37-38, 43-45).

The question I want to raise about Curley's claim is quite simple. In Part Two of the Discourse, in the passage in which Descartes states four precepts, is he referring to -- perhaps providing a digest or giving some indication of -- the old method or the new? Briefly, I shall state reasons which might be given for and against both answers. In favor of the first, it can be argued that the Discourse is ostensibly an autobiographical account of Descartes' intellectual development and that Part Two is ostensibly about reflections which he made while in winter quarters in Germany, i.e., about a period in his life that we have reason to believe is the winter of 1619-1620. Since this is long before the alleged change in Descartes' view about
method, it seems that the passage containing the four precepts must be about the old method, not the new. A second reason for this answer is that there are, as Curley points out (pp. 21-22), "parallels" or "analogues" of these precepts in the Rules. There appear to be ancestors of the four precepts in the part of the Rules in which the pre­scriptions are not tied to any particular discipline or subject matter, namely, Rules I-VII inclusive; and it can be argued that, when Descartes states the four precepts in the Discourse, he is attempting to give some indication of that part of his early methodological doctrine which is, so to speak topic-neutral.

Two reasons of rather considerable strength can be mar­shalled against this answer. First, it seems that we should not be taken in by the autobiographical style of the Discourse. Indeed, Curley quotes a passage from Part Two of the Discourse which comes before the statement of the four precepts, and he takes this earlier passage to contain a distinctive feature of the new method (p. 44). In justification of his procedure, he notes that there are some points "on which the Discourse cannot be accepted as history" (p. 44, n. 22); and he attributes to Descartes an inclination "to project his mature ideas into his youth and conceive his life as a unity." Second, it would be puzzling if, in a passage in which Descartes gives the appearance of divulging his vaunted method, however allus­ive or incomplete the information provided may have been intended to be, there would be no reference at all to the important new features in his doctrine. I suppose Curley might say that, although there is no reference to the dis­tinctive features of the new method in this passage, they are described earlier in Part Two in the passage which he cites in connection with the new method. But then it is not clear why, in so carefully contrived a piece of writing as the Discourse, Descartes would serve up his methodo­logical doctrine in such a disjointed way. Moreover, in the passage in which he states the four precepts, he seems clearly intent on giving the reader the impression that we are here at the very heart of his powerful method, at least insofar as he chooses to reveal that method in the Discourse. Why, then, would he not refer to a part or parts of his doctrine which, on Curley's account, he regards at the time of writing the Discourse as integral and very important ingredients?

The second answer that Curley might give, namely, that Descartes is describing his new method in this passage,
could be supported by the two reasons just given against the first. And it could be argued that in the statement of the first precept reference is indeed made to what Curley takes to be the distinctive features of the later method. The last part of the first precept is, "to include nothing more in my judgements than what was so clearly and so distinctly present in my mind that I would have no occasion for putting it in doubt" (Bridoux, p. 137, my emphasis). "What was so clearly and so distinctly present in my mind" could be taken to be the proposal of clear and distinct perception as criterion of truth, and "no occasion for putting it in doubt" to refer to the program of metaphysical doubt.

Against this answer, there are two related objections which appear to be very strong. First, Descartes tells us in the Discourse that he made use of his method for nine years before he turned to "difficulties commonly disputed among the learned," and he clearly implies in this passage that his method can be used in mathematics and physics pre-philosophically viz. before, and independently of, engaging in the process of metaphysical doubt of Discourse IV and Meditation I. If, however, we take that program to be enjoined by the first rule, pre-philosophical use of the method is impossible. Second, if we take the first precept to be in some way related to the "Rule of Truth" in Meditation III, it must be noted that, in Meditation III, clear and distinct perception -- or very clear and distinct perception -- is proposed as a sufficient condition of truth, whereas the part of the first precept in the Discourse in which it might be supposed that there is mention of such a criterion is worded in such a way that we would have to take the criterion stated there to be the statement of a necessary condition of accepting something as true. Taken as the statement of a necessary condition, the rule would presumably be to accept nothing unless it is clearly and distinctly -- or perhaps very or most clearly and distinctly -- perceived to be true. But this is a precept which Descartes would not have been prepared to enjoin at any time in his life. On his view of mathematics, there are propositions which are too complex for any human being ever to perceive them clearly and distinctly to be true; yet he certainly does not wish to place these propositions out of bounds. Indeed, one of the points of the fourth rule in the Discourse is to reduce the risk involved in accepting propositions like these. Moreover, regarding the method to be employed in physics, there is no indication whatever of an injunction against accepting propositions which are not perceived clearly and distinctly to be true, though he does intend to exclude propositions which contain elements that are not
clearly and distinctly perceived, viz., powers, faculties, tendencies, real qualities, substantial forms, and the like. So it seems that, in the first precept of the Discourse, Descartes is not, or is not just, proposing a variant of the "Rule of Truth" in Meditation III.

The problem posed for Curley's "two methods" thesis arises independently of that thesis if we admit with Curley (as I am prepared to do) that Descartes comes to think of his program of metaphysical doubt as part of his methodological doctrine and if we also attribute to him (as I think we must) the view that his method can be employed "pre-philosophically" in mathematics and in physics prior to, and independently of, the metaphysical doubt and subsequent procedure of the Meditations. The views which we have to attribute to Descartes seem to be inconsistent, and the inconsistency is so very obvious that it is something of a mystery that Descartes would have failed to perceive it. Toward solving the mystery, I am inclined to favor Williams' suggestion in his recent book on Descartes (Bernard Williams, Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry p. 33 (New York: Penguin Books, 1978)) that the first precept of the Discourse is intended to be understood in two ways. If "occasion ... for doubt" is taken to include the reasons for doubt presented in Meditation I, the rule can be applied, in Williams' terms, "radically" and followed "to its limit." But "occasion ... for doubt" can also be taken to mean reasons for doubt other than the metaphysical reasons for doubt stated in the First Meditation; and, on this construal, the rule is far less restrictive and, as Williams suggests, is the same as the admonition which we find in Regulae II to "assent only to what is perfectly known and cannot be doubted" (Bridoux, p. 39).

I am not sure that Curley would, or could consistently, accept such an interpretation. On pp. 37-38 he does seem to be making such a suggestion. "I suggest," he writes, "that sometime around 1628 Descartes became convinced that the Regulae, though still valid at one level, did not go deeply enough into the problem of knowledge" (my emphasis). But I have not been able to reconcile this statement with Curley's claim that Descartes rejects parts of the methodological doctrine in the Regulae. I shall leave the topic of method with a question for Professor Curley: what exactly does he think Descartes intends to prescribe in the last part of his first precept in the Discourse?
For key arguments in the Meditations, Curley provides "reconstructions" in which he enumerates steps and comments on ways in which these steps might be related or supported. I have questions about steps in two of these reformulations. (a) In his restatement of the skeptical argument from dreaming in Meditation I, the second step is: "(2) Sometimes I have, in dreams, experiences which I take to be of ordinary-sized objects in my immediate vicinity and which are so like my most vivid waking experiences that they are not, in themselves, certainly distinguishable from waking experiences" (p. 51). Curley makes some claims regarding this step which I have not been able to reconcile. About the term "experience" which appears here, he says somewhat puzzlingly, "Though not explicit in Descartes' presentation of the argument, the concept of experience is crucial to the argument" (p. 52). Acknowledging that "experience" is a technical or "quasi-technical" term, he then hastens to assure us that, in his reformulation of the argument, it is used "in a neutral way." By "neutral" he does not mean neutral with respect to the question whether a person can be said to have experiences while asleep and dreaming. As for that question, Curley rejects what he calls "bad Malcolmian arguments," and "experience" is said to be used in such a way that a person certainly can have experiences while asleep and dreaming (pp. 55-56). The alleged "neutrality" is something else which he explains in the following sentences:

I use "experience" in as neutral a way as possible. For me to have an experience which I take to be of a red object is for me to be in a state in which I think I see a red object. Surely there can be no question as to whether, in this sense, experiences occur. I am sometimes in a state in which I think I see a red object. As I understand Descartes' argument, it involves no commitment to sense data, or any other contentious entities. (pp. 52-53, Curley's emphasis)

From this brief account of his use of "experience," it seems to follow that to say that a person has an experience of a red object in certain circumstances is simply to say that the person thinks he sees a red object, and it seems that, by "someone's thinking he sees a red object," Curley can be taken to mean that someone believes he sees a red object. If so, then one feature of this avowedly "neutral" use of "experience" is that experiences are beliefs of a certain kind; and, since it is clear that people do have
beliefs of this kind, Curley thinks that experiences in this sense of the term undoubtedly exist or occur. Another feature of his allegedly neutral use of "experience" is, as he explains in the last sentence, that it does not involve a commitment to "contentious entities," such as "sense data" or the "sensing of sense data." Since it seems that sense data, or the "sensing of sense data," might be posited as the cause of beliefs to which Curley refers, the second feature of his neutral use of "experience" is that no reference or commitment is involved to the "contentious entities" which, according to some philosophers, are supposed to cause and explain or having beliefs such as the beliefs we have when e.g. we think we see something red.

If this is a correct reading of the sentences in which Curley explains his use of "experience," he cannot consistently claim, as he goes on to claim, that Step (2) in his reformulation can be viewed as an explanation of why we are deceived or mistaken while asleep and dreaming (pp. 55, 59-60). Substituting "belief" for "experience" in (2), we get the following sentence: "Sometimes I have, in dreams, beliefs which I take to be of ordinary-sized objects in my immediate vicinity and which are so like my most vivid waking beliefs that they are not, in themselves, certainly distinguishable from waking beliefs." Now, though the occurrence or existence of beliefs -- perhaps of "vivid" in the sense of "strong" beliefs -- might be a necessary condition of our making mistakes while asleep and dreaming, the mere occurrence or existence of such beliefs cannot be taken to constitute an explanation of our making these mistakes. Such an explanation would have to include an account of why we have these mistaken beliefs, and it would not be enough just to say that we do have them and they are as strong as our waking beliefs.

Farther on in the book, Curley suggests a rather different account of what might be meant by "experience." He says there

Being in a state in which it seems to me that \( p \) is being in a state closely related to, though not identical with, believing that \( p \). Call it a tendency or inclination to believe that \( p \) -- a tendency which, if not opposed by a conflicting tendency, that is if I am not at the same time also inclined to believe that not-\( p \), will naturally lead me to believe \( p \). (p. 191).

The second meaning suggested here for "experience" is,
roughly, than an experience is not a belief of a certain sort but a tendency to have such a belief -- a tendency, he says, which if unopposed results in belief. If we substitute "tendency to believe" for "experience" in (2), we get what might perhaps be regarded as an explanation of our making mistakes while asleep and dreaming; namely, that, while asleep and dreaming, there exist or occur certain tendencies to believe and sometimes these tendencies are as "vivid", or powerful, as the tendencies we have while awake and hence are"in themselves" indistinguishable from such waking tendencies. But the price that Curley would have to pay for such an explanation is quite high. A "tendency to believe" seems to be no more nor less mysterious and contentious an entity than a "sense datum"; and, if this is in fact what he chooses to mean by "experience", his use of that term is by no stretch of the imagination "neutral." Hence, either "experience" is not used in the neutral way at first suggested, or step (2) in his reconstruction cannot be viewed, as Curley claims it can, as a possible explanation of mistakes made while asleep and dreaming.

(b) In the steps enumerated in Curley's "tentative summary" of Descartes' ontological proof in the Fifth Meditation, the proposition "Existence is a perfection" is conspicuously absent. It turns out that this proposition, as Curley construes Descartes' proof, is part of a "subargument" that is supposed to support one of the steps in the argument which is stated earlier and which Curley apparently takes to be the main argument for God's existence in the Fifth Meditation (pp. 141-143). I say "apparently" because he prefaces the statement of that argument with the words, "Tentatively, then, we summarize the argument thus ... ." The step in that argument which the "subargument" is supposed to support is, "(4) I perceive clearly and distinctly that existence belongs to the true and immutable nature of a supremely perfect being" (pp. 141-142); and the subargument is said to be"

(a) All perfections belong to the true and immutable nature of a supremely perfect being.
(b) Existence is a perfection.
(c) (Therefore,) existence belongs to the true and immutable nature of a supremely perfect being.
(p. 142)

A question can be raised as to how exactly Curley thinks this argument is related to the argument stated first, but a prior question is whether Descartes ever in fact states this argument. Attributing the argument to Descartes, Curley cites AT VII, 66, and HR I, 181. But, on these pages, there
is no use of the expression "true and immutable nature" or its Latin equivalent; nor do we find the proposition "Existence is perfection." On the following page, while attempting to answer an objection, Descartes does state an argument which bears some resemblance to the subargument Curley attributes to him:

Although it is not necessary that I should ever entertain the thought of God, nevertheless whenever it happens that I think of a first and sovereign being and, so to speak, draw this idea from the treasure house of my mind, it is necessary that I attribute to (this being) every perfection, although I do not then enumerate all of them nor attend to particular ones; and this necessity clearly suffices to make me rightly conclude, after observing that existence is a perfection, that a first and sovereign being exists....

In this passage (and nowhere else in the Fifth Meditation), we find the proposition "Existence is a perfection"; but the conclusion of the argument in this passage is "A first and sovereign being exists" (my emphasis) and not the conclusion of Curley's subargument, i.e. "Existence belongs to the true and immutable nature of a supremely perfect being" (my emphasis) let alone the step in the initial argument which it is said to support, i.e. "I perceive clearly and distinctly that existence belongs to the true and immutable nature of a supremely perfect being" (my emphasis). The conclusion of the argument is simply "A first and sovereign being exists."

Curley would, moreover, have some difficulty answering a question about the logical relation of the conclusion of his subargument to the proposition -- let's call it "(d)" -- "A supremely perfect being exists." The question is: Is (c) logically equivalent to, or does it entail, (d)? If Curley attributes to Descartes an affirmative answer to this question, then it is unclear why the subargument should be regarded as a subargument and not a proof proper of God's existence, or at any rate of the existence of a supremely perfect being. If, on the other hand, Curley credits Descartes (as I believe he would) with the view that (c) "by itself" does not entail (d) but that (d) is entailed by (c) in conjunction with some other proposition or propositions contained in the argument initially stated -- for simplicity, let us say the proposition "(e) Whatever pertains to the true and immutable nature of some thing is
true of that thing" --, then the view attributed to Descartes is inconsistent with another view imputed to him regarding deduction, namely:

If a valid argument contains a premise which is necessarily true, that premise can be eliminated, salva validitate. That is, if \( p \) and \( q \) entail \( r \), and \( p \) is necessary, then \( q \) alone entails \( r \). (p. 34)

It seems that the proposition which would have to be added to (c) to get (d), namely, (e), would for Descartes have to be a necessary truth (insofar as any truth can be said to be a necessary truth for him). But it would then follow that (e) is dispensable; and hence Descartes cannot consistently claim that (e) is a necessary truth, that (c) and (e) in conjunction entail (d), and that (c) by itself does not. The views which Curley attributes to Descartes seem to contain a pretty obvious inconsistency. Saying this, I do not mean to claim or imply that Curley's construal of Descartes' proof is thereby refuted, but I think it is important to note that the views are inconsistent.

3

The "overall reading" announced at the outset of Professor Wilson's book is, briefly, that Descartes' primary objective in the Meditations is establishment of his "ontology of nature." When we look at the development of the thesis and ask exactly who or what, according to Wilson, the target of Descartes' attack is and what precisely, according to her thesis, would constitute success in his enterprise, we find some unclarities in her reading. At the outset (pp. xiii-xiv), she says, "Descartes conceived his scientific system as the successor and replacement of the great Aristotelian-Scholastic synthesis that had dominated European thought for centuries"; and, farther on (p. 104), she refers to Descartes' opposition to what she calls a "world-view" to be found in "the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition." Part of her contention clearly is that, as Descartes is intent in physics on getting rid of Aristotelian-Scholastic sorts of explanations and theories and replacing them with his own, so he is concerned in the Meditations to attack certain philosophical theories in the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition and replace them with philosophical theories of his own. But this is at most part of the objective that Wilson attributes to Descartes. In some places, the whipping-boy is said to be "commonsense empiricism," and, although there is no doubt that she
thinks there is some relation between what she calls "common-sense empiricism" and the "world-view" of the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition, it is also clear that she does not think they are the same; for, on p. 113, she refers to "our ordinary commonsensical world-view" (my emphasis), and on p. 104 she says, "One can begin to see clearly the change from (mere) 'hyperbolic doubt' to outright criticism of the world-views (plural, my emphasis) of commonsense empiricism, and of the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition." It seems that, like William James, she is inclined to view Scholasticism as "common sense's college-trained younger sister..." (Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking, p. 189. (New York: Longmans, Green, 1943)); and what she thinks they have in common appears to be a certain philosophical theory about bodies and their relation to the ways in which we perceive them. Part of that theory is that there is something in bodies similar to (or perhaps identical with) the colors we sense when we perceive them, and part of her "overall reading" is that, in the Meditations, Descartes is out to undermine theories such as this one.

The first unclarity I find in her reading is with respect to what is to count as accepting, or being committed to, a "commonsensical world-view" or an alternative bit of terminology that she borrows from Sellars -- a "manifest (sensory) image of the world" (p. 126-127, 225). More particularly, the unclarity is with respect to what is to count as accepting, or being committed to, the supposedly erroneous theory about color perception which is an attendant or constituent of this "world-view" or "image." Professor Wilson rightly attributes to Descartes an inferential or judgmental theory of sense perception according to which, when, for instance, the plain man sees that a lemon is yellow, he makes an inference, or forms a judgment, about the color of the object before him. What is not clear in her account of Descartes' theory is the relation that is supposed to hold between making these particular inferences or judgments, such as the plain man's inference or judgment that this lemon is yellow, and holding the general theory about color perception which is taken to be part of the commonsensical world-view or sensory image of the world, namely, the theory that in bodies there is something similar to (or perhaps identical with) the colors we sense when we perceive them. (a) In one place, she attributes to Descartes the view that "our habitual inferences from sensations to things are wrong" (p. 104), and the reason she assigns to him for thinking they are wrong is that we conflate a "subjective state or sensation" with a "property of a physical thing" (p. 101). According to this account of Descartes' view, it
appears that the mistaken theory about color perception is embedded in the particular everyday inferences or judgments of the plain man in such an intimate way that it would be a (conceptual, logical) impossibility for him to make precisely these particular inferences or judgments yet not accept the general theory. Making these inferences, he would eo ipso be committed to the mistaken theory -- even though he may perhaps never have formulated the theory not have given any thought whatever to any problems about sense perception that have interested scientists or philosophers. On this account, the plain man's judgments in everyday life commit him willy nilly to a false philosophical theory, and the "world-view" of which this is a part seems to be all-pervasive, at least among plain men.

(b) In another place, Wilson gives a rather different account of the relation that is supposed to hold between the plain man's particular inferences and his acceptance of the philosophical theory in question. Referring to Descartes' position on our knowledge of bodies, she speaks of the inferences we regularly make "that produce our ordinary commonsensical world-view" (p. 113, my emphasis), implying (I believe) that making the particular inferences on the one hand and accepting the theory or world-view on the other are causally related and also distinguishable and separable. On the account suggested here, making the inferences causes us to accept the theory, and it would be at least (conceptually, logically) possible to make the inferences yet not accept the theory. It seems that, again, acceptance of the theory would be widespread, though what, in addition to making the inferences, would constitute accepting the theory is not on this account clear.

A second, related unclarity is with respect to what, on Wilson's interpretation, would constitute success in the program attributed to Descartes viz. of undermining the world-view of which this theory about color perception is a part. Would someone who has undergone the purgation of the Meditations have to stop making or at least radically alter his particular judgments e.g. the judgment he makes when he says, "This (lemon) is yellow"? On the first account of the relation between particular judgments and philosophical theory, it appears that, in order to get rid of the mistaken theory, this is exactly what would have to be done. The reform advocated would not be, as it were, simply a trade-off of philosophical theories but a thoroughgoing revision of every single judgment that a person makes on each occasion on which he perceives the color of something. It would not, in other words, be a revolution confined to the study
but an upheaval of the countless judgments which, according to Descartes, we are inclined to make in innumerable circumstances whenever we are perceptually aware of something. On the second account of the relation of particular judgments to theory, i.e., that the former cause the latter, such an upheaval would presumably not be necessary. Someone enlightened by the Meditations could continue to make the same sort of perceptual inferences that he had made in his uninformed state without being committed to the erroneous theory, for now his making these judgments no longer causes him to accept the theory. Other causes, presumably intensive study of the doctrine of the Meditations, would override the causes that formerly led him into this grievous error.

Although I am not sure of this, I suspect Wilson would not be happy with either description of the reform which, on her interpretation, Descartes is intent on bringing about. She speaks of "our persistent error in embracing the worldview of commonsense empiricism" (p. 105, my emphasis), implying (I take it) that, even after purgation by way of the Meditations, the convinced Cartesian continues to make — perhaps cannot help making — the same sort of inferences he made in the past and thereby remains committed to and accepts at least in his unreflecting everyday moments a theory which, through his reading of the Meditations, he has come to see is false. If I am right, Wilson envisages the success of the Cartesian revolution as a state of ambivalence and inconsistency on the part of the convinced Cartesian. On the one hand, simply in virtue of making his everyday inferences, say, about the color of the lemon, he accepts a certain theory; yet on the other hand, for philosophical reasons, he also rejects that very same theory. In short, it seems that the philosophically enlightened man necessarily believes both \( p \) and not \(-p\). I wonder whether Descartes would indeed approve such a description of his aim in the Meditations.

There are two particular points in Professor Wilson's book about which I want to raise questions. (a) Discussing the sentences about a piece of wax at the end of Meditation II, Wilson observes:

When Descartes says at the end of the discussion of the piece of wax that we have quoted: "(R)e-moving those (things) that do not belong to the wax, let us see what is left." he concludes without further ado, "surely nothing other than
something extended, flexible, and mutable."
(p. 88, my emphasis)

Is it correct to say or imply here that, when Descartes asserts in Meditation II that the wax is nothing other than an extended somewhat flexible and mutable, he is drawing a conclusion from his preceding discussion? Is it his intention, in other words, that the reader regard his proposition as something which is supposed to follow from, or to have been proved by, his remarks about the wax in its change of state? If, as Wilson suggests, we take Descartes to be stating an argument with his conclusion, we have to credit him with an extremely bad argument. Supposing he is arguing on the principle that nothing pertains to the wax that changes while the wax remains, he is clearly not justified in concluding that the wax is nothing other than an extended somewhat flexible and mutable. In the preceding discussion, he says, "The color (of the wax) changes" (color mutatur ..., AT VII, 30; Hr I, 154). From this it could be taken to follow that the particular, determinate colors we sense do not pertain to the wax, but it would not follow that the indeterminate quality of being colored in general, or of having some color or other, does not pertain to the wax -- any more than it would follow that the indeterminate property of being extended, or of having some shape or other, does not pertain to the wax. Indeed, it is worth noting in this passage that, while Descartes says the color of the wax changes, he says that the shape of the wax is taken away or lost (figura tollitur). If Descartes were arguing in the manner Wilson suggests, it would seem to follow from these remarks that, though a body must have some color or other in all its states, it need not have a shape.

Professor Wilson notes a "gap" in the argument she imputes to Descartes. She says, "as far as the preceding argument goes, it (his assertion about the wax) comes out of the blue" (p. 80). She then points out that Descartes does state an argument for such a conclusion elsewhere, namely, at Principles II, 3-4 and 11. But why, if the alleged "argument" in the Second Meditation is so incredibly gappy that the ostensible "conclusion" appears to be a non-sequitur, should we be at all inclined to suppose that Descartes in fact states this argument in the Second Meditation? There is another possibility which seems far more plausible. He prefaced his assertion about the wax with the words: "Let us attend and ... see what remains ..." (my emphasis). When he goes on to say, "nothing other than an extended somewhat flexible and mutable," it would be
more charitable at any rate to take him to be reporting an intuition -- an "inspection of the mind" or, in the words of one commentator, "an immediate donning of consciousness" (Williams, op. cit., p. 222) -- rather than to be drawing the conclusion of what would be an extraordinarily, indeed unbelievably bad argument.

An inadequately supported pronouncement of this kind would certainly not be unique in the Meditations. In Meditation I, for instance, Descartes simply tells us regarding "simple and universal matters" that "to such a class seem to belong corporeal nature in general, and its extension, the shape of extended things, also quantity or their size and number, as also place in which they exist, time through which they endure, and the like" (AT VII, 20; HR I, 146). Just as this statement appears to be an assertion which is indeed related to what comes before but is not intended to follow from the preceding discussion, so too the statement about the wax in the Second Meditation seems to be an assertion which is certainly related to the foregoing description of the wax in its change of state but is not supposed to be proved by, or to follow from, it. It is an assertion which is indeed related to what comes before but is not intended to follow from the preceding discussion, so too the statement about the wax in the Second Meditation seems to be an assertion which is certainly related to the foregoing description of the wax in its change of state but is not supposed to be proved by, or to follow from, it. It is an assertion which Descartes thinks can be proved but which he does not attempt to prove in this place. Furthermore, this assertion about the nature of a body is not a necessary step in the main line of argument in the Second Meditation. Descartes' concern at the end of Meditation II is to answer a possible objection, namely, that a particular body which can be sensed and imagined is more easily known than a thinking thing or mind which cannot be known in similar fashion. To answer this objection, he need only show that, since the wax can assume an indefinite number of particular sensible qualities, it cannot, as is commonly supposed, be comprehended by way of the senses or by imagination and that some (other) faculty of the mind is required. Moreover, to establish this point, he does not need to tell us what that faculty of the mind reveals the wax to be, though, for reasons which Professor Wilson stresses in her book, he does choose to divulge this extraneous bit of information in the Second Meditation.

(b) About Descartes' philosophy of mathematics, Wilson maintains that, in his later philosophy as well as in the
Rules, Descartes views imagination as an indispensable aid in geometrical physics and, if I understand her rightly, in non-applied or "pure" geometry as well (pp. 104, 232 n. 5, 168 ff). Thus, commenting on the role of imagination in geometry, she says, "Descartes thinks of imagination not just as the faculty of production or reproduction of sense-derived images in general, but also as a faculty of mathematical illustration, one that can be used to reproduce or construct geometrical images" (p. 104). About this faculty of imagination, she also seems to subscribe to the thesis developed by Norman Kemp Smith that, in the later works as well as in the Rules, imagining a shape consists in "direct apprehension" of a corporeal figure traced in part of the brain (New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes, passim (London: Macmillan, 1952)). It is, I believe, the conjunction of these two claims about imagination that leads her to conclude that, in one sense of the term "Platonist," Descartes does not appear to be a Platonist in mathematics. According to the interpretation suggested, Descartes' answer to the question "Does our mathematical knowledge depend in any degree on our having a body ...?" is "Yes" (pp. 170-171), presumably because we need to be aware of images traced in the brain, at least in geometry; and to the question "Does it (our mathematical knowledge) ... derive directly from pure understanding?", the answer is "No" (loc. cit.), presumably for the same reason. The view attributed to Descartes has some surprising consequences. Would it follow from this view that disembodied spirits could not do geometry? It seems unlikely that Descartes would knowingly at any rate have deprived them of that pleasure.

Both claims leading to the conclusion that Descartes is not in a certain sense a Platonist are controversial; and, when conjoined, the resulting interpretation is, I believe, incorrect. What evidence is there for the claim that imagination has an essential function in mathematics as Descartes came to conceive the subject? The only reasons Wilson gives are in the following sentence: "The prominence accorded the notion of imagination in Meditation V (and the beginning of Meditation VI) would suggest that it (imagination) is far from being an incidental aid" (p. 171, her emphasis). It seems to me that there are better explanations of Descartes' motivation in these passages. In the passage cited in Meditation VI, Descartes in fact contrasts the blurred and unhelpful images of most geometrical figures with less restricted, indispensable and genuinely operative acts of pure understanding (AT VII, 71-73; HR I 185-187). And, in the Discourse, he complains, regarding
the geometrical analysis of the Ancients, that it was "so tied to the consideration of figures that it cannot exercise the understanding without greatly fatiguing the imagination ..." (AT VI, 17-18; HR I, 91). Also, in the "Conversation with Burman," he is reported as saying that "in Physics there is no place for imagination ..." (AT V. 177). It is certainly not clear that, in Descartes' later works, imagination is taken to have an essential function, or indeed an important function at all, in mathematics or in physics.

I conclude with some questions. Here are some for Professor Curley. How does he think the first precept of the Discourse is related to the "Rule of Truth" in Meditation III? What is the concept of "experience" introduced in the reconstruction of Descartes' skeptical argument from dreaming? and how, on his account, does the proposition "Existence is a perfection" enter into the ontological proof in Meditation V? The question I think is most important for Professor Wilson is: What does she mean by accepting and/or rejecting a world-view? Of lesser importance are the questions just raised about Descartes' "conclusion" in the passage about the wax and her suggestion regarding the use of imagination in Cartesian mathematics.

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