CARTESIAN THEODICY
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Descartes’ Quest for Certitude

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In his work to which he devoted all his talents, [Monsieur Descartes] wanted to envisage God only as the author of Nature. It was not the natural theology, but only the Revelation which he left out of his design.

Adrien Baillet

I cannot forgive Descartes: in his whole philosophy he would like to do without God; but he could not help allowing him a flick of the fingers (chiquenaude) to set the world in motion; after that he had no more use for God.

Blaise Pascal

God created the world for two reasons... one, to provide an idea of his greatness, the other to depict invisible things in the visible. M. Descartes has destroyed the one as well as the other. "The sun is a lovely piece of work," one says to him. "Not at all," he replies, "it is a mass of metal filings." ..."The world is so big that one can get lost in it," he says, "but I regard it as a set of numbers." ... Descartes is like a thief who has killed another thief [Aristotle] and taken his booty from him.

Le Maistre de Sacy

One can say that Cartesian philosophy in attempting to account for all the wonders of Nature in terms of simple movements, it narrows and limits, so to speak, the grandeur of the works of God, and it diminishes the admiration which one should have for them. This admiration is one of the principle exercises of piety, and one of the least of the ordinary ways to elevate oneself to know and love God.

Louis-Paul du Vaucel
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Parts of chapters 1 and 5, concerning the influence of Augustinian corpus on the formation and development of Descartes' metaphysics, are taken from my forthcoming *Index Augustino-Cartésien. Textes et Commentaire* (Paris: VRIN).
Introduction

Having so settled the rights of faith and of reason as rather to place reason at the service of faith than in opposition to it, we shall see how they exercise these rights to support and harmonize what the light of nature and the light of revelation teach us of God and man in relation to evil.

Leibniz, Theodicy

The topic of this study — theodicy — might appear at first glance somewhat exotic in the context of the current discussions of Descartes' philosophy. Yet there is no term that better captures both Descartes' intention and the overarching argument in the Meditations. Surprisingly enough, with the exception of Sergio Landucci's study La Teodicea Nell'Età Cartesiana in which he discusses theodicies of several seventeenth-century thinkers, the Meditations have never been interpreted as theodicy. The reason for this, in my opinion, is the fact that Descartes' prime concern is Certitude or Truth, while the classical theodicies deal with the existence of moral evil. Not once is the term moral evil (malum culpae) used in the Meditations; what comes closest is the word sin (peccatum). This is not an insurmountable obstacle to my thesis. According to Descartes, both error and sin result from the indifference of the will towards the true and the good. Although Descartes tried not to meddle with theological and moral issues, it is clear from his treatment of the good and the true — both of which, according to him, were established by God — that they are two aspects of the same problem. Thus insofar as theodicy is concerned with examining the relationship between the existence of evil on the one hand and God's omnipotence and benevolence on the other, Descartes' question "How would the goodness of God not preclude the possibility that nature is deceptive?" is in perfect conformity with, and continues the long tradition of, Christian apologetics.

When the Meditations is read from such a view point, Descartes' philosophy can be said to clothe the same old theological puzzles in new dress. What was truly new and original, however, was Descartes' method — the "methodological doubt." Whether Descartes was more successful in solving the problems that philosophers traditionally attempted to answer is not clear. The spectacular progress of modern science, in which the role played by Descartes' philosophy cannot be overestimated, is un-

1. This point is made and developed by Leszek Kolakowski in his famous essay "The Priest and the Jester: An Examination of the Theological Heritage in Contemporary Thought" (1968) and is applied to the philosophy of Spinoza (1958).
questionable. For modern science to take off, Aristotelian-Scholastic teleology and the theory of substantial forms had to be rejected. Almost with a stroke of his pen, Descartes turned Aristotelianism into a shambles by reducing the whole physical universe to what he termed *extension*. Scientists no longer needed to seek recourse to the Scholastic substantial forms to explain and predict the behavior of bodies: all bodies, regardless of what they are, the shape they have, etc. are subject to the same laws of physics, and these in turn can be expressed by means of numbers. This clearly Cartesian attitude has become so prevalent in contemporary science that, as one contemporary physicist has put it, "mathematics is... the language of nature itself... the world [is] nothing but bits and pieces of mathematics."\(^2\)

This discovery, or rather invention, had momentous consequences for man's *Weltanschauung*. In the universe of the Scholastics the existence of God was a matter of demonstration. As St. Thomas argues in the so-called cosmological argument for the existence of God, because change implies an ultimate source that is unchanging — otherwise there would be an infinite regress — God must exist. In the Cartesian world there is no "cosmological ladder" leading from the physical world to the Creator. Because the senses sometimes deceive us, the existence of the world is uncertain. Thus one cannot prove the existence of God starting with the world. What is left is the ontological proof for God's existence: we know that God exists because we have an idea of Him, which He himself implanted in our minds. In Descartes' philosophy, the relation of God to the world is that of a Law-Giver who created the world and imposed on it laws that the world is bound to obey. Although in ontological terms the world has no *raison d'être* in itself because God is indispensable for maintaining it in each moment of its existence, when we investigate the world, we need not think about Him. As Paul Davies puts it, "For the modern scientist, it is sufficient only that nature simply have the observed regularities we still call laws. The question of their origin does not usually arise."\(^3\)

Descartes' philosophy turned the world into a soulless aggregation of matter governed by physical laws.\(^4\) The Cartesian universe is, to use Pascal's words, a terrifying abyss, where God left no traces. In such a world there is room neither for mystery nor for God — with the exception of what Pascal called a *chiquenaude* (the flick of the fingers) indispensable to set the world in motion. To be sure, one can try, as some

2. Davies: 1992, 93; emphasis in original.
3. Davies, Ibid., 77.
4. For example, Bernard Lamy in his *Entretiens sur les Sciences* (276) remarks that "At present one does not believe that one can know something unless it can be explained in mechanical terms. This path was opened by Descartes." Fontenelle in his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686) makes a similar observation: "I perceive,' said the Countess, 'Philosophy is now become very Mechanichal.' 'So mechanichal,' said I, 'that I fear we shall quickly be aschame'd of it.'" Quoted after Willey: 1953, 13.
contemporary physicists do, to look for the Creator behind the iron curtain of the laws of physics. If, however, behind what physicists call a "singularity" (the point of infinite compression of matter, where space, time, and matter collapse into one and the laws of physics break down) a creator is found, it is unlikely that this discovery would yield the Biblical God who exercises His providence over creation.

Retrospectively speaking, and somewhat simplifying the problem, one can say that while the Reformation set religion free from the authority of the Church of Rome, the philosophy of Descartes set the Catholic Church free from the authority of Aristotle. The centuries-long marriage between Christianity and the philosophy of Aristotle was dissolved by the emergence of the *nouvelle philosophie*. Three and a half centuries after Descartes, we can add only that the Enlightenment — the rise of which would be impossible without Descartes' sharp separation of the truths of religion and those of reason — set man free from the authority of religion. The link with transcendence has been broken. Again, in the process of secularization the role of Descartes' philosophy — which in one way or another was appropriated by the Enlightenment *philosophes* — was crucial.

Is there a logical connection, a *vinculum substantiale*, as it were, between the philosophy of Descartes and the process of secularization? Some of the seventeenth-century Augustinians — Arnauld, Nicole, Desgabets, Ambrosius Victor, La Forge, to mention only a few — believed that there is a concordance between the new philosophy and Christianity, or more properly, an Augustinian form of Christianity. Without entering now into details about the nature of this "concordance" between the thought of the Bishop of Hippo and the French philosopher, note that Descartes' distinction between the soul (mind) and body was especially appealing to the Augustinians. As Arnauld points out in *Nouveaux Elémens de géométrie* (1682 ed.), Descartes, like St. Augustine, emphasizes the study of mathematics as the best way for man to detach his mind from the senses. In so doing, the new philosophy is supposed to prepare man to embrace the truths of Christian religion. In the preface to the fifth edition of *La Logique* (1683), however, Nicole warns his readers that the study of mathematics and other sciences has a higher goal, otherwise it is useless:

> Men are not born to devote their time to measuring lines, to considering the connection between angles, or to consider movements of matter. Their spirit is too grand, their life is too short, their time is too precious for them to busy themselves with such small things.

Despite the belief of the seventeenth-century Augustinians that the Christian religion had found an ally in the *nouvelle philosophie*, a few decades after the death of Descartes, Cartesianism became an effective weapon in fighting religion. In its various forms and incarnations (Spinozism being only one of them), Cartesianism gave a fatal blow to
the Christian Weltanschauung. One might argue, however, and in perfect conformity with many of Descartes' own statements, that there is nothing in this new philosophy that automatically excludes a belief in the truths of Revelation, and therefore there is no logical link between Descartes' philosophy and the process of secularization. This is certainly true, but neither is there anything in the new philosophy that would make us accept the truths of religion over those of philosophy, and very many of those who accepted la nouvelle philosophie were prone to reject religion precisely in the name of Cartesian rationality. Because one cannot rationally demonstrate the truth value of the Revealed truths on the grounds of Descartes' philosophy, religious faith must ultimately remain a matter of arbitrary decision that has nothing to do with philosophical justification.5

It goes without saying that once Cartesianism was cut off from the transcendent roots from which it sprang, it greatly contributed not only to the eclipsing of religious beliefs but also to the erosion of a large body of problems — including the very possibility of theodicy — that had animated philosophical reflection for centuries. The consequences of this extended to Cartesian scholarship itself. The existing scholarly literature on Descartes is immense. Two volumes of Bibliographia Cartesiana amassed by Sebba, Doney and Chappell include several thousand books and articles and these comprise only the works written in major European languages. In this scholarly popularity contest, Descartes is second only to Plato and Aristotle. Yet despite the explosion of interest in Cartesianism, especially during the last four decades, it is characteristic of many studies that they ignore the questions that form the core of Descartes' philosophy: What is error? Is error evil? Where does it come from? If God created the world, why does man go wrong? What are the conditions of Absolute Truth? Does the notion of Absolute Truth have any meaning in a world originated by chance? These are, note well, Descartes' own questions. In contrast to the magisterial works by Gilson, Gouhier, Laporte, Alquié, Beck, Beyssade, Marion one cannot find answers to these questions in most recent works devoted to Descartes. As one reads them, one often gets the impression that Cartesianism is a body of epistemological puzzles that have no relation to truly human concerns.6 Cartesianism is reduced to a skeleton from which the skin has been ripped off or a complicated machine without any specific purpose to serve.

The present work is not an exposition of Descartes' system. My aim is more general. I interpret the philosophy of Descartes by beginning with the most general idea that stands behind Descartes' quest for

6. According to Roger Scruton (1995, IX): "The technocratic style of modern philosophy — and in particular that emerging from the Anglo-American universities is in danger of killing all interest in the subject, and of severing its connection to humane education."
Certitude. This key idea is theodicy. To be sure, there are many different interpretative keys to Cartesianism, or to any philosophy for that matter. That is why many different Descartes emerge from the works of different authors: Gilson's Descartes, an anti-metaphysical physicist and an enemy of St. Thomas; Laporte's Descartes, who wishes to revindicate the mystery of Christian religion; Hamlin's Descartes, a forerunner of modern Idealism; Victor Cousin's Descartes, an exponent of spiritualistic metaphysics; the apologetics-minded Descartes of Espinas; Frankfurt's Descartes, attempting to validate reason; Popkin's and Curley's Descartes, fighting against scepticism; Gouhier's Descartes, for whom the problem of the absolute validity of the clear and distinct perceptions is tantamount to knowing the source of man's existence is non-accidental; Geurout's Descartes, who builds his system along the lines of a strictly mathematical order; Alquie's Descartes, the creator of modern anthropocentric metaphysics; Marion's Descartes, the interlocutor of Suarez; or the Descartes of Garber, a builder of modern physics. Each of these commentators present a different aspect of one and the same philosophy of Descartes, and the above list is by no means exhaustive.

In this study, I present yet another Descartes. I deal with specific epistemological and interpretative problems, but I am primarily concerned with those relevant to Descartes' argument for theodicy. Unlike many interpreters of Descartes, however, I derive the foundations of Descartes' philosophy directly from the theology of St. Augustine. Despite his break with the past and his declarations to the effect that he proceeds according to the "order of reasons," Descartes never freed himself completely from the tradition he showed so little concern for. I agree with Laberthonnière's apt observation that despite Descartes' announcement at the opening of the Meditations that he starts building his philosophy from the point of absolute zero, he uses the old metaphysical building blocks in erecting his own edifice. "Descartes' situation," Laberthonnière remarks, "is reminiscent of that of a man who found himself in a place covered with ruins. But these ruins are like ready-made stones at his disposal. He makes use of them.... The material is borrowed, but transformed, yet it preserves the original look."7 We can safely dismiss Descartes' own myth of his philosophy as being without precedent and recognize it as merely a rupture, however big, with the past.8 What is new are not the concepts he uses, although many of them have been given a new meaning, but the goal they are supposed to serve. This goal is modern physics designed to master Nature. However, insofar as Cartesian philosophy derives from the same problems that animated

previous philosophies, Descartes unquestionably remains a member of the same family of European metaphysicians.  

There is, of course, the question of what Descartes retained and what he rejected from the traditional Aristotelian-Scholastic concept of metaphysics. Etienne Gilson, for whom the yardstick of metaphysical refinement was the metaphysics of St. Thomas, considered Descartes to be a metaphysical amateur. "I don't know if I will create scandal by saying that, apart from Spinoza, there was something amateurish in even the greatest of seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophers." After Descartes, according to Gilson, the traditional metaphysics of being gradually degenerated, not to resuscitate until Wolf. In contrast to Gilson, Ferdinand Alquie was a little more understanding. While conceding that Descartes impoverished the medieval metaphysics, Cartesian metaphysics cannot, as Gilson would have it, be reduced to the foundations of science. According to Alquie, Descartes' metaphysics essentially remains philosophia prima. To regain the lost concept of being, Descartes reestablishes the relationship of man to God on the principle of the "incomprehensibility" of Being. In the eyes of Alquie, Descartes' metaphysics is not a superfluous, however indispensable, springboard for science, but is first of all a mirror in which man can see the image of himself as being.

It is a truism that an interpretation of a philosophical system to a certain extent mirrors the interpreter's personal prejudices. This is especially the case for interpreters of Descartes. The reason lies not so much in the greatness of his philosophy — much of which was soon rejected — but more in the central role it played in forming what came to be called Modernity. It is no exaggeration to say that how we read Descartes today is partially conditioned by what we consider to be the essential elements of modernity. If by modernity we mean both a break with the Medieval vision of the world and the development of new scientific methods, the Descartes of Liard, Lévy-Bruhl, and Garber is a suitable candidate for making the break. If by modernity we mean the demise of Scholastic metaphysics, the Descartes of Gilson and Marion is quintessentially modern. If one views modernity as a secular or anti-religious movement, its founder is the Descartes of Hiram Caton. There is also the Descartes of Henri Lefebvre, whose concept of the cogito marks the birth of modern bourgeois individualism. If one wants to understand how Descartes' philosophy influenced the character of Christian faith in modern times, one can turn to the works of Gouhier and Labéthonnière, or to Laporte who provides one of the most intriguing and provoking interpretations, and whose Descartes can be called a typical rationalist only with the greatest of difficulty. Finally, if one wants to see Descartes as a

forerunner of the analytic tradition in philosophy, one can consult the works of Anthony Kenny, Bernard Williams and John Cottingham. There is no end to assessments of the role of Descartes' philosophy in shaping the modern mind. To some (Gilson) he is a mediocre metaphysician but a creative mind; to others (Cottingham) he is the greatest of the seventeenth-century thinkers. Be that as it may, one's interpretation will always be conditioned by one's assessment of what one believes Descartes reacted to.

The point of this study is to show how Descartes' philosophy derived from the early-seventeenth-century debates over divine and human freedom, and to what extent those debates influenced Descartes' epistemological considerations. Several scholars have noticed certain similarities between the structure of the *Meditations* and theodicy, but no one has made theodicy the interpretative axis of the *Meditations*. In this study, I offer a new perspective from which to read the *Meditations*. I start with the First Meditation — with Descartes' considerations about the source of error and his attempt to define God's role or responsibility in man's cognitive fallibility insofar as God is the creator of man's nature. The culmination of Descartes' hypothesis of the *deus deceptor* in the First Meditation is, I argue, a reiteration of an old Epicurean argument that there is an incongruity between the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent Creator and man's imperfect nature. The problem of error that Descartes addresses in the First Meditation is, however, only a prelude to his considerations in the Fourth Meditation, where the question of the origin of error is intertwined with more general considerations about the nature and scope of human freedom. The center of gravity of my discussion is Descartes' conception of human freedom and divine liberty. While the question of human freedom forms part of the discussion of error and falsity in the Fourth Meditation, divine liberty (better known in Cartesian scholarship under the name of the doctrine of eternal truths) is discussed by Descartes only in his correspondence and in the *Objections and Replies to the Meditations*. Because the conception of human freedom is the reverse of the doctrine of divine liberty, however, I analyze the two conceptions as two sides of the same problem — the problem of man's relation to God, or the problem of the relation of finitude to Infinity. I show that Descartes' quest for Certitude or Truth — which runs parallel to his attempt to overcome the problem of an evil deity, elaborated in the *Meditations* as the hypothesis of the deceiver — can be reformulated as the problem of creation: Did man come into existence by chance? (in which case our cognitive rules are accidental and are an expression of nothing more than the way human cognitive apparatus functions); or, was man created by God who is the ultimate *ratio essendi* of those rules? The problem of error is presented here as the problem of evil; the problem of human will is presented as the

problem of human freedom, and the quest for Certitude is interpreted as theodicy, that is, as the vindication of God's goodness and omnipotence. I understand the ultimate goal of Descartes' quest to be an attempt to demonstrate that the world we live in is perfect.

Cartesianism, as I argue, can be interpreted as a kind of epistemological Augustinianism. The role and influence of St. Augustine's thought in the seventeenth century are without precedent. As Jean Dagens remarks, it was the age of St. Augustine. And the theological problems and controversies kindled by the doctrines of St. Augustine in the seventeenth century (most notably the rise of the Oratorian movement in the 1620s and 1630s, and of Jansenism in the 1640s), are clearly reflected in Descartes' thought.

The thesis of Descartes' Augustinism is not entirely new. It was first formulated by Alfred Espinas in *Descartes et la morale* (1925) and by Etienne Gilson in his classic work *La Liberté chez Descartes et la théologie* (1913), and was later developed by Jean Laporte in his *Le rationalisme de Descartes* (1950). Gilson's work, however, encountered criticism from his pupil Henri Gouhier and more recently from Jean-Luc Marion. As time passed, the thesis of Augustinian connections in Descartes' philosophy was more or less abandoned. Despite the occasional appearance of books and articles on St. Augustine and Descartes, which more often than not are variations on the famous *cogito*, not much has changed in this respect in Cartesian studies since Gilson. In fact, Gilson himself considered this matter insoluble and almost closed. "We will never know to what degree Descartes was influenced, directly or indirectly, by St. Augustine or the Augustinian tradition." Whether Descartes was under direct or indirect influence of St. Augustine's thought is a purely historical problem, to which a fully rigorous solution at the present stage of historical research is, perhaps, not possible." As I show in my *Index Augustino-Cartésien*, Descartes was under the direct influence of St. Augustine and he was a very conscientious reader of his works.

There are several points essential to Cartesian metaphysics: the doctrine of the eternal truths (i.e., the conception of God's freedom); the conception of human freedom; the theory of error and the explanation of the will's propensity towards error (evil); and the account of human nature. All of these are in St. Augustine and there is considerable evi-

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15. See the very valuable comparative study by Stephen Menn: 1998. For an instructive account of the place of Gilson's contribution to the development of Cartesian studies, and of the role of Augustinian elements in it, see Marion: 1979, 13-34.
dence that Descartes took them from St. Augustine. I begin my dis­

cussion by describing the theological landscape immediately preceding the

publication of the *Meditations* in 1641. I contend that, much as

Descartes insisted on the timelessness of his philosophy, what he said

concerning the relationship between God and man, God's and man's re­

spective freedoms, and God's and man's natures is a reflection of theo­

logical battles fought by seventeenth-century Augustinian and Molinist

theologians and was expressed by Descartes in the language and cate­

gories created by St. Augustine.

Augustinian metaphysics is dead today. Unlike the philosophy of St.

Thomas, which gave rise to Neo-Thomism, Augustinism does not have

serious adherents, and indeed has not had since its last fortress, l'Abbé de

Port-Royal, was torn down by its enemies in 1712. To be sure, the fol­

owers of St. Thomas have never suffered similar persecution, yet the de­

struction of the Augustinian movement almost three centuries ago does

not fully explain why St. Augustine's metaphysics did not continue to be

a source of philosophical inspiration. The reasons for this are cultural. A

distinctive feature of much of today's philosophical reflection is oblivi­

ousness to what all great European philosophers considered to be the

Ultimate Questions. In this sense the situation of Augustinism is not dif­

ferent from any other philosophical orientation which insists on the ex­

istence of a hard Reality — be it the Platonic heaven of Ideas,

Aristotelian-Thomistic Being, the One of the Neo-Platonists, or God.

There is little doubt that Descartes' philosophy is historically responsible

for the dissolution of the notion of hard Reality. If Descartes' meta­

physics derives indeed from that of St. Augustine, it is an irony of his­

tory that the Augustinian ideas that largely shaped the intellectual coun­

tenance of Western (Latin) Europe for centuries were transformed in the

hands of Descartes into forces that led to its destruction.

18. See Wulf: 1907.
1. The *Meditations* as Theodicy

Had not God been infinitely Good, perhaps he might have not permitted imperfect Beings; but have been content in Himself, and created nothing at all... Imperfection then arose from the Infinity of Divine Goodness.

William King, *De origine mali*

Let us begin with two quotations:

Yet firmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature that I am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable? But perhaps God would not have allowed me to be deceived in this way, since he is said to be supremely good. But if it were inconsistent with his goodness to have created me such that I am deceived all the time, it would seem equally foreign to his goodness to allow me to be deceived even occasionally; yet this last assertion cannot be made.

To begin with, I recognize that it is impossible that God should ever deceive me... So what, then, is the source of my errors? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand. Since the will is indifferent in such cases, it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and sin.

These two accounts, in which Descartes purports to explain the source of error, come from the same work — the *Meditations*. The differences between them are so striking that one can accept that they came from the pen of the same author only on the assumption that the second is a revision of the first. What the first advances, the second denies. The first account (Med. I) implies that were a benevolent God my creator, He would have created me such that I would not be deceived. According to the second account (Med. IV), deception is a result of the wrong use of free will. As a matter of fact, much of what Descartes claims in the later
parts of the *Meditations* is, indeed, a revision of the views he presents earlier. Such seems to be the case with the contents of these two quotations. The juxtaposition of the two accounts shows an essential shift over the span of two Meditations (II-III) in Descartes' explanation of the source and nature of error. While in the first account error is involuntary, in the second account man's inappropriate use of free will is the source of error. But there is more to Descartes' explanation. If the first passage, which contains an implicit challenge to God's goodness, is taken as a starting point of Descartes' inquiry, and the second passage, in which God's goodness is vindicated, is taken as a point of arrival, the structure of the *Meditations* can be interpreted as theodicy.

*Unde malum* (Whence evil)? This is the question theodicy is designed to answer. Its goal, regardless of the strategy taken, is to exonerate God from the responsibility for evil. Since St. Augustine, who codified Christian teaching in Latin Christendom, it has been taken as a matter of course that as a result of the Fall of the First Man (and the fall of angels), human will has been perverted ever since and is thus the source of all evil. Original Sin reveals itself in concupiscence, which is a rebellion of the flesh against our spiritual nature. An implicit assumption of theodicy is that despite all its imperfections, the world is *de facto* perfect: whatever God created is good, and evil is the absence (*privatio*) of good.

This explanation has never been accepted as satisfactory. Can one believe, without assaulting reason, that the world with all its misery was created by an omnipotent and benevolent Creator? The Epicurean dictum *Because there is evil, then either God is evil or impotent or both,* Voltaire's sneering at Leibniz's idea that the world in which we live is the best of all possible worlds, Ivan Karamazov's rebellion against God, Nietzsche's attack on Christianity, and Camus' idea that suicide is the only philosophical problem, are only a few examples of the same intuition: our (imperfect) world cannot be a work of God. Were the theodicy builders oblivious to these arguments? Did they try to deny the reality of evil? Of course not. Leibniz and Voltaire lived in the same world. The point of their disagreement is not that Leibniz denies the reality of evil by claiming that evil is only apparent while Voltaire insists on its actuality; the crux of the controversy is whether there evil has any *meaning*.1

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1. After the huge earthquake in Lisbon, outraged with the magnitude of the event and the number of lives lost, Voltaire wrote a poem to commemorate the event. No Christian philosopher (certainly not Leibniz) thought of natural disasters as begging for explanation; their problem was moral evil (*malum culpae*). Although Voltaire considered himself to be primarily a dramatist, he is now known chiefly as the author of *Candide* and of the *Dictionarie philosophique*. The tone of most of his works is strongly anti-religious. His distinguished intellectual career as a mouthpiece of the Enlightenment consists to a considerable degree of his mocking respected thinkers. He ridiculed Leibniz's idea of the best of all possible worlds, castigated Pascal for making his readers believe that all people are wretched, and ridiculed the "stupidity" of the Jesuits and Jansenists involved in
The answer of the theodicy builders is that the creation of human beings requires that they be endowed with free will which inevitably entails the possibility of doing both good and evil.

Unlike their opponents, and despite obvious difficulties concerning the reconciliation of evil with God's goodness and omnipotence, the builders of theodicies were fully aware that the rejection of God as the creator of the world and in its stead the acceptance of the naturalistic account of its origin (be it chance, fate, or any other cause) would put an end to any philosophical attempts to explain the nature and origin of evil. "I tried to solve the difficulty in question, about the cause of error," Descartes wrote to Denis Mesland, S.J., "on the assumption that God had made the world most perfect, since if one makes the opposite assumption, the difficulty disappears altogether."2

Although the traditional subject matter of theodicy is moral evil, nothing in the notion of theodicy prevents us from extending it to other realms of philosophical inquiry, for example, epistemology, provided, of course, that the epistemological issues can ultimately be translated into moral terms. The Fourth Meditation, which is devoted to the freedom of the will, provides ample evidence that error is of interest to Descartes only in so far as it is voluntary and as such begs for explanation.

The theoditic character of Descartes' argument in the Meditations has not escaped the attention of Cartesian scholars; yet no previous attempt has been made to read it as such. In the major works on the Meditations, the religious character of Descartes' enterprise is either played down or is limited to the pointing out of similarities between Descartes' theory of error and the Christian idea of sin.3 The reasons for this silence are not difficult to explain. Descartes set forth several objectives for himself in the Meditations: (1) to demonstrate the existence of God and (2) the immortality of the soul; (3) to build "new foundations for the sciences"; (4) to establish the "foundation of all human certitude"; to overcome (5) scepticism and (6) atheism.4 While the first five are traditional problems of epistemology, it may not be immediately ap-

the controversy over the freedom of indifference (freedom of indifference is, as he explained it in his Dictionaire, the freedom to spin either in one direction or in another). It is rather surprising that the same Voltaire who ridiculed all those who tried to find the meaning behind the "chain of natural causes," was outraged with Nature.

2. Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644 (AT IV, 113; CSMK III, 232).
3. Among scholars who devoted some space to the relationship between error and sin are Mamus: 1890; Gilson: 1913, 214-15, 271; Gouhier: 1924, esp. 215, 209, 214; Devillaires: 1988, 70ff. English-language Cartesian scholars are almost silent on this issue; there are, however, exceptions. See Cottingham: 1988, 158; Soffer: 1987.
4. "Now my purpose was excellent, because I was using the supposition [of the deceiver] only for the better overthrow of scepticism and atheism, and to prove that God is no deceiver, and to establish that as the foundation of all human certitude." Letter to the Curators of Leiden University, May 4 1647 (AT V, 9; CSMK III, 316-17). In the Conversation with Burman, 16 April 1648, there is the following statement: "in the Meditations [Monsieur Descartes] established... certainty against the sceptics" (AT V, 165; CSMK III, 347).