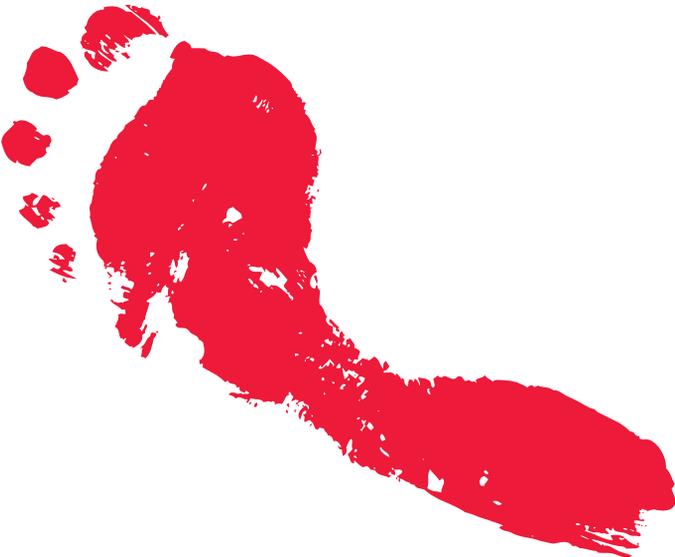


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Descartes'
Meditations
on First
Philosophy

Kurt Brandhorst



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Philosophy***

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Descartes'
Meditations on First Philosophy

An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide

Kurt Brandhorst

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Series Editor's Preface

To us, the principle of this series of books is clear and simple: what readers new to philosophical classics need first and foremost is help with *reading* these key texts. That is to say, help with the often antique or artificial style, the twists and turns of arguments on the page, as well as the vocabulary found in many philosophical works. New readers also need help with those first few daunting and disorienting sections of these books, the point of which are not at all obvious. The books in this series take you through each text step-by-step, explaining complex key terms and difficult passages which help to illustrate the way a philosopher thinks in prose.

We have designed each volume in the series to correspond to the way the texts are actually taught at universities around the world, and have included helpful guidance on writing university-level essays or examination answers. Designed to be read alongside the text, our aim is to enable you to *read* philosophical texts with confidence and perception. This will enable you to make your own judgements on the texts, and on the variety of opinions to be found concerning them. We want you to feel able to join the great dialogue of philosophy, rather than remain a well-informed eavesdropper.

Douglas Burnham

Note on Texts Cited

Citations to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* use the pagination of the modern standard edition of the original Latin and French: *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, revised edition (Paris: Vrin/CRNS, 1964–76). This edition is designated by 'AT' followed by the volume (7) and page number. I have used the translation by Donald Cress which can be found in *René Descartes: Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006. Reprinted by permission of Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. All rights reserved). Citations can be located using the AT numbers which are printed in the margins of the Cress translation (and most other translations of *Meditations*).

The citation from Georg Christoph Lichtenberg on page 69 is from §18, Notebook K (1793–1796) in *The Waste Books*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2000).

1. Introduction and Historical Context

This is a book on *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). While this might seem to go without saying, I think it is important to emphasise this point because this is a book only about *Meditations on First Philosophy*; this is not a book about Descartes, Descartes' philosophy in general or the place of this philosophy in the tradition of western thought. There are other books that address these issues but this book is nothing more than an attempt to address the text of *Meditations* in order to better understand what it has to say.

This is also therefore an attempt to take seriously what the text says rather than what has been said about the text. Perhaps the greatest challenge a reader faces when approaching an iconic text such as *Meditations* is finding the text under the layers of tradition. Everyone seems to have an opinion about what Descartes is up to in *Meditations* and some very illustrious and influential thinkers have contributed to the understanding of what we might call Cartesian Philosophy. The role that this form of Cartesianism plays in the tradition of western philosophy is indisputable and if we want to understand Gilbert Ryle's or Martin Heidegger's, Richard Rorty's or Luce Irigaray's quarrel with the tradition of Cartesian Philosophy we ought to take it seriously. Unfortunately, the text of *Meditations* is rarely the target when criticisms are raised against the tradition of Cartesianism. Indeed, the text of *Meditations* has little to do with much of the tradition that claims it as ancestor.

The text of *Meditations* seems to have been mislaid and the industry of commenting upon it has come to be dominated by attempts to say what the text ought to have said and attempts to coax the text into making sense in terms of current philosophical debates. *Meditations* has perhaps been too influential for its own good. When the likes of Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume and Kant offer glosses of Descartes' philosophy as a backdrop for their own philosophical projects it is only natural that

the traditions that take these thinkers as touchstones would be likely to defer to their judgement about what is going on in the original text. Thus a tale of what *Meditations* is meant to be doing often supplants what the text says. In this regard, Hume and Kant stand out for particular merit because of the degree to which they managed to transform the philosophical tradition into an epistemological tradition.

Roughly put, the Anglo-American view of the history of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century philosophy is largely shaped by the Enlightenment projects of Hume and Kant. This is no accident. Both thinkers saw themselves as revolutionary and, in keeping with the practice of modern revolution, actively (if perhaps not consciously) added a historiographical dimension to their work. In other words, Hume and Kant not only presented their own work as new and important but also explicitly stated how their work was progress on (and yet the culmination of) previous philosophical projects. As progress becomes an integral part of the philosophical project it becomes necessary to show that the philosophers you claim to have progressed beyond were involved in the same project you are now involved in. Thus Hume explicitly characterises Locke's project as his own, badly executed, and Kant bemoans the failure of Plato to investigate the possibility of synthetic *a priori* propositions! This historiographic tendency in Kant most notably results in the positing of two competing traditions in modern philosophy (what will come to be known as rationalism and empiricism) neither of which tells the whole story but which Kant's revolution happily reconciles.

These historiographic flourishes could be dismissed as so much bluff and bluster were it not the case that they have been so successful in characterising the early modern period as primarily if not exclusively about the questions Hume and Kant want answered: questions of knowledge, mind and experience – the epistemological bias. This is not the place to go into the way that this bias sells the likes of Locke and Leibniz short; nor is it my task to deny that Descartes' philosophy is not also concerned in various important ways with the 'problem of knowledge'. Rather it is crucial to note at the outset that this bias does serious harm to *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Thus, part of the task of this book will be to explore what can be meant by 'first philosophy' as well as to emphasise the ways in which *Meditations* is concerned with ontology and subjectivity rather than epistemology and philosophy of mind – after all, its most famous proclamation is primarily about being and existence and only secondarily about knowledge and certainty.

A contributing factor in the reinterpretation of *Meditations* as an epistemological text is, of course, that Descartes wrote more than one book. Taken as a whole, therefore, there might be good reason to believe that Descartes is interested in questions of knowledge. But here again *Meditations* suffers from a well-meaning misapprehension. *Meditations on First Philosophy* is a book that is almost immediately accessible to beginners in philosophy. Often it is taught as if it were a primer, a substitute for the more technical books of Descartes' corpus. If, however, *Meditations* is not undertaking the same project as *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (abandoned in 1628), *Discourse on Method* (1637) or *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) then the text suffers serious distortion through this approach.

It is worth remembering that *Meditations on First Philosophy* is neither a discourse nor on method, and this is a good place to begin when trying to understand what sets *Meditations* apart from Descartes' earlier text. By the same token, *Meditations* is not immediately about rules or principles no matter how many rules and principles can be derived from it. Therefore, taking the text of *Meditations* seriously requires that we take meditation seriously. In order to understand what the text has to say we have to understand how approaching a meditation necessarily differs from approaching a discourse, essay or treatise.

Thus far I have emphasised the need to treat *Meditations* in itself and as a unitary entity. There remains, therefore, only the difficulty of determining just where the boundaries of *Meditations* lie. For such a compact text *Meditations* has a surprisingly large penumbra. The grey area of supporting documents is indeed imposing. To the core six meditations, Descartes has appended a title, a dedicatory letter, a preface, a synopsis, and – most dauntingly – seven sets of objections and replies. Add to this the de facto eighth set of objections and replies to be found in his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and the waters are well and truly muddied. So what counts as *Meditations*?

Rather than answer this difficult question, I have adopted a strategy meant to enable readers to navigate the grey area around the text for themselves. Thus, I take the core of *Meditations* to include the features that would have been addressed to a 'first reader'. That is, the dedicatory letter, while available to us as readers, is addressed to specific readers that we cannot be; in other words, in reading it we are eavesdropping on someone else's conversation. Similarly, the objections and replies are by their very nature an exchange after the fact. That is, the objections are evidence of someone else having been a 'first reader', while the replies

are necessarily responses to someone else's first reading. The exclusion of the objections and replies complicates the way in which I must treat the preface for it is in the conclusion of this preface that the reader is asked to withhold judgement until they have read the objections and replies. At the very least this indicates that the preface itself, as with most prefaces, is a reply of sorts: a reply by a first reader named Descartes. As a result, the text as available to a first reader would only include the title, the synopsis and the six meditations. I will occasionally make use of the remaining documents but always with a caveat: commentaries on *Meditations*, even Descartes' own, are evidence of a first reading. It is the purpose of this book to make it possible for each reader to take up the position of first reader – and then it will be possible to compare notes with other first readers such as Kurt Brandhorst or indeed René Descartes.

Meditations

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of *Meditations on First Philosophy* is that this text is composed of meditations. But what does this mean? To the modern ear 'meditation' calls to mind certain religious practices or the mental exercises that are derived from these – and we would not be far wrong in thinking of Descartes' *Meditations* in this way. Certainly, this is better than pretending that the text is a treatise, discourse, or essay.

By treating the text as we would a philosophical treatise or discourse, we would be forced to assume that the literary form of *Meditations* is irrelevant to the reading and interpretation of the text. This is perhaps the most common approach to Descartes' text. Practitioners of this sort of approach range from those who express dismay at Descartes' foray into such an esoteric literary form and bemoan his failure to present us with a proper treatise, to those who acknowledge that the form of *Meditations* displays Descartes' literary merits and rhetorical skills and yet deny these any significant role in the interpretation of the text so presented.

In each case, so the argument goes, the 'philosophical' reading should attempt to disentangle the content of *Meditations* from its form. In this sort of approach the task of the interpretation is to extract arguments and conclusions, derive premises and principles; in short, this approach to the text takes up the task of trying to set out clearly what the text 'fails' to set out clearly – to say clearly what Descartes does not say but 'meant to say' or 'ought to have said'. While I think that this approach

is intrinsically damaging to the text, and will attempt to avoid talking over the text in this way, this is not the only problem faced by this sort of reading.

Deciding what counts as an argument is a crucial first step in deciding what can – and what cannot – be extracted from a text. Not all arguments are attempts at logical persuasion and, given that this text is a meditation, consideration must be given to rhetorical, psychological and even spiritual argument. But more importantly, one must first ask whether the text is proposing an argument of any kind at all. What harm might one do to a text that does not argue if one finds and extracts arguments from it? It is worth noting that relatively few philosophical forms take argument to be their primary task. Limiting the field to examples which precede Descartes, we should keep in mind the therapy of the Stoics, the strategy of Sextus Empiricus and Epicurus, the rhetorical and poetic persuasion of Plato, the autobiography of Augustine, and the reassurances of Anselm. In these cases, argument is employed but is never the whole or even the main story.

While each of the above forms might be of use in understanding *Meditations*, perhaps the best example we can look to for an understanding of the meditational literary form is that of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* (c. 1524). As a devotional meditation, *Spiritual Exercises* does not propound an argument or put forth a set of principles to defend. Instead the text is meant to serve as a guide for a journey of spiritual enlightenment. Various attempts have been made to draw parallels between the two texts, and biographically there is good reason to believe that Descartes had come into contact with Ignatius' text in some form or other in his early education. Unfortunately, most of this attention has focused on possible similarities of either the form or the content of these texts. This, I believe, is the wrong way forward. Rather than looking for ways in which *Meditations* and *Spiritual Exercises* are saying the same thing or saying things in the same way, we ought to be looking to *Spiritual Exercises* for guidance on how to use a meditational text.

Devotional Meditation and Ignatius Loyola

Ignatius (1491–1556) founded the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, and developed the *Spiritual Exercises* as a course of meditative practices and prayers for those seeking a deepening of spirituality and a closer contact with God. Over time these *Spiritual Exercises* became the basis for the

Jesuit order and a pedagogical tool in Jesuit schools. Despite the fact that Descartes' early education was at the Jesuit college at La Flèche in Anjou and there is therefore little reason to believe that he would not have been exposed, at least in passing, to the *Spiritual Exercises* of the founder of that order, Descartes is not writing a guidebook to spiritual enlightenment in the precise theological sense of Ignatius.

Moreover, Descartes' text is both a challenge to authority in philosophy and an enquiry into the nature of knowledge rather than faith. Still, we should be cautious to avoid enforcing too strict a division between the spiritual and the philosophical here. As we shall see, one of the things that *Meditations* accomplishes is a transformation of the notion of spirit into that of mind. A transformation, however, is not the same as a rejection. Indeed, while it is clear that Descartes and Ignatius have a different understanding of the spiritual and the religious, it is far from clear that Descartes' *Meditations* is not intending to induce a religious experience in his own 'spiritual' work.

There is little doubt that Descartes is *not* intending to induce the same sort of religious experience that Ignatius seeks to induce. But, we should be careful not to assume that there is a meaningful distinction to be had between metaphysical knowledge and religious experience. The medieval tradition in philosophy, of which Descartes is among the final flowers, takes it largely for granted that metaphysical knowledge is both a way to and a form of religious experience. This assumption is particularly strong in the Neoplatonic/Augustinian strand of Christian philosophy which most truly informs Descartes' view of philosophy.

That Descartes' text does not espouse a particular dogmatism is hardly sufficient to support the claim that his *Meditations* are not meant to induce a religious experience. It is only in a decidedly post-Cartesian climate that one could assume that philosophy, or the quest for metaphysical knowledge, could be wholly detached from religious commitment. Indeed, Descartes is advocating no less a religious conversion than any 'religious' writer of his day; the commitment to a method and orientation to the world is not something that requires the trappings of a particular God, set of dogmatic beliefs or rituals to make it religious. It is only prejudice that leads us to assume otherwise. To sequester religious experience from philosophical or scientific experience on the grounds that the former cannot avoid being dogmatic only serves to rob the latter of precisely the sort of life-changing and revolutionary orientation that the tradition is so keen to affirm in Descartes.

Moreover, we should be careful not to confuse the cognitive revolution of the second meditation with a rejection of the spiritual. As we will see in Chapter Two, it is true that Descartes re-brands the mind in terms of cognition but it is no less true that this rebranding is in the service of the soul. Indeed, for Descartes, as for the tradition since the time of Plato, the distinction between mind, soul and spirit is not firmly fixed. Saying that the mind is essentially cognitive is not clearly distinguishable in Descartes' usage from saying that soul or spirit is essentially cognitive. Given that the explicit point of the second meditation in which the cognitive revolution occurs is to establish that the mind is distinguishable from the body, and given that the explicit point of establishing *this* is to secure the possibility that the soul will survive the death of the body, it seems remarkably difficult to make sense of the claim that while *Meditations* are cognitive they are not spiritual.

What Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* brings to the reading of Descartes' *Meditations* has little to do with the content or indeed the particular form of the texts. Instead Ignatius provides a model for the sort of commitment involved in the reading of a meditational text. The reading of a meditational text is distinct from the reading of most texts but perhaps most of all from the reading of a traditional philosophical discourse. The reader does not approach the text for information as one might an encyclopaedia or textbook; a meditational text is not a resource. The reader does not approach the text as one might a set of instructions or a manual; the meditational text is not description. The reader does not approach the text as one might an essay or treatise; the meditational text has nothing to prove. Ignatius' text is not called *Spiritual Exercises* by accident. Like a book on physical exercise, this text is useless unless the reader does the exercise. It would be odd to read a book on how to do yoga as a treatise, a textbook, or even a set of instructions without ever actually doing any yoga.

In the case of a meditational text like *Spiritual Exercises* the doing involves thinking (meditating, praying) rather than any particular physical activity. And for this reason it might be easier to conclude that the non-physical activity of reading would be sufficient. But just as teachers do not usually equate the turning of the pages of a book all the way to the end with having actually read it, Ignatius is unlikely to be sympathetic with a meditant who claims merely to have read *Spiritual Exercises*. There is a presumption in a meditational text that time must be spent in the reading, in thinking over what has been read; there is a

presumption that there will be layers of understanding corresponding to the level of commitment one makes in the meditational practice. One's bodily understanding of yoga changes over time and through practice. Likewise, a meditational text is meant to take time and the reader is meant to take time with the text. And it is not incidental that Descartes invites only those readers who have the desire to meditate *seriously*.

It is at this point in the comparison that the reading of *Meditations* as a meditational text runs up against the reason most people read the text in the first place. The text is very easy to read and is thus perfectly suited to classes for beginners and introductory philosophy courses. Unfortunately, what I am arguing is that this is precisely the wrong reason to read the text and that any reading that begins with this assumption is bound to be unsatisfactory. *Meditations* will be as easy or as difficult as the reader allows it to be, but a reading that takes it seriously as a meditational text will find that the whole piece hangs together much more convincingly and fruitfully than one which approaches the text as a discourse or textbook.

Descartes' *Meditations* is not as structured as *Spiritual Exercises* but we should not conclude from this that it is not meditational. By inviting us to meditate with him, Descartes invokes a literary form that has expectations of the reader. We will eavesdrop on Descartes' own meditational practice; we will allow the text to appeal to our imagination as well as our reason; we will take the time with the text to make Descartes' practice our own; we will think hard about the things Descartes thinks through before us; and in the end we just might discover that we really are better persuaded by the reasons which we have discovered for ourselves in the process than we could ever be by those dictated to us by an other.

First Philosophy

Descartes presents his meditations as *Meditations on First Philosophy*. What, then, is 'first philosophy'? To explain this, as is often done, by saying that 'first philosophy' is another name for 'metaphysics' is not entirely helpful if one does not already know what 'metaphysics' means. More to the point one would have to know in advance what metaphysics means to Descartes for this to be a helpful explanation. And here is yet another opportunity for prejudice to enter our reading of *Meditations on First Philosophy*, for it is not likely that what Descartes means by metaphysics will be what is meant by metaphysics today. Fortunately, all this

can be avoided if we explore what might be meant by ‘first philosophy’ instead.

The notion of ‘first philosophy’ is first invoked by Aristotle in a series of writings that came to be known as *Metaphysics* (*meta ta physica*) because it came after the writings called *Physics* in the standard ancient collection of Aristotle’s writings. In invoking ‘first philosophy’ Descartes casts us back into the Aristotelian roots of metaphysical philosophy. Descartes’ relation to the Aristotelian/Scholastic philosophy of his day was largely hostile and this evocation of Aristotle’s usage is both a challenge to this Scholastic tradition and a reminder that perhaps his philosophy is closer to the spirit of Aristotle than to the tradition of Aristotelianism.

According to Aristotle, first philosophy is the study of being qua being (or being in itself). That is, it is not the study of any particular being (a dog, a cloud) or even of any particular kind of being (animals, meteorological phenomena) but of what it means to be. In Aristotle’s philosophy this question of what it means to be would involve that which all beings have in common. Just as the study of dogs would set out to determine that which all dogs have in common (dog-ness) which makes each one of them a dog (and not a cat or a cloud), first philosophy sets out to determine what all beings (things that are) have in common as beings. First philosophy asks after the being of being.

Given this, the notion of ‘first’ in play in first philosophy might initially seem counterintuitive. Aristotle is clear that all speculation *begins* with the experience of particular beings and we progress to the study of more general categories of being by the method of abstraction, by asking what each member of a set has in common. As the largest set is the set of all beings and it is the study of this set that concerns first philosophy it might seem that Aristotle ought to talk of ‘last philosophy’ as the philosophy of being qua being. But it is not *temporal priority* that is in question when we speak of first philosophy. We find first philosophy last but when we find it we understand what must in fact have been first for the particulars to be the way they are.

The key to understanding this reversal is to be found in Aristotle’s analysis by causes which is the centrepiece of his philosophy. ‘Cause’ (*aita*) for Aristotle has a very technical meaning that is much broader than the common meaning we might associate with the word. Without going into too much detail, there are four causes (material, efficient, formal and final) by which all things that are (beings) can be analysed. And this analysis is possible because everything that is, every particular

thing that we experience, owes its being as it is (its particular being) to these causes (understood as grounds of being). To use a simple example, to give a complete analysis of the being of a particular soup bowl, we must ask after: the matter (clay) of the soup bowl (material cause – that which makes up the particular being); the maker (the potter) of the soup bowl (efficient cause – that which brings the particular thing into being); the ‘form’ of the soup bowl (formal cause – that which identifies the soup bowl as a soup bowl and not a wine chalice); and the purpose or *telos* (to hold soup) of the soup bowl (final cause – that toward which the being of the particular is directed).

A complete understanding of a particular being will give an account in terms of these four causes. Without putting too much weight on the term, everything that is, every particular that we experience, is the ‘effect’ of these causes and thus these four causes are the ground for anything that is. It is in this sense that, while the experience of the particular being must always be temporally first, the proper understanding of this particular being involves the understanding of what must have preceded it for it to be. And as not all the four causes function temporally, this precedence is not entirely temporal but logical (concerning thought) or ontological (concerning being). In this sense, first philosophy concerns that which is most abstracted from any particular being but must have priority for any less abstract being to be. Ultimately, the proper understanding of particular beings (or sets of particular beings), what Aristotle calls physics, rests on a proper understanding of the study of first philosophy; and yet the method of abstraction from particular beings grounds this first philosophy.

Here is where Descartes differs from Aristotle. Like Aristotle, Descartes embraces the idea that a proper understanding of first philosophy is essential to the understanding of physics (science). But Descartes rejects the method of abstraction that the Scholastic philosophy of his day, derived from Aristotle, advocates for this. Descartes doubts that a science of ultimate generality (metaphysics) can be achieved by greater and greater abstraction from particulars. He also doubts that any metaphysics developed in this way has the right to be called first philosophy. At root this worry is twofold. First there is the suspicion that by starting with the experience of particulars and applying the method of abstraction science will forever be limited to taxonomy (albeit a remarkably complicated one). But more importantly for the reading of *Meditations*, Descartes is worried that there is no clear method for reliably picking out the particulars to start with – there is little doubt that if your initial

sample of particular beings is unreliable then any general science derived from it will be faulty.

So Descartes clings to Aristotle's insistence that the question of first philosophy is paramount but abandons Aristotle's methodology. In doing so he reverses the Aristotelian approach. For Descartes, first philosophy is the study of that which is necessary for the experience of particulars rather than the study of that which is necessary for the being of particulars. In effect, Descartes is attempting to ground the Aristotelian starting point by suggesting that the experience of particular beings is not as easy as it appears. Descartes thereby realigns the 'first' of first philosophy with the 'first' knowledge. For this reason Descartes is sometimes called a foundational philosopher. Rather than admit that any of his naïve opinions be given the status of knowledge and the basis for future investigations, he insists that first philosophy deal with those things that we are able to know first. And this means first jettisoning everything that we *think* we know.

While this shift is revolutionary, however, we should not immediately assume that Descartes is abandoning ontology for epistemology. The revolution is much more subtle. Descartes does problematise the naïve experience at the heart of Aristotle's philosophy but he has not abandoned Aristotle's ontological definition of first philosophy: ultimately, what Descartes discovers as the first principles for experience are the being of the ego and the being of God. And for this reason Descartes' metaphysics can be seen as the legitimate heir to Aristotle's concern with the nature of original, or first, being.

The Title

Having already discussed the words of the main title of Descartes' text, we now turn to the *full* title, of which there are famously two versions:

First Edition: *Meditations on First Philosophy in which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated*

Second Edition: *Meditations on First Philosophy in which the existence of God and the distinction between the soul and the body are demonstrated*

Apart from the historical contingency that Descartes was not entirely happy with the publisher of his first edition and that, apparently, this