

USAGE STATEMENT & AGREEMENT

- **This document is the property of the author(s) and of www.epsociety.org.**
- **This document has been made available for your individual usage.**
- **It's possible that the ideas contained in this document are of a "preprint" quality. Please consult the author(s) for any updated content.**
- **If you quote from this document, whether for personal or professional purposes, please give appropriate attribution and link to the original URL whenever you cite it.**
- **Please do not upload or store this document to any personal or organization owned website, intranet, portal, server, FTP area, or any other shared space.**
- **You are permitted to store this document on your own individual, privately-owned computer or device.**
- **By opening this document, you have agreed to abide by the above stated usage policy.**
- ***We welcome your comments and interaction about the ideas shared in this document by going to www.epsociety.org!***

Descartes and the Philosophy of Theological Anthropology

Richard J. Mouw
Fuller Theological Seminary
Pasadena, California
rjmouw@fuller.edu

Abstract: In summing up what he has explored in Descartes, Frederick Copleston complains that many later philosophers have ignored “the most important aspects of [Descartes] philosophy when we consider it in its historical setting.” They insist, he says, on depicting Descartes as replacing “the ancient and medieval problem of reason, [with] the modern problem of consciousness.” Through an engagement with Copleston, this essay offers up a significant contribution by Descartes to the history of philosophy despite common criticisms in the history of philosophy and theological anthropology.

In his magisterial multivolume *A History of Philosophy*, Frederick Copleston devotes sixty pages to a careful exposition of Descartes’s discussions of mind and body. In summing up what he has explored in Descartes, Father Copleston complains that many later philosophers have ignored “the most important aspects of [Descartes] philosophy when we consider it in its historical setting.” They insist, he says, on depicting Descartes as replacing “the ancient and medieval problem of reason, [with] the modern problem of consciousness.” The result is that they miss the central motive of the Cartesian project, which is, says Copleston, the desire “to reconcile the ‘geometric’ view of the world with a belief in God, in the divine activity and in the spirituality of the human soul.”¹

In lodging this criticism, Copleston has in mind particularly Hegel, Husserl and Sartre, but he could also have added the examples of the analytic philosophers with whom I studied. I taught my first philosophy course in the university where I was doing my graduate study, and all of us who taught sections of Introduction to Philosophy were required by the department to assign readings from the same texts.

¹ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Modern Philosophy, vol, IV: Modern Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 152.

The texts included both Descartes' *Meditations* and Hobbes' *Leviathan*, and in each case, we were advised by the department chair to “stick to the basics” and not get “bogged down in the other stuff.” And attending to the “basics” in Descartes' case meant not doing too much with materials beyond his first few *Meditations*.

When I did go beyond those “basics” in my study of Descartes, I was intrigued by his obvious interest in religious issues. In the *Principles of Philosophy*, for example, Descartes touches on some significant theological topics, such as reconciling human freedom with God's omnipotence; the divine pre-ordination of all things, the reality of special revelation, and the like.

I was especially taken, however, with his insistence in Principle XIII that “the knowledge of all other things depends on the knowledge of God”—which means, he says, that the human self “can have no certain knowledge until it is acquainted with its creator.”

I had come to my graduate work in Philosophy from studying in a Reformed seminary, and a highlight of that experience had been reading through John Calvin's *Institutes* for the first time. And while it seemed counter to everything I had heard previously about Descartes' thought, I was struck by what I heard as echoes in his *Principles* of Calvin's wonderful opening lines in the *Institutes*:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.²

A standard reading of Descartes in the *Meditation* is that he only gets around to acknowledging the reality of God after he first establishes a clear understanding of his own true nature. Copleston points to a problem in reconciling two ways of depicting the relationship between the human self and God. But in the third *Meditation* he does suggest that we can come to know our own imperfections only after we have come to understand something of the divine perfection. And we get more of the same at some points in the *Principles*.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, vols. XX and XXI; edited by John T. McNeill and translated by F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book I, Ch. I, sec. 1, 81.

To be sure Descartes' formulations here are a bit murky, he does seem to be presupposing what Copleston identifies as the "Augustinian" notion that "[o]ne does not really know oneself, the self whose existence is affirmed in the *Cogito, Ergo Sum*, unless it is known as one term of the total relationship, self-God." And Copleston clarifies much of this by urging us to distinguish here between *the ordo essendi*, the order of being, and the *ordo inveniendi*, the order of discovery.³ However much we may dissent from Descartes' pattern of discovering the nature of things, we can at least appreciate what he ends up discovering: Two things are perfectly clear, he says in summarizing Part I of the *Principles*: "that we exist, inasmuch as our nature is to think, and at the same time that there is a God upon whom we depend."⁴ There certainly is enough in all of this to justify Copleston's assessment that Descartes was sincerely motivated to set forth a philosophical perspective that was grounded in "a belief in God, in the divine activity and in the spirituality of the human soul."

Richard Mouw is a philosopher and author of over twenty books, previously serving as President of Fuller Theological Seminary and director of Fuller's Institute of Faith and Public Life.

³ Copleston, *History*, IV, 114.

⁴ Rene Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, Volume I (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), Principle XIV, 252.