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Brief Biography:

I received my PhD from New York University in 1982. I am a Full Professor at St. John’s University and the College of St. Benedict in Minnesota, where I have been teaching since 1984. Most of my research has focused on the philosophy of Descartes and on early modern philosophy. I have published a number of articles on Descartes, and my book—*Squaring the Circle in Descartes’ Meditations: The Strong Validation of Reason*—was published in September 2014 by Cambridge University Press. The paper I am proposing expands on the account of Descartes’ validation of reason that I offer in my book.

Title:

The Neoplatonic Foundation of Descartes' Scientia

Abstract:

Descartes explains that the epistemological task of his *Meditations* is to transform persuasio into scientia. The foundational step needed for this task is his Meditation III proof of the existence of a non-deceiving God. But it is traditionally argued that this proof is a circular one, since Descartes uses clear and distinct perceptions as premises in a deductive demonstration to conclude that these perceptions are true. I propose that Descartes did not intend his deductive demonstration to be his decisive proof for God’s existence. Immediately after that demonstration, he claims that it has not eliminated the need to remember the reasoning used to establish its conclusion; but the elimination of that need is a distinguishing characteristic of his scientia. Descartes’ “second proof” in Meditation III is his decisive one. That proof is not a deductive demonstration; rather, it is achieved in line with Plotinus’ account of the soul’s experience of participation in Nous.

Plotinus explains in Enneads III.8.5 that “the Soul ... by its participation in the Supreme ... comes to identification with the object of its knowledge.” When the “Reason-Principle [is] made one identical thing with the Soul of the novice ... [Soul] becomes productive, active” and, in its Contemplation, “has a tranquil vision of what it produces.”

The text of the final stage of Meditation III directs the meditator to proceed through three experiential steps. She must first attain the idea of God as an “infinite being”—an idea which exceeds her comprehension and provides her with the experience of God’s power moving her will. Then, she must form the idea of God as a “perfect being”—an idea which is clear and distinct, and provides her with the experience of her mind’s power to generate that idea. Finally, she must experience both ideas simultaneously. At that point, she will experience her clear and distinct perception of God to be a participation in God’s perception of Himself. She experiences her mind to be one with God—her object of knowledge—and to be receiving from God its active power to produce an idea of Him. This Plotinian experience provides the foundation of Descartes’ scientia.