

Descartes Our Contemporary

Descartes: An Intellectual Biography. By Stephen Gaukroger (Oxford University Press, 1995), xviii + 499 pp. £25.00 cloth.

Descartes and his Contemporaries: Meditations, Objections, and Replies. Edited by Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene (University Of Chicago Press, 1995), vii + 261 pp. \$17.95 paper.

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The past two decades have witnessed an accelerated growth in interest among analytic philosophers in the history of early modern philosophy and science. This has helped to make Descartes scholarship the rich and lively field of research that it is today, as the latter of the two books under review rightly attests in its prologue. Stephen Gaukroger's masterful *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* supersedes both previous English-language biographies (Elizabeth Haldane's *Descartes: His Life and Times* (1905) and Jack Vrooman's *René Descartes: A Biography* (1970)) in its exhaustive account of the intellectual development of the so-called 'father of modern philosophy.' Although he must rely upon Adrien Baillet's comprehensive *La vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes* (1691), and to a lesser extent Charles Adam's *Vie et oeuvres de Descartes* (1910), for the majority of his biographical facts, Gaukroger has consulted new historical evidence (e.g., the recently discovered document listing the theses Descartes defended for his law degree in Poitiers in November 1616) and contemporary records and documents (e.g., the curriculum at La Flèche) in order to produce the most historically accurate account available of the development of Descartes' philosophical views. Gaukroger is especially good on Descartes' early mathematical and scientific works, such as the *Compendium Musicae* (1618), the *Thesaurus Mathematicus* (1619), and the early sections of the *Regulae* (1620). It is a mark of his thoroughness that we do not come to the *Discours de la méthode* (1637) until we are already three-quarters of the way through the book. It should be said, however, that this is very much an intellectual biography, with the narration of the details of Descartes' life taking second place to the exegesis of his writings and the examination of the cultural and scientific context in which he wrote. For stories about Descartes fighting a duel over a woman, or defending himself against mutinous sailors on a crossing to Holland, or being reconciled with the sick Gassendi at his bedside, the reader will have to turn to Baillet, Adam, or Vrooman.

Gaukroger's account is not simply a chronicle of intellectual development, however. It is also a long argument for an important claim about the motivation behind Descartes' later writings. The claim is that Descartes' project of metaphysically justifying his natural



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philosophy in the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641) and the *Principia philosophiae* (1644) was merely an attempt to legitimate it for an audience of theologians and intransigent Scholastic philosophers, whom he feared would condemn it. Gaukroger's argument for this claim rests upon three premises. The first is that Descartes never had a sceptical crisis, and that he had no genuine philosophical interest in scepticism; he only became interested in scepticism late in his career, after he had already outlined his natural philosophy in *Le Monde* and *L'Homme* (c.1633). The second is that the turning point in his intellectual career was the condemnation of Galileo by the Inquisition in 1633, which led to his abandoning his plans to publish *Le Monde* and *L'Homme*. Since the heretical Copernican thesis of the movement of the earth could be derived from his natural philosophy, Descartes realised that if he wanted to avoid the condemnation of the Church authorities he would have to present his natural philosophy in such a way that it would be acceptable to them. The third is that in abandoning the earlier natural-philosophical mode of argument for a mode of argument derived from scholastic metaphysics, Descartes was not attempting to provide a genuine elucidation of his natural philosophy, but was merely attempting to demonstrate his orthodoxy for an audience. Gaukroger repeatedly points to a quotation from the 1649 interview with Frans Burman, where Descartes is reported as saying 'A point to note is that you should not devote so much attention to the *Meditationes* and to metaphysical questions, or give them elaborate treatment in commentaries and the like. ... They draw the mind too far away from physical and observable things, and make it unfit to study them. Yet it is precisely these physical studies that it is most desirable for men to pursue' (quoted, 362). His biography thus makes an important contribution to the general revisionist project in Descartes scholarship of undermining the view that Descartes was primarily an epistemologist.

Gaukroger makes a good case for his claim about the motivation behind Descartes' later writings. Given Descartes' great zeal to avoid confrontations with authorities of any kind, and his desire to ingratiate himself with influential theologians and royalty in order to avoid trouble (at a politically unstable time), I am inclined to accept the general point about his motivation, without conceding that the enormously influential metaphysics which he constructed was not independently true and important to him. I am thus sceptical of the third premise in Gaukroger's argument. The Burman quote is somewhat disingenuous since Descartes is on record as saying that a person should only do metaphysics a few times *per year*, and his point to Burman can be read as a piece of practical advice, rather than as a comment on the relative unimportance of his metaphysics.

Throughout the book Gaukroger provides his own interpretations of key Cartesian doctrines. His most implausible interpretation of an element of Descartes' natural philosophy comes in his discussion of Descartes' position on animals. Here the notorious *bête-machine* hypothesis—the hypothesis that animals are merely machines, or bodies without minds, and that they do not have any sensations at all—is rejected as being a misrepresentation of Descartes. Although elsewhere he briefly acknowledges Descartes' vivisection experiments on live rabbits and dogs to monitor the beating of their hearts, Gaukroger insists that 'Descartes' claim is that their [animals'] thoughts and experiences are not like ours, not that they do not have any thoughts and experiences at all' (288). However, the textual evidence overwhelmingly points to the conclusion that Descartes believed that animals did not have thoughts or experiences at all.

The 350th anniversary of the publication of the *Meditationes* was marked in 1991 and 1992 by conferences held in Reading, Paris, Lecce, and at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene's edited proceedings of the 1992 Virginia conference, *Descartes and his Contemporaries: Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, brings together papers by leading Descartes scholars on the objections to the *Meditationes* made by various contemporary theologians and philosophers, and Descartes' replies to them. The claim, made in Jean-Luc Marion's opening paper 'The Place of the *Objections* in the Development of Cartesian Metaphysics,' that the objections and replies are not merely additions to the meditations but form 'an organic whole' (7) with them, sets the tone for the collection.

It is true, as Marion claims, that certain important Cartesian doctrines are only advanced or properly clarified in the replies. Both Theo Verbeek and Jean-Robert Armogathe, for example, examine the exchange with Johannes Caterus on the relationship between God and causation, in which Descartes clarifies what is meant by the claim that God is a *causa sui*, while Thomas Lennon examines the exchange with Pierre Gassendi on the possibility of having a complete idea of God, in which Descartes advances the thesis that our idea of God represents the essence of God, which is complete, although our idea of God itself is not complete. Nevertheless, the most important exchanges between Descartes and his critics were those which concerned central Cartesian doctrines, argued for in the body of the meditations, and the most rewarding papers in this collection are those which deal with those exchanges, and which manage to shed new light on Descartes' views. Space prohibits discussion of them all, but two in particular are worth mentioning.

Margaret Osler's 'Divine Will and Mathematical Truth: Gassendi and Descartes on the Status of the Eternal Truths' argues, against the grain of previous scholarship, that the position on eternal truths defended by Descartes in his testy exchange with Gassendi is best understood as an intellectualist position, similar to that of Aquinas, rather than as a voluntarist position, similar to that of Ockham. Her argument is that for Descartes 'the immutability of God's understanding and the unity of his will and intellect jointly entail the immutability of his will' (152), such that, once God has freely created the world and established certain fundamental principles that are necessarily true, those principles or eternal truths can never be altered, since this would entail God's changing his will. Hence Descartes believed that eternal and immutable natures exist.

Another excellent paper is Stephen Menn's 'The Greatest Stumbling Block: Descartes' Denial of Real Qualities.' Menn examines the exchange between Descartes and Antoine Arnauld over the denial of the reality of sensible qualities and the problem that this posed for the sacrament of the Eucharist (where the outward accidents remain but the substance of the host is transformed into the body of Christ). Menn argues, again against the grain of twentieth-century scholarship, that 'Descartes' denial that colours, heat or figures are real qualities does not commit him to denying that these are really qualities or that they really belong to things' (185). Descartes accepts that a body is really coloured, or that colour really belongs to a body; he simply rejects the thesis that colour is a real existence, separate from the body. This is all that he means when he says 'I do not suppose any real qualities in nature, which would be added to substances (like little souls to their bodies), and could be separated from them by divine power' (quoted, 185).

There are two points which need to be made about the objections and replies, however, which are not made by the editors or the contributors. The first is that, if Gaukroger is right, Descartes' primary concern in having others read and reply to the meditations was to gain the approval of the theologians. His letter to Mersenne in November 1639 seems to point to this: '[M]y plan is to have printed only twenty or thirty copies, in order to send them to the twenty or thirty more learned theologians with whom I might be acquainted, in order to have their judgement, and to learn from them what it will be well to change, correct, or add in it, before presenting it to the public' (quoted, 17). This would explain why five of the seven sets of objections come from theologians, and why the strong objections made by the two philosophers, Gassendi and Hobbes, are given relatively short shrift, and the exceptionally weak objections made by the Jesuit theologian Pierre Bourdin are responded to at great length. The second point is that, quite simply, Descartes had a vain streak and detested criticism. This is why several of the exchanges are bad-tempered. His response to Arnauld was exceptionally warm ('I could not wish a more perspicacious or more obliging critic of my writings,' quoted, 110) in part because Arnauld had not disagreed with any of his conclusions, but had merely queried his argumentation. To paraphrase Somerset Maugham, whenever Descartes asked for your criticism, all he really wanted was your praise.