

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF RENÉ DESCARTES: A PHILOSOPHY THAT TAKES TOO MANY LIBERTIES?

René Descartes, *Correspondența completă. Vol.I. 1607-1638*, ed. Vlad Alexandrescu, trans. Vlad Alexandrescu, Robert Arnăutu, Robert Lazu, Călin Cristian Pop, Mihai-Dragoș Vădana, Grigore Vida (Iași: Polirom, 2014), ISBN- 978-973-46-4245-8, 858 pp.

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Considered an intimate instrument of expressing ideas and arguing different theoretical stances, Descartes' philosophical correspondence is widely recognised as a solid introduction to the historical and scientific aspects of his significantly writings. Nevertheless, the epistolary tradition associated with the Cartesian corpus of philosophical texts reveals a privileged access to certain problems claimed by the *Republic of Letters*, placing Descartes' intellectual attitudes as reactionary approaches of major European events, such as Galileo Galilei's condemnation by the Inquisition, arousing a high caution in launching potential contradictory thesis to the dogma of the Catholic Church, or the successful experiments of Pascal, that created a compatible scientific area with Descartes' assumptions from *The Principles of Philosophy*.¹

Notorious projects dedicated to the epistolary interpellations of Descartes' writings, such as Cerselier,² Adam&Tannery³ or Armogathe's⁴ editions of philosophical correspondence of Descartes, representing about 768 letters, are completed nowadays by a Romanian edition, developed in three generous volumes, the first one being published by *Polirom*. Edited by Vlad Alexandrescu, the first Romanian volume of Descartes' complete correspondence gathers in nearly 800 pages the epistolary Cartesian works from 1607 to 1638, written not only as a confessional discourse, but also as a methodological response conceived to consistent theoretical objections that a diverse class of interlocutors addressed to the philosophical writings disseminated initially through the same epistolary system. Part of the letters, signed by authoritarian figures for the culture of the Early Modern Philosophy, such as Beeckman, Mersenne, Balzac, Ferrier, Villebressieu, Wilhelm, Stampioen, Reneri, Morin, Huygens and many others, are legitimately recognized as accessible instruments for any philosophical research that might provide an authentic perspective on Descartes' loyal claims or affinities for professing mentors.

Translated by Robert Arnăutu, Robert Lazu, Călin Cristian Pop, Mihai-Dragoș Vădana, Grigore Vida, the volume published by Polirom in 2014 opens with letters signed by a Descartes hypostasized as a philosopher in correspondence, who integrates significant theoretical positions and arguments into his epistolary corpus, whose flow was originally intended to control various forms of reception of his writings, as well as to develop an accessible hermeneutical path to his published work.

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On the one hand, evaluating this volume, that claims inroads both philosophical and philological, will focus, therefore, on the impact of creating a complementary instrument to approach the Cartesian corpus, observing the manner in which the Romanian philosophical terminology resists to the obstacles of developing a translation that remains loyal to the epochal spirit of the XVI-XVII centuries. On the other hand, investigating epistolary contents allows to inaugurate a sustainable hypothesis claiming Descartes' letters as reactionary attitudes to objections to the previous philosophical writings that later inspired the formation of a separate work. In this regard, considering the *Meditations* a reply addressed to any objections that Descartes' correspondents invoked against the *Discourse* encourages the speculative intention of recognizing the character of collective work that might be attributed the *Meditations* themselves. Therefore, the principal aim of this review is to assess the impact that the appearance of this volume sparked on interpreting the Cartesian oeuvre, in terms of creating, by respecting all the editorial exigencies, a complementary instrument of approaching Descartes' philosophical work into an era in which the European *Republic of Letters* was facing an uncertain identity regarding its authority.

At 'a first sailing', Descartes' full correspondence is treated as a secular chronic of the cultural policies of The Netherlands, a controversial ambience not only because of the progressive attempt to affirm ideologically and intellectually the *Republic of Letters*, but also because of the religious patterns that sustained or discouraged metaphysical arguments, most of them reflecting the nucleus of Cartesian theories. Epistolary interventions are often perceived as "forms of testing of some original philosophical positions in a landscape saturated with conventional views" (p. 43): sometimes prudent, otherwise vehement, we find Descartes obedient to the clerical authorities, profoundly dedicated to impose his work as an intellectual inheritance from one of his potential mentors or revolted against contemporaries who claimed paternity of his theories. Despite the humanistic model that Descartes' correspondences inherits from Seneca and Erasmus' epistolary work, the conflict of letters denotes both the conflict of cultural mentalities and the germinated tensions between individual intellectual positions assumed by the representatives of different scholar communities who pretend to create with aplomb the social and ideological borders of the *Republic of Letters*.

Hence, why would the expansion of correspondence, embraced by the *Republic of Letters* as principal form of communication, be an opportunity for Descartes to impose a philosophy that takes too many liberties, when the power of the free circulation of any argument or ideology was the result of a cultural policy created by an intellectual community trying to establish a febrile society in which the interdisciplinarity was fluidly manifested through the scholar dialogues?

Descartes declares himself in the letter sent to Mersenne in 6th May 1630 as a prudent philosopher in releasing certain theses which might prove being a controversial subject because of their hermeneutical consequences reflected in metaphysical or theological paradigms: "I do not want to involve myself in theology, and I am already afraid that you will think my philosophy too free-thinking for daring to express an opinion on such lofty matters."⁵ The correspondence of Descartes is revealed as a proper complementary creation of his philosophical writings: regarded as

an intellectual laboratory full of justifications and explanations for metaphysical, moral or scientific arguments, the letters represent, in many cases, a plea expressing convictions, insights and intuitions of research, intellectual options or, more pragmatic, a travel journal of a modern philosopher who converts each opera into a cultural correspondent of the ideological dimension of his quotidian social attitudes. Even though the correspondence is not an intimate soliloquy of a ‘solitary intellectual’ (p. 42) controlling his ‘moderate passions’⁶ in an intellectual and spiritual sense, Cartesian letters are conceived as an alternative panorama of his personal life, biographical incursions letting Descartes to express himself as a *Du Perron* (p.77).

Nevertheless, the osmosis of colloquialism and academic rigor is not a constant epistolary protocol agreed by Descartes. Rejecting Beeckman both as a natural philosopher and as his mentor, after changing few letters with Mersenne and finding out that part of his individual and original ideas were publicly presented by his pretended friend from Breda as collective ones constitutes a direct proof of Descartes’ intellectual attitudes exercised in different creative circles of the *Republic of Letters*, assuming as principal repertoire the matter of originality. Because of their epistolary dialogue, Mersenne often plays the role of a pion able to certify Descartes’ creativity or attachment to tierces philosophical positions, transforming the legitimacy of any idea into a matter of reputation: it is the meeting between Mersenne and Beeckman from August 1630 the main cause of anti-cartesian reactions. Reading Beeckman’s *Journal*, Mersenne realizes the false interpretation that Descartes gave to his popular ideas: asking for an explanation, they both received a late reaction from Descartes who was determined to solve the intellectual dispute after the support that Beeckman obtained from his colleagues from the *Latin School* in Dordrecht, expressed into a formal letter signed against the French philosopher. Misunderstandings on Descartes’ *Compendium Musicae*’s reception by Beeckman are dissolved in successive letters from October 1630; yet, the intellectual triangle formed by Descartes, Mersenne and Beeckman is an illustrative paradigm of disputing theoretical authority in creating interdisciplinary approaches of different contents from science, theology, music or mathematics, who become popular through epistolary correspondence, written and conflictive dialogue and intellectual partisanships. To conclude this part of my analysis, it is noticeable, from the epistolary atmosphere, the fact that in the *Republic of the Letters*, the governance of original ideas, despite their original linguistic and cultural nucleus, is a social problem potentially solved by transgressing intellectual borders.

Secondly, this scholar attitude is not popular for the Romanian public: the translation of Descartes’ correspondences might be regarded as a stage of developing innovative instruments of philosophical research created in the field of the Early Modern intellectual history. The present volume is a direct proof of the successful attempt to sync previous European projects dedicated to the translation and circulation of Descartes’ correspondences with the exigencies of Romanian academic research practiced both with philosophical and philological ambitions. Linguistic, the main difficulty of any translation of this nature is to adequate the philosophical research to original texts and editions of reference, selected from a generous panoply of bibliographical elements. Based on the Adam&Tannery integral edition of Descartes’ correspondence, the present translation was sustained also by the *Clerselier*

and the *Bos*⁷ editions. Authentic editorial options regarding annotation changes, dating uncertain fragments or including corps of text containing objections to different Cartesian works that otherwise were never integrated in the classical set of correspondences, are obvious manners of overcoming conceptual, contextual and technical obstacles, reflected by the possibilities of the Romanian philosophical and philological register to preserve their genuine directions and significances. Keeping the interrogative attitude from the beginning of this analysis, Descartes' simplicity to operate interdisciplinary concepts, especially in scientific and technological problems integrated to the philosophical discourse might be considered a particular sign of an intellectual program which 'takes to many liberties': sometimes understood as eccentricities, sometimes as scientific demands, they reflect a difficult linguistic test for any Romanian translation.

Finally, this volume must be recognized as a consistent effort to legitimate the philosophical correspondence as a scientific research instrument in the Romanian academic area. Familiarizing both researchers and a large audience with the manuscript tradition representative of the epistolary regime which dominated the philosophical dialogue developed by contrasting and authoritarian figures of the early modern thought, is a consistent process of extracting the canonical oeuvres from their ivory tower, guiding their *opera aperta*'s character to a potential return to an authorial explanatory perspective. Moreover, many Cartesian contents are inaugurated in correspondences, being enunciated in the philosophical work much later. The eternal truths, for example, represent a philosophical content from the Cartesian corpus that must be researched starting from their mentions in different epistolary works: letters from 6th and 27 May 1630, successively send to Mersenne discuss the critical treatment of the mathematical truths. It is for the first time when Descartes asserts and recognizes that they are posited by God and entirely dependent on him, being perfectly equated with the eternal truths called by Mersenne.⁸ In consequence, the philosophical correspondence of Descartes attests moments of the synchronization of scientific and philosophical positions of the time, making the interdisciplinary and the intercultural dialogue accessible by formalizing the priorities, order and significances of its main problematic concepts.

At a meta-level of this analysis, the Romanian translation of Descartes' complete correspondence is not a gesture of philosophical and philological maturation of scientific research instruments, as it was speculated, but a perfect proof of the fulfilment of a European cultural synchronism. At a micro-level, it is easy to understand the privilege that the translation of this philosophical oeuvre offers to construct an internal perspective of perceiving the linguistic differences between the discourses of transmitting scientific approaches in the early modernity and the contemporary paradigms. One cannot have the same feeling in reading a philosophical work diary and a philosophical correspondence: going through the present volume gives one the impression of hearing the voices of different diaries forced to talk to each other, under the pretext of constituting a propaedeutic discourse for every philosophical work they represent or might create one day. Sometimes it is said that disputes give birth to ideas. In the case of philosophical correspondences, it appears that they saved them. At least, in this way, we know which ones are Cartesian.

References

- ¹ For more details, see Alexandrescu, V., “The Correspondence of Descartes, A Battlefield” („Correspondența lui Descartes, un câmp de bătălie”) in Descartes, R., *Correspondența completă. Vol. I, 1607-1638* (Iași: Polirom, 2014).
- ² Clerselier, C. (ed.), *Lettres de M^r Descartes*, 3 vols. (Paris: Charles Angot, 1657, 1659, 1667).
- ³ *Oeuvres de Descartes* (hereafter AT), eds. Ch. Adam & P. Tannery, 11 vols. (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1897-1909).
- ⁴ Armogathe, J.-R., *Descartes, Correspondance annotée* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013).
- ⁵ Letter to Mersenne, 6 May 1630. AT I, 151-52; *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume I* (hereafter CSM), eds. and trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- ⁶ To be consulted Haack, S., *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- ⁷ Bos, E.-J., *The Correspondence between Descartes and Henricus Regius* (Utrecht: Zeno, 2002).
- ⁸ “The mathematical truths that you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely, no less than the rest of his creatures” (first letter to Mersenne AT I, 145; CSM III, 23).