

THE RELATION BETWEEN PHYSICS AND METAPHYSICS IN DESCARTES AND THE EARLY FRENCH CARTESIANS

Mihnea Dobre, *Descartes and Early French Cartesianism: Between Metaphysics and Physics* (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2017), ISBN: 978-606-697-041-9, 422 pp.

Grigore VIDA*

Descartes and Early French Cartesianism: Between Metaphysics and Physics (“Foundations of Modern Thought” series; Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2017) is Mihnea Dobre’s doctoral thesis, defended quite a while ago, in 2010. Since then, Dobre has continued to deepen his research into French Cartesianism, with a special focus on the problems raised by historiographical categories like rationalism, empiricism and various other “-isms”; among other things, he has co-edited in 2013 an important collection of essays on “Cartesian Empiricisms”. The present volume is concerned with the relation between metaphysics and physics in Descartes and his early French followers; it’s a big topic, involving many ramifications and difficult interpretative challenges. Dobre keeps tight to the subject and tries to hold a balance between the French and the Anglo-Saxon scholarship on Descartes, though he is clearly more influenced by the latter one.

In order to set a background for Descartes, Dobre begins with a sketch of the history of the relation between metaphysics and physics from Aristotle to late scholasticism. Here the account is inevitably based on secondary sources and many things could be added or debated. What I would like to comment on is the period immediately before Descartes and the position that Dobre assigns to the Frenchmen when compared with his predecessors. To be sure, a history of metaphysics and its transformations during the 16th and 17th centuries is yet to be written. It was certainly the beginning of a split within metaphysics between a study of being qua being, i. e. ontology, and a study of God, the soul and other immaterial/ separated substances – what will be later called general and special metaphysics. An early instance of this separation is to be found in the Jesuit Benito Pereira, but the trend was mostly followed by Protestant thinkers, usually from Germany, ending up in the 18th century in the systematizations of Wolff and Baumgarten. Also, in this tradition, people like Taurellus and Gorlaeus gave priority to metaphysics over physics. On the other hand, there were the late scholastics maintaining the Aristotelian equivoque about metaphysics, understood both as the science of being and as theology. For Suárez, the study of being ultimately coincides with the study of God and his *Disputationes metaphysicae* are an effort to keep this unity of metaphysics. Consequently, I think Dobre is wrong when he claims that “[Suárez] set metaphysics before theology” (p.

* Institute for Research in the Humanities, Research Institute of the University of Bucharest, 1 Dimitrie Brandza St., RO-060102, Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: grigore.vida@gmail.com

37) and also when he concludes a little bit later that “Descartes, educated by the Jesuits and writing in the Netherlands, seems to be the double heir of both Suárez’s and the Protestant ontologists’ reversal of the order of metaphysics and physics” (p. 38). To my mind, Descartes remains alien to the line developed by the Protestant ontologists, since he lacks a theory of being qua being, a feature mostly emphasized by Marion. The key to understand his conception about metaphysics lies rather in the scholastic tradition. When Descartes elaborates in the *Preface-Letter* on “[...] metaphysics, which contains the principles of knowledge, including the explanation of the principal attributes of God, the non-material nature of our souls and all the clear and distinct notions which are in us” (AT IX-2 15; CSM I 186), Dobre claims that this a “drastically different table of contents” (p. 48). But was it really that different? Metaphysics as the study of God and the soul is clearly present in Eustachius, for instance. What is indeed novel is, of course, the epistemological redefinition of metaphysics, and I think this has something to do with the other major departure from the Schoolmen which Dobre, following Garber, stresses, namely Descartes’ placement of metaphysics before physics (the famous tree metaphor). What seems to me misleading here concerning the scholastics is a confusion between the didactical order of the disciplines and their grounding relation, or, to put it in Aristotelian terms, between the order of knowledge and the order of nature. After all, metaphysics was “first philosophy” and even Dobre admits that, at least for some scholastics, it provided the principles for all other sciences; what complicates the things further is the presence of a “general physics” at the beginning of the study of physics, covering topics that we would label as metaphysical. Since for Descartes the order of knowledge is the same with the order of things, his setting of metaphysics before physics was somehow a natural move, but one that I think makes sense on the terms of the scholastic tradition.

Concerning the first chapter, I want to make just one more observation with regard to Clerselier. He is a little bit mistreated, since Dobre affirms that “he did not hesitate to add some ‘new’ letters to Descartes’ editions” (p. 52). The reader gets the impression that Clerselier published forged letters, but this is not the case. At a meeting where the dispute between Descartes and Roberval was discussed, he did indeed read a letter written by him as being by Descartes, but when he published it in the third volume of the *Letters*, he clearly mentioned in the title that it was his own work.

The next chapter is entitled “The Structure of Descartes’ Philosophy”, but it is inevitably historical, since Descartes presents this unique case in which the structure of his thought overlaps with the history of it. Dobre’s account is much in line with Garber’s view about an abandonment in the late ’30 or early ’40 of the previously developed method for solving particular problems in favor of a system-grounding metaphysics. But Dobre also offers a new suggestion, namely that there is a shift in Descartes from method to methodology. What I find missing in this account is a place for the lost metaphysics of 1629, which certainly poses some problems for those who see Descartes’ metaphysics as being developed after his physics, in order to ground it.

Chapter 3 deals with “The Tension between Physics and Metaphysics in Descartes’ Natural Philosophy” and, more precisely, with the status of part II of the

Principia: is it physical or metaphysical? In order to provide an answer, Dobre treats extensively with such classic topics of Cartesian scholarship as the laws of motion, the rules of collision, God's causal role in the world etc., taking into account exhaustively – I would say – the secondary literature. A special emphasis is on the problem of individuation of bodies, since for Dobre Descartes' metaphysics is not able to distinguish between different bodies and physics has to step in: adding motion to the bare extension in order to individuate bodies is a requirement coming from physics, Dobre argues. In the end, part II of the *Principia* appears to be a mixture of physics and metaphysics, resembling in a way the *physica generalis* of the scholastics.

The next chapter shows Dobre's historical skills at work. It contains contextual reconstructions and detailed analyses of the main works of four Cartesians from Descartes' proximity, namely Jacques du Roure, Gerould de Cordemoy, François Bayle and Jacques Rohault. Dobre has uncovered a lot of information about these lesser-known figures and I would say this is the most substantial part of the book. He devotes to each of them a section in which he evaluates the Cartesian heritage and also the relation between physics and metaphysics in their works. The role that they ascribed to metaphysics is captured by the following quote from the "Conclusions": "What is striking, above everything else, is that none of the four early French Cartesians discussed here considered metaphysics to be 'foundational' for physics" (p. 390). More than that, Dobre thinks that, although Descartes proclaimed that metaphysics provided the foundation for physics, what was ultimately foundational was the mixed domain from part II of the *Principia*, so that when the early Cartesians elaborated their physics, they didn't have to go back to metaphysics, because the foundational elements were not actually there.

I think this book offers an important example of how science brackets sometimes metaphysics in order to follow its own way; metaphysics can certainly become a hindrance to the development of science: think at Boyle's bypassing of the disputes between atomists and plenists. As for Descartes' physics, whether it can stand on its own without metaphysics or not, it seems to me that we should keep two different levels straight: his own conception about it versus how it was understood and put to work. Descartes' posterity clearly shows that a Cartesian physics could dispense with the Cartesian metaphysics. Dobre's quote from Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, about the independence of Descartes' physics from his metaphysics (p. 55) goes in this direction. But, of course, Marx and Engels were not interested in reconstructing Descartes' thought – this is the task of Descartes-scholars and they have to make sense of Descartes' own statements.

It's a pity that Dobre didn't publish his thesis immediately after the defense (at that time Cartesianism was much more understudied than today), but we should welcome nevertheless this delayed publication – *habent sua fata libelli*.