

PATHWAYS IN CARTESIAN PHILOSOPHY

Roger Ariew, *Descartes among the Scholastics* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), ISBN–13: 978-9004207240, ISBN–10: 9004207244, pp. xiii + 360. Revised and expanded edition of *Descartes and the last Scholastics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), ISBN–13: 978-0801436031, ISBN–10:0801436036, pp. xii + 230.

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However paradoxical it may sound, “Descartes among the Scholastics” is our Descartes, insofar as this contemporary reading of the modern philosopher is in line with a longstanding tradition of Cartesian research. This tradition dates back to 1913, when the French scholar Étienne Gilson published *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie* and *Index Scolastico-cartésien*¹. According to Gilson, every product of the human mind depends organically on the social-cultural milieu where it was born and developed. In the early seventeenth century, this milieu consisted mainly in Scholasticism and the competing new natural philosophies. Since then, much interpretation of Descartes’ philosophy was conducted in the light of this milieu.

But “our Descartes” doesn’t refer to a canonical view that comes from a precise historical background, which could tell us once and for all the meaning of various topics in Descartes’ philosophy. On the contrary, reading Descartes within the context of the Scholastic and the new natural philosophies opens a wide space for dialogue, a space for reconstructions, not in order to meld things together, but to discern and understand.

Roger Ariew’s work, *Descartes among the Scholastics*, the second revised and extended edition of *Descartes and the last Scholastics* (1999), offers us a complex reading according to a three step pattern repeated throughout the volume: he moves from a generally accepted opinion about a certain Cartesian topic to its intellectual context; then Ariew attends to the philosophical debate between Descartes and his contemporaries, and finally moves to the forthcoming reception of Cartesian philosophy. Notably, this possible way of reading Descartes’ philosophy corresponds to the historical manner in which this philosophy was developed and intended to be understood.

In the first chapter, “Descartes and the Last Scholastics: Objections and Replies,” Ariew argues precisely for this possibility. We are well acquainted with Descartes’ skeptical attitude toward Scholastic philosophy and, generally, to the learning of the Schools, from the First Part of the *Discourse on Method*². Nevertheless, a reading of Descartes’ works and correspondence reveals the opposite: the philosophical project of the *Discourse* and *Meditations* was engaged in a debate with the scholastic intellectual community of the time. This project has a “responsorial”³ status,

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for it was addressed to this community and, in turn, addressed by it. Moreover, Descartes planned to introduce his philosophy in the Jesuit schools, which meant relearning scholastic philosophy and interpreting his thought in scholastic terminology. The *Principles of Philosophy* was thus conceived as a new Scholastic textbook.

Who were the Scholastics Descartes was amongst, and what was their framework? Ariew raises these questions in the second chapter, “Descartes and the Scotists.” Against Gilson’s monolithic interpretation, he argues that seventeenth century French Scholasticism wasn’t Thomism. A close parallel between the Thomist official doctrine and that of Duns Scotus helps Ariew to show that the philosophical context in France in the early seventeenth century was predominantly Scotist. His thesis is reinforced by the fact that Thomism and Scotism were not only opposite views, but also “actors’ categories” for the seventeenth century Scholastics. The case of Eustachius a Sancto Paulo, a theologian from Sorbonne, is particularly important. His work, *Summa philosophiae quadripartita de rebus dialecticis, moralibus, physicis, et metaphysicis*⁴, was a faithful summary of the teaching at the University of Paris, one that leaned towards Scotism rather than Thomism and also a compendium that Descartes deemed as the best of its kind. In tracing Descartes’ Scholastic influences, it is important to consider especially the Scotist milieu, at least for sentences like “extension subsists independently of any form” or “the principle of individuation is the form”⁵.

In the third chapter, “Ideas, Before and After Descartes,” Ariew deals with a topic that for us, the moderns, is clear and distinct – the notion of “idea.” Although this notion should be evident in itself, Ariew addresses questions such as what is an “idea,” what is its nature, where did it come from, what was its epistemological function and how is it that “idea” came to be the *locus veritatis*? Analyzing the employment of “idea” and “exemplar” in literature and in philosophy, Ariew explains that Descartes’ “idea” is a mental act of pure thought inspired by the presence of ideas or exemplars in God’s mind.

The next three chapters could be seen as questions about whether paradigmatic reconstructions of the history of science reflect the development and change of scientific theories accurately. Chapter four, “The Cartesian Destiny of Form and Matter and its Critics” argues that the gulf between the so called Aristotelian and Modern paradigms was not so great. Considering the theme of matter and form, Ariew maintains that different trends in scholastic philosophy conceived matter as independent (against Aristotelian hylomorphism), and weakened the concept of form to the extent that it became the principle of individuation, relating to the physical structure or shape of bodies, “rather than the organizing principle that makes the thing the kind of the thing it is”⁶. In chapter five, “Descartes, Basso and Toletus: Three Kinds of Corpuscularianism,” Ariew explains why being a corpuscularian philosopher in the seventeenth century wasn’t equivalent with being in the camp of the Moderns; besides, there was no such strictly delimited camp. Ariew argues that the scholastic Toletus was, oxymoronically, a “Peripatetic atomist.” Also, while Basso was counted among the so-called *novatores* as an atomist and anti-Aristotelian, Descartes, a

corpuscularian, neither propounded atomism nor did he return to Aristotelian philosophy. The truth of his doctrine depended only on the true foundations of his philosophy. With the sixth chapter, “Scholastics and the New Astronomy on the Substance of the Heavens,” the aforesaid question becomes sharper. Galileo’s astronomical observations – mountains on the moon, new stars, solar spots, comets and novas – should have replaced the traditional Ptolemaic system with the Copernican or Tyconic one. Instead, Aristotelian astronomers such as Du Chevreul, Bouju, Fromondus and Grandamy made significant changes to the old theory in order to accommodate the new empirical facts, which took it far beyond the “Aristotelian paradigm”⁷. Descartes, on the other hand, competed with his complete different system.

In the next chapter, “Descartes and the Jesuits of La Flèche: the Eucharist,” Ariew analyzes the meaning of Descartes’ involvement in the delicate task of explaining the mystery of transubstantiation. Against the standard opinion that Descartes was dragged into the debate against his will or that he did so only to flatter the Jesuits, Ariew argues that Descartes’ interference reflects rather a common practice: in the first half of the seventeenth century, the natural philosophers used to discuss the compatibility of their physical theories with the mysteries of the Catholic faith, such as the transubstantiation⁸. Similar to Scotus, Descartes pretended to offer an orthodox explanation for the transubstantiation of bread as a reliable specimen of his natural philosophy and as a step towards a new Catholic philosophy and a Cartesian Scholasticism.

Chapters 8 and 9, “Condemnations of Cartesianism: the Extension and the Unity of the Universe” and “Cartesians, Gassendists and Censorship” deal with the reception of Descartes’ philosophy from the perspective of condemnations. Descartes made a career of condemnation, and to show how this works, Ariew invites us to disentangle the complex mechanism of condemnation. First, instead of pointing to remote condemnations from the history of the Church (such as the one from 1277), Ariew suggests paying attention to the contemporary scholastic teaching of the prohibited doctrine. With his thesis about the unity of the Universe, Descartes found himself unique among the Scholastics. Secondly, similar doctrines were not symmetrically condemned. Rhetorical strategies, intellectual and social context have to be called into discussion in order to understand what was involved in a condemnation and why, for instance, Cartesianism was condemned, while an atomist philosophy, like Gassendi’s, was tolerated.

In the final chapter, “The Cogito in the Seventeenth Century,” Ariew sketches a history of the influences and reception of Descartes’ *cogito*. Emblematically, perhaps, the *cogito* doesn’t have one meaning. Different questions (metaphysical, logico-linguistical) reveal different sides of the *cogito*. It is as if we are dealing with many of them in just a single one, but still not the same one. Before Descartes, Augustin, Jean de Silhon and Antoine de Sirmond had formulated something similar to the well-known “I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am.” But none of them conceived the “I think” as a spiritual separated substance, something that could be used as the bedrock of a metaphysically grounded science. After Descartes, the

reception of the *cogito* was rather unfavorable: the *cogito* was considered a defective syllogism, since it stands in need of an unproved major premise; also, it wasn't accepted as a foundation for science, for it was thought to be a particular proposition whose evidence doesn't belong essentially to every particular; thirdly, the method of doubt wasn't regarded as an adequate one, for it rejects the *cogito* as well.

The themes presented in Ariew's book are proposed not as closed readings, but merely as pathways for understanding Cartesian philosophy and its socio-cultural milieu. Its generous bibliography, its faithful historical reconstructions recommend the book as a guide, tempting us to begin and continue the exploration of Descartes within his scholastic context. *Descartes among the Scholastics* can serve as a useful research guide and this is probably the book's great merit.

It is in this sense that I understand the deployment of its themes and why the *cogito* is placed at the end, even though it is both the beginning and the central element of Descartes system of philosophy. But, then again, why bother with the details of the story when you already know the essential? Nevertheless, Ariew's book wants to lead us into the story.

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- ⁴ Eustachius a Sancto Paulo, *Summa philosophiae quadripartita* (Paris: Carolus Chastellain, 1609).
- ⁵ Ariew, R., *Descartes among the Scholastics* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 95-97.
- ⁶ Ariew, 136.
- ⁷ Ariew, 213.
- ⁸ Ariew, 224-225.