

DESCARTES' COMPLETE CORRESPONDENCE

René Descartes, *Corespondența completă. Vol.II. 1639-1644* ed. Vlad Alexandrescu, trans. Vlad Alexandrescu, Robert Arnăutu, Călin Cristian Pop, Mihai-Dragoș Vădana, Grigore Vida (Iași: Polirom, 2015), ISBN 978-973-46-4244-1, 941 pp.

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The project of translating and editing a major philosopher's complete correspondence for the first time in a certain language poses difficulties not only for the translators, but also to the language itself, the more so as Romanian has not been systematically acquainted to the fundamental concepts of early modern thought. Translated by Vlad Alexandrescu, Robert Arnăutu, Călin Cristian Pop, Mihai-Dragoș Vădana and Grigore Vida, the second part of *Descartes' Complete Correspondence* pursues the goal started in 2014. As was the case of the first volume, the text of the second volume is based on a multitude of sources, for instance the Clerselier edition, the Adam and Tannery edition or more recent and specialized editions.¹ The 303 letters translated in the present volume prove to be more than mere biographical concomitants to the Cartesian oeuvre. The philosophical consistency of the correspondence is not only due to the ethos of interlocutors such as Huygens, Hobbes or Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and rises above the seventeenth century epistolary tradition. Rather, it is determined by the nature of Descartes' works which originate in a vivid philosophical dialogue with his peers of the Republic of Letters. The volume covers the period of 1639-1644. Indeed, these years were critical for Descartes' philosophy, as both the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) and the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) were published. The volume begins with an extensive chronology written by Vlad Alexandrescu.² In 1639, Descartes was living in Haarlem and was still collecting objections to the *Discourse on Method*. He was looking forward to publish them along with his replies, an idea which he gradually dropped. In a letter to Mersenne from November 1639 (114-119) he was already considering writing a new version of his metaphysics, and in 1640 he begins the first part of the *Principles* "in an order which can be easily taught" (312-316). Along with the gathering of objections to the *Meditations* and the development of the *Principles* in the following years, his relationship with Regius and the beginning of his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth are particularly interesting.

A very welcome feature of the translation is its explanatory character. Aside from the letters' footnotes, the volume contains eight complementary notes which address the milestones of Descartes' work in these six years. This gives the volume a wide scope, being suited both for advanced scholarly uses and other more lay interests. They usually present systematic arguments and also provide sufficient

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historical background so that the reader can understand the debates and the context in which they took place.

Thus, in the note concerning the writing of the *Meditations*, Alexandrescu claims that the project of a metaphysics coexists with Descartes' mathematical and physical ambitions as early as 1628, and offers a detailed account of the stages of the *Meditations* until it saw the first French translation. The Cartesian explanation of free fall reconstructed by Arnăutu reveals the difficulties that had to be overcome in order to give a satisfying description of free fall in a space which contains, unlike Galilei's, no void. The third complementary note covers the interactions between Descartes and Hobbes. Their dispute over the nature of motion of light proves to be much more fruitful than Hobbes' objections to the *Meditations*. Vida summarizes both theories on the nature of light, claiming that while they have much in common, "the main point of difference is the issue of actual motion" (824). Of a great historical importance is Descartes' relationship with Pierre Bourdin. Arnăutu emphasises the consequences of their dissension, as Bourdin was perceived as the main representative of the Jesuit Order. A rather lengthy complementary note deals with the different usage of the concept of *infinite* in Descartes and Jean Baptiste Morin. Here, Alexandrescu suggests that this difference is the root of Descartes' concept of *indefinite*, devised to avoid certain methodological and theological complications. The objections to the *Meditations* raised by an interlocutor known as Hyperaspistes are presented by Pop in the sixth complementary note. While the identity of Hyperaspistes is not known³, his objections are "some of the most vigorous and subtle objections ever raised to the *Meditations*" (840). Each of the 14 objections, along with the replies, are presented and explained separately. The beginning of the academic dissemination of Descartes' ideas occurred at the University of Utrecht. The political problems which Descartes and his follower, Regius, faced here are described in a note entitled "The dispute in Utrecht". The last complementary note covers the context of writing the *Principles of Philosophy*. This was Descartes' ambition of writing a book in a deductive order, thus resembling a scholarly textbook.

It could be argued that Descartes is as philosophical in his letters as he is in his books; one might even argue that his philosophy is more articulated or unfolded in his correspondence. With this second volume published, the argument is, for the Romanian reader, easier to give.

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References

¹ For the complete list of sources, see Alexandrescu, V., "Corespondența lui Descartes, un câmp de bătălie" in Descartes, R., *Corespondența completă Vol. I, 1607-1638* (Iași: Polirom, 2014).

² The titles of the biographies used to compose it can be found at p. 13, footnote 1.

³ For some of the different opinions about his identity, see p. 419, footnote 1.