

Emanuela Scribano. *A Reading Guide to Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy*. St. Augustine's Press 2016. 208 pp. \$26.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781587316906).

In April 2016 St. Augustine's Press published *A Reading Guide to Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy* by Italian scholar Emanuela Scribano. First published in 1997 and presently translated into English by C.C. Godfrey, this is Scribano's first book-length work available to English-speaking readers. Its publication marks another step in a trend of increasing contact and collaboration between North American and European historians of early modern philosophy, a trend which has been gathering momentum during the last few years. As the title indicates, this volume intends to provide assistance to those interested in getting a better understanding of Descartes' *Meditations*, one of the seminal texts of Western Philosophy. Without being a line-by-line commentary of Descartes, this *Reading Guide* closely follows the reasoning of the Cartesian meditator.

Scribano stresses that Descartes' *Meditations* is a work of metaphysics in which two traditional metaphysical topics, God and the soul (mind), are carefully treated (1) for the declared purpose of establishing science on a solid foundation (3). This foundation will turn out to be the self as repository of innate ideas implanted in the meditator's mind by a veracious God. By means of these innate ideas the meditator is able to obtain knowledge of the real, extra-mental world; the divine guarantee ensures that the corpus of demonstrations built on the basis of innate ideas and axioms (also part of the mind's endowment) maps the structure of the actual world. In line with these two key topics (God and mind) which structure this *Reading Guide*, below I will focus on three elements that make Scribano's treatment of Descartes' *Meditations* noteworthy: (i) her analysis of the grounding role of the self and knowledge of the self (rather than knowledge of bodies, as the Scholastics held, or direct divine assistance, as in the Augustinian tradition); (ii) her treatment of innate ideas as making experience possible and organizing it; and (iii) her noting that Cartesian innate ideas prefigure but also differ greatly from Kantian forms of intuition and understanding.

(i) Among Descartes' original contributions, Scribano numbers the decision to make the self as a purely thinking substance the cornerstone of the new science. Founding metaphysics on the self is part of 'the attempt to base the truth of science in an ordering apart from the infinite, pivoting on what one can know to be absolutely true, starting from the finite subject ... The self, then, is both the protagonist and the center of the Cartesian system of metaphysics' (21).

Scribano sets the stage by remarking that having set as her goal the establishment of science on a solid foundation, the protagonist of Descartes' *Meditations* engages in a process of meditation modeled on the religious meditations familiar to seventeenth century readers. The science that is in need of grounding is mathematical and involves only certainty; probabilities are excluded outright. To arrive at an unshakeable foundation, the meditator finds no other means than to doubt everything that up until then she had accepted as true or likely to be true. Whatever admits of the slightest reason for doubt will, for the time being, be set aside as (if it were) false.

To further emphasize the first-personal and engaged character of the whole enterprise, Scribano opts for interpreting doubt as a dialogue between two aspects of the epistemic agent. The main character of the Cartesian scenario gets split in two: an old self and a meditating self. The meditator self-conducts a sort of interrogation, subjecting the old self to question after question regarding the grounds of her beliefs. The old self, in turn, attempts to respond to these challenges only to be forced to entrench herself in fewer and fewer opinions left unassailed (26).

Pushed to its furthest limits, doubt makes the meditator realize that it is impossible for her to doubt her own existence while engaged in the very process of doubt. So the proposition *I am, I exist* emerges as the meditator's first certainty. Following Descartes himself Scribano notes that the *cogito* is not original with Descartes. Similar claims occur in Augustine, Aquinas, etc. What is original with Descartes, according to Scribano, is Descartes' use of the *cogito* to draw conclusions about the nature of the meditator's mind, a purely thinking substance needing nothing corporeal in order to exist and continue to think (53-54). Thinking involves not intelligible species (as it did for the Scholastics) but ideas. Descartes defines an idea as 'the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought' (AT VII, 160; CSM II, 113) and classifies ideas into innate (implanted in the mind by God and non-modifiable by the mind), adventitious (seeming to come from without the mind) and invented (put together by the mind).

(ii) Scribano's reading of the wax example shows that she takes (what will later, in *Meditation III*, be dubbed) innate ideas to be preconditions of all experience. As she sees it, there can be no knowledge whatsoever, no ideas (be they clear and distinct, and thus originating in the intellect, or obscure and confused) in the absence of innate ideas (63-66). In other words, the idea of extension in length, depth and breadth is a necessary condition for perceiving any features of the wax (colour, texture, size, shape, etc.). 'Sense experience is always a construction of the mind. The elements of this construction, as we shall see later on, are those ideas that are purely mental, that is, innate ideas such as the idea of the infinite extension and configurations that make possible judgments that *seem* to be of empirical origin.... Innate Cartesian ideas, which in origin are purely intellectual, allow one to realize the components that lend structure to experience and make it possible, and that are in no way obtained through experience itself' (67).

(iii) Given this framing and organizing function Scribano finds in Cartesian innate ideas, it is not surprising that, when discussing the wax, Scribano explicitly mentions Kant: 'Here Descartes opens up a way that, taken as far as it goes, leads one to Hume's position and then Kant who says that one must search one's own mind to find what makes experience possible, as this is all interwoven with elements not inferable from empirical data alone' (67). Moreover, in the final chapter of the book, she explicitly notes both the similarities and the differences between Cartesian innate ideas and Kant's *a priori* forms of the intuition and the intellect. Descartes' innate ideas are not only functional molds but possess content of their own; they are substantive enough to allow the epistemic agent to gain information about the structure of the external world. Scribano concludes that '[t]he "Copernican Revolution" that Kant claimed to have accomplished, the inversion of the center of knowledge from the external world to the subject, is the spawn of the revolution that Descartes was responsible for when he placed the subject at the center of knowledge' (189).

Emanuela Scribano's book has much to recommend it to an English-speaking audience, including students wanting to familiarize themselves with Descartes, Cartesian scholars and historians of early modern philosophy more broadly. This *Reading Guide* contains enlightening reconstructions of important arguments from Descartes' *Meditations*, reconstructions which bring to light details and connections often not fully spelled out in Descartes' text. Students will find this particularly useful, together with the *Bibliography* which draws on French, Italian and German sources. It is a shame that intricate phrasing (part of the original Italian text? Uninspired translation choices? One cannot say for sure.), typos and unreferenced citations at times detract from the clarity of the volume.

Another positive feature of this work is Scribano's placing Descartes' views in their historical context, both with regard to the past but also the future. This book identifies and briefly

presents those positions (such as Plato's, Aristotle's, Augustine's, Aquinas', Duns Scotus', Suarez's, etc.) which would have inspired Descartes and to which he would have been responding (either by building on or sometimes by criticizing and/or radically revising them). Scribano also dedicates a whole chapter to the legacy of Descartes, tracing from him not only contemporary philosophical positions (phenomenology, modern empiricism and hermeneutics) but also views developed closer to Descartes' time: certain varieties of idealism (Malebranche, Berkeley, Kant) and materialism (La Mettrie).

To conclude, as both the result of and the occasion for (further) interaction between European and North American students and scholars of Descartes, Emanuela Scribano's *A Reading Guide to Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy* represents a welcome addition to the ever-growing body of secondary literature on Descartes.

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