

John Cottingham

Cartesian Reflections.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008.

339 pages

US\$80.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-922697-5)

This volume gathers fourteen previously published essays, plus a lengthy new introductory essay, by this accomplished expositor and translator of Descartes. Scholars will welcome the bundling of such classic Cottingham papers as ‘Descartes on Thought’, ‘A Brute to the Brutes?’, and ‘Cartesian Trialism’, which fostered a more nuanced understanding of mind-body relations than the stark label ‘substance dualism’ encourages. Cottingham argues that only in a restricted intellectualist sense is ‘thought’ a purely mental activity; sense perceptions and feelings, in contrast, have a ‘curious hybrid nature’ (103) involving both mind and body. This suggests that Descartes is an ‘attribute trialist’: the attributes of sensations and feelings ‘fall into a distinct and irreducible category of their own’ (181). Trialism explains why Descartes distinguishes human experience from that of angels (thought *sans* sensation) and animals (feelings *sans* thought). So Cottingham’s article on the brutes should improve Descartes’ reputation among animal lovers: ‘Descartes, dualist or no, undoubtedly and explicitly attributes such feelings as anger, hope and joy to animals’ (170). The more recent papers in the volume extend these early efforts to re-integrate and de-mythologize Cartesian philosophy. As the introductory essay explains, Cottingham’s Descartes is a ‘Synoptic Philosopher’ whose unified system of metaphysics, science, theology, and moral philosophy produced insights of lasting value for all these fields.

Section 1 of the volume contains two papers on Descartes’ ‘Position in Philosophy’. The first, concerning his relation to the philosophy of his own time, argues that the revolutionary import of Descartes’ science was constrained by certain trappings of scholastic metaphysics, especially the notions of substance and efficient causation as a transfer of reality. Cottingham’s case is compelling, but sorely lacking in detail. He indicates that Descartes’ science required Hume’s metaphysics; but this ignores the success of Newton’s physics, which is far from Humean in its conceptions of substance or causality. The second paper attempts to rehabilitate Descartes’ reputation within current philosophy as a ‘village rationalist’. Cottingham points out that if rationalism requires logical entailment between cause and effect, then Descartes was no more a rationalist than Hume. As for the ‘certainty’ Descartes claims for his science, Cottingham maintains this is consistent with modern holism since Descartes, like Quine, holds that our degree of confidence in a system ‘derives from its systematic and unificatory structure’ (80). Cottingham admits that many Cartesian texts intimate foundationalism but rightly emphasizes that even for Descartes justification comes to an abrupt end with the incomprehensible power of God. Descartes’ theological voluntarism is not so far removed from epistemic naturalism, whether Humean or Quinean.

Section 2, ‘Mind and World’, contains Cottingham’s best-known essays. The general problem is how mental representation of the physical world is possible given Descartes’ ‘official’ dualism. Cottingham does not evaluate Descartes’ arguments for dualism but he does find many of his views on mental representation valuable even for ongoing research. For example, Descartes offers a more subtle analysis of color perception than his fellow secondary quality theorists: ‘A visual perception, for example of redness, indicates (under normal observing conditions) the presence of some property of the external object, but tells us little or nothing about the nature of that property; we need, as it were, to crack the code and discover what the property consists in’ (160). While readers may not find their own puzzlement about color removed by this, Cottingham at least helps ‘crack the code’ about Descartes’ own remark, ‘when we say we perceive colors in objects, this is really just the same as saying that we see something in the objects whose nature we do not know’ (*Principles* I, 70; CSM 1 218).

Cottingham’s greatest contribution in these middle essays is his careful disambiguation of Descartes’ crucial notion of ‘thought’ (*pensée/cogitatio*), our essence and foundation for knowledge. Descartes does not intend *cogitatio* to include even imagination, will and sensation: these ‘special modes of thinking’ are thoughts only if accompanied by reflective self-awareness. This opens the door to non-reflective sensations such as we experience while absent-mindedly walking or singing. Descartes frequently proposes such ‘thoughtless’ experiences as a model for animal sensation. On this gentler version of the notorious *bête-machine* doctrine, animals are not automatons, or even zombies, but unreflective minds (in Leibniz’s terms, monads lacking *apperception*). Unperceived perceptions might seem ‘un-Cartesian’ given Descartes is generally regarded as a champion of the doctrine of mental transparency. This, along with the doctrine of mental ‘privacy’, is among the Cartesian legends that Cottingham is most eager to demystify. Especially when it comes to our emotional lives, Descartes acknowledges that we are largely in the dark.

As for the doctrine of privacy, with its accompanying ‘homuncular’ model of mental representation, Cottingham points out that Descartes himself dismisses such models of sense-perception as unscientific and regress-inducing: ‘as if there were yet other eyes within our brains’ (*Optics*, 6; CSM 1 167). Moreover, according to Cottingham, ‘Descartes came close to treating language as criterial for thought—as necessary and sufficient for its occurrence’ (127). In defending this claim, Cottingham relies heavily on Descartes’ main argument against animal thought, namely that ‘speech is the only sure sign of thought hidden within a body’ (Letter to More; CSMK 366). Despite this revealingly un-Wittgensteinian way of characterizing the language-thought relationship, Cottingham neglects Descartes’ frequent insistence on the highly contingent and conventional relationship between language, as material inscription, and thought, as mental process. As Descartes explains to Chanut, ‘when we learn a language we connect the letters or the pronunciations of certain words, which are material things, to their meanings, which are thoughts’ (CSMK 307). Nevertheless, Cottingham makes a strong

case that even Cartesian ideas (the vehicles of meaning), are not entirely subjective. Descartes cleaves to the Platonic tradition (favored also by Malebranche but rejected by Locke) of associating ideas with mind-independent ‘forms’ of thought. Cartesian ideas have a psychological side considered materially; but considered objectively they are ‘more like publicly accessible concepts than private psychological items’ (131). Still, in the crucial case of sensory ideas it is not all clear what this content amounts to. So although the connections drawn to Wittgenstein and Freud are dubious, we can thank Cottingham for demonstrating that ‘Cartesian transparency, rather like Cartesian privacy, is a label that embodies very great oversimplification’ (124).

The first two papers in the final grouping, ‘Ethics and Religion’, present historically rich treatments of Descartes’ vexing analysis of the relation between the will and intellect. Cottingham argues persuasively that Descartes does not separate these faculties as radically as Spinoza supposed. Less persuasive is his case that Cartesian freedom involves no ‘two-way power’ of choice. Cottingham fixates on the compatibilist fourth meditation at the expense of later strongly libertarian remarks, such as to Mesland: ‘When a very evident reason moves us in one direction, although morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction, absolutely speaking we can’ (CSMK 245). The next paper defends the unsurprising thesis that although we cannot withhold assent to a clearly perceived truth we have an epistemic responsibility to suspend judgment about doubtful matters and focus our attention on the light of nature. The final papers underscore the philosophical importance for Descartes of ethics (i.e. happiness and virtue) and religion. Cottingham beautifully explains how Descartes’ scientific and normative concerns converge in his theory of the passions, which ‘offers us the hope that by an informed understanding of their psycho-physiological causes we may be able to lead enriched lives, free from the feeling that we are dominated by forces outside our control’ (248). The way religion informs Descartes’ thought is much less clear. On the one hand, God plays numerous important roles: epistemic guarantor, producer of regular motions, creator of the eternal truths, etc. Furthermore, Descartes frequently professes an apparently sincere Catholic faith. On the other hand, as Cottingham recognizes, Descartes’ God seems highly abstract and impersonal: beyond logic, good and evil, and human comprehension. And the Christian drama seems orthogonal to Cartesian philosophy. We can understand why the more enthusiastic Pascal could never forgive Descartes for utilizing God only to ‘flick’ the world into motion (265). The final, remarkable (and most recently written) paper draws out, but does not resolve, this spiritual tension in Descartes’ philosophical journey. Looking backwards, Descartes falls in with the contemplative tradition of Bonaventure, Augustine, and ultimately Plato, which counsels resignation to God, the light of nature, and the Form of the Good. Looking forward, Descartes is the brashest of moderns, putting philosophy, science, and even God himself, into service of the human program to control and transform nature.

Not all the papers rise to the level of the final one. Some break little ground (e.g. Chapter 11 on belief and the will) while others are unevenly supported by the Cartesian

texts (e.g. Chapter 5 on language and thought). Moreover, the lengthy volume contains frequent repetitions of content. Certain lessons stressed by Cottingham may sound obvious, such as the importance of the mind-body union and ‘scientific ethics’, but this is no doubt partly because his work has already exerted a major influence. Potential readers should be warned that although the discussions are rich in primary sources (often far beyond Descartes), Cottingham does not attempt to take comprehensive account of recent secondary literature. That said, these clear and distinguished reflections will be essential for scholars and useful for students or teachers of any branch of philosophy that interested Descartes.

Geoffrey Gorham
MacAlester College