

Philosophy in Review

BOOK REVIEW

Andrea Christofidou. *Self, Reason, and Freedom: A New Light on Descartes' Metaphysics.* Routledge, 2013.

PHILOSOPHY IN REVIEW

Vol. 35, No. 1 | FEBRUARY 2015

URL: <http://www.uvic.ca/pir>

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UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

Andrea Christofidou. *Self, Reason, and Freedom: A New Light on Descartes' Metaphysics.* Routledge, 2013. 278 pp. \$150.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780415501064).

The main textual focus of this book is Descartes' *Meditations*, which Christofidou (hereafter "C") reads as "an exemplar of a systematic order of discovery according to the order of reasoning, an inquiry into some of the deepest and most complex metaphysical questions" (1). C holds that Descartes' primary question is "What is real and true?", a question that (she claims) prompts him to ask, "Is a new metaphysics possible?" (1). The quest for this new metaphysics, we are repeatedly told (e.g., 3, 131, 132, 143, 144, 165-166), informs the central moments of Descartes' work.

Thematically, we are concerned here above all with an effort to treat Cartesian freedom in metaphysical terms, rather than within a more narrowly epistemological or evaluative setting. "It is only by understanding the centrality of freedom to his entire metaphysics, and the intrinsicness of freedom to our rational nature, that we can understand the significance of the real distinction between the essential nature of the self and the essential nature of the corporeal world. There is no doubt that Descartes' dualism has been, through the centuries, rejected, dismissed, denied, caricatured, scorned, but not refuted" (234). Though some idealists and an odd materialist may raise an eyebrow at C's claim that Descartes' dualism has never been refuted, in itself the object of C's study is clearly worthy, both within philosophy generally, and within the narrower framework of Cartesian scholarship. That said, perhaps C and her publisher overstate the need for a study of this kind, as in fact a great deal of recent scholarship on Descartes has focused on questions surrounding the will.

What, then, has C to say about the question of freedom in Descartes' philosophy? We should start with what is perhaps her most frequently repeated phrasing of the issue, namely, "the internal relation between reason and freedom" (2). By "internal" C. seems to mean both internal to the mind (which in a way makes the term redundant), and, more importantly, "intrinsic", i.e., involving a deep, logical relation. For C, understanding this relation is the key to understanding the *Meditations* and in fact the whole of Descartes' philosophy. In this regard, the Fourth Meditation features prominently in her interpretation—"The Fourth [*sic*] is the core of his metaphysics" (194)—and one of her central goals is to secure a significantly more elevated status for it than it has been accorded by previous interpreters.

Given this thematic, the sixth and (especially) seventh chapters are the most important of the book. C's main interpretive challenge is to reconcile two apparently inconsistent tendencies in Descartes' treatments of freedom. In the *Meditations* we encounter what appears to be an intellectualistic account, one which stresses spontaneity or inner determination, according to which freedom consists in determination of the will by reason—a kind of compatibilism, though not surprisingly critics see it as thinly disguised determinism. Elsewhere (*Principles* I 37, and *Letters to Mesland*, 2 May 1644, and 9 February 1645), we find a more voluntaristic account on which the will retains a kind of autonomy from—a capacity to stand its ground against—determination by reason. On C's resolution of this tension, Cartesian spontaneity and autonomy are compatible because, for Descartes, "reasoning and willing are fundamentally orientated toward truth and goodness" (161). In a sense, we might say C opts for spontaneity, because she holds both reason and will to share a common *orientation* (taking "orientation", whatever it amounts to in each case, to be a kind of determination).

On the whole I was sympathetic to C's efforts to rescue consistency from the Cartesian texts, and found her discussion incisive and penetrating given this most tortuous terrain. Still, because that terrain is so tortuous, it would be impossible for anyone to go along *fully* with C's (or anyone's) reasons. My suspicion is that the consistency she purchases on Descartes' behalf comes at the expense of a satisfactory account of autonomy, which C portrays as being at the foundation of spontaneity: spontaneity for Descartes is a "manifestation of autonomy" (159) and "comes...from the internal relation of the authority of reason and the autonomy of the will, freed from the fetters of indifference" (161). Autonomy and indifference are of course integrally bound up with one another. My concern is that C has not fully captured the relation, if indeed it is there to be captured in Descartes' philosophy. In whatever manner this bond occurs, we must ask: can *indifference* of will amount to a "fettering" or restraint of will, as C claims here? C writes, further, that for Descartes "[f]reedom of spontaneity is the greatest good because without it the will would remain indifferent, bound by custom and habit" (159). But how can an *indifferent* will be a will that is "*bound* by custom and habit"? Besides, it is hardly the case either that indifference occurs only at the sensory/habitual level (cf., e.g., *Principles* I §41, where Descartes equates freedom and indifference), or consequently that for Descartes the only mental paralysis is at the sensory level, since our finitude does not consist *solely* in our being sensory beings. So where or what *is* autonomy on this account?

As for C's other main concern, establishing the metaphysical orientation of Descartes' approach, it is not clear to me how Descartes' commitment to the real and the true translates into what sounds to me more like a Kantian concern for "the possibility of a new metaphysics". In Descartes' scattered pronouncements on metaphysics, it is hard to find anything quite matching this question, on which C sets such store. By way of general remark, I think her position might have been aided by a consideration of what is unquestionably the most important work on this topic in decades, by Jean-Luc Marion. Regrettably, however, Marion receives no mention on this score. Nor indeed is there any engagement on this point with others, e.g., Cottingham, Gaukroger, or Descartes' near contemporaries Malebranche and Leibniz, who in their differing ways attribute to Descartes a significantly more instrumentalist, even indifferent, attitude toward metaphysics.

It may be that C has overstated her case for casting Descartes as primarily a metaphysician. In fact, it must be said that there is considerable overstatement throughout the book. Right on page 1 there is an explosion: "Descartes is concerned with matters of metaphysics, with things and substances, their nature and individuation. Concern with epistemology is secondary to this; he takes knowledge and truth (not itself an epistemic notion) to be metaphysically basic, not subject to reduction or analysis... *By rejecting a conception of philosophy as being fundamentally concerned with epistemology, Descartes effected a significant metaphysical turn*" (1-2). If C's historicizing is correct here, this means that, prior to Descartes, philosophy's fundamental concern was with epistemology; depending on how else one reads C, it may also mean that after Descartes effected his turn, philosophy's focus was metaphysics.

Other overblown or highly problematic generalizations follow. "Descartes rejects as unreliable introspection, or what he calls internal sense (AT VII), and with it any notion of introspective epistemology" (5). "Descartes does not think, let alone argue, that the self and knowledge of the self are epistemologically foundational" (7). "Descartes is not concerned with psychological reasons, certainty or conviction, one's psychological conviction has no bearing on what is true or indubitable" (16). The Cartesian Circle, "one of the most controversial problems in Descartes' metaphysics", "has fascinated and perplexed inattentive critics through the centuries"

(182). Only *inattentive* critics, not attentive ones? Perhaps: “A lot of ink would have been saved, if readers carefully attended [*sic*] to the different stages of Descartes’ arguments, his rigorous use of notions, and the important distinctions he draws, which clear up at least the difficulties proposed” (183). “[T]here is *no argument from doubt in Descartes’ work, neither [*sic*] for dualism, nor for anything else*, nor is there an argument from divisibility” (210, emphasis added). Compare this with Descartes’ assessment of Descartes’ work: “I wrote that we cannot doubt that our mind exists, because *from the very fact that we are doubting, it follows that our mind exists*” (CSM I 301, AT VIII-B 354-5). Most of these pronouncements, it must be said, don’t really get very far, and given their content it could hardly be otherwise in a monograph of 230 pages. But nor are they harmless, distracting as they do from C’s agenda.

There is one problem with this book that I wish to discuss at length, because I find it an unusual one to come across, and it is pervasive. I identify it as a methodological problem, involving secondary source usage that I regard as illicit to the logic of sound interpretation. To make my point, here are a couple of examples:

(A) “It is sometimes claimed that Descartes is obsessed with absolute truth, but ‘[a]bsoluteness is not a modality of truth. It is a feature of sense, one might say, not reference’” (3).

By my lights, the argumentative or logical force of the “but” here is such that those who make the historico-philosophical claim about Descartes’ commitment to absolute truth are mistaken, *given the contents of the quotation*. However, the quotation, which is a claim about the truth-absoluteness relation rather than about Descartes’ understanding of that relation, can support the “but” and controvert the claim about Descartes’ commitment, *only* if it be a quotation from *Descartes*. But it is not. David Wiggins is the author (which you learn only by checking the endnotes). The question is: why should anything *he* thinks, rightly or wrongly, about that subject bear upon and thus potentially recommend C’s interpretation of *Descartes* on the point?

I stress that this example is representative: instances abound throughout this book where, for the purpose of supporting her interpretation of Descartes on a specific point, C simply invokes, without making a case to invoke, the generalized position of some third party—Wiggins or, just as frequently, Bernard Williams or Gareth Evans, and others too (Wittgenstein, David Lewis). This way of proceeding effectively positions these third parties as philosophical and/or interpretative authorities on whatever points C determines them to be (cf. 108, 112, 134, 158, 225 for other examples).

(B) “Descartes does consider the possibility that it is within God’s power to have brought it about that the self should ‘never make a judgment about anything which [it] did not clearly and distinctly understand’ (Meditation Four, AT VII 61), and thus never err. This is rejected in *Principles* I 37-38 on the grounds that, if God had done so, even without the loss of the self’s freedom ‘in the sense that it would still have required willingness to act in accordance with [its] intellect’s clear and distinct ideas’” (139).

In this passage it sounds for all the world as if, in the second quotation, C is referring to the text she is citing, Descartes’ *Principles* I 37-38. But she is not. She is citing Descartes alright, but quoting *Peter Schouls*. It’s almost like a bait-and-switch tactic (without the tactic), and it leaves us wondering: (a) What after all *is* in *Principles* I 37-38 that is supposedly of relevance to C’s account, i.e., does *Principles* I 37-38 *actually* serve the interpretive purpose to which C puts it? (b) Does

Schouls, whose interpretation has been parachuted into the discussion, get Descartes' *Principles* I 37-38 right? (c) Does C get *Schouls* right in using him this way? All in all, what is undermined here is our confidence that story C is telling is the *Cartesian* story we came to hear, rather than a hybrid one. Here (and throughout) C is mostly silent on whether the commentators she quotes are talking even about the same passages from Descartes that she is citing. Moreover, even granting that they are all considering the same Cartesian texts, C almost invariably fails to provide any indication that the *reasons* others read Descartes in their way are the same as the *reasons* she reads him in hers.

This last point is especially important. Consider three very differently oriented interpreters of Descartes: Etienne Gilson, Bernard Williams, and Jean-Luc Marion. All are accomplished philosophers in their own right, and not surprisingly all have very different ways of regarding Descartes' work. The labor involved in enlisting any one of them in support of one's own interpretation is likely to be very different—to follow very different thought lines that it is very important to display—in each case. Bringing Williams' ideas on Descartes to one's interpretation is simply not the same as bringing Gilson's ideas, nor the same as bringing Marion's. But the point is, whoever it is that one brings to one's interpretation, *there is bringing to be done*. These interpreters cannot simply be quoted without explanation when they agree; for in truth, in *their* eyes (and in ours), they might not agree (or disagree, as the case may be).

The point is one of methodology within history of philosophy, an interpretive domain *par excellence* (since, séances notwithstanding, our subjects are incapable of assisting us). There is, arguably, an ideal pecking order, according to which the best or most preferred interpreter of Descartes is—no surprise—Descartes (something that, coincidentally, Descartes' himself points out someplace). Obviously, however, it is impossible for Descartes to be an interpreter of his thought in the way you and I interpret him for ourselves. The point about privileging him is that our first order of business as interpreters is to square the Cartesian texts with each other, especially the Cartesian texts that are about other Cartesian texts. Having done with the primary texts, next comes the interpreter—here, C—to whom we, as readers of a book on Descartes, have granted a kind of provisional authority. We know (and C should know) that as Descartes' interpreter the person to whom she has the greatest obligation is Descartes (a.k.a. “the texts”, on a true interpretation thereof). Finally, on the lowest rung of the ladder (at least while C engages our attention) are *other* interpreters of Descartes. Concerning this last group we are willing to accept C's judgment that they deserve a place at C's interpretive table, but—and this is the point—*only* if C makes a case for their place there. A big mistake in this book is that time and again C simply does not do this (cf., e.g., 42; 66-67; 87 nn. 26, 27; 108-109; 112 n. 19; 141; 145; 158; 179; 198; 202; 205; 207; 220; 225).

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