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Book Reviews

Buchbesprechungen

Review of John Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections. Essays on Descartes's Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008, pp. xiii + 332, \$80.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-19-922697-9.

John Cottingham has earned his stripes as a historian of philosophy, particularly with respect to Descartes, having written extensively about him and co-edited and co-translated his works. *Cartesian Reflections* is another work that deals with Descartes, consisting of an extensive introduction and fourteen chapters originally published as journal articles and book chapters. The author sets out to reveal one-sided interpretations of Descartes's philosophy, tackling issues the connection between which at first sight is difficult to see, extending from Descartes's views on the internal organization of animals to the role of God in obtaining knowledge. Apart from that, Cottingham must deal with the challenge to mould his individual contributions, which were not written with the intent to relate them to each other, to a systematic whole.

The first part of the book, the introduction, is used to make some general observations and to present the upcoming chapters, at the same time elaborating the views to be argued for. For the sake of brevity, I will not deal with these here, but limit myself to observing that in retrospect, after having read the rest of the book, the elaborations have an added value; even irrespective of this, the introduction's merit is obvious as it indicates what the reader is to expect, but in this case there is an additional reason why its presence is welcome, since it provides the opportunity to cement the book's various parts, which are independent essays, together.

Part 2 discusses Descartes's place in philosophy. Cottingham questions the originality of Descartes's philosophical approach. Indeed, it is clear for a reader of the *Meditations* with some knowledge of the history of philosophy that there are crucial parallels and unrevealed references to previous thinkers. Cottingham stresses this and points – throughout the book – to the influence of Plato, Augustine, Aquinas and Bonaventure in particular (Anselm does not come to the fore – and is mentioned only once in the book – but understandably so, considering the topics dealt with). In chapter 2, this intellectual background is used to account for God's role in validating the truth and the appearance of the notion of substance; Descartes is shown to be entrenched in traditional thinking and terminology. As I intimated, essentially these are not novel observations, but they are of value on account of the number of parallels that is presented and the lesson that can be gathered from them, in line with Cottingham's general remark that “[...] to engage in philosophical enquiry is, whether we like it or not, to be involved in a cultural tradition.” (p. 4).

Throughout his work, Cottingham unmasks various simplicities that ensue from a distorted and procrustean interpretation of Descartes's texts, and that lead to a straw man representation. In chapter 3, two of these are discussed. First, a distorted picture of Descartes's 'rationalism', which deems it to be apriorism – “[...] the bizarre view that the whole of science can be spun out deductively from the armchair.” (p. 77) – and necessitarianism, is dismissed. Francis Bacon is not referred to here, but it seems obvious that the 'rationalist spider'-image can be attributed to him (albeit, of course, anachronistically in the case of Descartes) (cf. J. Cottingham, *The Rationalists*, pp. 1, 2). Cottingham argues that the structure of his philosophical system is in question rather than a specific element that would render certainty: “[...] Descartes's [...] confidence in the certainty of his system

derives from its systematic and unificatory structure.” (p. 80). This is only accomplished by straining what Descartes actually says and by interpreting creatively, but I will not dwell on that. (Incidentally, Cottingham will later on, in chapter 13, point to the role of empirical observations in Descartes’s thinking, relativizing the ‘rationalist’ image.)

The second image that needs adjustment according to Cottingham is the radicalism of Descartes’s rationalism, since reason itself is not (and could not be) validated (p. 83). The line of thought that is pursued is rather that a process is needed to lay bare the truths that cannot be doubted. (This can be defended, although Cottingham stretches Descartes’s position when he presents him as a virtual precursor of Kant (pp. 91, 93).) If one should want to salvage Descartes’s project, the *basis* for his doubt (Cottingham refers to this as his Archimedean point) must indeed itself be postulated beyond doubt (and other assumptions may also be necessary – cf. B. Williams, *Descartes. The Project of Pure Enquiry*, p. 58). Descartes requires God as the ultimate source of the truths of logic and mathematics (and, Cottingham will advance in Ch. 13, of all reality). Whether Descartes’s project is in the end convincing remains a matter of debate; in any event, Cottingham makes it clear that perceiving Descartes as searching for “[...] a complete insight into the nature of reality.” (p. 91) is incorrect. Cottingham is right when he concludes that “[...] much of what is called ‘Cartesian rationalism’ is a historiographer’s fiction.” (p. 93).

Part 3, which includes, just as part 4, six chapters, focuses on metaphysical and epistemological issues, while part 4 has ethics and religion as its subject matters (these fields are not separated rigorously; the overlap that exists justifies the bringing together of these essays in the first place).

‘Cogito, ergo sum’ (“[...] *ego cogito, ergo sum* [...]” (AT VIII–1, p. 7)) is perhaps the best-known of Descartes’s phrases (and in Western philosophy as a whole). The meaning of ‘cogito’ is questioned in chapter 4, where Cottingham opposes the view that it should be understood very broadly, including willing and feeling besides thinking (pp. 97, 98). Instead, “[...] far from extending *cogitare* to any conscious state, Descartes will count a conscious state as a *cogitatio* only if we restrict ourselves simply to the reflective mental judgement involved.” (p. 18); “Descartes’s *cogitatio* is intellectualistic and cognitive: there is always a reflective mental act involved.” (p. 105). Crucially, only the reflective cognitive act can provide a sufficient basis for the ‘cogito’-argument. Should one opt for the acceptability of substituting this reflective act for a broad range of acts, the indubitability would be given up (p. 100) and one would be confronted with interpretational difficulties (p. 101). There is much of interest here. The chapter does give rise to some new questions, particularly how the ‘I’ is to be understood; Cottingham deals with this issue in chapter 13.

Disclosing why attributing the ‘privacy of thought’ to Descartes is incorrect is a focal point in chapter 5; it is also dealt with in chapters 3, 6 and 13. Cottingham presents some textual evidence to denounce the notion that ‘private’ images are crucial for Descartes’s account of sensory awareness, and additionally points – in chapters 5 and 6 – to the specific interpretation of ‘idea’ in Descartes’s work: ‘idea’ is a formal rather than a psychological notion (pp. 116, 117, 130–132); “An idea is certainly not an image or picture [...]” (p. 133).

It is true that Wittgenstein, who is brought to the fore as the main antagonist of the private thought notion, speaks of sensations (‘Empfindungen’) (e.g., L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, § 246 (p. 357), § 248 (p. 358), § 268 (p. 365), § 272 (p. 366)) and of pictures (‘Bilder’) (e.g., § 294 (p. 374)). Pictures are not, incidentally, to be confused with images – an image is not a picture, according to Wittgenstein (yet a picture can correspond to it) (§ 301 (p. 375)). (Wittgenstein’s work is notoriously difficult; he also points to the opacity regarding the role of imaginability in ensuring the sense of a proposition (§ 395 (p. 404)) and introduces the mental picture (‘Vorstellungsbild’) (§ 367 (p. 397)). The details must be left aside here, of course.)

Still, one may wonder whether Descartes can get off the hook so easily. If the ‘idea’ is indeed just a formal notion, the consistency of the Cartesian model is secured at the expense of insight: it will be difficult for Descartes to make it clear, without resorting to the use of images, how someone can entertain thoughts, particularly if the contrast is sought between ‘thought’ and ‘idea’ (p. 131). (I just referred to ‘idea’ in this model as being a formal notion, but only used this word, ‘notion’, because no equivalent is available; ‘formal notion’ may actually be a contradiction in terms, and not even an oxymoron, which at least implies the existence of a notion.)

One is reminded of Searle’s argument to demonstrate the absence of thought in a computer (or man) if all it (or he) does is manipulate symbols without knowing their meanings; there may be syntax, but semantics is absent (J. Searle, *Minds, Brains and Science*, pp. 32, 33). Of course, one can argue that the content is to be found in the idea (in the formal sense), but that does not resolve the issue. In chapter 6, Cottingham says: “Cartesian ideas are in some respects more like publicly accessible concepts than private psychological items: two people could not be said to have the same *thought*, since a thought is a (private) mental item or mode of consciousness; but they could be said to have the same *idea* in so far as their thoughts have a common representational content.” (p. 131). Here, the word ‘concepts’ appears. Above, I pointed to the difficulty of using the word ‘notion’ without referring to an image, and the same problem arises here; one may bestow a meaning on the word ‘concept’ (or ‘notion’), but it must remain insightful. In spite of the accompanying footnote (p. 131, note 5), this is not accomplished.

As Cottingham indicates, the ‘idea’ as a formal notion stems, through a long lineage, from Plato; the advantages for Descartes of including it in his system of thought are evident from Cottingham’s discussion, but the problems involved with Plato’s Ideas (or Forms) are part and parcel of this legacy. (By the way, the observation in chapter 15 that an equation of ‘idea’ (at least in the case of the primary idea to which one is led by the idea of God) with Plato’s Idea is unwarranted (p. 304, note 43) does not alleviate the difficulties for Descartes’s theory.) Be that as it may, Cottingham’s attempt to nuance the often propagated Cartesian picture is successful once again.

Chapter 7 concentrates on Descartes’s treatment of secondary qualities, as they have come to be known, i.e., the qualities that do not inhere in objects but are non-essentially (‘accidentally’) manifested. Dismantling again too narrow an interpretation, Cottingham describes how Descartes clings to the ‘accidental’ nature of color vis-à-vis the object it qualifies, but attributes this to Descartes’s notion of causality. A similarity between cause and effect is necessary, and a color cannot cause the required physiological process: “For Descartes [...] nothing can be explained by attributing to objects a real quality of redness, for such a quality is incapable of figuring in a causal explanation of how our senses are affected by those objects.” (p. 154). Since no natural process can serve as a solution, Descartes is finally committed to an answer that foreshadows the occasionalism espoused by Malebranche. Such a move requires a creative interpretation of Descartes’s work, but Cottingham manages to make his point.

Chapter 8 is, arguably, the easiest read in the throughout readable book. Cottingham makes it clear that Descartes distinguishes animals’ cognitive capabilities from their ability to feel. To be sure, Descartes maintains that they are machines and automata, and don’t think or have language, but it does not follow that they don’t feel. Cottingham’s reading of Descartes’s ‘cogito’ is decisive, and he basically argues that a wide interpretation of ‘cogito’, of the kind rejected in chapter 4, would lead to an inconsistency that Descartes could hardly have missed. Apart from that, Descartes explicitly argues the existence of feelings in animals. With regard to Descartes’s position on animals, Cottingham compellingly subverts, in this straightforward and pellucid chapter, “[...] the monstrous view that all the com-

mentators attribute to him.” (p. 163), once more exposing an unrepresentative simplistic outlook unwarrantedly ascribed to Descartes. A problem that remains – ‘res cogitans’ being characterized as stringently as Descartes does – is that an animal can only be deemed ‘res extensa’ (an extended thing), which seems difficult to reconcile with its ability to feel.

In this chapter, no solution is provided, but in the next one, called “Cartesian Trialism”, Cottingham inquires the merits of adjusting Descartes’ dualism, one of his trademarks, in order to be able to account for ‘hybrid features’, i.e., those features that do not belong to the mind or body alone, but “[...] that belong to man qua embodied being.” (p. 174), a human being being a ‘hybrid unit’ (p. 180). Incidentally, the dichotomy established in the case of animals in chapter 8 remains: only in the case of imagination and sensation is man not merely to be considered as a thinking thing, some corporeal elements (the brain and the sense organs) also being involved: “[...] sensory awareness, like imagination, does not belong to us qua incorporeal ‘thinking things’, but attaches to us qua embodied beings [...]” (p. 179).

‘Trialism’ is a somewhat misleading term, perhaps: as Cottingham himself intimates (pp. 36, 186), *ontologically* Descartes only clings to two categories. The threefold division is a real one – Cottingham constructs his view carefully, on the basis of several sources – but seems to add to the inconsistency prevalent in this part of Descartes’s philosophy, similar to the problems involved in Descartes’s account of the role of the pineal gland as an intermediary between the physical and mental domains. This does not detract from the fact that Descartes’s introduction of the third category “[...] may be regarded as a significant philosophical improvement on his approach when formulating his initial dualistic distinction.” (p. 187).

The relation of the will and the intellect is the topic of chapter 10. Spinoza criticizes Descartes’s stance that man’s (free) will has a greater scope than his intellect, which according to Descartes accounts for errors in judgement (if one does not limit oneself to what is clearly perceived – the intellect’s scope – the possibility for error looms; it is incumbent on man to restrict himself to this domain).

Spinoza’s explanation of this relation is more straightforward, as he identifies them. Cottingham claims that Spinoza’s consideration bears a closer resemblance to Descartes’s than would appear at first sight. Essentially, Descartes acknowledges cases in which one cannot but assent to the truth of a proposition. The clear (and distinct) propositions are obvious candidates; Cottingham refers to an elementary judgement in the field of mathematics (p. 197). As for perceptions that do *not* meet this standard, the divergence between Spinoza and Descartes is downplayed, although some acrobatic interpretation is needed here. The strategy to bridge the gap between Spinoza’s and Descartes’s philosophy with regard to the ‘free will’-position is not quite convincing, although Cottingham (again) forces the reader to nuance a temptingly easy conception. He maintains, *in nuce*, that it is incorrect to consider Descartes as alleging that there is an ‘absolute’ indeterminism when it comes to human actions.

Research on the genesis of the French translation of *Principia Philosophiae* shows (p. 204) that it was not Descartes himself who included the word ‘entièrement’ (or ‘entièrement’, in the current spelling) (‘entirely’) in section 41 of part 1, in the sentence “[...] la toute-puissance de Dieu [...] laisse les actions des hommes *entièrement* libres & indéterminées [...]” (AT IX-2, p. 42) (“the omnipotence of God leaves the actions of human beings *entirely* free and undetermined.”). However, even if this is right, without the addition, the basic idea of man’s actions being undetermined remains; in the original Latin version, Descartes speaks of “[...] liberas hominum actiones indeterminatas [...]” (AT VIII-1, p. 20) (“the free actions of man that are undetermined.”). The same line of thought must be applied in dealing with another passage, which is analyzed in a similar manner. Cottingham says (p. 205) that in

article 39 of part 1 of the same work, Descartes merely claims that freedom means that one can assent or not in *many* cases, and not in *every* case. Although this is correct – it is what Descartes is saying – the matter remains that one still has a ‘free will’ in precisely those many cases (which are those in which no certain or conclusive outcome is reached).

This means that Spinoza’s radical position is not approached, contrary to what Cottingham’s reasoning entails. To be sure, Descartes also refers to ‘freedom’ in a specific way: “The more I incline in one direction, either because I clearly understand that reasons of goodness and truth point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thought, the freer is my choice.” (p. 206; AT VII, pp. 57, 58). Cottingham’s translation deviates slightly from CSM II, p. 40; I have quoted *Cartesian Reflections* here.) It is important, however, to recognize the existence of different grades of freedom. Cottingham remarks, in the wake of this, that “[...] though Descartes does acknowledge a two-way power of choice in conditions of equilibrium, he is very far from extolling it as the model of true human liberty.” (p. 207). The *Meditations* may invite such a conclusion, but it is difficult to read such a meaning in the passages in the *Principles of Philosophy* referred to above.

As for the similarities between Spinoza and Descartes, these are not to be overrated by avoiding the Scylla of sketching too great a divergence on the basis of Spinoza’s expressed distance from his predecessor at the expense of opting for the Charybdis of reading, with hindsight, too many similarities in their respective positions. After all, Spinoza’s deviation from, *inter alios*, Descartes in his criticism that Descartes adheres to a ‘realm within a realm’ (*imperium in imperio*) (*Ethica*, part III, preface (p. 137)), i.e., a domain supposedly separated from the determinism in nature, marks their different starting-points in this matter. (In the end, Spinoza himself does not escape an important inconsistency, but this is not the place to evaluate his position.)

In chapter 11, a comparison with Plato is made again, this time in the discussion of the voluntariness of belief. The various grades of freedom come to the fore anew. Cottingham submits that Descartes offers “[...] a methodology of enquiry that is within our control as epistemic agents.” (p. 224). There are important parallels with the previous chapter. The role of the will in the search for truth is shown to be supportive in the mind’s path to reaching its full potential.

Chapter 12 explores the links between Descartes’s scientific program and his ethics. By sketching the contrast with Stoicism, Cottingham demonstrates what the role of reason in the ethical perspective is: Descartes does not envisage reason as a mere means to deal with the course of nature, but considers it under the active guise which follows from the scientific grasp of nature. In order to paint a comprehensive picture, the relevant aspects of man’s nature are charted; he is characterized by a close union of the soul and the body (p. 238). The link with the subject-matter of chapter 9 is evident: “A human being is no mere soul making use of a body, no mere pilot lodged in the corporeal ship, but a genuine entity in its own right. It is an entity, moreover, with properties (sensory states, emotions, and passions) that are not reducible either to modes of extension, or to pure modes of thought.” (p. 239).

The relevance of this conception becomes clear when Descartes’s attitude with regard to the passions is discussed: “Descartes clearly saw that a complete philosophical system must find space for the affective dimension of our existence, for the significance of sensation, emotion, and feeling in the way in which we understand ourselves, and conduct our lives.” (p. 241). The contrast between Descartes’s account and the ‘classical’ recipe is taken up again when Cottingham indicates how Descartes tackles the problem that it is difficult to see how one fails to act ‘rationally’, acting rather on the basis of the passions, and stresses the importance of acknowledging the opacity of man’s emotional life, *en passant* dismantling yet another feature mistakenly attributed to Descartes, namely, the transparency of the mind that he allegedly professes.

Descartes's solution for escaping the dominance of the passions is to learn how to deal with them through training, as Cottingham also makes clear in chapter 10. In the present chapter, he adds to this the positive aspect of "[...] the hope that by an informed understanding of [the passions'] psycho-physiological causes we may be able to lead enriched lives, free from the feeling that we are dominated by forces outside our control." (p. 248). The step from Cottingham's extensive exposition on Descartes's 'therapy' to guide the passions to the optimistic view just mentioned is, arguably, too great. On the whole, however, the chapter merits a favorable review.

In the final chapters, Descartes's philosophical project is considered in a broad perspective; it is inquired how it coheres, with special attention paid to the religious aspects. Cottingham again places the discussion in a historical context. As a reader of Descartes's most important philosophical works knows, God is accorded a crucial role in them. Cottingham's goal consists in exploring the depths of this given. Indeed, "For Descartes [...], the nature and existence of the Deity is something that lies at the very heart of his entire philosophical system – something without which it would be entirely unrecognizable." (p. 255). In spite of the limitations in gaining knowledge of God, it is on the basis of reason rather than belief that God is granted a pivotal role in Descartes's philosophical system when it comes to establishing (scientific) truths.

The ethical dimension becomes clear, in line with what Cottingham expounds in chapter 12, in Descartes's view on the (partial) mastery of the passions: "[...] our scientific knowledge of the workings of the passions, and the way they are linked to physiological mechanisms, will enable us to manage and control them, so that they can be brought into line with what our reason perceives to be good, and thus become a source of joy." (p. 269). The link with God is evident: "True virtue, Descartes proclaims [...], is a matter not of outward achievement but of the inner exercise of our will. [...] The good life is not the autonomous power to recreate ourselves or the environment, but the use of our God-given free will to bring our lives into conformity with divinely generated truth and goodness." (p. 314).

The aspect of giving this goodness a solid basis remains a problem for Descartes. With regard to perceiving truths, the intellect is limited and one's scientific insights do not entail a grasp of "[...] the ground or basis for the universe's being the way it is: the rationale for the principles or laws of motion must be, as Descartes said of all God's purposes, ultimately 'shut up in the inscrutable abyss' that is the mind of God." (p. 302). One may, then, consider that God is indeed a malicious demon, granting scientific insights for an unknown reason. (An exposition on Descartes's failure to disprove this (in the third *Meditation* (AT VII, pp. 34–52, CSM II, pp. 24–36)) is neither required nor warranted here.) So when Descartes assigns "[...] an essential role to God as the source of all reality and truth." (p. 303), this is a feature that must remain opaque. On the whole, Cottingham's contribution in these chapters is to be rated with the same regard as the work in general, providing a worthwhile perspective to gain some novel insights into a part of Descartes's philosophy to which relatively little attention is paid elsewhere.

In conclusion, Cottingham's attempt to unnerve simplistic and reductionistic readings of Descartes that have emerged in time is successful. Throughout his book, he presents interpretations that force the reader to forgo too straightforward and procrustean views widely ascribed to Descartes and to exchange them for balanced alternatives. A nuanced analysis is offered, not avoiding the inconsistencies and other failures that remain, although a uniform interpretation is at times attempted too contrivedly. Another minus is the existence of some incongruities between the chapters, although these emerge infrequently, the internal coherence prevailing. Moreover, the differences between the essays are understandable, given that they were originally drafted as self-standing contributions. The author might have accounted for these discrepancies, but the essays as such are not affected by this omission.

Most importantly, in taking Descartes seriously, the author manages to demonstrate the historical value of his thoughts.

Cottingham's style is eloquent, while the book is accessible, though not, perhaps, suitable as an introduction to Descartes's thinking, as it presupposes some foreknowledge of his thoughts and Western philosophy in general, without which one may understand the work but not fully appreciate it. For those, however, who are somewhat advanced in Western philosophy and who seek a book that does not eschew unconventional (but at the same time well-founded) analyses, it is a recommended read.

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