
The title of Roger Ariew’s new book parallels that of his earlier collection of essays, Descartes and the Last Scholastics, published in 1999 and widely regarded as a signal contribution to the study of Descartes’s relationship to his intellectual predecessors. Some of the themes of that work are reflected in the new book as well. In both, Ariew seeks to overthrow the myth of Descartes as staunch opponent of Scholasticism by revealing his affinities to strands of Scholastic thought. Indeed, given the title, it may be surprising that much of Descartes and the First Cartesians focuses on Descartes’s relationship to Scholastic philosophy. The reason is that Ariew’s aim is to show how Descartes’s followers designed textbooks for his system, supplanting a traditional Scholastic curriculum and spreading Cartesianism in its stead.

To make sense of this evolution, Ariew provides a fascinating account of how Scholastic textbooks were typically structured. Thus, after a useful first chapter delineating the key philosophical, theological, and political factions at play in the educational institutions that Descartes and his followers hoped to influence, the second and longest chapter of the book is titled “Summa Philosophiae Quadriparta or the Construction of the Late Scholastic Textbook.” As the title suggests, a philosophy textbook in the period was expected to include four parts: logic, physics, metaphysics, and ethics. The chapter digs into the details of how a variety of Scholastic textbooks presented these four topics, and Ariew persuasively argues that the patterns found here reflect important developments in late Scholasticism. For example, they reveal the slow rate at which scientific results were taken up by the academic community (87–92), and the transition toward a modern conception of form as structure (78–79).

In chapter 3, Ariew provides an overview of (some of) Descartes’s views insofar as they fall under the four traditional textbook categories, emphasizing points of continuity with Scholastic views. Since Ariew aims to set the stage for the Cartesians, this chapter provides a fairly orthodox portrayal of Descartes. Finally, the fourth chapter leverages the examination of late Scholastic textbooks to highlight how different Cartesians came up with their own ways of systematically presenting (and sometimes modifying) Cartesian philosophy in the style of a textbook. Ariew considers an extremely wide range of Cartesians, from the more familiar (Pierre Sylvain Régis, the young Baruch Spinoza) to those less frequently investigated (François Bayle, Jacques Rohault, Jacques du Roure).

Anyone familiar with even a portion of Ariew’s decades of work in the history of philosophy will know to expect top-notch historical scholarship. Descartes and the First Cartesians does not disappoint. Ariew provides extensive references to primary texts when they bear even a whiff of relevance to a topic, and the author’s deep knowledge of the period is on full display throughout. That said, the author’s engagement with contemporary debates is often cursory, sometimes making it difficult to understand the extent of his contribution to the literature. To take one example, consider the introduction to a nice discussion of Descartes’s concept of moral certainty: “There has been a fair bit of commentary about moral certainty, but I think Descartes’ concept is still not fully understood. . . . [A]gainst most commentators . . . moral certainty should not be equated with high probability” (143–44); no contemporary authors are cited. Since Ariew provides no specific reference to the commentary at issue, it is hard to be sure precisely whom he has in mind, and therefore difficult to evaluate the debate. When Ariew engages more carefully with the secondary literature on a point of contention, however, his arguments are informative and persuasive. His argument that Descartes is not properly understood as promoting the “mathematization” of nature—contra an influential line of interpretation tracing back to Alexander Koyré—is exemplary in this regard. He disarms the opposing interpretation by illuminating the developmental history of Descartes’s views. This in turn supports his alternative view that the appearance of the mathematization of nature is produced by the fact that Descartes “roots his physics . . . in a metaphysics of clear and distinct ideas” (137).

In the end, Descartes and the First Cartesians is perhaps not best construed as a book about Descartes and the first Cartesians. The treatment of the Cartesians is always with an eye on the
author’s overarching narrative according to which “they tried to supplant the Aristotelians by producing Cartesian textbooks that would teach the whole collegiate curriculum” (205). Although Cartesianism provides the motivation for the work, it is the author’s study of seventeenth-century French educational institutions, doctrines, and textbooks that turns out to be the most detailed and illuminating contribution of the book. It is an impressive feat of scholarship and required reading for anyone interested in the role that educational institutions played in the transition from late Scholastic to early modern philosophy.

John Grey

Michigan State University


A fair number of recent monographs and essay collections on Descartes cover the same old ground, rehashing well-worn problems (and well-worn solutions) and taking us for another tour in Cartesian circles. Much to be preferred are those studies that go beyond the familiar and truly advance our understanding of Cartesian metaphysics, epistemology, science, ethics, and philosophical theology, especially with new insights into their complex relationships. The best anthologies will also contain original essays by both well-established scholars and new colleagues, thus providing a nice snapshot of the state of the art at the time of publication. There is much to be learned about the development of the field by comparing, for example, the Anglo-American essay collections on Descartes from the 1960s and 1970s—mostly analytic pieces focused mainly on the Meditations—with more recent volumes containing historically and textually sensitive essays by international casts that cover a wider range of Descartes’s writings and their philosophical, scientific, political, and religious contexts.

Lectures de Descartes, a collection of essays by European scholars, is a superb case in point. It is part of a series titled “Lectures de . . .” that includes volumes on early modern, late modern, and recent thinkers and trends, including Hobbes, Spinoza, Kant, Bourdieu, Sartre, and analytic philosophy. The goal of the editors of this Descartes volume is to take us beyond a caricatured Descartes who has been reduced to certain overworked themes (hyperbolic doubt, the cogito, the provisional ethics, etc.) and give the reader a better picture of the rich variety of topics that Descartes addressed as well as a finer sense of “la densité et l’inventivité” of his philosophical views. The charge they set for the French, Italian, and Dutch contributors is to put to rest Descartes’s image as a thinker whose only legacy is a bundle of errors, and to dispel some of the prejudices that have tainted his reputation and the reading of his works. As the editors put it, they seek “à déplier des complexités le plus souvent ignorées, et d’abord à rendre à la pensée cartésienne les nuances qui en sont constitutives” (7). We are, they insist, far from being finished with trying to understand what Descartes really wanted to accomplish and precisely how he went about doing it, whether in general or on some specific topic or another.

While I do not believe that the best recent scholarship on Descartes is guilty of the reduction, prejudice, and caricaturing that the editors cite, still, on this last point, they are absolutely right. And what the chapters of this book, taken together, are intended to provide is a holistic understanding of Descartes’s project by revealing the intimate relationships among its various parts—especially the connection between his metaphysics and his “science,” so often separated (the editors say) by those who think that the former alone is worth the trouble of examining and by those who believe that the latter can be detached from its metaphysical foundations.

On these terms, the chapters succeed admirably. The pair of essays by Stefano Di Bella (“Le programme métaphysique de Descartes”) and Frédéric de Buzon (“Le concept de la physique”) does an especially good job of providing an integrated picture of these two parts