

DESCARTES¹

from Études d'histoire de la philosophie by Émile Boutroux

Translated from the French by

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The reissue of the complete works of Descartes which come to be undertaken under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Instruction is the indication of the lively interest that his philosophy excites in this moment and of the desire experienced by a great number to study it anew in the more exact and complete documents. No intellectual movement could be more justified.

It is certain that Cartesianism, only viewing things historically, dominates every development of modern philosophy. The eminent historian of Cartesian philosophy, Monsieur Frانسisque Bouillier, has furnished in this respect, for forty years now, with his scholarly accuracy and firm judgement of philosophy, a complete and definitive demonstration. This assertion, we have the assurance thereof, is not imputable as an illusion of our patriotism. The scholarly Germans, among others, so preoccupied with discovering the internal principles of historical developments, are themselves pleased to unravel, in the Cartesian problems, the starting point for all the great questions debated by modern philosophers. They have seen, in particular, in the Cogito, the living germ from where ought to protrude, by an immanent dialectic, all the flowering of the great systems which have appeared up to this day. It is thus that Kuno Fischer made expressly from Cartesianism and the antinomies which it was committed to by developing, the origin or necessary condition for the occasionalism of Malebranche, the monism of Spinoza, the monadology of Leibnitz, the sensualism of Locke, the materialism of La Mettrie, the idealism of Berkeley and the criticism of Kant. Among the majority of German historians of philosophy one finds analogous deductions.

Generally speaking, one is able to say that the central problem of Cartesian metaphysics was the passing of the thought to existence. Thought alone is indissolubly inherent in itself: how then, from what right and in what sense are we able, in our judgements, to affirm existences? There is a case, and a unique case, where existence is immediately bound to thought in the intuition of understanding: this is the case where we say "Cogito, ergo sum." How and in what sense are we able to extend to other existences the certitude that we attribute right away to that of thought? Such is the crux of the Cartesian philosophy. Now this problem of existence will preside over the enquiries of Locke, Hume, Reid and Kant, as to those of Malebranche, Spinoza and Leibnitz. Existence, which, for the ancients, was a given thing and immediately distinguishable, that it only acted to analyze, is here a far-off object, which it is a question of attaining, if indeed it is possible to attain here. Here resides the distinctive character of modern philosophy; and this character, is the Cartesian mark itself.

Not only does Cartesianism command the progress of modern philosophy, but it has a considerable importance in the general history of the human spirit. Without doubt, our 17th century dips, for a large part, into the Christian and classical sources, but science is here developed beside literature; and science, then, is the Cartesian conception of the world: it is the seizure of the mathematical mechanism over all that is not properly called thought, condition of this very mechanism. "Nature," wrote Huygens, "at the time of the death of Descartes,

Nature, accepts the mourning, and weeps for the first
The great Descartes!...
When he lost the day, you lost the light:
It is only in his light that we have learned to see you."

And when Newton would reform Cartesianism, will this not be by placing on this very terrain of the mathematically treated natural philosophy, what had cleared and assured Descartes?

This is not all: as Descartes is dualist, assessing illegitimate every mixture of philosophy and religion, of corporeal philosophy and spiritual philosophy, in this way the 17th century is simultaneously religious and rationalist, moralist and scholarly, without the various disciplines penetrating and deteriorating each other. Mystic Pascal was not detrimental to physician Pascal, and vice-versa.

Finally Descartes had placed thought unrivalled and found in it alone the principle for certitude. In the same way, the 17th century assessed that in the thought consists the dignity of man, and that it is from there, not from material grandeur, that it is in us to relieve us. The conviction of the power of the reason insinuates itself at this point into the spirits, if one does not delay to knockdown the barriers, either provisional, or even definitive, that Descartes had erected before it. The social and political questions, which for a long time, in his eyes, were unable to be accessible to science, the religious questions, which absolutely went beyond it, were handed over to the reason. To this work the 17th century devoted itself, and one was able to say that the French Revolution was born from the Discours de la Méthode [Discourse on the Method]. Error, if one wants to signify that Cartesianism contained one such consequence, but bearable assertion, if one understands here that it is in the name of the Cartesian principle of rational evidence that society had been renewed in 1789.

Thus Cartesianism is an essential piece of philosophic and moral history of modern times. But does it only belong to history? Has it nothing more to teach us?

According to the philosopher and English scholar Huxley, as far as the system of Descartes being only a curiosity of erudite, he is the soul of philosophy as of contemporary science. Our philosophy is idealist, and it is the Cogito of Descartes which is the principle of this idealism. Our science is mechanist, and it is the Cartesian reduction of all which has not spirit to encompass it, which has founded this mechanism.

Independently of these general directions, it is certain that a good number of the questions to which attach themselves in preference to contemporary science is the legacy of the philosophy of Descartes.

Such are, in metaphysics, the problem of existence, that of the relationships of the will and understanding, that of certitude, that of the relationships of science and metaphysics, and that of the relationships of spirit and matter. The philosophy of science debates today, overall perhaps, the question of the relationship of mathematics and experience. How and in whatever sense which is proved through demonstration is it able to agree with what is known through perception? How does it happen that the physical is able to be treated mathematically? Now this question is the very former that first of all achieved Descartes a certain standing, and one can say that it is in order to solve it that he has built his system of metaphysics.

In what concerns science, the alliance of geometry and analysis, the mechanical interpretation of phenomena, the exclusion of final causes, the mathematical mechanism, applied not only to the systematization of the phenomena, but to the explanation of the genesis of the world, not only to the study

of inorganic bodies, but to the study of life, finds itself, like so many essential pieces, in the Cartesian philosophy. And it is still the Cartesian spirit which presides over certain particular modern sciences, such as experimental psychology and positive sociology, which look to consider the psychical or social facts in their elements or their mathematically measurable equivalents.

May one not say, moreover, that, in order to be in possession of these directing ideas, it is sufficient to receive them from the current scholars, such that have made them for two centuries of discussion. He does not have ideas as facts, whose knowledge almost fatally perfects itself. Who is able to know the exact measure of a phenomenon, which serves by collecting a course measure? But an idea is a mysterious plant which puts forth sometimes otherwise to another than to its author, and which may wait for a long time before encountering favorable terrain where it will produce all its fruit. Here is why it is important to consider the ideas in the spirit where they are developed. As from faith they have thus appeared more grand and fecund as were not made for the disciples incapable of embracing them! "Philosophia duce regredimur," according to a profound motto of the Renaissance founded by Monsieur Victor Egger.

Is it now necessary to recall the excellence of Descartes as a writer? To this point of view too, its importance could not be exaggerated. Is it a question of his historical role? Monsieur Désiré Nisard has shown that he has given the first perfect model of the French prose. It is the Cartesian language which will be the material for the style of our great writers. And, considered in itself, this language, shown as the hallmark of the method of the philosopher, possesses in the highest degree the principal qualities of all language: the property of the terms and the expression of the order of the ideas. Cartesian intuition and deduction have placed their impression on the style of the Discours de la Méthode. Not that this language is abstract and impersonal. The reason of Descartes is a living and enthusiastic reason, which does not limit itself to putting into syllogisms the established truths, but which applies itself to finding, to creating, to communicating to the intelligences its creative activity. This life of the thought animates the style itself, which allies, in a surprising fashion, to the precision and to the demonstrative order, the movement, accent, originality, color, spirit, the very charm, or the very irony, or the arrogance, according to the intellectual passion which passes through the soul of this lover of truth. Whatever impression one experiences at the first address, by encircling oneself sometimes within these long sentences which require an active reader capable of deduction, one does not delay to prove the prestige of this magisterial style. And even today, it is sufficient that the manner of a writer recalls in some way that of Descartes, so that one celebrates thereof in emulation the superiority and austere seduction.

Finally, why would we not recall the particular motives we have, as French, to wish that the works of Descartes are spread as much as possible in our country and abroad?

Descartes is one of the most pure and beautiful expressions of the genius of our race: the diffusion of his thoughts, this is our life and our influence.

We love the reason, intermediary between the spirit of positivism, which keeps to the facts properly said, and the spirit of mysticism, which tends to believe, without requiring proof. Of all the intellectual qualities, that which we value the most is the judgement, to the eyes of which experience and the very reasoning are only sources of truth if they are subjected to the supervision of the spirit. It is in this sense that we search for the clearness and order of ideas. It does not suffice for us that a system is well constructed and consistent with itself. We require that each part, taken separately, is intelligible and true; and we prefer to hold separately the

the two ends of the chain, without seeing the intermediary links, losing the truths won in order to understand the hypothetical bonds. Among the sciences, one of those where we have excelled is mathematics. Our sense of clearness and of logic is found here with it. In the moral order we have loved reason with an ardent love, enthusiastic, misled sometimes and contrasting with its own object; but through our fluctuations, it is clear that we pursue an accord with individual liberty and with rational law, where neither the one nor the other would be sacrificed. And at the same time that we search, in a practical spirit, for what suits our country, it is impossible for us to separate in our thought the happiness of others from our own happiness, and to require the good other than under this universal form as reason commands.

Now, these different traits, which count among the principles of our character, we find them in Descartes. Mathematician and philosopher, profound and clear, superior by his cunning spirit as by his geometric spirit, eager for independence and servant of reason, concerned about the practical conclusions of life and ambitious to work towards the happiness of all of humanity, he offers us, in an eminent sense, the model and as archetype the qualities that we aspire to unfold.

To study Descartes and to introduce him, this is to work towards the accomplishment of the scientific and civilizing mission of France.

Endnotes

- 1) Partial reproduction of an article published in the Revue de metaphysique et de morale, 1894, regarding the reprint of the works of Descartes.