

COTTINGHAM, John. *Cartesian Reflections: Essays on Descartes's Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2008. xii + 329pp. Cloth \$80.00—Descartes cuts a lively figure in this excellent collection of essays by a recognized authority on Cartesian philosophy. Cottingham's familiarity with the Cartesian corpus enables him to argue forcefully against what he takes to be the distorting interpretive influences of contemporary analytic philosophy, contemporary secular thought, and an ecclesiastical establishment that has viewed Descartes with suspicion as the harbinger of trends both anti-clerical and anti-religious. In addition to correcting traditional stereotypes, Cottingham illuminates aspects of Descartes' thought that have gone underappreciated including his ideas on ethics and religious belief, and his self-understanding as a seeker after wisdom in the Platonic-Augustinian tradition. What emerges is a Janus portrait with one head looking forward to the developments of modernity and the other looking back to Scholastic philosophy and Platonism – the figures of Aquinas, Augustine, and Plato especially.

After a helpful overview, the book divides into three parts: (i) essays that situate Descartes within the broader philosophical landscape both historically and problematically, (ii) essays discussing Descartes' views on mind and body, and (iii) essays on ethics and religion including a timely discussion of the dialectical relationship in Descartes between the desire for technological control and the demands of a morality based on virtue and our response to truth and goodness. All are clearly written. They avoid unnecessary jargon, and are easily accessible to non-specialists. I cannot do justice to all they accomplish. Here are just a couple examples.

Cottingham argues that Descartes did not endorse the “private” conception of mental phenomena that informs current discussions of consciousness in philosophy of mind. Nor, he argues, was thought for Descartes the grab-bag category it is often made out to be. Descartes took it to comprise propositional attitudes such as beliefs, but not qualia, the alleged subjective impressions that contemporary consciousness theorists claim constitute the “what-it’s-likeness” of experience (the entire notion seems foreign to Descartes). Nor did Descartes take thought to comprise imagination or sensation except in an extended, technical sense. These latter belong instead to another category of properties, says Cottingham, not those that belong to mind alone, nor those that belong to body alone, but those that belong to the union of the two – “psychophysical properties” which include sensations, appetites, and passions. It seems, then, that Descartes was committed to there being two irreducibly distinct kinds of substances and three irreducibly distinct kinds of properties – substance dualism combined with property pluralism.

Cottingham is helpful in identifying sources of misunderstanding. The tendency to view Descartes as the exponent of an “egocentric” metaphysic, for instance, overlooks a methodological distinction Descartes takes from Scholastic philosophy between the order of knowing and the order of being: My existence may be epistemically prior to God's, say, in the sense that the former is better known to me than the latter, but it does not follow from this that my existence is prior to God's ontologically in any sense.

More importantly, Cottingham supplants the fragmented image of Descartes often suggested by problems-oriented philosophers, with a synoptic view that displays the interconnections among various aspects of Descartes' thought such as the implications of his philosophy of mind for his views on ethics and religion. Descartes endorsed an ethics of virtue, for instance, that took the good life to consist in part in the correct management of the passions. He followed Aristotle in recognizing the importance of habituation to this end, but went further in his confidence that science would enable us to exert greater control over the physiological mechanisms that trigger the passions. He was not a simple mechanist about this, however, since

on his view the passions have a psychophysical nature that makes them opaque. They have neither the transparency of our thoughts, nor the transparency of our mathematical ideas of extension, and they are further obscured on account of the unprincipled ways we experienced them in our childhood. This opacity not only allowed Descartes to explain why the passions are difficult to manage, says Cottingham, it also provided him a handy account of *akrasia*, a phenomenon the ancients found philosophically vexing, and it gave him an apparently “Freudian” insight about the importance for moral development of reappropriating in adult life patterns of feeling acquired during childhood.

Cottingham’s essays succeed in showing even untutored readers a thinker who is much more subtle, interesting, and compelling than is often appreciated – a thinker, moreover, whose deep religious commitments played a role in his philosophy more central than either secularists or the traditional religious establishment have often been willing to admit. A must read for those with an interest in early modern philosophy, they are highly recommended for those who work or teach in other areas such as philosophy of mind.— William Jaworski, Fordham University.