

REVISTA DE LIBROS

Descartes' Dualism, de GORDON BAKER AND KATHERINE J. MORRIS. ROUTLEDGE, LONDON AND NEW YORK, 1966, XIV+ 235 pp., £35.00.

One could begin any historical survey of philosophical positions on the relation between the mental and the physical by reviewing positions before Descartes. One could, for example, profitably begin by examining the views of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas or any number of other thinkers. What one cannot do, however, is begin by looking at philosophical positions which have come after Descartes. Why is this? Not simply because Descartes gives us a classic statement of the problems involved, not simply because he represents a particular position which people still argue for and against (though both of these is true) but also because, to a large extent, his work has set the framework of Cartesian categories and so perpetuate the very problem they claim to resolve. Thus Erwin Straus exaggerated only a little when he said that "The ideas of Descartes have become so much a part of everybody's thought in Europe that later centuries took credit for the discoveries prepared or made by Descartes. Just because European thought was so deeply suffused with Cartesianism, those who came later were unaware of repeating the great thinker, they were ignorant of the sources on which they depended." Descartes' views are thus not simply of concern to those interested in the history of ideas and so no apology is needed for a continuing interest in his work.

However, if the central thrust of Baker and Morris' ambitious and closely argued work is true, the foregoing claim for his continued relevance should be made with some reservation. At best, the relation between this 'Cartesian' heritage and Descartes' own views is not straightforward and, in fact, may be largely nebulous. Baker and Morris' main contention is that the 'Cartesianism' with which we have become so familiar is something of a changeling and 'has much of the character of a projection of distinctively more modern ideas on to an early seventeenth-century thinker'. Close textual analysis reveals that this changeling, what the authors dub the Cartesian Legend, is a strained interpretation of his work which requires Descartes to hold positions at odds with the general direction of his thought. Central to the Cartesian Legend, of course, is the view that Descartes was a Cartesian Dualist. Not so, say Baker and Morris: it is possible to read Descartes in a way such that he did not think that thoughts constitute an inner realm of mental objects, that this inner realm is apprehended by a quasi-perceptual faculty called 'introspection', that its deliverances are indubitable, that the body is an insentient machine, that the mental and the physical are causally (and thereby externally and contingently) related, and that he did not use the term 'thought' to embrace all 'states of consciousness'. They propose an alternative, more sympathetic, reading in which Descartes' Dualism is presented as more refined, of its time, and consistent with the general principles governing his own metaphysical, logical, ethical, and theological thought.

Despite the fact that ‘A whole [conceptual] ocean now separates us from him’, the historicism of Baker and Morris’ approach does not mean, they argue, that reading Descartes today is any less relevant than it once was. There is always some value to reading the Great Dead Philosophers anew; not least that of making manifest the unexamined tacit assumptions which inform our own thought. There is much here with which to agree, though they recognise that many of the proposals which result from this new reading have been already advanced by other writers in the field. The picture of Descartes which emerges from the work of philosophers such as John Cottingham and Stephen Gaukroger is one of an extremely subtle thinker whose views are at odds with the motley of positions grouped together under the simplistic title ‘Cartesian’. Descartes himself is clearly much less Cartesian than we who live and work in the shadow of the Cartesian turn in philosophy. However, where the present work differs from many other recent studies of Descartes is in their claim that his work presents a unified and coherent whole and that perceived tensions in his work are extrinsic rather than intrinsic.

For example, Popper powerfully argued that what Bernard Williams referred to as the ‘scandal of Cartesian interactionism’ is a problem *for us* in that we have a too narrow and outmoded understanding of cause as the push of one thing on another. Now it is certainly true that Descartes himself understood causal relations between physical things as being a function of their extension; but it is equally true that he thought that we could not use this type of model for understanding the relation between the mind and body. Indeed, in the Fifth Set of Replies he seems to suggest that this relation is *sui generis* and Baker and Morris’ gloss on all this is that Descartes could be best termed an ‘Occasionalist Interactionist’. This may seem abhorrent to the modern ear and distasteful to our secular palates; but it is not obviously inconsistent or incoherent.

Nevertheless, I cannot help feeling that, as well-meaning as they are, attempts to present Descartes’ work as univocal and completely tensionless actually do something of a disservice to the great man by obscuring the richness of his thought. *Pace* Baker and Morris, there are strands of thought in his work, such as the epistemic insecurity of his bodily being and his recognition of his body’s special status or the picture of perception he often presents as a channel of sense and his denial of homuncular accounts of the mind, which pull in opposite directions. As Cornelius van Peursen once remarked ‘It is the mark of the really great philosophers that they are never entirely consistent in their thinking. Books which describe the systems of these philosophers present us, in reproducing them, with unambiguous, sharply differentiated ideas within a coherent logical scheme. But read the works of the great thinkers themselves and you find that they display the subtleties and nice distinctions of argument – even elements of uncertainty – precisely at those points where the most nodal ideas are at issue’. Descartes is, in this respect, the paradigm of a really great philosopher who amply repays the effort of revisiting his work.

Stephen Burwood
Department of Philosophy, University of Hull
Hull, HU6 7RX, England
E-Mail: s.a.burwood@phil.hull.ac.uk