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descartes

André Gombay

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To B.

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preface

May 2001: a Norwegian friend – no philosopher – has just written us a letter, a paean to the return of spring. She concludes: "How lucky I am: unlike Descartes I do not need to think in order to be!" The remark is plain, unsurprising, simply one more testimony to the fact that a certain dictum of Descartes' is the most famous sentence in philosophy, indeed one of the most famous sentences ever. In a curious way it resembles another monument of our culture, the *Mona Lisa*. It, too, has the smooth face and the secret smile, that portent of depths impossible to plumb. It, too, has a way of getting under one's skin, of eliciting reactions that go beyond intellectual or aesthetic appraisal. Dictum and painting alike arouse an urge to put down, or denigrate, or deface, or parody. Our Norwegian friend rejoices at being free of a tiresome constraint; viewers of the *Mona Lisa* will say "so what?" or shoot a bullet through the canvas. Have we not all seen Mona Lisa made up as a hag? or mustachioed? or winking? Don't we constantly come across parodies of the Cartesian sentence? "I run, therefore I am"? or (for academics) "I write, therefore I am"? or (one up) "I am read, therefore I am"? And countless more?

Nor is it just those five words of Descartes – the *cogito*, they are commonly called – that elicit these reactions: I am almost tempted to say that it is Descartes himself; and Descartes not just when he is read by philosophers. Some years ago after surgery for cancer, my wife decided not to heed the surgeon's advice to undergo chemotherapy as further treatment, and perhaps even radiation; but opted instead for a regimen that put the accent on relaxation, self-awareness and meditation – an approach to health that is commonly called *holistic*. Well, thanks to my wife's decision I soon learnt of another common idiom: in the circles in which she now moved, the standard way of referring to the medical approach that she had foresworn was to call it *Cartesian* medicine.

Another "unlike Descartes," then: perhaps "unlike Descartes, I do need to think in order to be healthy." And strangely, this new distancing fits in well with the earlier one – almost the reverse side of the coin, one might say. If you hold (Norwegianly) that there is more to you than mere thinking, you might also hold (holistic-therapeutically) that there is

more to your body than mere ticking. You might reason like this. "Sheer thought isn't all that makes me what I am; other things are involved – feelings for example. And surely *they* are much entwined with what goes on in my body. So my body cannot be something that I own simply the way I own my car; and by the same token, preventing cancer from spreading in my body cannot be like preventing rust from spreading in my car. Yet that is exactly what Descartes (and my surgeon) would think."

Would they? or would Descartes? As we shall see, it is by no means a straight matter to tag him with this belief. Yes, he did say things in that vein: for example, he compared his body to a clock; but he said other things too, different – like telling Princess Elisabeth that she would not be rid of her fevers until she "made her soul happy."[1] It is interesting that he should nonetheless be singled out by public opinion as a hard-liner, and singled out so categorically. Nor do such imputations end here – let me mention one or two more, continuing to confine myself to episodes of my own life. A few months ago, on hearing that I was at work on the present book, my neighbor Clive sneered: "Ah! the man who said it was all right to beat one's dog." Again, not a new label. A 1650s visitor to Port-Royal School reports on how the children there enjoyed dissecting dogs that they had nailed live to wooden planks: after all, "their cries when hammered were nothing but the noises of some small springs that were being deranged"[2] – Descartes *dixit*. For its part, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1801 devotes most of its entry on "brutes" to explaining why Descartes held that animals were automata, or *robots* as we might now say. One main reason, the writer tells us, is that this answered one great objection to God's goodness: that he should "suffer creatures who have never sinned to be subjected to so many miseries."[3]

As it happens, I have *not* come across that thought in Descartes, though he certainly did say that animals were automata. Yet he also sometimes spoke – seemingly without qualms – of animals expressing joy or hope.[4] So again we might ask: why was the brutal view at once so commonly ascribed to him?

The tags hung around Descartes' neck testify, I think, to two things. First, a certain quality of his prose; we shall have ample occasion to note it as we look at the texts. Descartes dislikes technical jargon; his sentences – their syntax, their vocabulary – are readily graspable as you read them; they feel fluid and plain. Think only of the *cogito*. Yet there is also a strange tinge to that plainness – the suggestion of a deeper hinterland, a vista of things unsaid. Many readers have sensed this, and many have held it against him. Descartes is a philosopher who is often accused of being intellectually dishonest: he did not say all that he ought to have said. "Why did he *not* say outright that animals had no feelings, if he thought they were mere machines?" Or: "Why did he *not* say that

stopping cancer was like stopping rust, if he thought human bodies were just complicated clocks?" So the charges go.

Still, it is not just a matter of prose quality: there is another, deeper, reason for the tags. Descartes is not the father of modern philosophy for nothing. All these views that are commonly assigned to him are ones that for the past three or four centuries have had a vivid life of their own: many of us – and not just philosophers – are preoccupied with them. We are attracted even when we disagree. To use a Freudian word, let us say that we are *ambivalent* and want someone to have spoken out these thoughts, if only perhaps then to distance ourselves from the speaker. "Unlike Descartes . . . ," we intone. What is more, that ambivalence sometimes extends to matters that did not interest anyone much when Descartes wrote of them, but have come to interest us now, and where again he is someone to whom we can ascribe a hard line. He did write – didn't he? – that "we cannot have a thought of which we are not conscious the very moment that it is in us."[5] Does this mean, then, that there can be no such thing as an unconscious feeling, or unconscious memory, or unconscious desire? To put it mildly, these matters have been a subject of some curiosity in the past hundred years – and not just to theorists of the mind. And if we are looking for a hardliner on one side, who is a better candidate than Descartes?

He is *that.* But then again, he is a philosopher who worried greatly about the fact that other people could know about him what he could not know himself – for example, the mistakes he was making; and who, in order to account for that imbalance, offered an engrossing analysis of the mental make-up in human beings that made making mistakes possible at all. In the same vein, when writing about feelings and emotions (he devoted an entire book to them), he takes pains to remind his readers that "those who are most strongly agitated by their passions are not the ones who know them best."[6] So once again, the portrait has more lines and shadows than appeared at first sight.

Let us look more intently, then – hoping that Mona Lisa's smile remains.

chapter 1

life and writings

Much of what we know about Descartes' early life comes from a two-volume biography, *La Vie de Monsieur Descartes*, written by Adrien Baillet in 1691.

Born

(a) March 31, 1596, near Tours;
(b) into a family about to be ennobled; in fact, though apparently not wishing to be so addressed, Descartes is often called *Seigneur du Perron*;
(c) into a well-off family: he will have independent means, won't have to seek a patron.

School

(a) enters the *Collège de La Flèche* in 1606 or 1607, and stays for eight years;
(b) this was a Jesuit school founded in 1604; we know a lot about its curriculum of studies, thanks to the *Ratio studiorum* – a pedagogical treatise elaborated by the Jesuits in the 1580s and 1590s and strictly followed for the next two centuries in all their institutions; so that, for example, though born generations apart, Descartes and Molière and Voltaire would have had *exactly* the same school education; namely:
(c) five years of classical humanities, Latin and Greek; followed for those who stayed on by three years of "philosophy" – which meant a year of logic (Aristotelian), then a year of mathematics and Aristotelian physics, and finally a year of ethics (including casuistry), and metaphysics (basically Aristotelian);
(d) something else is important about Jesuit schooling: Jesuits are the first, in Europe, systematically to *mark* the work of schoolchildren – from good to bad, from best to worst. They mark by assigning letters or numbers; and mark not just the students' work, but the

mental attitudes and aptitudes that the work evinces – like effort, assiduity, intelligence, interest, etc. Not only that, but now teachers also *rank* students according to the marks they have received. This happens in every subject and in every class. In fact teachers go even further, they have instituted signs of honor or dishonor according to the marks that students have achieved. They assign seats in the classroom according to rank; and at the end of the year there are celebrations where the school publicly honors the students ranked highest – "prize days," they are called. At the end of the year also, there are examinations to decide whether a student is to be promoted to the next higher class: dunces have to repeat their year.

University: 1615–16

Descartes studies law at Poitiers: the abstract of the dissertation for his law degree (on will-making), together with a dedication to his godfather, were found and published a dozen years ago. He will never practice.

Travels: 1616–29

Very little is known in detail or with certainty about this long stretch of Descartes' life. Here, however, are some more or less assured events:

1618 Beginning of the Thirty Years War: Descartes goes off to Holland, to join the army of Maurice of Nassau (Protestant).

1618–19 Spends winter in Breda, in southern Holland. Forges an intense friendship with a young Dutchman, Isaac Beeckman, with whom he discusses scientific issues. Descartes gives Beeckman as a personal present a treatise he has just written, the *Compendium Musicæ*; incidentally, Descartes is one of the few great philosophers – some others are Plato, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein – to have been keenly interested in music. As we shall see, music also has to do with the last piece he wrote, a few weeks before his death.

1619–20 Leaves Holland for southern Germany to join the army of Maximilian of Bavaria (Catholic); perhaps stays till the end of 1620; perhaps participates in the siege of Prague, and in the removal of Frederick from the throne of Bohemia.

November 10, 1619 On that day – St Martin's Eve – Descartes discovers "the foundations of a wonderful science," and in the night that follows has three vivid dreams which he describes in detail: did he regard them as omens of his life to come? We have that description via Baillet – who then, however, almost expunged it from the next edition of *La Vie*, doubtless to allay the thought that an oneiric experience lay at the birth of rationalist philosophy.

1620–5 We know very little about these years. Descartes travels widely, with occasional returns to France; befriends Marin Mersenne on one of them; goes to Italy, in particular on a pilgrimage to Loreto to fulfill a vow he had made on the night of the dreams; perhaps meets Claudio Monteverdi in Venice in 1624.

1625–7 Descartes is in Paris – his only long sojourn there. Meets everyone who is anyone in the world of intellect, *chez* Mersenne and elsewhere: mathematicians (Hardy, Morin, Debeaune); writers (Guez de Balzac); theologians – mostly Oratorian rigorists (Bérulle, Gibieuf). Two events are perhaps noteworthy (Baillet places them in November 1628, but they probably occurred about a year earlier):

(a) The Chandoux lecture. Before an assembly of bright minds at the Papal Nuncio's palace, a Parisian wit named Chandoux gave a talk where he attacked Aristotelian philosophy; everyone applauded – except Descartes. Pressed to explain, Descartes promptly showed how harmless the assault had been: with such enemies, did Aristotle need any friends?

(b) Meeting with Bérulle, a few days after the Chandoux episode. Bérulle, who had been present, summoned Descartes to an interview, where he told him that he (Descartes) owed it to God to give the world a new philosophy. Descartes left Paris soon afterward.

Holland: 1629–49

In the spring of 1629 Descartes goes to Holland, where he will stay for the next 20 years except for a few brief trips abroad, including three returns to France, in 1644, 1647, and 1648. We know much more about this portion of his life. For one thing, as he becomes famous, accounts by others begin to appear. Second and more important, still extant is a large correspondence – letters to and from him. They are of course mostly about philosophy or science, but not entirely. On occasion, they reveal quite a bit about Descartes, or about his correspondent.

Here are a few dates: my division into periods is quite arbitrary.

1629–37 Descartes' interests are mostly scientific: he mentions in 1629 that he has begun a short treatise on metaphysics, but apparently does not pursue the project. He corresponds about astronomy, optics, the laws of motion, the circulation of the blood, geometry, and algebra. He does not publish anything till 1637.

Autumn 1629 First letter to Mersenne – the beginning of a long correspondence. Mersenne is foremost remembered today as Descartes' correspondent and intellectual agent; but in his lifetime he was known in his own right as a philosopher, scientist, musical theorist, prolific writer of vast volumes, and, perhaps most important, as an

intellectual middleman. He wrote thousands of letters, corresponded with many thinkers and scientists – Galileo, Grotius, Fermat, Torricelli, Pascal – fostering interchange and discussion. We know of more than 300 letters between Descartes and Mersenne, of which about one half is extant – almost all from the philosopher's pen: Descartes seems not to have thought Mersenne's missives worth keeping.

Spring 1632 Meets Constantijn Huygens. Huygens was secretary to Maurice of Nassau – a demanding and influential post – but he was also a Renaissance man, keenly interested in science and the arts. He and Descartes see each other quite often and exchange many letters, though not many about philosophical subjects: after Mersenne, Huygens is Descartes' most frequent correspondent.

November 1633 Hearing of the Inquisition's condemnation of Galileo, Descartes decides not to publish – indeed not to finish – *Le Monde*, where he, too, defended a version of Copernicanism; he also leaves unfinished *L'Homme*, a treatise meant to accompany *Le Monde*.

June 1635 Birth of Francine, daughter of Descartes and Helena Jans, his housekeeper.

June 1637 Publication in Leiden, and without Descartes' name, of the *Discours de la méthode*, followed by three *Essais* presented as illustrations of that method: *La Dioptrique*, *Les Météores*, and *La Géométrie*.

1637–42 These are the central years in the elaboration of Descartes' metaphysics.

1637 Cartesianism has its first airing in academe: Descartes' doctrines are taught at the University of Utrecht by Reneri and by Regius.

September 1640 Francine dies. Descartes alludes to her death in a letter of January 1641, writing that he is "not one of those who think that tears and sadness belong only to women."

1641 (Paris) and 1642 (Amsterdam) Publication of the *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, followed by six (Paris), eventually seven (Amsterdam), sets of *Objectiones* and *Responsiones*.

1642–9 New enemies, new friends.

1642 Beginning of Descartes' difficulties with Dutch universities. At Utrecht he is accused by the rector Voetius of various religious or theological sins: atheism, pelagianism (the view that human beings can avoid sin even without God's grace), and other heresies. Charges and countercharges fly for years; at one point in 1643, Descartes even fears arrest, and appeals to the French ambassador for protection.

1642 or 1643 Descartes meets Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, oldest daughter of Frederick, whom Descartes (perhaps) helped depose from his Prague throne in 1620: the family has lived in exile in The Hague ever since. Elisabeth and Descartes are to become friends. They see