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ESSAY REVIEW

## The young René Descartes—lawyer, military engineer, courtier, diplomat ... and, we might add, ambitious ‘savant’

**The young descartes: nobility, rumor and war**, Harold J. Cook, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2018. xvi + 276 pp., \$35 (cloth) \$10 to \$35 (e-book), ISBN-13: 978-0-226-46296-7 (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-0-226-54009-2 (e-book)

In 1921 Gaston Milhaud’s *Descartes, savant* was published posthumously in Paris. Milhaud focussed on the intellectual enterprises of Descartes other than his metaphysics, systematic natural philosophy and theory of the passions; that is, on his mathematics, optics, hydrostatics, piecemeal corpuscular-mechanical speculations and his little noted interest in experimentation. Milhaud covered material from Descartes’s later career, but the really eye-opening dimension of the book was his explication of the work of the young Descartes, prior to his first publication, at forty years of age, of the *Discourse on Method* and accompanying *Essays on Geometry, Dioptrics and Meteors*. Only late in the twentieth century was Milhaud’s path reopened by scholars interested in Descartes’s early scientific and mathematical endeavours and his early intellectual biography.

But what of the young Descartes’s broader biography? Descartes, the man in full, has not been revealed in intellectual biography or history of science dealing with his early work. Certainly, some striking facts are known about the young Descartes. For example, after leaving the elite Jesuit college of La Flèche, probably late in 1612, and before he settled for roughly twenty years in the United Provinces of the Netherlands in 1629, the young Descartes led a life of almost ceaseless travel, punctuated by curious adventures. He had been a gentleman volunteer in the Dutch Protestant army of the great Maurice of Nassau (at that point an ally of France). Then, after some shadowy and dangerous travel in northern and eastern Europe, he had been present with the victorious Catholic forces at the Battle of White Mountain near Prague which in 1620 marked the beginning of what would be the Thirty Years War, as the ‘Winter King’ of Bohemia, the usurping Protestant Elector Frederick of the Palatinate, was deposed. In Paris in the late 1610s and mid 1620s, he mixed in the trendy ‘libertine’ culture of free thinking, sceptical and radically philosophically inclined writers, poets, philosophers and courtly bon vivants, such as Guez de Balzac, La Mothe le Vayer and the scandalous poet and philosopher Théophile de Viau. He visited the shrine of Loreto in Italy; met in Germany with leading mathematicians like Faulhaber; and perhaps visited Johannes Kepler, while having also been rumoured to have sought out members of the purported Rosicrucian movement. Then, in 1629, he suddenly moved to the United Provinces of the Netherlands, following a couple of unusual events. First, he uncharacteristically gave a public performance, refuting the alchemical philosopher Chandoux at a Parisian soirée held at the residence of the Papal Nuncio. This led to at least one interview with the imposing Cardinal Bérulle, founder of the French Oratorians and leader of Counter-Reformation thought in France. Scholars acquainted with the

structures of early modern French history also know that Descartes came from the upwardly mobile provincial bourgeoisie. Some of his ancestors were physicians, while some, including his father and brother, attained high position in the bureaucratic/judicial class of nobility of the robe, a status for which Descartes had prepared by taking a law degree at Poitiers in 1616.

Still, is any of this important for understanding Descartes *savant* who later becomes Descartes, metaphysician and systematic corpuscular-mechanical natural philosopher? Aside from the obviously crucial meeting with the Dutch practical mathematician, pedagogue and pioneering mechanical philosopher, Isaac Beeckman, in Breda in November 1618 — an event that shaped several strands of Descartes's intellectual DNA — few of these facts register in history of science approaches. If only a reliable study had been available in the 1970s, guiding us through the trajectory of the living, breathing young René Descartes in his personal, institutional and cultural networks, then my work and, I believe, that of colleagues similarly involved with the intellectual biography of Descartes, would have been greatly improved. Now, at last, with Hal Cook's volume we have a work that provides exactly what I — and I think quite a few others — have needed for two generations: not a 'Descartes, *savant*' but, as my title hints, a 'Descartes *Lawyer, Military Engineer, Courtier, Diplomat.*' I shall try to articulate what Cook has achieved and why all Cartesian scholars need this work on their shelves. However, there will be a caveat, signalled at the end of my title. Cook's book raises difficulties about the topic of Descartes as *ambitious savant* and its relation to the wider biography. But first we must attend to the book's achievements.

Cook begins with a nicely explicated framing theme: 'A France of Broken Families'. This denotes the network of personal, familial (hence political, social and religio-ideological) fractures that beset the French elites, from the royal family down, during the long period of civil and religious wars in the late sixteenth century. A short respite began in 1594 with the accession of the Protestant turned Catholic Henri of Navarre as King Henri IV, the first of the Bourbons, who then issued the Edict of Nantes (1598), extending toleration to his former co-religionists. One-third of the country remained Protestant, including large numbers of the nobility and urban elites. When Henri was assassinated by a fanatic in 1610, as he was about to launch a war against the Austrian Hapsburgs (and their Spanish cousins), the instability returned under the minority of Louis XIII and Regency of his mother, Marie de Medici. Descartes was fourteen when Henri IV died. His entire young manhood, down the late 1620s, saw an endless round of elite splits; courtly intrigues and plots; show trials; and political jockeying by noble families and their retainers, always articulated with unstable networks within the nobility of the robe. Descartes was in his early thirties when this simmering situation reached crisis point, with the interlinked violent consolidation of Richelieu as first minister of Louis XIII and the successful royal siege of the Huguenot stronghold of La Rochelle (1627-8).

To speak very broadly about Cook's findings, one can say that young René started as a '*politique*', meaning a devotee of the policies promised by Henri IV — tolerant of Protestantism, secular in state policy, envisioning a more unified, peaceful France (and thence Europe). Descartes therefore generally cleaved to the political line and important noble families and clientage networks favourable to the Queen Regent and later Gaston d'Orleans, her third son. These *per force* also included Huguenot interests. The long run of events 1610-1629 favoured Louis XIII and his eventual chief minister Richelieu, who were aspiring absolutists and anti-Huguenot religious conservatives, who would ally with foreign Protestants in their anti-Hapsburg campaigns but sought politically to neuter the Huguenots and enforce religious uniformity inside France.

Cook demonstrates that the young René, seeking a role suited to his education and connections, had inter-personal and career problems rooted in the terrain of this France of broken families. Descartes's mother died when he was one. He was brought up by maternal relatives while his father, Joachim, remarried, moved away, began a new family and rose high in various juridical/bureaucratic, and (Cook speculates) diplomatic roles. Across the late 1610s and 1620s Cook has Joachim Descartes edging ever closer to the circles backing the young Louis XIII as he and Richelieu took greater control over the state apparatus. René was never close to his father, who paved the career path of Descartes's more compliant brother Pierre. In Cook's story, a key break between Descartes and his father occurred in 1626 when they took different sides in the crisis leading to the show trial and execution of the anti-Richelieu comte de Chalais.

Indeed, Descartes's prospects of obtaining an appointment in a *Parlement*, or in the suite of a significant noble interest, seem to have been constantly spoiled by the often violent shifts of power that followed in the decade and a half after the assassination of Henri IV. In 1617 the young King engineered a coup against the Queen Regent and her favourite, Contini. This probably aborted Descartes's first round of preferment seeking. Cook argues that Descartes's choices of networks of Parisian friends and possible noble patrons did not help his prospects; nor did his cultural proclivities. For example, Cook fills in details of Descartes's connections with his friend, the noted writer Guez de Balzac, well beyond what the few letters between them can reveal. Cook nicely contextualizes Balzac in the courtly and patronage micro-politics of the time, thus showing that Descartes was himself probably well-disposed toward, and with, Balzac's own aristocratic backers, who, again, fell out of favour during the 1620s as Richelieu rose and reaction to libertinage and scepticism began to be organized. So the shifting political sands again damaged Descartes's professional prospects. In fact, Cook suggests that Descartes himself may have been at personal risk in the events that led Richelieu to force Balzac into internal exile late in 1628.

One pair of events in the late 1620s has loomed large in intellectual biographies of Descartes: the so-called Chandoux episode and Descartes's purported subsequent interview with Cardinal Bérulle, both mentioned above. These events took place right before Descartes began his long exile in the United Provinces. The best known intellectual history account of these events derives from Richard Popkin's widely read *The History of Scepticism*. Popkin maintained that the Chandoux and Bérulle episodes convinced Descartes to defeat scepticism, so that he retired to the relative anonymity and repose offered in the Netherlands to begin work on the metaphysical grounds of certainty. According to Popkin, at the Papal Nuncio's Descartes's public performance (supposedly grounded in his 'method') shocked even himself about the deconstructive power of argument; then Bérulle encouraged the young man to use his reason in the service of defeating scepticism. Descartes retired to the United Provinces to do just that. Thus we have intellectual history causes and effects of these events.

For Cook this is not a matter of intellectual history at all. What we have is a moment of political crisis for Descartes. Cook argues that Descartes's discussion with Bérulle had a different purpose: that he was made aware by Bérulle of being in danger from the strengthening Richelieu regime, and the besting of René's own favoured political and cultural circles, as seen in the comte de Chalais affair and banishment of Balzac. Presumably the public performance against Chandoux, fomented by Bérulle himself, had brought Descartes to the notice of Richelieu's people. Chandoux's ideas may have been of some interest to Richelieu, while Bérulle was falling out of favour with the Cardinal. Bérulle's preferred grand strategy advocated closer relations with the Hapsburgs;

Richelieu and Louis aimed to wage war against the Hapsburgs in ‘*realpolitik*’ consonance with useful Protestant powers. (Bérulle died under suspicious circumstances in October 1629.) Descartes’s life as an aspirant for office or potential courtier was over. He turned into the sequestered scholar of metaphysics and natural philosophy that we know from his mature works. So, for Cook, we have political causes and consequences shaping Descartes’s biography at this point. The account is persuasive; but, we shall soon see that intellectual concerns were also at stake for Descartes in this crisis.

A good example of Cook fleshing out facts previously viewed superficially concerns Descartes’s military career in the late 1610s and 1620s. Descartes was not simply a ‘gentleman officer’. He was in fact a military engineer, having begun his training with the army of Prince Maurice. Cook explains well the rise of this branch of the practical mathematical arts — focussed on new conceptions of defensive fortification, offensive siege operations, statics, hydraulics, strength of materials and surveying. Then Cook demonstrates that there was even more to Descartes’s military career. He seems to have had advising roles, and occasional diplomatic tasks, at various headquarters. Cook convincingly reconstructs Descartes’s participation, under Maximilian of Bavaria, in the Hapsburg campaign against the usurping Frederick, Elector Palatine, the ‘Winter King’ of Bohemia. Descartes did some diplomatic work at headquarters in Ulm, mid 1620, and then was at the crucial Battle of White Mountain in November. Immediately after that he served with Hapsburg-linked Catholic forces of the Count of Bucquoy in central Europe, until they were defeated and the Count killed. Descartes narrowly escaped. In 1624 he may have dabbled in political entanglements in the Valtelline, which soon led to French military intervention. He was at the gigantic siege of La Rochelle, possibly as a combatant, entering the Huguenot port with the victorious Royal army in late October 1628.

One way to grasp the historiographical cash value of Cook’s detailed biographical reconstruction is to consider these facts: historians of science and mathematics know of several other elite French mathematicians of that time who had successful careers in a Parlement or other royal office: the great Pierre Fermat; Claude Mydorge, Descartes’ optics collaborator and friend; and, in the previous generation, the powerful analytical mathematician François Viète. They all came from similar *noble de robe* backgrounds. Cook can explain why René failed where his father, brother and mathematical peers succeeded: Descartes’s choices of connections and friends, as well as events he could not control, along with his underlying family difficulties, meant he did not conform to what a historical sociology would predict — a Fermat-like ‘Descartes’, a great mathematician, certainly, but definitely not the author of the *Meditations* and *Principia Philosophiae*.

Cook’s depiction of Descartes also helps to make sense of certain well-known dimensions of his personality. Descartes was touchy and possessive about his work. For example, he was quick to turn on an old and important friend like Beeckman when it appeared that the (true) fact of Descartes’s initial dependence upon him for key ideas in natural philosophy was going to come out. Descartes became haughty and dismissive, to the point of distorting the history of their intellectual relations. Cook helps us appreciate the various layers of Descartes’s life experience as an adventurous, ambitious, highly cultivated, mentally and physically well-honed, well-connected, gentleman, deeply conscious of honour and status. This implies that Descartes’s comportment was arguably less a matter of individual traits or quirks, and more just social interactional business as usual for a man of his background and experience. Descartes was also wily enough to keep this French *noble de robe* persona under wraps in the Netherlands, preferring a ‘masked’ existence. But when threatened, for example, by the University and Town

Council of Utrecht, Descartes proved a hardened, determined and skilled opponent. Cook enables us to see that the real René was not simply an anti-social philosophical recluse.

Finally, Cook's picture of Descartes the cosmopolitan man of action and veteran military engineer reinforces a finding clear to at least a minority of Cartesian scholars: that Descartes was quite interested in empirical evidence and the latest discoveries. Descartes certainly trusted his own dazzling theorizing in preference to that of any other, even the likes of Galileo, Kepler, Harvey and his own mentor, Beeckman. But Cook's René was a realist and pragmatist. He took seriously the facts, opportunities and challenges of everyday life, just as recent studies have shown him to have valued empirical evidence in natural philosophy and the specialist sciences.

Such are some of the virtues of Cook's volume. Acute readers might still wish to raise a concern already noted in some generalist reviews of the book. This is the issue of the relative scarcity of evidence and hence the status of Cook's resulting, often admittedly conditional, arguments. There are, Cook explains, three interrelated later-seventeenth-century biographies of Descartes, by Daniel Lipstorp (1653), Pierre Borel (1653) and most importantly by Adrian Baillet (1691). Descartes's correspondence for the early years through 1629 consists of only about two dozen items. The *Discourse on Method* and later correspondence contain some autobiographical claims and allusions. There are also some collateral family or legal documents. Cook brings to the use of this evidence expert knowledge of French and wider European history, concerning institutions, events and personalities. In this unavoidable process of historical reconstruction and synthesis Cook excels.

For example, Cook makes good use of the accounts given in the biography by Baillet, written at the height of the Catholic reaction and centralizing push of Louis XIV. Much of what Baillet says about Descartes in the 1620s was modulated, so that Descartes's connections to libertinage and his now dubious record of political jockeying amongst anti-Richelieu groups was occluded from view. Cook elicits from Baillet's text an arguably more real René, taken off his intellectual pedestal and placed on a carefully articulated itinerary, amongst his relevant contemporaries, at the locations he visited and in relation to events at which he was present, or which affected him. I find Cook's reconstructions generally convincing. They add up to an historiographical *tour de force*. One cannot do justice in brief scope to the extent and density of Cook's at times blow-by-blow reconstruction of Descartes's comings and goings, often fraught, at times sneaky and secretive, occasionally dangerous. The tale of the dashing, brilliant minor noble, eventually denied a bright career in the state by the rise of Richelieu, estrangement from his father, and a concatenation of 'wrong' political and cultural moves, surely has the makings of a novel or screenplay.

Up to this point, then, all is very well with *The Young Descartes*. There is, however, one area of difficulty requiring discussion in a review in a history of science journal. This difficulty does not affect how the educated general reader will approach the book, nor even how social, political and cultural historians might. But, when it comes to experts in history of science, the difficulty is material. The issue here is that some aspects of 'Descartes, *savant*' must necessarily protrude into a narrative otherwise focussed on the wider life of the young Descartes. The fact is that Descartes did a great deal of intellectual work in the years 1618-1629. Some mention of aspects of that work simply cannot be avoided if the wider biography is to make optimal sense at certain moments. As with any sophisticated historiographical problem, nice judgements are required about which of these matters need attention and how to handle them.

Cook of course knows all of this. He acts on the issue, discussing events in Descartes's intellectual life several times, while appropriately citing the relevant literature. Nevertheless, for whatever reasons — perhaps the publisher's requirements for a popular readership — in some important areas less than optimal decisions have been made, resulting in some problems in the narrative. I shall give three examples. But before I do so, let me be clear that I am not saying that Cook should have written yet another intellectual biography of Descartes. Rather, I instance some cases where I believe better decisions might have been made about which intellectual technicalities to discuss and how to treat them, all in the service of the larger biography.

- (1) Cook's fine discussions of the business of military engineering, and Descartes's participation in it, lead directly to a quote from the *Discourse on Method* in which Descartes famously compares his quest singlehandedly to reforge the foundations of knowledge to the way the strength of fortifications designed by one hand surpasses that of those jerry built over time. (A nice advertisement for the new art of fortification by a retired professional!) This suits the general reader, but misses key matters well known to experts on Descartes's scientific and natural philosophical pursuits: Descartes's command of military engineering comported with his soon to be engaged work with Isaac Beeckman. There, issues in the mixed mathematical fields (such as mechanics, geometrical optics and music theory) were to be pursued under the aegis of a radical agenda called 'physico-mathematics'. It involved attempts to render parts of the mixed mathematical fields more relevant to — or indeed integral to — the higher status game of natural philosophy. As I have argued elsewhere, they were to be 'physicalized', made to speak to the matter and cause categories constitutive of natural philosophizing. Therefore Cook leaves out something important, and the matter is compounded by my second example: Cook's account of the crucial first meeting of Beeckman and Descartes in November 1618.
- (2) What we chiefly hear about is Descartes's *Compendium of Music*, composed as a gift for Beeckman. Music theory certainly was one of the classical mixed mathematical sciences. But, of all the things Descartes pursued with Beeckman, it is by far the most conventional, and least important — and it was not an exercise in their 'physico-mathematics'. Much more significant for Descartes's intellectual development and destiny was their physico-mathematical work on hydrostatics, the law of falling bodies, and for Descartes within the next year, his first physico-mathematical ventures into optics, dealing with some claims of Kepler regarding the refraction of light. I have shown how these early studies, scattered, inconclusive and subsequently surpassed, fed into the threads of the conceptual DNA of Descartes's scientific and natural philosophical work, down through *Le Monde* and indeed into his masterpiece of systematic natural philosophy, the *Principia philosophiae*. Therefore, historians of science need to proceed with care to repair this glitch when attempting to knit together Cook's accounts of the larger circumstances with what is now known about Descartes's early intellectual trajectory.
- (3) Finally, Cook briefly talks about Descartes's crowning intellectual triumph of the 1620s — his discovery, with his friend Claude Mydorge, of the law of refraction of light, which they quickly applied to a theory of lenses. This monumental discovery deeply shaped Descartes's subsequent scientific and natural philosophical interests. For example, he quickly started speculating — in a physico-mathematical way! — about the underlying mechanical causes of the law. In turn, that

work fed into the core of his later systematic corpuscular-mechanism, by suggesting his design of the dynamics of corpuscles that constituted its ‘causal register’. This achievement also suggested to Descartes that his vaunted method did not, and could not, have led to the result, an insight that grew on him by the time he abandoned his *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* in 1628. As Descartes headed to the big inflection point in 1628/9 where he dropped the *Regulae*, defeated Chandoux, met with Bérulle, and then betook himself to the United Provinces, we need to know more about his optics than the mere fact that he had discovered the law of refraction. Here is a point where detailed treatment of certain intellectual activities should not be avoided, even in a broad gauge biography.

There are even ways in which Descartes’s early intellectual career can actually illuminate Cook’s wider biography. For example, Cook briefly mentions the *Regulae*, but not the very obvious anti-sceptical and anti-radical natural philosophy orientation of the latter parts of the text, begun in Paris after the discovery of the law of refraction, around 1626, and abandoned two years later. In these passages of the *Regulae* Descartes was trying to emulate and surpass the programme of his friend Marin Mersenne, as I have argued several times since 1980. Descartes’s new ideas about a mechanistic theory of light and vision underpinned this attempt — thus linking back to point 3 above. All this bears on Descartes’s larger biographical path at the time. He was navigating away from libertine circles and aligning with the cultural conservatives (albeit conservatives who would use novel intellectual tools).

Similarly, we now know that an important part of Descartes’s mature natural philosophy was his elaborate construction of a radical realist Copernicanism to sit within his corpuscular-mechanical framework. Consider his vortex theory, a non-trivial construct, as I have argued at length; his theory of stars and light; of cosmic magnetism, sunspots, the birth and death of comets and planets and the reasons for their differing types of orbits. These, along with integration of the latest facts about *novae*, variable stars and sun spots, were all eventually woven into an ultra-radical realist and mechanist Copernicanism. Before he moved to the Netherlands in 1629, Descartes had never shown much interest in astronomical novelties, Copernicanism or the Keplerian problem of the causes of planetary motion.

Cook mentions Descartes’s discussions concerning comets around 1619 with Faulhaber, and possibly even Kepler. It was a hot topic in the wake of the famous comet of 1618. Cook sees here a possible source of Descartes’s later interest in comets, which is fair enough. But this pales in significance compared to what Descartes encountered when he met with Beeckman a second time in 1628, after a gap of ten years. I have shown that Beeckman was ploughing through the astronomical works of Kepler, seeking to evaluate instances in which Kepler had invoked immaterial celestial forces. In each case Beeckman re-wrote these into corpuscular-mechanical terminology. Beeckman tried several versions of a planetary theory. What he wanted to explain is orbital stability, through a balance of particles issuing from the sun and the other stars. He postulated that different flows of particles weaken differently with distance, so that equilibrium loci, or orbits, are created. Beeckman’s approach focused on orbital equilibrium, and the physical roles of the sun and stars in celestial causation — exactly as Descartes’s vortex theory would soon do. Arguably, Descartes’s interest after 1628 in the problem of celestial mechanics grew from his acquaintance with Beeckman’s speculations. Beeckman had shown him that the royal road to any systematic articulation of corpuscular-mechanism ran through the integration of a mechanized Copernicanism, thereby




marginalizing Gilbert and Kepler, the two chief non-mechanist natural philosophers intent on physicalising astronomy. Thus, once again, detail from the intellectual biography helps to fill out the picture Cook can paint in broader terms of Descartes's shifting agenda after 1629.

Finally, let's go one step further, superimposing the intellectual biography onto the larger biography at the crucial inflection point of René's career; that is, the concatenated Chandoux episode, interview with Cardinal Bérulle and quickly ensuing 'exile' to the United Provinces. We have looked at Cook's treatment and mentioned Popkin's classic history of philosophy approach. Being clear about what is at stake here, I must mention my own account of the situation. This places the collapse of the project of the later *Regulae* at the centre of Descartes's inflection process. I have shown that the problems — mathematical, epistemological and natural philosophical — that beset the later *Regulae* were clear to Descartes and explain his summary dropping of the project. No wonder we find a gigantic reorientation of his activities. In his first six months in the Netherlands he sketched his metaphysical dualism and slid toward ever more ambitious designs for a mechanistic account of nature in what became *Le Monde*. I suggested that when he appeared at the Papal Nuncio's residence to deconstruct Chandoux, and in his subsequent interview with Bérulle, Descartes was putting a brave face on his intellectual situation, pretending that he had a viable 'method'. But Descartes knew that the *Regulae*, which instantiated the method, did not work. There was, in fact, little basis for his unprecedented public posturing. Compared to his situation, say, a year or so previously, he was now almost completely intellectually bankrupt. He was still committed to (piecemeal) corpuscular-mechanism and the agenda of physico-mathematics. And he had his optics. But this did not add up to a coherent programme. Surely here were reasons to disappear from Paris — reasons which help explain the new directions his work took in the Netherlands. Citing my work, Cook alludes to my view that internally generated problems led to the abandonment of the *Regulae* in 1628. He does not, however, link this to Descartes's situation *vis à vis* Chandoux and Bérulle. This is a missed opportunity.

Why not say that Descartes's intellectual crisis was overlaid and sharpened to near catastrophic levels by the scenario Cook paints of the triumph of Richelieu, marginalization of Bérulle and possible threat to Descartes, recently enrolled as an ally of the great Oratorian? I view this as entirely possible. Why not conclude, then, that Descartes's intellectual *and* socio-political situation amounted to a single, organic crisis? I am happy to envision future attempts to meld the two dimensions together. Such a synthesis would render all the more remarkable the maturation over the next twenty years of René — retired military engineer, failed courtier, unemployed jurist and diplomat — into arguably the leading mathematician, systematic natural philosopher, realist Copernican and student of the passions of the soul in Europe. Talk about overcoming an identity and career crisis!

To conclude, had Cook's book existed forty years ago, without doubt it would have beneficially 'inflected' my work and that of every other Cartesian scholar interested in his science, natural philosophy and method. It certainly will do so now, even though it misses some of the opportunities provided by those intervening forty years of research into the intellectual activities and agendas of the young René. Cook has given us an excellent 'Descartes, *Lawyer, Military Engineer, Courtier, Diplomat.*' But another persona needs to be integrated back into Cook's compelling larger life trajectory of the young René. This personage is, of course, the now better understood descendant of Milhaud's original '*Descartes, savant*' — like the larger René a touchy, combative, visionary, creative and ambitious but similarly (at least momentarily) stymied player

in the then rapidly transforming and highly contested games of natural philosophy, mixed and pure mathematics.

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