

Transcendental or Historical Change of Mind?

Almost two generations ago J.E. “Ted” McGuire first published his still seminal work on Newton. Here he remains at the top of his game, presenting, with his brilliant accomplice, Peter Machamer, a comprehensive new interpretation of what exactly was the mature system of Descartes. Although they work chronologically through Cartesian texts dealing mainly with metaphysics, McGuire and Machamer eschew the sustained reading of entire works and claim to offer in *Descartes’ Changing Mind* neither “contextualised history” nor “intellectual biography” [ix]. Instead, their chief aim, and the bulk of their argument, concerns an intricately constructed, synthetic model of the mature Descartes as a “causalist” of the most systematically thought through type, rather than any manner, shape or form of an occasionalist. This Cartesian super system is argued to peek out, at first hesitantly and in piecemeal fashion, from several different portions of the *Meditations*; to mature slowly in parts of the *Replies to Objections*; and only fully to emerge in the *Principles* (snippets of which are invoked at different stages in the argument, augmented by other textual slivers of correspondence and publications).

The resulting Descartes, taken as an intellectually constructed object, is presented as having articulated his systematic causalist weave along three axes: The first runs from God vertically down through to both material bodies and minds via a brilliant reconstruction of the doctrine of efficient causation of being (*causa secundum esse*), mainly but not solely articulated out of the admirable late neo-Scholastic Suarez. The second holds amongst material bodies, with the authors manoeuvring brilliantly amongst and beyond the best modern commentators on Cartesian causation, such as Schmaltz, Gabbey and Garber, in ways much too complex to be rehearsed here. The third axis, perhaps the most interesting, involves the special “substantial union” of each human mind and its unique body in the realms of sensation, emotion, the passions and their tending, as developed in *Meditation VI*, the correspondence with Elizabeth of Bohemia and the *Passions of the soul*. The systematising Descartes wrapped up his newly consistent causalist cloth in a fine new, embryonically modernist packaging, which McGuire and Machamer term the mature Descartes’ “epistemic stance”. This involved Descartes “teleological and perspectivalist commitments” to the position that human knowledge is relative to what our survival demands and offers sufficient cognitive grasp to allow humans to do what the author’s habitually call “science”.

Cartesian scholars, more attuned to the intellectual biography or contextualised history which McGuire and Machamer avoid, and whose specialties reside in history of medicine, mathematics, natural philosophy, literature or ethics, will be duly impressed by this ingenious model of the mature Descartes. But, they will wonder in general what is the historical point of this elaborate construction, and in particular, where in this brilliant edifice is there useful insight for one’s own historical work. After all, few serious Descartes scholars doubt that his intellectual career, beginning in 1618, was characterised by many layers and types of change and inflection. His post 1640 struggles with the mind–body union, and his exploitation of it in the mid and late 40s as the fulcrum for discussing ethics, psycho-somatic medicine and the nature and control of the passions, are consensually seen as a shifting, unfinished battle, conditioned by threats, opportunities and concatenating unintended consequences for the aging, and tiring, Descartes. McGuire and Machamer pointedly have to ignore the lived reality of Descartes’ struggles in the 40s, turning Descartes’ conceptual contortions in *Meditation VI* and his later unresolved entanglements about the substantial mind–body union, into the very touchstone of the triumphant, mature “epistemic stance”.

On the other side of the ledger, but for similar reasons, the authors have to ignore the underlying continuities at the heart of Descartes' corpuscular-mechanical natural philosophy, running from *Le Monde*, his first system in that field, to the *Principles*, his second. The almost complete overthrow of *Le Monde* is central to the authors' view of the *Principles* as the first embodiment of the mature (total philosophical) system of Descartes. But, natural philosophy was the crucial field of activity for Descartes, and strong continuities marked his work in it.

For example, in *Le Monde*, McGuire and Machamer need to see Descartes' corpuscular mechanics as grounded in God's causal activity of *conservation* rather than instant by instant *recreation*—the latter's emergence being for them a central plank in the mature super system. The authors thus ignore the strong evidence that in *Le Monde* Descartes already had a “punctiform dynamics” of micro corpuscles”, as Stephen Gaukroger and John Schuster ('The Hydrostatics Paradox and the Origins of Cartesian Dynamics', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 33: 569) term it. The action of light was the exemplar for that dynamics. From as early as 1620 Descartes believed he could literally see the instantaneously acting causes at work in well formed geometrical diagrams of sound optical (as well as hydrostatical) results. Here Descartes had just the instantaneous conjunction of cause and effect that McGuire and Machamer claim as essential to Descartes the mature causalist. Similarly, Descartes' vortex mechanics, the often misunderstood “engine room”—as I have termed it—of his natural philosophical project, both in *Le Monde* and in the *Principles*, depended upon just this punctiform dynamics. What Descartes did, over time, under contextual challenges and self generated insights into problems, was to elaborate further the metaphysics of cause meant to underwrite his punctiform dynamics. He did this in various ways and without ultimate, self-enunciated closure.

The kind of change of mind that McGuire and Machamer claim for Descartes can only be detected by synthetic exercises in adducing supposedly hidden, transcendental and total systems, not by historical study involving integral and holistic analyses of texts. These are not opposed approaches in some common field of evaluation. They are different scholarly games, serving different groups, values and ends. We may admire achievements in both domains, and seize useful cross fertilisations; but, it is not advisable to mistake results in the one for results in the other.