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Fred Ablondi, *Gerould de Cordemoy: Atomist, Occasionalist, Cartesian*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005. 127 pages. Bibliographical references. \$17.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-87-46266-76.

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During the seventeenth century, Gottfried Leibniz accused the Cartesians of having become what they most despised, that is, “interpreters or commentators on their master [Descartes] just as the philosophers of the schools [were] with Aristotle.”[1] In the same spirit, one of Leibniz’s correspondents, the erudite anti-Cartesian Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721), penned a philosophical satire in which Descartes boasted: “I won’t have to wait as many centuries as Aristotle did to have as long a list of commentators.”[2] Descartes rightly continues to fascinate philosophers, intellectual historians, and historians of philosophy and science. Beyond the intrinsic intellectual interest, it is nearly impossible to comprehend European intellectual life during the seventeenth century without grappling with Descartes. Indeed, whether they loved or hated him, few of Descartes’ contemporary intellectuals could afford to ignore him.

In France, “Cartesianism” rapidly spread beyond small groups of sophisticated philosophers and natural philosophers who were seeking to establish knowledge on a firm epistemological basis. Indeed, Descartes’ ideas were applied to social, political, and religious questions that would perhaps have surprised (maybe even shocked?) him. The Jansenists Pierre Nicole and Antoine Arnauld, authors of *La logique, ou l’art de penser* (1662), owed a substantial intellectual debt to Descartes, for example, and Cartesianism and Jansenism connected in other ways during the intellectual debates of the later seventeenth century.[3] Taking the form of public spectacles and popularizing accounts, Cartesianism became “science for a polite society.”[4] As a social phenomenon, Cartesianism had a significant gender dimension. A popular subject in the salons, it attracted many female adherents, most notably a trio of *cartésiennes* that included Catherine Descartes, niece of the great man himself.[5] The renegade Jesuit François Poulain de La Barre made Cartesianism even more attractive to female audiences by skillfully arguing that Cartesian ideas of the mind nullified conventional notions of female intellectual inferiority, thus giving women a sound philosophical basis on which to demand advanced education.[6] Despite the eclipse of Cartesianism by Newtonianism in the eighteenth century, Cartesianism continued to influence French culture; exploring these wider cultural ramifications, including how “Cartesian” became an element of French identity, has proven a fascinating subject.[7]

As a philosophy, Cartesianism was never just a slavish recapitulation of Descartes’ ideas by his epigones, though it served the polemical interests of opponents to depict Cartesianism as monolithic. Recent studies have made clear how Cartesians in the two generations after Descartes modified his ideas in important ways to resolve problems they perceived in Descartes’ formulations and to answer his critics (who have also received more scholarly attention in recent years).[8] Consequently, Cartesianism has become “Cartesianisms,” and adherents of various stripes have become fruitful subjects of investigation. Fred Ablondi’s *Gerould de Cordemoy: Atomist, Occasionalist, Cartesian* makes an important contribution to these studies by bringing to our attention a philosopher who was one of the leading French Cartesians and perhaps the most original. Ablondi argues that Cordemoy (1626-84) was a “radical Cartesian,” a formulation first applied to Spinoza and some Dutch thinkers by Henry Krop and then to a pair of French Cartesians, Robert Desgabets and Pierre-Sylvain Régis, by Tad Schmaltz.[9] Given this scholarly context, Ablondi might be considered a member of the “Popkin school’ of philosophy, an approach which emphasizes history by seeking philosophical understanding through a reconstruction of

the historical steps that produce philosophical thought.”[10] Ablondi’s account is internalist, considering Cordemoy’s ideas as they relate to those of contemporary philosophers without much reference to his subject’s larger social and cultural contexts. This traditional history of ideas approach requires close reading, skillful exposition and analysis of texts, and astute comparison, tasks that Ablondi performs very well. His text displays considerable erudition at points, and his notes attest to a thorough familiarity with the relevant literature.

As Ablondi’s title suggests, *Cordemoy* is less a coherent monograph than a study in three sections. Chapter one is a cursory introduction, briefly stating Ablondi’s objectives and summarizing Cordemoy’s biography (personally, I would have liked to know much more about his life). Chapters two and three could stand alone as independent articles; respectively, they discuss two important aspects of Cordemoy’s thought, atomism and occasionalism. The fourth and final chapter resembles an extended afterword, making the case for Ablondi’s assessment of Cordemoy as a radical Cartesian (though Cartesian nonetheless).

Ablondi’s second chapter on atomism will be the most satisfying for readers not current on (or concerned about) the fine points of debate among the Descartes specialists. At every step, Ablondi’s discussion is admirably clear, convincing, and intellectually satisfying. Because he handles several important Cartesian essentials along the way (e.g., the plenum, the nature of motion), this chapter also serves as an excellent introduction to basic principles of Cartesian physics. During the seventeenth century, the philosophically naïve sometimes confused atomism with Cartesianism; in fact, atomism was the central tenet of a group that competed vigorously with the Cartesians as a viable natural philosophy, the Gassendist-Epicureans. Thus, Cordemoy charted a very independent philosophical course when he adopted atomism, “the doctrine that the physical world consists at its most basic level of indivisible, indestructible bodies existing in empty space” (p. 15). Ablondi shows that Cordemoy paradoxically arrived at atomism and its corollary, the void, by rigorously pursuing the logical consequences of Descartes’ own definition of “substance,” a fundamental concept of Descartes’ science. Understandably, prominent Cartesians such as Claude Clerselier, Dom Robert Desgabets, and Régis were not enthusiastic about Cordemoy’s innovations, though apparently none of them mounted a thorough-going response.

Cordemoy’s occasionalism, Ablondi’s second subject, was rather less radical. Here Ablondi is rather more concerned with grinding a few scholarly axes, such as the claim by Henri Gouhier and others that Cordemoy’s occasionalism significantly informed that of Malebranche. Once again, Ablondi ably reconstructs the logic by which Cordemoy became convinced of occasionalism, “the doctrine that God is the one true efficient cause in the world” (p. 55). Again, Cordemoy based his reasoning in fundamental Cartesian ideas of motion, body, and minds. Briefly put (and much too simplistically), Cordemoy argued that, because bodies cannot be the source of motion, mind has to be; because our minds cannot be the source of motion, God must be. This obviously had significant ramifications for human action and freedom, even raising the question of whether human beings can sin at all (and, if so, who is to blame when they do?). Ablondi briefly handles these topics along with Cordemoy’s theory of language, which was logically consistent with his occasionalism. Indeed, I would have liked more discussion of both these topics, perhaps even an entire chapter on Cordemoy’s linguistics. And what were the ramifications of occasionalism for scientific endeavor? After all, Descartes wanted to put knowledge of the natural world on a firm epistemological basis. What were natural philosophers supposed to be doing--indeed, what *could* they do--if God became the only efficient cause?

In his final chapter, “Cordemoy and Cartesianism,” Ablondi addresses the question of whether Cordemoy should be considered a Cartesian at all “given the dramatic departure which Cordemoy’s thought takes from both Descartes and most, if not all, other Cartesians with regard to his atomism, and given his occasionalism (a doctrine which Descartes never explicitly embraced” (p. 87). This question is

certainly important, though less interesting than the others Ablondi has already tackled so capably. Moreover, Ablondi's earlier discussions make clear that, while fellow Cartesians expressed some discomfort with Cordemoy's ideas, sometimes even regarding him as a schismatic, they considered him a Cartesian, and he considered himself one. Certainly Cordemoy was radical in the "more etymological sense of getting to the 'root' of Descartes thought," [11] but ultimately how do we make a judgment about Cordemoy's "radicalism" without a "mainstream" for comparison? Once more, I would have preferred more discussion of Cordemoy's linguistics, which Ablondi discusses again briefly, and Cordemoy's attempt to reconcile Cartesian physics with the Genesis account of Creation, which Ablondi alludes to in a few tantalizing comments. Ultimately, the project of further exploring the richness of "Cartesianisms" that existed in the late seventeenth century, not to mention his subject's intrinsic interest, sufficiently justifies Ablondi's attention to Cordemoy. His book convinced me that there is much more to say about this independent-minded Cartesian, and I hope that Ablondi plans to tell us more.

NOTES

[1] Quoted by Clarke, Desmond M. Clarke, *Occult Powers and Hypotheses* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 38.

[2] My translation from Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Nouveaux mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Cartésianisme*, first published in 1692, reprinted several times in the following decade and now available in a version edited by Claudine Poulouin and published by Séquences in 1996.

[3] Steven M. Nadler, *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Tad M. Schmaltz, "What Has Cartesianism To Do with Jansenism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60/1(1999): 37-56.

[4] Geoffrey Sutton, *Science for a Polite Society: Gender, Culture, and the Demonstration of Enlightenment* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1995).

[5] Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[6] Though de La Barre rejected the humanist- and Latin-based pedagogy advanced so well by the order he had abandoned: François Poulain de La Barre, *Three Cartesian Treatises* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Londa L. Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 175-78; Siep Stuurman, *François Poulain de la Barre and the Invention of Modern Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[7] François Azouvi, *Descartes et la France: Histoire d'une passion nationale* (Paris: Fayard, 2001); Stéphane Van Damme, *Descartes: Essai d'histoire culturelle d'une grandeur philosophique* (Paris: Presses de Sciences, 2002); Mordechai Feingold, *The Newtonian Moment* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[8] See Clarke, *Occult Powers*; Thomas Lennon, *The Battle of the Gods and Giants: The Legacies of Descartes and Gassendi, 1655-1715* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and his translation of Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Censura philosophiae cartesianae* (1689), *Against Cartesian Philosophy* (New York:

Humanity Books, 2003); Tad M. Schmaltz, *Radical Cartesianism: The French Reception of Descartes* (Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). *The Journal of the History of Ideas* has also published many articles on Descartes, Cartesianism, and related seventeenth-century topics.

[9] Schmaltz, *Radical*, p. 18.

[10] J. B. Shank in his review of works on Descartes and Cartesianism by Azouvi, Schmaltz, Van Damme, and Richard Watson, *H-France Review* Vol. 3 (May 2003) No.46, <http://h-france.net/vol3reviews/shank2.html> [consulted September 9, 2006].

[11] Schmaltz, *Radical*, p. 17.

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