

---

H-France Review Vol. 22 (March 2022), No. 29

Frédéric Lelong, *Descartes et la question de la civilité. La philosophie de l'honnête homme*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2020. 244 pp. Bibliography and index. \$86.38 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9782745352835.

Review by Lisa Shapiro, Simon Fraser University.

To appreciate Frédéric Lelong's achievement in *Descartes et la question de la civilité*, one needs first to highlight long entrenched assumptions about the place of René Descartes in early modern intellectual history, and indeed as the originating character of that history. At least well into the 1990s, Descartes appeared as a revolutionary thinker who broke with his predecessors to provide the metaphysical foundation, both in the defense of reason as capable of certainty and in the conception of body as extended substance defined by its geometry, that enabled the Scientific Revolution. This reading of Descartes positioned him as a kind of anti-humanist: concerned with reason and logic rather than rhetoric, concerned with certainty rather than skepticism. In the latter part of the twentieth century, historians of philosophy, intellectual historians, and historians of science began to revise this history, showing how Descartes's metaphysics was connected to late scholasticism, how his physics was connected to sixteenth-century mechanics, and how his methodological deployment of skepticism was tied to the revival of ancient skepticism of the period, and so had antecedents in a range of thinkers from Montaigne to Teresa of Avila. These revisions acknowledged Descartes as an innovator, but for the ways in which he managed to synthesize and make accessible ideas that had been in circulation rather than as a revolutionary genius. Nonetheless, these revisions left intact the view that Descartes was a rationalist, whose program ran counter to humanism. It also left intact another central assumption about Descartes's philosophical program: his commitment to individualism. Two of Descartes's key works, the *Discours de la méthode* and the *Méditations*, were written in the first-person singular, and in the former, he told a story of how he discovered his method for achieving truth in the sciences by locking himself in a stove-heated room. It is easy for the imagination to draw an analogy, and suppose that the "I" of his foundational truth that I exist insofar as I am a thinking thing ("*Je pense, donc je suis*" or "*Ego sum, ego existo' quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur, necessario esse verum*"), that this thinking thing is also solitary, and that each of us as thinkers depend on no one but ourselves in thinking as we do. Twentieth-century anglophone philosophy has certainly caricatured Descartes as a solipsist.

Lelong's objective in this book is to problematize this second assumption by reading Descartes' conception of a thinking thing, Cartesian subjectivity, through the lens of the humanist concept of *civilité*, which I will translate as "civility" going forward. Read through this lens, Lelong aims to show that Descartes's thinker is very much a social being.

In the first part of the book, Lelong articulates the key concepts of his interpretative framework and their sources in humanist texts. Civility is not to be understood as a code of conduct, rules which those in society need to follow or receive some kind of social sanction, but rather as a set of virtues that are each aligned with the natural, or human nature. These include aptitude (*facilité*), propriety (*convenance*), gentleness (*douceur*), and whatever we might call the opposite of the vice of *pédantisme* or “pedantry.” As Lelong explains it, “civility is in the first instance a relation to being, and to one’s own being, prior to being an ethical relation to the Other, to Truth, or to the Good, even if, at the same time, this affirmation of ‘my’ being is equally controlled by the presence and the desire of others” (p. 54).

Lelong draws on an array of figures, perhaps most centrally Marcello Ficino and Cicero, but also Montaigne, St. Frances de Sales, Méré, Ambroise de Milan, as well as Castiglione and others, to articulate humanism as a world view in which our aptitude for acting well is grounded in a metaphysics of human nature, one that holds that our nature is not of our own creation and is intrinsically good. Lelong highlights humanist attention to a very interesting dynamic between our sociality and our individuality. For the humanist, acting well involves both the moral and aesthetic evaluations proper to our social lives—good manners—and an attitude—an inner sensibility or reflectiveness—that we bring to our actions, one grounded in the idea that human beings are agents who have the freedom (*liberté*) to act as we do. Human nature is always realized in particular individuals in a way that is proper to their social roles, so part of what it is to display civility—to be an *honnête homme*—is to know not only how to act like a human being, but how to do so *oneself* in the role one happens to be in. Nonetheless, there is an interesting equalizing effect of a shared human aim of knowledge, no matter what our social role: The search for truth is proper to each of us. Our search for truth affords us a gentle power, which both serves to distinguish humanity from the brute force and associated violence that characterizes the animal kingdom, and to model our ability to identify errors and move beyond them, holding ourselves to the pursuit of truth that constitutes human virtue.

Within a Christian context our aptitude for acting well can be impacted by grace. We can be visited by God-given grace to overcome the corruption of original sin and thereby to retrieve the aptitude to do well proper to human beings. But it can also impact the equalizing force of knowledge. For the claim to knowledge runs the risk of appearing as a sinful pride, and thereby makes the search for truth that was the pinnacle of propriety instead the paradigm of impropriety, unless of course one has been graced with the privilege of Scriptural authority. By distinguishing true from illusory epistemic authority, this transformation also sets up a vice of pedantry. But genuinely vicious pedantry comes not only from using language to obfuscate and to obscure the truth, but also from failing to realize that we all as human beings strive to realize the truth. The language of the pedant effectively short circuits the human collective endeavor of seeking truth.

In the second part of the book, having articulating this humanist framework, Lelong aims to read Descartes’s conception of thinking, of human subjectivity, as “a re-appropriation by reason of humanist values” and thereby the “establishment of a complex affinity between rationality and rhetoric” (p. 57). The lynchpin in this interpretation is Guez de Balzac, a friend and correspondent of Descartes. Lelong offers a sustained reading of Balzac to show how his conception of eloquence and rhetoric as a *practice* of writing and reading had a humanist foundation, and further that reading Descartes alongside Balzac, we can see him as adopting this humanist framework. In particular, in the *Discourse on Method* and the *Meditations*, “‘style’ is a true philosophical question, a question that clarifies the cartesian conception of subjectivity and its relation to the world” (p.

93). With this foundational point about how to *read* Descartes in place, Lelong turns to show how Descartes deploys the four key concepts of humanism he has identified.

According to Lelong, Descartes situates the humanist natural aptitude (*facilité*) in intuition. In the standard readings of Descartes, “intuition” is a logical and epistemic concept that identifies our natural faculty to access objective truths; differences in interpretation concern how it does so. Through the lens of the humanist tradition, and in particular Ficino, the aptitude of intuition is not to be understood along the lines of Aristotelian logical principles or even as a transcendental connection between our will and God. Rather, it is quite simply reflective of our good nature. The same term, *facilité*, characterizes the *intentionality* or aboutness of our intuitive knowledge. It is in this connection that Descartes notes that the indubitability of clear and distinct perceptions derives from the way in which they accord with our nature. While certainly connected to epistemic concerns, this privileged intentionality is not reducible to rules of valid inference. Moreover, it opens up a space in which aesthetic concerns are relevant to our understanding of the world (the world need not be disenchanted: “The poetry we evoke is not a simple rhetoric of sensibility, it is indissociable from mathematical knowledge, and thus from the objective knowledge of things” (p.107).) In addition, the same natural aptitude in play in the epistemic domain for Descartes also figures in his account of our moral attitudes.

Lelong argues further that the humanist notion of propriety (*convenance*) gains expression in the Cartesian order of reasons, which does not simply express a set of rules but also a particular “elegance’ of the order that is associated with its logical and epistemic rigor” (p.117). This argument starts with a fascinating discussion of the seventeenth-century sense of “*impertinence*,” which, while it does comprise the contemporary sense of social rudeness, also grounds that sense in a failure of rationality that undermines proper self-esteem, respect for the dignity of others, and a peaceable civil society. From reflecting on this one word, Lelong argues that rationality requires a coherence in our understanding of nature and our nature, on the one hand, and our self-conceptions and our actions on the other: “Descartes’s aim is not simply the search for truth, it concerns a search for truth that “is proper” to human beings, which is in accord with human nature and human ‘natural light”” (p. 123). The reflexive element central to Cartesian epistemology highlights this concern with propriety.

Reading Descartes through the lens of propriety (*convenance*) adds further texture to these points. One point of Lelong’s focus is the way the meditator positions himself as a finite being against the infinite being, God. This positioning first highlights that the meditator is not simply concerned with the truth, but also with understanding his own proper place, as well as the proper place of his ideas with respect to one another. And just as he did in his discussion of *facilité*, Lelong makes a further point that this attention to properly understanding one’s place is integral to Cartesian subjectivity or awareness. Certainly, as per standard interpretations of Descartes, part of what it is to be a human subject—a thinking thing—is to represent the world, or to think about objects, and to situate those ideas with respect to one another and thereby articulate a logic, or an order of reasons. Just as important to thought, however, is the internalization of the recognition of one’s own finitude and its distance from the infinite into the very awareness constitutive of thought. Though others have argued that Descartes links the epistemic and the moral through his conception of a thinking thing, they have not anchored this idea in the humanist conceptual framework, as does Lelong.

Lelong aims to show that Descartes, through his appropriation of the humanist notion of gentleness (*douceur*), acknowledges the intersubjectivity of thought, and so of the essential sociality of thinkers. Though I am quite sympathetic, the claim here is more contentious. Lelong aims to show that “Cartesian gentleness need not be conceived as a simple rhetorical ornament of his writing...it is a fundamental affective tonality which accompanies the Cartesian constitution of subjectivity, on its epistemic, methodological, and moral structure, but also at a level that is properly transcendental and concerns its relation to truth and the world in general” (p. 177). This is a very challenging view to articulate, let alone establish, and Lelong’s argument is truly innovative: that Descartes’s choice of a dialectical method, eschewing the scholastic *disputatio* in favor of a dialectical reasoning, builds the gentleness proper to civility into reasoning itself. Insofar as dialectical method takes conversation as its model, it enfoldes the mutual respect, and so the gentleness proper to civility, into the process of providing and evaluating reasons. To show that this mark of civility is intrinsic to reasoning and not external to it, Lelong leans on remarks in Clauberg’s *Logica vetus et nova* on the *douceur* of even mathematical demonstrations—the paradigm of logic at work—and then reads it back into Descartes’s own model of reasoning in the *Meditations*. Lelong’s reading of Clauberg is certainly intriguing, but Clauberg’s work was first published in 1658, after Descartes’s death, and so it is hard to establish this as Descartes’s own view, even if it is how others read him. It is also not clear whether this claim is robust enough to constitute genuine intersubjectivity. Lelong sees a Cartesian critique of pedantry as bolstering the idea that Cartesian subjectivity is essentially social, but I am not entirely convinced by that argument.

While I might take issue with some details of Lelong’s interpretation, I have instead focused on articulating the picture that Lelong is aiming to put before us. Let me conclude with some critical remarks. In part because Lelong is aiming to give us such a different picture of Descartes, he is reticent about how his reading interacts with other lines of discussion. For instance, readers who have focused on the significance of Descartes’s rejection of formal causes for the development of the mechanist sciences will wonder just how to square Cartesian science with this humanist Descartes. Equally, Lelong might have strengthened his position by acknowledging some scholarship that foregrounds some aspects of Cartesian thought Lelong attends to (Lelong is principally focused on French scholarship and so misses some potential allies in Anglophone scholarship.) Equally, recent work on early modern French literature has focused on the theme of friendship in the period immediately following Descartes, especially in the writings of women.[1] These studies could also lend support to Lelong’s reading of Descartes, especially his point about the intersubjectivity of thinking, insofar as they open up a potential line of influence.

These critical points, however, should in no way detract from Lelong’s achievement of both fully articulating a fulsome interpretation of Descartes that is well-grounded both in the Cartesian corpus, and in the writings of Cartesians and in situating that Descartes within an historical context that has been largely (if not entirely) ignored by early modern historians of philosophy. Lelong’s systematic articulation of this humanist intellectual historical context not only adds force to his interpretation of Descartes, it also challenges us to retell the history of philosophy to include the humanist as much as the scholastic context and that of the history of science. Lelong’s interpretation is truly ambitious in the best sense, and it will, I hope, influence future interpretations of Descartes.

NOTE

---

[1] See for instance the essays in Lewis C. Seifert and Rebecca M. Wilkin, eds., *Men and Women Making Friends in Early Modern France* (New York: Ashgate, 2015), as well as Derval Conroy, “Society and Sociability in Gabrielle Suchon: Towards a Politics of Friendship,” *Early Modern French Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, Routledge, 2021, pp. 54–69.

Lisa Shapiro  
Simon Fraser University  
[lisa\\_shapiro@sfu.ca](mailto:lisa_shapiro@sfu.ca)

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172