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Steven Nadler, *Descartes: The Renewal of Philosophy*. London: Reaktion Books, 2023. 288 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781789146837; \$25.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781789147308.

Review by Stephen Bold, Boston College.

Steven Nadler's *Descartes: the Renewal of Philosophy* is a rich new intellectual biography in the series of concise *Renaissance Lives* curated by Reaktion Books, an innovative publisher of contemporary scholarly thought coming in all shapes and sizes. Or, more flatly, as the website for the University of Chicago Press (Reaktion's USA distributor) puts it: "Reaktion Books publishes books for general readers and for academics in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and natural history."^[1] *Renaissance Lives*, only one of this publisher's several biographical series, is edited by François Quivigier, a French-born Fellow at the Warburg Institute of the University of London. It seems curious, then, that Nadler's *Descartes* is one of only two French lives represented in the series, at least so far. The other is one of the first books to appear in this series: *Blaise Pascal: Miracles and Reason* by Mary Ann Caws, who begins her biography of the author of the *Pensées* in full-Freudian mode.^[2] Clearly the series editor gives great freedom to each of its authors in choosing the best approach.

In his brief introduction, Nadler reflects on the use of terms like "modern" or "new" philosophy to identify the "paradigm shift" away from the Aristotelian model and finds that "there is no better place to look" for a modern philosophical equivalent to "*Ulysses* or *Demoiselles d'Avignon*...than the oeuvre of Descartes" (p. 11). In chapter one, "Man of Touraine," Nadler begins the biography proper with an amusing (if morbid) play on the phrase "separation of mind and body," noting that Descartes' "intellectual legacy—the contribution of his mind...is bookended by disputes about his body": i.e., from debates about where René was conceived and born to questions about the condition and the burial of his mortal remains, including his head (p. 14). Without any formal statement about his approach to his subject, one can glean from these observations that Nadler has tried to balance intellectual history and simple biography to produce a book appropriate both for general readers and academics. One can hardly call this threading a needle, but the difficulty of this balancing act is as central to Nadler's book as is the mind/body question to Descartes' "oeuvre."

Steven Nadler, a preeminent historian of early modern philosophy, is superbly placed to give an authoritative account of his subject's intellectual contributions. Nadler's numerous previous books include several foundational studies on the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza and, as author or editor, works on Malebranche and at least four earlier books on Descartes and

Cartesianism.[3] Few other writers could approach his expertise and his command of the intellectual history of the “Age of Reason”: his understanding of Descartes’ writings in philosophy and science is certainly beyond question. The first chapter on Descartes’ intellectual development at the Collège de la Flèche constitutes for first-time readers an accessible and very readable companion to the opening parts of the *Discours de la méthode*. Here and elsewhere, Nadler offers a condensed version of standard readings of the texts. Rarely, if ever, does he enter into “myth-busting” or revisionism or get mired in detailed scholarly debates or controversies. The closest he comes to this is, perhaps, an effort to correct what he considers the common misconception of Descartes as anti-empirical or anti-experimental.

Nadler’s earlier work on Descartes includes *The Philosopher, the Priest, and the Painter: A Portrait of Descartes*, the portrait in question being the painting long thought to be the work of Frans Hals, a reproduction of which is found on the cover of the book under review.[4] Nadler begins this earlier book quite precisely by walking us through Room 27 in the Richelieu Wing of the Louvre, where the portrait is on display. It is a bit in this manner that the author leads us on a pleasant passage through the most important moments of Descartes’ life, choosing judiciously overall when to digress down an interesting side street or corridor, as a means both of breaking up the predictability of the narration, and also of enriching the story by contextualizing his subject’s life within a period that was in many ways—politically, intellectually, culturally—a turning point leading to our “modern world.”

For example, in the chapters concerning the *Méditations*, Nadler shows his mastery not only of the text’s challenging metaphysical arguments, but also of the fraught story of the book’s gestation, articulation, circulation, and post-publication tribulations. Nadler introduces each of the “objectors” to the *Méditations* with a brief biographical sketch and, delving not only into Descartes’ counter-responses but also fairly deeply into his abundant correspondence, he convincingly describes the private, lived experience of this most public of philosophical debates, which the philosopher endured at the same time as the crushing loss of his daughter Francine (or Fransintge) to scarlet fever. In this book, Nadler’s storytelling, a characteristic feature of his historical writing, does not necessarily provide new interpretations of Cartesian thought, but it certainly enhances the pleasure of reading Descartes’ texts and, fittingly for a biography, gives a more complete portrait of the man.

These digressions or contextualizations do sometimes grow to fairly surprising lengths. In particular, Nadler calls on his substantial knowledge of Dutch social and political history as a background for the ups and downs of Descartes’ self-imposed exile from France in the United Provinces of the Netherlands. Chapter two begins with five full pages on the political and theological conflicts in Holland at the time of Descartes’ arrival in 1618; chapter four opens with a several-page account of the country’s “cultural blossoming” (p. 92) in the early 1630s; chapter eight starts with a detailed, nearly ten-page description of the negotiations leading to the Treaties of Westphalia that ended thirty years of war between Spain and the newly sovereign Dutch Republic, while, in chapter three, another ten pages are devoted to the “Galileo affair” that dissuaded Descartes from publishing his treatise on physics, *Le Monde*. This latter event is invariably mentioned as a crucial blow to Descartes’ hopes for entry onto the public stage, leading him to delay his publishing debut until 1636 with the anonymous and somewhat cautious *Discours de la méthode*. Typically, however, this “affair” is explained in a sentence or two. Nadler’s decision to expand on these background events certainly broadens the historical landscape and highlights our understanding of some of the landmines that the elusive and stubbornly private Descartes

clearly had to work around, while his account also shows that controversy was hard, if not impossible, for the philosopher to avoid, even from the remove of his itinerant existence in a string of secret abodes in the hinterlands of this mostly tolerant country.

As one would expect, Nadler's principal focus is on Descartes' writing and his scientific thought. It is hard to imagine a more sure-handed account, both concise and clear, of the vast and challenging Cartesian corpus than the one that Nadler provides. Even very technical texts, like those concerning the broad field of physics, are presented in a manner that should be quite comprehensible for non-specialists. His approach here is more descriptive than critical or technical, something that might disappoint certain academic readers. His summary readings eschew jargon and scholarly controversy and adopt a sometimes light and amusing style, of the kind one might experience from a presenter of a television documentary or a museum guide. It is inevitable, then, that certain of his treatments of Cartesian texts will seem incomplete to some, but his approach is appropriate for the series for which he has written this biography.

The academic public will bring a range of interests, competencies, and curiosities to reading this book. This reviewer, for example, has a particular interest in Descartes' intermittent and sometimes contradictory approach to moral philosophy, including the third part of the *Discours* and his final published project, *Les Passions de l'âme*. Nadler gives a brief but useful description of Descartes' gentle deviation away from the traditional, classical approach of Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, whose focus was on the path to a happy life—*eudaimonia* or the *beata vita*, reached through resistance to the negative effects of the “passions.” The Stoic tone of his *morale par provision* in *Discours* shows a Descartes still happy to follow tradition, not rocking the boat, in order to pursue his scientific agenda, whereas the more mature and battle-tested philosopher of a decade later takes, in the *Passions de l'âme*, a new, strikingly somatic approach to the problem of happiness, where the passions are no longer seen as an obstacle to contentment. Nadler presents this in a very clear fashion, even looking farther ahead to the Kantian reorientation of moral philosophy toward interpersonal ethics. What he leaves out, at least for this reader, is some of the detail of Descartes' own course corrections, especially his break with the Stoics as he moved, in his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bavaria, from early recommendations that she follow stoic doctrine on to a modern, mechanistic approach to mental health that emerges in their letters, stemming from his prior medical and physiological exploration in the *Traité de l'Homme*, during the early 1630's. A brief tip of the cap to the sensitive scholarship of Geneviève Rodis-Lewis on the *Passions* and Princess Elisabeth would have been a good thing, as would an acknowledgment of Descartes' clear rejection of the still dominant Galenic theory of the humors, an obvious alternative to the Cartesian approach. [5]

On the completely separate topic of Descartes' denial of a vacuum in nature, his position might usefully have been contrasted with more innovative contemporary experimental discoveries such as those provided by Torricelli and Pascal. Similarly, while Nadler is right to recognize the importance of Descartes' idea of “conservation of motion” (p. 192) for later Newtonian physics, one could have hoped for some contextualization of his (odd) views on the role of vortices in the plenum or his corpuscular optics. Where did these ideas end up? The question of his optics, in particular, might have provided some interesting discussion, especially given the role of his family friend and one-time disciple, Christiaan Huygens in the advent of wave theory. One would have been curious to hear more about that.

Still, it invariably seems churlish to point to what has been left out of a book, especially one whose length is expected to be fairly brief. All of these points, Nadler might say, would have been more appropriate for a longer book on Descartes' legacy than one on his life. Still, the subtitle *The Renewal of Philosophy* implies some sense of legacy. One last quibble on this point: on its back cover, this book is succinctly described by the phrase "The life and works of 'the father of modern philosophy.'" It is unlikely that Nadler would have proposed this wording, given his statement in the book's last sentence: "So, [Descartes was] maybe not *the* father of modern philosophy, but certainly one of its parents" (p. 251). Nadler seems here to be undercutting, with ironic purpose, overly simplistic statements about legacy. Irony, when married with respect, is a welcome thing when approaching so massive a personage as René Descartes. (See, in this vein, a humorous quip about where Henri IV's "heart lies" with reference to the Collège de La Flèche [p. 18].)

In sum, there is a wealth of knowledge and wisdom to be found in this extremely learned retelling of the life of Descartes, *perhaps* the father of modern philosophy, whatever his "true" ranking alongside other *Renaissance Lives*. Like the other books in the same series, this biography is affordably priced, attractively bound, and illustrated with high-quality prints both in black and white and in color. It will be appreciated both by the general reader who is eager to know about the man who *was*...through his thought (*Cogito ergo sum*), and by academics looking for an agreeable contextualization and summary of the work of France's preeminent early modern thinker.

NOTES

[1] https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/publisher/pu3430684_3430696.html. Consulted on December 13, 2023.

[2] Mary Ann Caws, *Blaise Pascal: Miracles and Reason* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017).

[3] See Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: a Life* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), *Spinoza's Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), *Malebranche and Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy: Cartesianism, Occasionalism, and Pre-established Harmony* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1993), *Occasionalism: Causation among the Cartesians* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), and *The Oxford Companion to Descartes and Cartesianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[4] Steven Nadler, *The Philosopher, the Priest, and the Painter: A Portrait of Descartes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[5] See Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, *La morale de Descartes* (Paris: PUF, 1956). See also, Jean-Maurice Monnoyer, "La Pathétique cartésienne" in his edition of *Les passions de l'âme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

Stephen Bold
Boston College
bold@bc.edu

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