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**François Azouvi**, *Descartes et la France: Histoire d'une passion nationale*. Paris: Fayard, 2001. 366 pp. Notes and index. 25.00 € (pb). ISBN 2-213-61045-2.

**Tad M. Schmaltz**, *Radical Cartesianism: The French Reception of Descartes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xiv + 288 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-521-81134-1.

**Stéphane Van Damme**, *Descartes: Essai d'histoire culturelle d'une grandeur philosophique*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2002. 352 pp. Notes, chronology, bibliography, and index. 16.00 € (pb). ISBN 2-7246-0825-9.

**Richard A. Watson**, *Cogito, Ergo, Sum: The Life of René Descartes*. Jaffrey, N. H.: David R. Godine, 2002. viii + 376 pp. Index and bibliography. \$35.00 (hb). ISBN 1-56792-184-1.

Review by J. B. Shank, University of Minnesota.

In Ridley Scott's postmodern epic *Blade Runner*, the run-down urban loft of J.F. Sebastian, a genetic engineer for the Tyrell Corporation, serves as setting for one of the film's many memorable philosophical exchanges. Surprised by a group of Tyrell's state-of-the-art genetic replicants, Sebastian is caught staring at the Adonis-like figure of a replicant named Roy. "You are perfect," Sebastian enthuses. "What generation are you?" "Nexus 6," replies Roy. "I knew it!" the engineer declares. "I do genetic work for Tyrell. There is some of me in you. Show me something."

One of Roy's companions responds to the request. Pris, a "standard pleasure model" played with appropriate erotic charge by a lithe, young Darryl Hannah, launches into a sequence of astonishingly acrobatic handsprings while Roy explains that "we're no computers Sebastian; we're physical." At the end of her performance, Pris looks down at the physically deformed engineer and smiles: "I think, Sebastian; therefore, I am," she says with a lascivious wink.

Further illustrations of this sort could of course be added, but this is sufficient to suggest the point. At the beginning of the third millennium, at a time when world chess champions express real satisfaction when they achieve stalemate in matches with supercomputers,<sup>[2]</sup> Descartes has simply become a very different kind of intellectual touchstone than he once was.

Not so long ago, *cogito ergo sum* was considered the sacred bedrock of human rationality itself. Similarly, Descartes' writings were viewed un-self-consciously as the founding revelation of modern thought, even of modernity *tout court*. Yet the owl of Minerva has flown. What was once natural, overdetermined, and self-evident has now become historical, contingent, and in need of explanation. Each of the books under

review here attests to this shift. They all offer a new engagement with Descartes' life, writings, and historical legacy that in one way or another speaks from this more detached historical vantage point.

Perhaps the most extreme example, and certainly the most peculiar work under consideration here, is Richard Watson's biography *Cogito, Ergo Sum*. Watson is known to most serious students of early modern European thought as a distinguished philosopher who has published numerous works during his forty-year career on the history of Cartesian philosophy.<sup>[3]</sup> Trained by Richard Popkin, Watson's work overall is representative of what might be called (by historians at least) "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.

Because of their historical orientation, scholars associated with "The Popkin School" (figures such as Daniel Garber, Thomas Lennon, Roger Ariew, Marjorie Grene, Stephen Nadler, and Tad Schmaltz, whose work I will consider shortly) have often enjoyed close relations with historians devoted to a "history of ideas" approach to intellectual history. *The Journal of the History of Ideas* in fact has served as the publication site for both historians of ideas and historical philosophers and thus as an organ for their shared understanding of the history of thought. Watson is without question a leading member of "The Popkin School" as well as an important presence in its cross-over history of ideas literature. Yet little in this oeuvre or in the wider literature which informs it prepares the reader for what is found in *Cogito Ergo Sum*.<sup>[4]</sup>

To understand Watson's project it is perhaps useful to step back from the book for a moment and consider its relation to "Das Descartes Problem," my term for the general conundrum that sits at the center of all efforts to interpret Descartes' life and work. The historical record attests that René Descartes was born in France, near Poitou, on March 31, 1596 and that he died in Stockholm, Sweden, on February 11, 1650. Between these dates it is also certain that he published (and wrote but left unpublished) a number of widely-read and influential texts while living in France, the Netherlands, and finally Sweden.

Descartes also engaged in many of the practices typical of savants of the period (i.e. Jesuit schooling, epistolary correspondence, travel, intellectual sociability, etc.). Yet despite this documentation of Descartes' life, efforts at performing the classic biographical task of connecting the life with the intellectual work are made difficult by two interrelated peculiarities of the Descartes case.

One is the astonishing dearth of documentary evidence about Descartes' day-to-day life. While all biographers struggle to reconstruct a life from the limited documentary traces that survive, Descartes presents an especially acute challenge in this regard. Entire decades of his relatively short life are thoroughly undocumented, including many years that are crucial to his intellectual development and career. What evidence does exist, moreover, is fragmentary and often opaque.

Yet the absence of source material alone would not make Cartesian biography so difficult were it not for another, parallel problem as well: the centrality of autobiography to Descartes' philosophical and intellectual work. His two most influential texts, *Le Discours de la méthode* of 1637 and *Les Méditations* of 1640, are framed as autobiographical accounts of Descartes' own journey toward philosophical enlightenment. Actual details of his life are narrated in these texts, and biography is made central to the philosophical discoveries he offers.

Consequently, the philosophical and authorial persona of Descartes in his most famous texts remains unusually entangled with the historical Descartes who lived and wrote the books. How is one to properly disentangle these two Descartes? When is Descartes narrating actual lived experience and when are his autobiographical narrations merely vehicles for and constructions of his intellectual and

textual agendas? These are complex problems, yet they sit at the heart of every effort to write Descartes' biography.

Further complicating the problem is the historical simultaneity of interested production and contested reception in the development of Descartes as a philosophical, authorial, and even historical subject. By adopting his innovative autobiographical approach to philosophy, Descartes made it impossible to separate his life from his thought in any simple way. Similarly, since so much of his philosophy is centered on the appropriate pathway to proper living, Descartes' texts in many respects set up his lived life as an exemplar of his philosophical point of view. His writings and their reception were thus acutely tied up from the outset with claims about the relationship between life and thought, a relationship permeated as well by the mind-body dualism that anchored his philosophy.

Most important was the charge that Cartesianism led to materialism and atheism, no light accusation in the wake of Bruno's execution in 1600 and Galileo's condemnation in 1633. The charge of irreligion made the details of Descartes religious life especially relevant and contested. To assuage these fears, the philosopher presented himself in texts and correspondence (whether sincerely or not) as a devout man pursuing philosophy as part of a pious Christian life. Others sympathetic to Descartes did the same, composing defenses of his philosophy rooted in narratives about the probity of the man and his work.

His critics offered a rival view, seeking out connections between Descartes and various nefarious libertine movements (the link between Descartes and Spinoza is perhaps the most famous) as a way of opposing his philosophical opinions. Whatever the truth of these and other linkages, they produced a peculiar entanglement between production and reception in the historical development of Descartes the writer and Cartesianism the philosophy. With him, philosophical writing and philosophical legacy, or stated more briefly life and biography, were always already entangled such that separating them now is impossible.

Defined this way, "Das Descartes Problem" confronts all students of the philosopher and his legacy no matter what the intellectual viewpoint. Given its pervasiveness, then, how does Watson attempt to resolve the problem in *Cogito Ergo Sum*? Unlike his most obvious predecessors, Stephen Gaukroger and Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, he does not attempt a straight-forward revision of Descartes' biography.[5] Like Watson, Gaukroger and Rodis-Lewis are historically-oriented philosophers with close ties to "The Popkin School." Their recently published biographies, moreover, speak directly to the history of philosophy literature by revising the story of Descartes' life initiated and still profoundly shaped by Descartes' earliest biographers, especially Adrien Baillet.[6]

Baillet's 1691 *La Vie de Monsieur Descartes* still provides the basic analytical architecture for most work in this area, and while Gaukroger and Rodis-Lewis each offer a specific, modern revision of Baillet's narrative (the former by situating Descartes more firmly within the "new science" of the Scientific Revolution and the latter by locating him instead within the currents of late-medieval scholasticism), neither work contributes any new historical evidence to the story nor breaks with Baillet's basic plot in any substantive way. Watson's work, by contrast, is radically innovative. He not only breaks entirely with all previous conventions of Descartes' biography, he does so in a way that pushes to the breaking point the very genre of biography itself.

The reviewer in fact struggles to find an appropriate framework for interpreting a work as idiosyncratic as *Cogito Ergo Sum*. To be generous to Watson's project, one could situate it alongside other experiments in historical biography such as Nina Rattner Gelbart's *The King's Midwife*. [7] Like Gelbart's, Watson's work is as much a self-conscious reflection on the problem of biography as it is a biography proper. It also ends up focusing as much time on the pre-occupations of the biographer as on the biographical subject under consideration.

Yet to force such a comparison would be to make Watson's book appear more theoretically and narratologically complex than it is. Certainly, the same "postmodern" cultural shifts that made Gelbart's book possible also inform Watson's approach to Descartes. Yet while the former made these theoretical agendas the self-conscious keystone of her project, the latter evinces no interest whatsoever in postmodern theorizing about subject/object relations in historical writing. Instead, Watson's self-consciousness is of a highly personal and ad hoc sort, so much so in fact that it seems wrong to suggest this framework as the proper one for reading the book.

Another possibility is to see the text as a kind of ironic inversion of the scholarly magnum opus. Watson is at the point in his scholarly life where convention dictates a grand summing up. His prolific career would certainly justify such an effort, and *Cogito Ergo Sum* does offer many magisterial commentaries on the state of Cartesian scholarship along with many reflections upon the author's life-long engagement with the philosophy of this particular Frenchman. Yet if the work is ultimately a summation of one man's engagement with a single, epochal philosopher, it is one which rings in a decidedly ironic key. Contrary to the ponderous and dauntingly erudite works that typify this genre, such as Ira Wade's massive final works on Voltaire and the French Enlightenment, *Cogito Ergo Sum* is self-deprecating, comedic, and explicitly subversive of the structures that attach scholarly authority to writing.[8]

One of the odder but also more amusing examples of this tendency is the omnipresence of Watson's wife, Pat, in the narrative. Pat (a professor of anthropology) was the author's travel companion on countless research trips. The couple also staged a "farewell tour" of sorts as part of the research for this book, attempting to retrace as closely as possible Descartes' own peregrinations in Holland and throughout Europe so as to observe the lived environment that he might have experienced. Watson incorporates accounts of these travels into the narrative along with his corresponding dialogues with Pat during the journeys. The result is an account of Descartes' life that is also an account of a scholar-spouse team that has grown old together with Descartes studies. How this particular narrative strategy advances the scholarly literature on Descartes is ultimately not clear, but as a variation on the genre of the scholarly magnum opus it is at least refreshingly original.

Watson's conversations with Pat are not at all marginal to *Cogito Ergo Sum*, and once the centrality of these and other subversions of traditional scholarly writing are recognized, Watson's work begins to appear in its truest light. In short, the book is a kind of parody, or to place more emphasis on the seriousness of the author's intentions, it is an experiment in creative writing by a published novelist (see note 4 below) and philosopher who has established more than enough scholarly credentials to justify his academic authority and who is interested instead in trying his hand at more playful and less academically disciplined forms of historical writing.

How else to explain the speculations in chapter one about whether Descartes was fondled as a child, a description that includes an index entry "Penis of Louis XIII, p. 56" which directs the reader to the comparative case used to elaborate the point? Or what about Watson's invention of an inner dialogue for Descartes as he contemplates accepting a pension from the French crown. "That pension ...," Watson imagines Descartes thinking. "Stop that! Stop thinking about it. Quit going over and over the thing. Get on with it. Will you stop thinking about it!" (pp. 277-8).

Inventions of this sort are offered throughout the book, and while the author is careful to distinguish them from quotations drawn from the historical record, academic distinctions of this sort prove unimportant to the overall narrative of the book. Ultimately, Watson wants to offer his own highly personal yet authoritative assessment of Descartes' life, and in the service of his cause he reserves the right to use whatever literary and narrative devices he deems necessary no matter what their implications.

Where then does this leave *Cogito Ergo Sum* in relation to Descartes scholarship? Obviously in a very personal corner of the field, one occupied by Richard Watson alone. Given the author's stature, many will find this work refreshingly original and highly readable while also recognizing it as knowledgeable and authoritative. In support of this view is the fact that, despite its ironic play with style and narrative technique, the book does cohere in the end around a set of very clear and informed judgments about the nature and import of Descartes' life and work.

For others, however, the often annoying and distracting self-consciousness of the text will make it appear maddeningly solipsistic. These readers will wish that the book was less about Watson and his own Descartes fetishes--his Pygmalion-like imaginings about the "Dutch milk maid" whom Descartes may have married (p. 185) are particularly gratuitous--and more about the philosopher and his intellectual and historical legacy.

My judgment falls somewhere in between these two positions even if I lean toward the latter point of view. I appreciate Watson's willingness to experiment with the conventions of historical biography, and at times I found the result interesting, entertaining, and insightful all at once. But overall, I felt as if he wanted to have his cake and eat it too on the question of authorial objectivity. Watson never ceases to expose the prejudices and biases of other interpretations, very often developing powerful critiques of the tentative and subjective nature of all interpretation as a weapon in his argument.

Yet in other places, he has no problem asserting the unequivocal authority of his own point of view, never reflecting at these moments on the biases that inform his own presentation. This can be read one of two ways. Either it is a bold assertion of the individual right to defend any interpretation (and corresponding narrative strategy) however idiosyncratic it may be; or it is a sloppy and often sophomoric use of postmodern flexibility about objectivity to pass off a self-indulgent piece of navel-gazing as popular history. Neither position quite fits with the book in a neat way, however, and thus in the final analysis the only conclusion to offer is *caveat lector!*

Tad Schmaltz's *Radical Cartesianism: The French Reception of Descartes* is a different kind of work altogether. Schmaltz is a younger member of "The Popkin School," with a book on Malebranche already under his belt.<sup>[9]</sup> Thus his work maybe be viewed as a recent example of the kind of historical philosophy upon which Richard Watson built his reputation. Yet if *Radical Cartesianism* is any indication, "The Popkin School" has seen better days.

The title is exciting in what it promises the reader attuned to the historical legacy of Descartes in early modern culture. Unfortunately, that promise is not fulfilled. Cartesianism was without question an important trigger for a number of explicitly radical movements, yet these connections have generated relatively little scholarly attention. Jonathan Israel has recently explored the links between Descartes and the radical Spinozists of the Netherlands, a movement which he persuasively locates at the center of the "Radical Enlightenment" more generally.<sup>[10]</sup> Erica Harth has likewise explored the connection between Descartes' philosophy and radical feminist thought in seventeenth-century France.<sup>[11]</sup>

Yet these two examples are the exceptions that prove the rule. What about the connections between Descartes and other radical movements beyond those implicitly or explicitly associated with Spinoza? And what about Descartes' role in stirring up other radical movements in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France? These are questions that have not yet generated a similarly rich scholarly literature, and by framing his study as he does Schmaltz suggests that the history of philosophy may have something to teach us about these developments. Once revealed, however, the details of the book show that the author's interests are really directed in a much less interesting direction.

*Radical Cartesianism* is neither about the general phenomenon of radical Cartesian philosophy nor about the French reception of Descartes in any general way. It is not even about the philosophical foundations of such radical possibilities. Rather, it is an analysis of two obscure Cartesians, Dom Desgabets and Pierre Sylvain Régis, and their particular interpretation of Cartesian metaphysics as it relates to Eucharist theology. The "radical" nature of their thought is not easily explained to those unschooled in seventeenth-century European metaphysics, and for historians such an explanation is not really necessary anyway since the conception of "radicalism" that informs it is confined to the history of metaphysics narrowly defined.

Schmaltz does attempt to build a bridge between his work and the work of intellectual historians, claiming in particular that he wants to integrate a history of these individuals together with a philosophical account of their thought. Yet the bridge he builds is both exceedingly short and structurally unstable. He asserts in his introduction that he aspires to integrate history and philosophy in his study, but the potency of the claim is quickly deflated when he further avers that the larger history of Cartesianism offered in Francisque Bouillier's comprehensive yet century-and-a-half old *Histoire de la philosophie cartésienne* is still adequate for the task.[12]

Schmaltz's "radical" Cartesians acquire their credentials largely through their opposition to "mainstream" Cartesianism as described by Bouillier. Yet many historians would contest even placing the label "history" on Bouillier's work. It narrates the history of Cartesianism in idealized philosophical terms, and it is also preoccupied with demonstrating Descartes' Catholic orthodoxy (the thesis which Watson amusingly labels "The Saint Descartes Preservation Society"). This fact is not surprising when one realizes that the book was published in the early years of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's imperial reign, at a time when concerns about secularism, materialism, and clerical authority made Descartes' Catholicism a particular source of intellectual interest. Yet a contemporary historian might see a certain interest in framing the history of radical Cartesianism in more contemporary terms given the very different climate of opinion today. Unfortunately Schmaltz possesses no such historical instincts.

Beyond dating his texts and taking seriously their development in a chronological sequence, Schmaltz allows no room for anything other than universal philosophical rationality in determining the trajectory of his subject's thought. Furthermore, when history is offered as an explanatory cause, it is only when philosophical rationality is unable to account for the changes observed. History thus functions for him as a purely irrational force which intervenes only when universal reason has reached a road block in its natural developmental path.

Schmaltz also uses anecdotal tidbits of history and biography to spice his narrative, but overall this is not a work of history at all. It is rather a dense philosophical monograph that concedes little to those outside the narrow discussions that define the academic history of philosophy.

The best historical philosophy, such as Daniel Garber's *Descartes Metaphysical Physics*, Thomas Lennon's *The Battle of Gods and Giants*, or, the mother of them all, Richard Popkin's *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, can fruitfully be read by intellectual historians interested in the wider history of thought.[13] This is because the historical and philosophical components of such works are successfully integrated in a way that allows historians and philosophers to meet around a discussion of the same topic. Unfortunately, Schmaltz's work does not rise to this standard. Historical philosophers may see things differently, but from the perspective of this historian, one who is comfortable reading and learning from technical history of philosophy, *Radical Cartesianism* is neither very successful nor very useful.

The divide that separates historians like me from historical philosophers such as Schmaltz is one reinforced by the larger divisions that divide the disciplines of history and philosophy in the American

academy. It is interesting, therefore, to move out of the American setting and to compare recent work on Descartes produced in other academic settings. France is a case in point. The institutional and intellectual divides in France separating historians from intellectual historians and separating intellectual historians from philosophers are fascinatingly different than those in the United States.

Historically-oriented philosophers in the United States suffer as something like an oppressed minority within the American philosophical profession given the overwhelming dominance of analytical philosophy on this side of the Atlantic. In France, by contrast, historical thinking is in the mainstream of French "Continental philosophy," so much so in fact that American historical philosophers often find French *philosophes* to be their most sympathetic and interested colleagues. This is especially true when a French thinker such as Descartes serves as the focus for such a union.

Intellectual historians, on the other hand, have a different relationship with their counterparts overseas. In the United States, intellectual history has a long-established position within the American historical profession, and with the recent "linguistic" and "cultural" turns in American historical scholarship more generally its centrality to historical writing in the United States has only increased.

In France, by contrast, the term "intellectual history" is something of a disciplinary category error. There exists the literature produced by French *philosophes*, the literature that merges comfortably with the historical philosophy produced in the United States. There also exists the grand synthetic works of *littéraires* such as Paul Hazard, Paul Vernière, Jean Ehrard, Jacques Roger, and Marc Fumaroli to name only a few.<sup>[14]</sup> These scholars are studied in the United States as paradigmatic examples of the "history of ideas," yet in France they are considered literary historians.

Moreover, given the post-war dominance of the Annales School in French historiography, histories of ideas of this sort were pushed to the margins of professional history while no comparable literature of intellectual history produced by *historiens* was developed in its place. Consequently, Franco-American discussions today about philosophers like Descartes involve a set of disciplinary and institutional translations that make the necessary linguistic translations mild by comparison.

The transatlantic disciplinary matrix at the center of Descartes studies provides one context for understanding what is exciting about the new books by François Azouvi and Stéphane Van Damme. Each of these scholars is a historian by training, yet each is engaged in a set of disciplinary innovations rooted in the practice of what they term, respectively, *histoire philosophique des idées* and *histoire culturelle*.<sup>[15]</sup> To an American reader, neither of these terms rings loudly of innovation, especially given the influential role which French scholars such as Roger Chartier have played in shaping the development of American intellectual and cultural history. Yet viewed from the perspective of the French historical profession, they do mark important new departures.

Chartier has always been much more of a disciplinary anomaly in France than he appears to be from across the Atlantic, and from this perspective what Azouvi and Van Damme represent is the development around Chartier and others of a broader and more historian-centered practice of intellectual and cultural history in France at institutions such as the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS).

This development is the result of a truly Franco-American collaboration (or perhaps a Francophone-Anglophone collaboration to capture the British context as well) rooted in the mutual interaction of post-Annales French historiography and post-linguistic turn Anglophone historiography. The result has been a new kind of intellectual history that sits at the disciplinary interstices of history and philosophy as traditionally defined. If this historiography has so far enjoyed greater vitality in United

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States than elsewhere, Azouvi and Van Damme demonstrate that the French seeds of this work have started to produce native species as well.

These authors do share a set of deep methodological affinities (including a shared institutional relationship with EHESS), yet there is still something odd about the remarkable similarity of these two books. They appear to have been published within months of one another and with only the briefest acknowledgement of the other (Van Damme cites Azouvi's *Lieux de mémoire* article which initiated the latter's project).<sup>[16]</sup> Each also offers much the same thing: a historical account of how Descartes became Descartes, which is to say how this particular French thinker became the philosophical icon that he has since become.

Azouvi's story is focused on France, where, he notes, a particular historical alchemy has made Cartesianism one of the essential attributes of modern Frenchness itself. As he writes in his introduction: "La chose, il faut le dire d'emblée, est singulière: les Allemands ne se disent pas kantien ni les Anglais lockien ou humien, quelque estime qu'ils aient pour 'leurs' philosophes. Les Français, en revanche, se déclarent cartésien." (p. 7) Van Damme, on the other hand, is interested in the more general phenomenon of Descartes' "*grandeur*," examining how it happened that this one seventeenth-century thinker became so widely esteemed among others. Azouvi also offers a much more sweeping and comprehensive narrative in the service of his agenda while Van Damme focuses more attention on the micro-complexities and contingencies that shaped these outcomes.

Despite these differences, however, each narrates much the same history, studying first the immediate reception of Descartes, and then his particular canonization in the eighteenth century, followed by an examination of the Descartes' legacy as it evolved within modern French history as a whole. Many of the same characters (Voltaire, Victor Cousin), topics (Descartes' "pantheonization," Third Republic educational reforms), and themes (Enlightenment, revolution, secularism, and the politics of literary history) also appear in each book. They bring a very different intellectual style to the history that they share, however, so let me exploit this difference by discussing each work in terms of its contrasting intellectual agendas.

Van Damme's work, to my mind at least, is the more theoretically interesting of the two even if it is also the more tentative and undeveloped as well. He has read Chartier more deeply and taken his arguments about cultural history more fully to heart. Unlike Azouvi, he has also absorbed the Anglophone science studies literature, another body of scholarship which owes much to French theory (especially Bruno Latour) but which has enjoyed greater development in the American and British academy than in France. (Van Damme's current affiliation with the Parisian Centre Alexandre Koyré, and his acknowledgment of its current director, Dominique Pestre, suggests that this trend may be changing). The result is a work which is more theoretically labored, conceptually probing, and intellectually self-conscious than Azouvi's, but a work that is also more methodologically insightful and conceptually provocative as well.

Van Damme is at his best when carefully reading particular texts or when working through precise historical moments. His book in fact is really a set of micro-histories strung together through an overarching narrative about the construction of Descartes' "*grandeur*." Those who want to see these precise episodes situated within larger contexts will want to consult Azouvi's text. But those who want to contemplate the precise historical nuances involved in Descartes' emergence as the iconic modern philosopher will find much to chew on in Van Damme's presentation.

Especially powerful is Van Damme's ability to escape the various disciplinary frameworks that have for so long trapped modern Descartes studies (philosophy, religion, science, literature, etc.) so as to view Descartes' legacy in new and different terms.

Post-Annales historiography, especially that of Daniel Roche, one of Van Damme's mentors, is one part of the mix as the author explores the material dimension of the Descartes phenomenon. How was Descartes positioned within the social field of his time? Who published his books? How did the material dimensions of print culture and intellectual life in the seventeenth century shape the making of Descartes? These and other related questions get fascinating attention, but not at the expense of more discursive and philosophical concerns as well. How was Descartes a genre innovator? In what ways was his language commonplace and innovative in light of the seventeenth-century discursive field? How did the material character of his works shape their readership, and what kinds of creative appropriations were crucial to the construction of Cartesianism? These and other Chartier-inspired explorations are pursued as well.

Finally, and refreshingly from my own point of view as an American historian of science, Van Damme also takes seriously the new and largely Anglophone work on the cultural history of the Scientific Revolution, asking how Descartes might better be fit into these newer scholarly frameworks. Descartes in particular and French science more generally have not benefited as much as other people and places from the innovations of historians of early modern science such as Paula Findlen, Mario Biagioli, Steven Shapin, Simon Shaffer, Lorraine Daston, and others.

This is in part an accident of the historiographical canon which has always privileged an Italy to England trajectory for the Scientific Revolution. But it is also a product of the disciplinary differences discussed above which have tended to create a division between the history of science practiced in France, which is tied closely to philosophy, and that practiced in the United States and Britain, which is tied more to history, sociology, and cultural studies. From this perspective, the abundance of English works in Van Damme's bibliography, along with his clear engagement with the methodological innovations that this body of work represents, marks an exciting development. It also makes his book on Descartes interesting in ways that very few other French works of intellectual history, history of philosophy, and history of science are.

I only wish Van Damme had pursued these agendas more boldly. His book is small and narrowly focused at precisely the points where Azouvi's is large and broadly conceived. While this is certainly a source of strength, producing a welcome analytical intensity, it does so at the cost of not fulfilling a number of fascinating and innovative suggestions that the book makes. In sum, like many brilliant microhistorians, including another of his acknowledged mentors, Christian Jouhaud, Van Damme's attention to the insightful detail and his ability to open up truly innovative conceptual perspectives leaves one excited. But it also creates a hunger for the larger framework that would give the analysis a broader punch.

As it stands, *Descartes: Essai d'histoire culturelle* is an exciting departure from the existing literature on Descartes. It escapes from the traditional philosophy and history of ideas approaches to this subject, suggesting as a result a whole scholarly terrain that is awaiting future scholars who can emulate Van Damme's innovative, interdisciplinary approach.

Azouvi's work is not necessarily less innovative than Van Damme's from this perspective, but it does pursue a very different set of intellectual agendas. The strength of *Descartes et la France* rests less in the precise case-by-case historical analyses it offers and more in the persistent resonance between its narrative about Descartes' reception and the larger history of France which serves as its context.

Intellectual history has always struggled to find a place at the center of mainstream historical writing, frequently being subject to the criticism that it focuses on a narrow sub-set of human experience and not on the central dynamics of historical change. The cultural turn has offered one response to this dilemma by emphasizing the representational character of all human experience and thus of all historical

phenomena. This has allowed intellectual history as a subset of cultural history to claim a place at the center of mainstream historical writing.

But the same argument has been harder to make when the topic is elite philosophers such as Descartes and their narrowly read and received philosophical work. How can intellectual work of this sort find a place at the head table of the historical profession? Azouvi offers a powerful answer by showing how a set of wider historical phenomena conspired to produce the equation between Frenchness and Cartesianism.

To achieve his goal, which is nothing less than a full genealogy of how Descartes came to occupy a central place in contemporary French identity, Azouvi is compelled to adopt a sweeping narrative style. His work consequently is thin precisely where Van Damme's is thick. It also raises the vexed question of audience since the book is as much a popular account of this history as it is a probing scholarly analysis of it. To give Azouvi and his publisher the credit they deserve, the book is emblematic of the high standards to which "cross-over works" of this sort can aspire. It also illustrates well the higher quality of public history in France than in the United States.

In fact, the popular/academic distinction may be a red herring since the book is at once a major scholarly work and a widely-read work of popular history. It is furthermore no less thoughtful, well-researched, or intellectually challenging for its concessions to narrative verve, stylistic vivacity, and popular accessibility. Curmudgeons, however, will no doubt wish that the book complicated a bit more the seamless narrative that it presents. They will also wish that Azouvi had framed his story more in terms of conflicting perspectives and politico-intellectual contests and less in terms of perceived consensus. These readers may just want to pick up Van Damme's *Descartes* instead.

Be that as it may, *Descartes et la France* is a very readable book that opens a fascinating perspective on the interplay between French intellectual history and the history of modern France more generally. Historians of all periods of modern French history will no doubt find fascinating discussions to consider.

Some of the story is surprising, such as the particular relationship between church and state that shaped Descartes' immediate reception or the odd alliance between Descartes and *La Partie Communiste* that formed in the early twentieth-century. Other episodes are more familiar. The account of Victor Cousin, for example, who is in some respects the hero of the story through his efforts at "mainstreaming" Descartes as an icon of modern French culture, fits comfortably with the prevalent historical understanding of France's movement toward secular, liberal modernity in the nineteenth century.

Yet taken as a whole, Azouvi argument offers a compelling framework for reflecting on the history of modern France more generally. What made Cartesianism and Frenchness synonymous was not some organic union between the French mind and the Cartesian method of dialectical reason. Indeed, as Azouvi shows, Descartes' persistent relevance over three centuries was predicated precisely on a construction of his legacy rooted outside his narrow epistemology and metaphysics. Beginning in his own lifetime and then solidified by the Enlightenment *philosophes*, Descartes was understood first and foremost as a defender of radical doubt and the corresponding detached, critical stance that such uncompromising doubt authorized. The French became Cartesian, then, not by adopting any precise philosophy but by idealizing a normative understanding of the self as essentially detached, skeptical, and critical.

Modern French political culture is only one thing that looks different when viewed in terms of Azouvi's Cartesian French subjects. Rather than looking for the connection between Cartesian rationality and the utopian schemes of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, Azouvi encourages us to find Descartes in the critical politics of the Revolution itself and in the notions of citizenship and polity that

it produced. Similarly, his framework sheds a different light on the political importance of the *engage* intellectual tradition which traces from Voltaire's construction of the *philosophe* persona through a creative re-appropriation of Descartes and continues down to the present through the role of critical intellectuals as philosophical *maîtres penseurs* and public, political figures in France. This tradition constitutes the heart of the France-Descartes union as Azouvi understands it, and if he is right that comfort with this kind of Cartesianism is a distinctive marker of modern Frenchness itself, then the history of modern France needs to be rethought in similar terms as well.

Yet it is less in the narration and analysis of these precise historical dynamics and more in the impact of the book as a whole that Azouvi's innovation resides. By detaching us from the reification that equates Cartesianism with some bedrock of modern Frenchness and by showing us instead through a lively and erudite narrative how this particular cultural entanglement was assembled in real historical time, Azouvi offers us a fascinating window into the deeper ways in which ideas, even abstract philosophical ideas, participate in the forging of modern national identity.

As such, *Descartes et la France* is a worthy heir of the project from which it was born, Pierre Nora's massive and influential *Les Lieux de mémoire* collection.<sup>[17]</sup> It is a book that not only suggests an interesting new path for intellectual historians to pursue, it also points to the ways that even the most abstruse of philosophical topics may be relevant to the vital contemporary project of understanding the complex imaginings of modern nationalism.

If the passage from Watson and Schmalz to Van Damme and Azouvi thus takes us from the obscure world of seventeenth-century metaphysics to the post-Maastricht conundrum of contemporary French identity, I prefer to end this essay by returning instead to the question of Descartes studies and to the conclusions about its future that I draw from this recent scholarship. All of these books, I think, speak to a new set of opportunities awaiting future scholars of Descartes and his legacy.

Having finally been liberated from his position at the mystical origin of modern philosophical rationality, Descartes is now free to be studied in new terms. Casting away the worn out frameworks of traditional philosophy and the history of ideas, a number of new and unexplored vistas start to appear, among them opportunities that will depend on the constitution of new disciplinary alliances at the center of Descartes studies.

One suggested by Van Damme's work centers on joining intellectual and cultural history and theoretical literary studies together in pursuit of an inquiry into the precise nature and historical significance of Descartes' texts. Now that the aura of their self-evidence as works of philosophy has been removed, it is possible to replace the old philosophical chestnuts with a new and fascinating set of literary-historical questions. What kind of texts did Descartes write? What were the historical expectations that readers brought to these books? In what ways was Descartes an innovative writer at the same time that he was an innovative philosopher, and how did his textual innovations participate in the development of his philosophical innovations and vice versa?

Work such as this must begin by recognizing with Van Damme and Azouvi that philosophy (and its requisite binary, literature) did not spring fully formed out the head of early modern history. These disciplinary distinctions were historically made. To understand them, therefore, one must approach iconic figures such as Descartes not as the natural effect of these procrustean historical developments but rather as historical actors whose knowledge-making practices must be understood according to the expectations of the day.

Traditional philosophy fails to do this by assuming as given the very factors that need to be historically accounted for. Literary-minded historians and historically-minded literary scholars, by contrast, are

capable of seeing things differently, and through an intensification of their interdisciplinary interactions one can imagine an entirely new body of exciting Descartes scholarship opening up in the future.

A second nexus of excitement is in the cultural history of science. For the reasons discussed above, Descartes has not been the subject of the kind of intense innovations that a Mario Biagioli has brought to Galileo or a Steven Shapin to Robert Boyle and the Royal Society.[18] Yet the frameworks are in place for an exciting new set of Descartes studies framed in precisely these terms. Especially intriguing to my mind is Descartes' place within the patronage networks and institutional arrangements that have rightly been the focus of so much work in early modern history of science.

Descartes, for example, was largely a loner, preferring solitude to the sociability of the learned academy or the princely court. He also made his isolation a central trope in his philosophical self-presentation, a self-presentation that was inseparably linked with his philosophy proper as I discussed above. How might these and other aspects of Descartes' place within the social field of seventeenth-century European learning be turned into innovative new interpretations of his thought and its legacy?

Returning to Schmalz's unrealized promise of a history of radical Cartesianism and its French reception, how did the social meaning inscribed in Descartes' philosophy shape the reception and institutionalization of Cartesianism in France and elsewhere? Revisionist scholars have been noting for decades that French science, despite the caricatures, was never monolithically Cartesian.

Yet how exactly was Cartesianism disseminated? What social and institutional factors conspired with the philosophical and theological issues raised by Descartes to produce the Cartesian legacy in France and Europe? We know, for instance, that Descartes seriously contemplated a position as court philosopher to the young Louis XIV. Yet despite the abundant work that has recently been done on courtly science throughout early modern Europe, we know virtually nothing about science at the grandest court of them all, the court of the Sun King. How might Descartes and Cartesianism look different if they were situated in (or against) this courtly milieu?

The disciplinary paradigms that have restricted Cartesian studies to philosophy and the history of ideas have so far excluded explorations of this sort. But a new era is dawning. This week many of us will flock with intense interest to the local cineplex to see the latest developments in the apocalyptic struggle between Neo, Trinity, Morpheus, and the intelligent, self-conscious machines of *The Matrix*. Amidst our enjoyment, some of us also will recognize that films such as these speak to (and from) our new intellectual environment—the Age of Jurassic Technology it might be called[18]—a philosophical climate which finds the traditional dualisms of modernity (i.e. mind/body, human/machine, nature/culture, subject/object, etc.) increasingly impossible to defend. Such an intellectual moment offers fertile ground for a re-conceptualization of the history of Descartes and Cartesianism, and the books under review here indicate that the revision has already begun. I for one am excited by the prospects that the future holds.

## NOTES

[1] This was the response of Gary Kasparov in February 2003 after his six matches against Israeli-designed computer “Deep Junior” ended in a draw.

[2] Most important are Watson's two books, *The Downfall of Cartesianism 1673-1712: A Study of the Epistemological Issues in Late Seventeenth-Century Cartesianism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966); and

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*The Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1987). He is also the author of numerous scholarly articles.

[3] Watson's extensive, non-philosophical *oeuvre* actually provides a more plausible context for *Cogito Ergo Sum*, which he describes as "the first biography of Descartes addressed to the general reader." Watson has published 15 books overall including three novels: *Under Plowman's Floor*, *The Runner*, and *Niagara*, the French translation of which was a candidate for the Prix de l'Astrolabe at the Saint-Malo Festival International du Livre in 1997. With Roger Brucker, he wrote a classic book of cave exploration, *The Longest Cave*. His literary-philosophical trilogy, *The Philosopher's Diet*, *The Philosopher's Joke*, and *The Philosopher's Demise*, has also variously been translated into seven languages.

[4] Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); and Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, *Descartes, Biographie* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995), translated as *Descartes: His Life and Thought*, Jane Marie Todd trans. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[5] Adrien Baillet, *La Vie de M. Descartes* (Paris: D. Horthemels, 1691).

[6] Nina Rattner Gelbart, *The King's Midwife: A History and Mystery of Madame du Coudray* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[7] Ira O. Wade, *The Intellectual Development of Voltaire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); and *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

[8] Tad M. Schmaltz, *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul: A Cartesian Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[9] Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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

[11] Francisque Bouillier, *Histoire de la philosophie cartésienne*, 2 vols. (Paris: Dunod, 1854).

[12] Daniel Garber, *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Thomas M. Lennon, *The Battle of the Gods and Giants: The Legacies of Descartes and Gassendi, 1655-1715* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

[13] Paul Hazard, *La Crise de la conscience européenne 1680-1715* (Paris: Fayard, 1961); Paul Vernière, *Spinoza et la pensée française avant la Révolution* (Genève: Slatkine, 1979); Jean Ehrard, *L'Idée de la nature en France dans la première moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1963); Jacques Roger, *Les sciences de la vie dans la pensée française de XVIIIe siècle: la génération des animaux de Descartes à l'Encyclopédie*. (Paris: A. Colin, 1963); and Marc Fumaroli, *L'Age de l'éloquence: rhétorique et "res literaria," de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique* (Paris: Champion, 1980).

[14] Azouvi has published a methodological manifesto of sorts, "Pour une histoire philosophique des idées, *Le Débat* 72 (1992): pp. 17-28.

[15] François Azouvi, "Descartes," in Pierre Nora ed. *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), III: pp. 735-783.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Mario Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier: The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Steven Shapin, *The Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[18] The reference is to the Museum of Jurassic Technology, the Ur postmodern museum, located virtually at <http://www.mjt.org> and physically on Venice Boulevard in Culver City, California.

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