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Thomas M. Lennon, *The Plain Truth: Descartes, Huet, and Skepticism*. Leiden: Brill, 2008. xi + 255 pp. Bibliography and index. \$145.00 (hb). ISBN 978-90-04-17115-2.

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Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721), Descartes's most famous critic in the late seventeenth century, is little known today even among experts. He was, however, one of the main figures in French intellectual life of the time. He practiced experimental science and played an important role in the institutionalization of science, founding the first French scientific academy that received royal patronage after the Académie Royale in Paris. [1] He was most famous, however, as an erudite scholar, learned in ancient languages and history. He discovered in Queen Christina's library in Sweden a manuscript of Origen, which he translated into Latin and on which he commented. [2] Under the influence of Samuel Bochart, Huet became an expert on sacred geography, a field in which his major contribution was a treatise on the location of the garden of Eden. [3] Huet was a bibliophile. His library was probably the largest—and certainly the most specialized—private one in France. Numerous philosophical books printed in the seventeenth century now housed in the rare books collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris belonged to him, and quite a few of them exhibit Huet's reading marks and notes. He was also an historian, a poet, one of the first to write about the origins of the novel, an apologist for Christianity and a philosopher. [4]

Huet's philosophy was skeptical and anti-cartesian. If the first feature became fully known only after the posthumous publication of the *Traité philosophique* in 1723, the second was largely known and the object of fierce polemics through Huet's *Censura Philosophiae Cartesianae* (1689). Richard Popkin dedicated half of one of the new chapters in his recent expanded edition of *The History of Skepticism* to Huet's skepticism, [5] and Thomas Lennon, who translated Huet's *Censura Philosophiae Cartesianae* into English, has examined Huet's skeptical reaction to Descartes and the Cartesians in a number of articles. [6] In *The Plain Truth*, Lennon revisits and expands his previous articles on Huet's criticism of Descartes and the Cartesians. As he says in the Foreword, the author presents a heroic and defensible Descartes, in response to the criticism of Huet and of contemporary scholars. Lennon proposes an intuitionist reading of Descartes, "according to which Descartes arrives at certainty of truth by a meditative process of removing obstacles to it." Once these obstacles have been removed, each "perception is either true because it has an object or unintelligible because it has none" (p. ix).

Lennon begins (chapter one: "People") by presenting the philosophers most relevant to Huet's attack on Descartes and the Cartesians. Besides Huet himself, Lennon mentions Simon Foucher (1644-1696), a skeptical anti-Cartesian acquaintance of Huet's, whose philosophical project was to revive and update Academic skepticism. [7] Lennon claims that Foucher's polemics with the Cartesians Malebranche and Don Robert Desgabets and an outline of Foucher's Academic project (which he sent to Huet) influenced the latter's *Censura*. Foucher argued that in his metaphysics Descartes did not follow the Academic rules of philosophizing which he began to doubt. Huet made the same criticism, but whereas Foucher attributed Descartes's failure to the difficulty of avoiding precipitation, in particular concerning judgments about the external material world, Huet claimed that Descartes's failure exhibited a lack of intellectual and moral integrity. According to Huet, Descartes's doctrines were conscious violations of

his rule that assent shall be given only to that which is clearly and distinctly perceived. Lennon shows accurately that Huet's debate was not only with Descartes but also, and even principally, with two Cartesians. The first of them, Pierre-Sylvian Regis, published a *Réponse au livre...Censura* (Paris, 1691). Regis's reply was taken into consideration by Huet in his second expanded edition of the *Censura* (Paris, 1694) and was criticized in greater detail in a manuscript which remains unpublished. [8] The other "Cartesian" influencing Huet was Malebranche, whose contempt for erudition exhibited in *De la Recherche de la Vérité* (Paris, 1674) was antithetical to Huet's methods. Although one never named the other, Lennon presents convincing textual evidence that Huet's attack on the Cartesians was aimed in particular at Malebranche. [9]

Chapter two ("Kinds") addresses Descartes's relation to skepticism. Lennon is opposed to the influential theory proposed by Richard Popkin that Descartes began with the goal of refuting skepticism but failed, ending up rather reinforcing the skeptical threat. [10] He also disagrees with Huet's contrary view that Descartes began as a skeptic and ended up as a dogmatist. Lennon presents a complete dossier of Descartes's references to skepticism and the skeptics, claiming that there is no evidence that refuting or replying to skepticism was among Descartes's aims, that he most often addressed the issue only when pressed by critics or correspondents, and that he actually despised the skeptics and their philosophy.

The remaining chapters address the main issues critically examined by Huet. Chapter three ("Thoughts") replies to Huet's inferential reading of the *cogito*—a reading which, according to Lennon, was to a large extent reactive to Malebranche—and presents his thesis of the transparency of the mind (once obstacles to clear and distinct perceptions are removed, the mind is aware of the object of its perception and that what it perceives of the object is true). Chapter four ("Doubts") deals with the status of Cartesian doubt, one of the main polemical issues that opposed Huet and Regis. He examines the specific purpose of each doubt and how it was generated. Chapters five ("Rules") and six ("Circles") contest Huet's view, shared by a number of contemporary scholars, that Descartes used a criterion of truth, either that of clear and distinct ideas or that of the natural light. Were these truly criteria Descartes would have been trapped, as Huet showed, in the Pyrrhonian trope of circularity (in order to claim something as true one needs a criterion, but the criterion itself must be presented as true, so in need of a criterion). Lennon claims Descartes needed no criterion because of the transparency of thought. Clear and distinct perceptions needed no proof or justification besides the perception itself. Chapter seven ("Gods") is a defence of the "objective reality" of Cartesian innate ideas. Lennon shows that Gassendi was the source of Huet's objections against Descartes's claim that clear and distinct ideas had an intentional reality caused by their objects and presents a detailed analysis of the position held by the author of the Fifth Set of Objections to Descartes's *Meditations*. He deals, in particular, with what Descartes called the "objection of the objections," which was in fact extracted by some friends of Descartes's from Gassendi's reply to Descartes's replies to the Fifth Objections. [11] Gassendi's objection, reappraised by Huet, was that concepts we can clearly and distinctly conceive in our mind may nevertheless have no reference at all in the real outside world. This objection, according to Lennon, amounted to the denial of intentionality and, consequently, the reduction of human beings to beasts or machines.

The last chapter ("Virtues") replies to Huet's most basic criticism of Descartes, namely, his pride and vanity in pretending to be the first to come up with a true philosophy. Lennon begins by arguing, against Charles Larmore [12] and others, [13] that the 'I' of the *Meditations*, including of the First Meditation, referred to Descartes himself. This means that the doubt, though not practical, was, contrary to Regis's view, real and was actually experienced by Descartes, and not feigned. Huet's charge was that Descartes pretended that his doubt was not serious only after realizing that it could not be overcome. Lennon's view is that Descartes both experienced the doubt and sincerely held the doctrines discovered by the 'I' of the *Meditations*. In the same way that everything could be genuinely doubted in the First Meditation, the *cogito*, the existence of God and the real distinction between mind and body all could not only be ascertained as certain truths by Descartes, but had to be so ascertained,

given the clarity and distinctness of their perceptions. Another section of this chapter explains why Descartes held certain physical doctrines which were false to be absolutely certain, namely the instantaneous propagation of light and the heat beat. Descartes made such claims not out of arrogance and pride but because he was sincerely convinced that if these were indeed false, all his clear and distinct perceptions might also be false, jeopardizing the integrity of his intellect. Another issue which, according to Huet, exposed the failure of Descartes's character was his position on the moving earth. According to Lennon the episode showed rather that Descartes was "not the pusillanimous dissimulator of Huet's depiction, but a courageous hero prepared to publish what he took to be truth knowing that he might be wrong and in danger of condemnation by the Church" (p. 235).

If Descartes's project was not to refute skepticism, if he despised the skeptics, and if he did not end up as a skeptic "malgré lui," that is, if, despite Popkin's and many others' claims to the contrary, the truth which he claimed to have reached was beyond any reasonable doubt, what is after all Descartes's relation to skepticism? I think that Lennon was influenced by the view of Huet and Foucher that Descartes began as an Academic skeptic in the sense of being fully committed to intellectual integrity—giving assent to only that which is indubitable. In so doing he was like the skeptic in that he rid himself of all preconceptions and precipitated opinions, but, unlike the skeptic he did find indubitable truth. This is contrary to Foucher's view of Descartes and even more against that of Huet, who denied even the certainty of the *cogito* acknowledged by Foucher. Academic skepticism was methodologically crucial for Descartes, since it removed the obstacles which precluded the mind from perceiving the truth. As Lennon indicates in the Foreword (p. ix), his interpretation of Descartes as a kind of intuitionist is basically the same as the one he presented in a previous book, *The Battle of the Gods and Giants*. [14] But whereas in this earlier work Descartes's position was viewed as leading to the authoritarianism of Plato's philosopher king, this same position is now seen as the full-fledged fulfilment of the anti-authoritarian position of the Academic skeptics who claimed that they alone were free because, holding to no beliefs at all, they could maintain the integrity of their intellect, in contrast to the dogmatic philosophers and ordinary men whose intellects were bound by non-epistemic beliefs. [15] It is curious that this complete reversal in Lennon's thinking resulted from years of research dedicated to the philosopher (Huet) who most attacked the integrity of Descartes and partially attributed the arrogance and vanity of the philosopher to the intuitionism of his philosophy, a claim to which Lennon ascribed in the *Battle*.

The Plain Truth has numerous merits. It is to my knowledge the first detailed examination of the Huet/Regis debate, which was one of the major episodes in late seventeenth-century Cartesianism. It is the first study to claim and show the relevance of Malebranche for Huet's anti-Cartesianism. It presents a very complete and balanced examination of the issues of doubt and skepticism in Descartes's philosophy. It successfully combines rigorous doctrinal and contextual analysis. However polemical Lennon's heroic Descartes may be, his presentation is a major exhibition of intellectual integrity.

NOTES

[1] See Léon Tolmer, *Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630 – 1721). Humaniste Physicien* (Bayeux: Colas, 1949) and David S. Lux, *Patronage and Royal Science in Seventeenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[2] Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Origenis in Sacras Scripturas Commentaria* (Rouen: J. Bertholini, 1668).

[3] Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Traité de la Situation du Paradis Terrestre* (Paris: J. Anisson, 1691).

[4] Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Traité de l'origine des romans* (Paris: C. Barbin, 1670); *Histoire du commerce et de la navigation des anciens* (Paris: F. Fournier, 1716); *Demonstratio Evangelica* (Paris: S. Michallet, 1679); *Alnetanae Quaestiones* (Caen: J. Cavelier, 1690); *Traité Philosophique de la Foiblesse de l'Esprit Humain* (Amsterdam: Du Sauzet, 1723). On the role of Huet in seventeenth-century intellectual life, see April G.

Shelford, *Transforming the Republic of Letters: Pierre-Daniel Huet and European Intellectual Life 1650-1720* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007).

[5] Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 277-282.

[6] Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Against Cartesian Philosophy*, edited, translated, annotated and introduced by Thomas M. Lennon (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2003), Thomas Lennon, "Huet, Malebranche and the Birth of Skepticism," in Gianni Paganini ed., *The Return of Skepticism from Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003), pp. 149-165; "Huet, Descartes and the Objection of the Objections," in José R. Maia Neto and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *Skepticism in Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Thought. New Interpretations* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2004), pp. 123-142; «The Skepticism of Huet's *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain*,» in Marc André Bernier and Sébastien Charles, eds., *Skepticisme et modernité* (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2005), pp. 65-75; "La Réponse de Régis à Huet Concernant le Doute Cartésien," *Philosophiques* 35 (2008): 241-260.

[7] On Foucher's attack on Descartes and the Cartesians, see Richard A. Watson, *The Downfall of Cartesianism: A Study of Epistemological Issues in Late Seventeenth Century Cartesianism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966). On Foucher's Academic project and its relation to Cartesianism, see José R. Maia Neto, "Foucher's Academic Cartesianism," in Thomas M. Lennon, ed. *Cartesian Views. Papers Presented to Richard A. Watson* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 71-95.

[8] As Lennon suggests, Huet most likely left the manuscript unfinished because he gave up the project of giving a serious philosophical reply to Regis, opting instead to write under pseudonym the satire *Nouveaux mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire du Cartésianisme* (Paris, 1692), a work dedicated to Regis, "Prince of the Cartesians."

[9] On early Cartesianism in France—including Huet's fight against it—see also Tad Schmaltz, *Radical Cartesianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[10] Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, chapter nine ("Descartes: Conqueror of Skepticism") and chapter ten ("Descartes: *Sceptique Malgré Lui*"), pp. 143-173.

[11] Gassendi replied to Descartes's reply to his objections to the *Meditations* in his *Disquisitio metaphysica seu dubitationes et instantiae adversus Renati Cartesii metaphysicam et responsa*, texte établie, traduit et annoté par Bernard Rochot (Paris: J. Vrin, 1962).

[12] Charles Larmore, "Skepticism," in D. Garber and M. Ayers, eds. *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), vol. II, pp. 1145-1192.

[13] For instance, Janet Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[14] Thomas M. Lennon, *The Battle of the Gods and Giants: The Legacies of Descartes and Gassendi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). The title is a reference to Plato's figuration in the *Sophist* of the fundamental metaphysical opposition between "the friends of forms" and the materialists.

[15] For the centrality of the notion of intellectual integrity in early modern skepticism, see José R. Maia Neto, "Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997): 199-222.

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