

DESCARTES: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

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Descartes: A Guide for the Perplexed

By Justin Skirry. New York: International Publishing Group, 2008.

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Since the title of the series is ‘Philosopher X: A Guide for the Perplexed’ the aim of the series ought to be to make that particular philosopher look less perplexing. In a recent addition to the series, ‘Descartes: A Guide for the Perplexed’, another book on Descartes is added to the torrent of literature on his work. What we can ask, as an initial question, is whether or not this book achieves the series’ aim: does ‘Descartes: A Guide for the Perplexed’ make Descartes and his philosophical views look less perplexing? One important point to notice is that this series is not intended to be for academics or perhaps even for postgraduate students. Rather the series is intended as a companion to those students working through the relevant philosopher for the first time. Taking all these facts together should therefore serve as the backdrop from which the book is assessed.

Skirry begins the book with some biographical information on Descartes and how he was one of the first modern philosophers to “make a break with the traditional Aristotelian philosophy and science that had dominated the schools of Europe for centuries” (p. 3). According to Skirry, Descartes’ “radical break” (p. 3) with this tradition is due to his rationalism and his acceptance of innate ideas. The second important reason for this break was that, unlike the Aristotelians, Descartes wanted to explain material objects and events within a mechanistic framework. Skirry writes that the Aristotelians “explained physical phenomena through the powers that those things possess” (p. 3). For example, the Aristotelians would have explained how opium puts people to sleep by deference to the “nature of opium” (p. 4). Instead, Descartes relied upon material properties such as size and weight in order to give “mechanical” explanations (p. 4) of the powers of those objects.

All of this information is useful for those of us who want to know more about, or be reminded of, the development of natural science and philosophy. But one question we

might ask is how this is relevant to Descartes in particular. Wouldn't an exposition of the incompatibility of Descartes' and Plato's views, for example, have been just as useful? If not, what explains the focus on the Aristotelians, the Scholastics and Descartes' relation to them? This question is never given a clear answer, and for this reason the relation between Descartes and the Aristotelians looks rather tangential, as mention of them is recurring throughout the text looks unmotivated. In fact, there are places in the text where Skirry appears to contradict his initial diagnosis of Descartes' break with the Scholastic-Aristotelian tradition. The first instance of contradiction is his explanation of how Descartes does not accept the Platonic thesis about universals. He writes:

[F]or Descartes, universals exist only as ideas in the mind and universal or general words have meaning only because they refer to these abstracted ideas (p. 59).

And,

Descartes is here rejecting the Platonic notion of universals where universals were thought to exist all by themselves in a non-sensible but intelligible realm of their own (p. 59).

Now, the Aristotelians and the Scholastics *also* rejected the Platonic conception of universals as forms. These philosophers often accepted either the nominalist or the conceptualist theory of universals, which is interesting because Skirry writes that "Descartes falls into [the] conceptualist camp with his own theory of abstraction" (p. 58). This leaves us wondering how far apart Descartes really is from the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition. Another instance of this occurs at the end of Chapter 3 on Descartes' metaphysics, where Skirry discusses Descartes' "causal-principle". According to Skirry, Descartes "causal-principle" incorporates the distinction between "formal reality" and "eminent reality". He writes that the concept of "formal reality stems from the *scholastic conception* of a form, which was the principle by which the potential for a reality is actualized" (p. 63, my emphasis).

Again, Skirry here indirectly admits that Descartes is trading on Scholastic-Aristotelian concepts within his own metaphysical framework. The reason I raise this issue is because I wonder whether Skirry's initial claim that Descartes was one of the first philosophers to break away from the Scholastic-Aristotelian tradition is premature. Of course, it is well known that Descartes was the source of several novel philosophical views. But often this is not sufficient to declare that a philosopher is independent of some other philosophical

tradition. In general, it seems it would have been more accurate to just highlight Descartes' similarities and differences to the Scholastic-Tradition without making the more robust claim that he made a *complete* departure from it.

I now want to concentrate on how Skirry's exposition of Descartes' philosophical views commences. One thing that Skirry does, which is quite novel, is that he tries to capture or otherwise recreate the holistic approach Descartes was after in his *Meditations* and his *Principles* in a concise volume. Skirry begins by presenting Descartes' views as tree-like: the planting of the 'seed' is Descartes' method (Chapter 1), the 'seed' his cogito argument (Chapter 2), the 'roots' his metaphysics (Chapter 3 & 4), the 'trunk' his epistemology (Chapter 5), and his physics the 'branches' of the tree (Chapter 6), growing outwards to his theory of human nature (Chapter 7) and morality (Chapter 8) (p. 4). Chapter 1 is on Descartes' methodology, and what is worth highlighting about this chapter is that Skirry does not just focus on Descartes' famous method of doubt, but also on his geometric method, his thesis about deduction and intuition, and his critique of the syllogism.

These other methodological views of Descartes play important roles in his wider philosophical views (such as in his metaphysics and epistemology), but these methodologies are often obviated from the undergraduate textbook or classroom discussion. In lieu of the latter, Skirry's book will serve as a good introduction to Descartes' other methodological views. Chapter 2 is on Descartes' theory of mind and the self. More specifically, this chapter highlights how Descartes' 'Cogito' argument functions as the foundation for the rest of his metaphysical and epistemological views. One important critical point to make here is that Skirry's discussion of Descartes' argument for the distinctness of mind and body – a hallmark of Cartesian philosophy – is at first rather thin, as it comprises only a page worth of text and consists in paraphrasing Descartes' original statement of the argument (cf. p. 34). The remainder of the discussion of this argument commences much later in the book, in Chapter 7 (from pp. 131 - 134 of Chapter 7). One thing that Skirry ought to have provided the reader information about is why the discussion of that argument commences towards the end of the book. The discussion of that argument in particular, unlike the other arguments he discusses, does not trade on the concepts discussed between Chapter 2 and Chapter 7. So the question arises: why did he wait to explain the argument in detail?

Chapter 3 is concerned with Descartes' metaphysics. In general, this chapter serves as the stage-setter for Descartes' argument for the existence of God, which starts in Chapter 4. However, this Chapter also has some virtues in its own right because it explains Descartes'

many difficult distinctions in a clear and concise format. One important distinction for anyone studying Descartes is that between substance, mode, and attribute. But what Skirry gives us is something more than an exposition of this distinction: he gives us Descartes' theory of distinction (pp. 45-49) which aims at explaining how Descartes arrives at those various distinctions, and how he proceeds from there. Chapter 4 is centered on Descartes' argument for the existence of God, but Skirry also covers Descartes' other theological views such as his view about the immortality of the soul (pp. 83 - 84) and the Eucharist (pp. 85 - 90). What is good about this chapter, and in particular the section on Descartes' argument for the existence of God, is that Skirry is careful to examine this argument in detail, but also to connect this argument back to the previous discussions of Descartes' methodology and metaphysics from the previous chapters. Chapter 5 is titled 'Knowledge', which for some will be misleading because the main focus of this chapter is "why [according to Descartes] people make mistakes, how to avoid them, and how God's existence and non-deceiving nature guarantee the truth of what is clear and distinctly perceived" (p. 91). Perhaps a better title would have been 'Error.' What would have made this chapter more relevant to traditional epistemological questions is a more thorough discussion of the Cartesian Circle.

On page 106, Skirry begins an argument for the thesis that Descartes' reasoning in his *Meditations* was not circular. That is:

[...] the Meditator acknowledges that the deceiving god scenario provides a very slight reason for doubt, and that anything subject to this doubt cannot be known until he discovers that God exists and cannot be a deceiver. This implies further that there may be some truths that do not depend on this, namely 'I think, therefore I am.' This observation hints at a resolution of the Cartesian Circle. Anything that is a precondition for the deceiving god scenario is itself beyond doubt and is, therefore, absolutely certain (pp. 107 - 108).

Skirry then adds that "[...] this is not the place to explore this speculation any further" (p. 108). What I want to know is this: if it is true that the brief paragraph Skirry provides us with could serve as an interpretation of Descartes where his reasoning is not circular (as Skirry seems to think), then why is it not the place to "speculate any further" on the matter? One obvious answer is that this is a guide to students working through Descartes' philosophical writings. If something like that is the reason, why did Skirry express his view in the first place? Why not discuss more of the charges of circularity to Descartes' reasoning from his contemporaries in the *Objections and Replies* section of the *Meditations* instead?

The final chapter is titled 'Sensations, Passions, and Morality', where the "branches" of Descartes' "tree" are examined. Now, this chapter is interesting because we are introduced to Descartes' moral "code" (see pp. 160 - 163), which is something most students who learn about Descartes will never encounter. The hallmark of Descartes' moral theory is his acceptance of the tenets of Roman Catholicism, and several maxims that should be followed "when engaged in the project of methodological doubt" (p. 161). These maxims are "provisional" because once we complete our methodic doubt, we will arrive not only at a firm foundation for human knowledge, but also at "an absolutely certain moral code" (p. 161).

The next question is 'what are these provisional maxims?' The first maxim is that we should live a moderate life. But how do we live a moderate life? According to Descartes, we ought to follow the laws and customs of our land (including the customs of other moderate people). The second maxim is to be "as firm and decisive in action as possible" (p. 160). The final two maxims are that we should master ourselves, and "review the various professions and choose the best" (p. 61). Each of Descartes' maxims stems from his methodological, epistemological, and metaphysical doctrines. For example, the 'maxim' that we should be master of ourselves stems from "[Descartes'] realization that all that is in his control are his own thoughts and nothing else", which means, according to Skirry, "that just about everything else is out of his control" (p. 162). On this view, one should desire *only* what is in one's power to attain (p. 162). I mention Skirry's discussion of the lesser-known Cartesian theories here in order to highlight how his book is consistently in line with the aim of being holistic.

Finally, Skirry's book is certainly a joy to read, and it could well serve as a good guide for students working through Descartes' difficult philosophical texts. But there is one caveat here. Since Skirry's guide is a holistic guide, one cannot simply open the book to a chapter after Chapter 1 and expect not to be perplexed. For this reason, if one is just focusing on some aspect of Descartes' thought for a class paper, it might be more worth their while to find another companion to Descartes. But for the more dedicated reader, Skirry's 'Descartes: A Guide for the Perplexed' ought to make its way onto their shelves.