



Nadler, Steven. Descartes: The Renewal of Philosophy

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Nadler, Steven.

Descartes: The Renewal of Philosophy.

Renaissance Lives. London: Reaktion Books, 2023. Pp. 288 + 12 col. ill., 13 b/w. ISBN 978-1-78914-7 (hardcover) £17.95.

If people know anything about the life of René Descartes, it is probably how he died—becoming sick in the darkness of the cold Swedish winter when he was at the service of Queen Christina. The second thing people might know is that his skull went missing. His remains stayed in Sweden for sixteen years after his death in 1650 before they were sent back to his native France. The skull, however, was for some reason left behind. It is now assumed to be the one on display in a cabinet at Musée de l’homme in Paris. Finally, of course, people might also know that René Descartes was a man who carefully contemplated the relations between the senses, the passions, the body, and the mind. As Steven Nadler writes in the very first chapter of this volume, one of Descartes’s major themes is the “radical separation of mind and body.” Among Descartes’s works, his *Meditations on First Philosophy* and *Discourse on Method* is perhaps the most familiar. Less well-known to today’s readers is, according to Nadler, his *Principles of Philosophy* and *The World*—a gap that this volume seeks to fill.

Starting off in the childhood of the philosopher-to-be, Nadler mixes the chronological retelling of Descartes’s early life and education with glimpses of more well-known episodes from his eventful life. Recurring in the narrative is the last months of his life, a period spent in Stockholm, Sweden, at the court of the multifaceted Queen Christina. This last period of Descartes’s life is also discussed in the final and shortest chapter of the volume, whose heading is a citation from one of his letters: “A land of bears, rocks and ice,” mirroring, of course, his view of the northern climate. In total, the book consists of eight chapters—in fact all cleverly named—such as “Rebuilding the House of Knowledge,” and of course, “I think, therefore I am.”

As indicated by these chapters, presentations and discussions of the philosophy and science of Descartes fill this volume, alongside the life story of the philosopher. It becomes clear that this was a man who lived and breathed his work, who craved silence and solitude, but at the same time wanted recognition for his ideas. Nadler points out several key figures and experiences that are suggested to have contributed to the development of Descartes’s intellectual thinking, his ground-breaking ideas, and his writings. Striking, but

not surprising, is the philosopher's awareness of the dangers that might follow if he were to publish some of his more challenging arguments. He kept himself well informed of, for example, Galileo Galilei's fate and carefully chose what to circulate, what to publish, and what to keep in the drawer while awaiting a safer future.

Written in the traditional chronological structure, this biography of René Descartes and his "renewal of philosophy" shows a successful balance of academic expertise and pedagogical aims directed towards a slightly broader audience than merely the specialists. I consider myself much more familiar with Descartes's work than with the man behind them, and here is a volume that instructively guides me through both of these worlds. However, in all, Nadler's focus seems to be on understanding and explaining the former—the world of ideas that was created by Descartes. As their titles indicate, each chapter circles more around the philosopher's process of writing, printing, and defending his work than on revealing new facts on his personal life.

Nevertheless, since this was a man who lived through his work, the personal is very much present in these processes. For example, Nadler discusses at length the objections, with Descartes's replies, that were included in the first published edition of *Meditations*. I find myself smiling when reading about the dispute between the contemporary mega minds. One critical voice was that of Pierre Gassendi, who revived epicureanism, and his objection was one of the longest. Clearly standing on very different sides of how to view the triad of body-mind-soul, Gassendi sarcastically addresses Descartes's "O Mind" in his objection, whereupon Descartes returns in the same tone by calling Gassendi "O Flesh."

Another fascinating side of Descartes is his relation to women. Nadler discusses both more well-known friendships, such as those with Elisabeth of Bohemia and Queen Christina of Sweden, and the more unclear relationship with a woman who, out of wedlock, gave birth to a daughter. Nadler presents archival documents that state that Descartes was the father of this child who, to the philosopher's grief, died very young. The close friendship he had with Elisabeth might be one of his most important, according to Nadler. She prompted Descartes to write his famous *The Passions of the Soul* and was the addressee of the dedicatory letter to the *Principles of Philosophy*. In the latter he praises the "outstanding and incomparable sharpness" of Elisabeth's intelligence and her unique intellect.

The smooth prose balances the input from a number of important sources and, at times, the more complicated content. Since this is a slightly popularized publication with a broader audience in mind, the primary sources, such as letters, outnumber the mentioning of previous research. Nadler shows a deep, solid knowledge of the material he is working with and is successful in the very difficult task of communicating the complex philosophical labyrinths of Descartes's ideas and life. Complementing Nadler's pedagogical style is the publisher's great care of details: of the cover, of the paper quality, of the beautiful illustrations. As such, this volume is a welcome addition to scholarship that will benefit scholars and educators as well as the general reader who takes a special interest in René Descartes, his world of ideas, and the time in which he lived.

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