

Rastko Jevtić

IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN COTTINGHAM

SUMMARY: My conversation with Professor Cottingham – one of the foremost living authorities on Descartes – aimed to illuminate often-overlooked aspects of Descartes' system and to explore unconventional interpretative perspectives. As a result, themes such as Descartes' metaethics, philosophy of emotions, and the ontology and teleology of human beings and animals take center stage. Naturally, discussing a Janusian figure like Descartes necessitates examining influences that penetrate deep into the past, present, and future. Our conversation, therefore, extends to his Ancient and Medieval predecessors, his contemporaries, and his successors. The depth of his influence also invites Professor Cottingham's reflections on contemporary themes, including issues of (mental) representation, problems of inverted spectrum, qualia problems etc. Ultimately, it might be easier to list the topics we didn't discuss than those we covered. Serbian – and all other – readers are fortunate to have such an intellectual delight before them.

The following text is a transcript of a discussion that took place on Wednesday, May 22, 2024. Although all objective evidence points towards the conclusion that the conversation occurred somewhere in Britain, I am far from convinced. The profound sense of fulfillment I experienced during the trip left me confused and without a clear answer to the question that still lingers: did I end up in the place I actually intended to go to?

I was supposed to travel from one part of the planet to another; whatever, it's all the same planet anyway. And yet, an unsettling and unfamiliar sense of well-being lingered for about 10 days – far too long for my highly refined taste – to the point where I have started doubting the mainstream explanation. A seasoned veteran of Cartesian philosophy such as myself has no problem with dredging up beliefs, however “reasonable” they may be. It dawned on me that a perverse scenario – one impossible even by Descartes' standards – made the most sense: an omniscient, omnipotent and, most importantly, absolutely Good entity decided to deceive me

about my trip, without any clear indication of doing so (for my own good, that's for sure). After all, no true philosopher can ever trust *sensus communis*; embracing this fact is merely a matter of courage. And so, I found myself in a place that looked very much like Britain on the outside; however, on the inside, I couldn't see anything I would have seen if I had, say, grown up in such a place. But dear reader, rest assured! Returning to Serbia made my eyes gloomy-clear once more and the uncomfortable sense of feel-good was replaced by the most lucid state a human being can achieve: mild depression.

The discussion before you represents the peak of my trip. The exchange with Professor Cottingham, free from constraints of premeditated questions, and, more importantly, from the weight that ideas usually carry for me, allowed for a lively back-and-forth during which something inexplicable happened. Some would say that I had finally lost my mind; others might feel that I was beginning to believe. In any case, the most radical of skeptical possibilities became reality in that very moment.

It happened like this: as I glanced through the window waiting for the professor to check the Latin expression Descartes used, I witnessed a peculiar scene: a mountain without a valley! It was the most beautiful landscape I had ever seen; however, it immediately disappeared. Then, instead of being dazed by the transcendent, I became distinctly aware of the fact that I was thinking well AND feeling well, both at the same time! Obviously, this kind of a skeptical scenario far surpasses the sinister works of Descartes' Demon, let alone a 21st century brain-in-a-vat or anything of the naturalistic sort. The vision of a mountain without a valley aroused some suspicion in me... but it was the experience of the innermost contradiction that was the final straw – a guarantee that something was seriously off... Professor found the expression he was looking for a few seconds later and we continued talking; I didn't have the luxury of reflecting on the experience, even though I felt the consequences in the days that followed.

For better or worse, the reader won't be able to find any evidence of the Event happening in the text. This is not my decision, but the ontology of audio recording is such: *esse est audiri*. It is true that, as I gazed at the mountain, I heard an extremely intense, though a very mellow sound that defies description (experiences like these make always me feel that tongue shouldn't ever leave the cheek). However, I know that professor didn't hear it (even a behaviorist would know this) and there is no such sound on the recording... All in all, the entity I mentioned earlier stopped playing around a few days later (probably got bored), marking the return to my *sane* old habits: "deep" thinking, unburdened by the inconvenient pleasantness of purposefulness. Right now I'm feeling absolutely fine, thank you very much.

(Dark) humor(s) aside, I hope readers will enjoy the discussion as much as I did. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Mr and Mrs Cottingham for their warmth and hospitality which made me feel truly at home. I will forever cherish the time and insights that Professor Cottingham so generously shared.

A special thanks goes to Professor Ljiljana Radenović – the primary *ratio essendi* of this conversation, alongside Professor Cottingham. Without her, none of this would have been possible; thus, it is only right that my gratitude matches her role in this project. My thanks extend to the entire team behind the *Science, Faith and Superstition* project for their outstanding collaboration. I am also grateful to the *Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion* for granting us the project and to the *John Templeton foundation* for funding it. Lastly, I want to thank the most important women in my life. I am yet to figure out if they are God’s fellow travelers or sleeper agents (it’s a fine line, really), as their elusive influence has extended far beyond the trip itself. One thing, however, is beyond doubt: you’ll have to take my word for it, as they would most certainly feign complete ignorance of what I’m talking about.

1.

R.J. The last paragraph of *the Passions of the Soul* is titled: *It is on the passions alone that all good and evil of this life depends*; this sounds pretty emotivistic, or even Humean. I was wondering what your perspective is: when it comes to Descartes’s metaethics, is there anything that is independent of passions and contributes to our value judgments? Because it seems to me that even in Descartes’s opinion, the good and the bad in ethics are based on our emotions.

J.C. Right, that’s a very interesting question. I think there is a kind of fundamental optimism in Descartes, despite all the ways in which the senses lead us astray and the passions can make things appear better than they are – and there are a lot of warnings in the *Passions* about things seeming, under the influence of the passions, more important or more valuable than they really are. Nonetheless, for Descartes, as for Aquinas, the human being is fundamentally configured towards the Good and all the mind-body correlations are set up in a way that conduces to the health and welfare of the whole human being. So in a sense, I think it’s right that passions are the key to human flourishing...

R.J. It seems that they are the ontological source of value ... but obviously, this value comes from God. I mean, this is God’s way of showing us what’s good: through passions.

J.C. Uhm... I think so, but it also has to be understood in conjunction with the Fourth Meditation, where the Good and the True are on equal footing – the *ratio boni* ranks alongside the *ratio veri*. So, the picture in the Fourth Meditation is that when we focus the mind in the most simple and transparent way possible, we have clear intuitions about the truths of logic and mathematics, as well as clear perceptions of the Good. And that’s, as it were, a metaphysical fact about the way our intellect is configured. And then the passions can go either way, they can direct us to the Good or to the Bad; this is why we need to train them. This is where Cartesian programme

comes in to shape our passions; to bring them into line with the clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect. So, I think they are ultimately a good instrument for producing our welfare, but with the proviso that they have to be, as it were, linked to the Good and the True, which are perceived not by us *qua* human beings but us *qua* souls, *qua* intellect.

R.J. Yes, yes, yes...

J.C. There is always this ambiguity in Descartes that “I” can refer to just the *res cogitans* or to the entire human being.

R.J. On the other hand, do you think that there is room for a more radical thesis: that there would be no good nor bad judgments if there were no emotions?¹ There obviously needs to be an element of rationality, because *ratio* is the faculty that “interprets” these emotions, that makes sense of them; however, how would ethics of pure rational beings, such as angels, look like? On what basis do they act? That is the question. The answer is challenging to find; for instance, you could talk about some kind of proto-categorical imperative, but it’s really hard to see.

J.C. There are, as it were, spontaneous movements of the will. If we think only of the *res cogitans* for a moment, there are two components to it: the intellect and the will. Descartes’ general view is that when there is a clear perception of the intellect, there is also a spontaneous movement of the will in that direction. So, you know that phrase in the *Fourth Meditation* – “*ex magna luce in intellectus consequuta est magna propensio in voluntate*”² – “from a great light in the intellect there followed a spontaneous affirmation of the will”. I don’t know what motivates an angel (these are speculative questions)... but you might think that an angel would always – just because there are no passions, no bodily passions – it would always just spontaneously proceed to the good, move towards the good. But of course, the angelology in the Bible is such that there are fallen angels who somehow...

R.J. Yes... I am speaking of angels as an example of pure *res cogitans*, so to speak. It is difficult to see what is good or bad³ in that case.... I am able to understand the notion of truth for pure *res cogitans*, it’s easier to conceive...

J.C. ... yes...

R.J. ... but the notion of good, for instance, or any other kind of notion of value for a pure *res cogitans* is somewhat hard to understand. And obviously, from our commonsensical perspective, the passions are certainly what we usually base our ethical judgements on.

J.C. Except that I think we want to beware of a kind of a David-Hume-type extreme view that reason is the slave of the passions or that the passions are the only source of moral value.

¹ The claim is about judgments of human beings.

² AT VII 59; CSM II 41.

³ ... for such beings.

R.J. The second formulation is the key one, in my opinion. Doesn't the existence of God make the crucial difference? You could accept the second formulation; still, emotions come from God. We still have work to do in the sense that we need to "filter" and understand our emotions, but if you accept the existence of God then you could even say that our emotions lead us towards the Good if we know how to understand and control them. There is no relativism there!

J.C. No! No, no! Because there is an objective order of Good and Evil which is independent of my desires or wishes...

R.J. ... yes, exactly...

J.C. And Descartes buys into that I think, he buys into the Thomistic picture really, which is that the mind perceives what is objectively Good and perceives what is objectively True. So, something like the subjectivism of say Thomas Hobbes, Descartes's contemporary – "whatever we like that we call good" – that is completely alien to Descartes's way of thinking ...

R.J. Our emotions follow the objective order of value. There is no question about that! The order exists, but the question is how we come to know about it. And because of this last paragraph, for instance, it seems to me that we actually know of it by through understanding of our passions. Is there any other way for a human being? There doesn't seem to be...

J.C. I partly agree, except I would say that for Descartes there can be pure intellectual perception of the good without reference to the passions. But I agree with you that the passions often play an important role. For example, even in the most, if you like, purely metaphysical passages, for example, the end of *the Third Meditation* – I don't know if you remember that last paragraph. Having established the existence of God, he says here "let us stay for a while" – I'm quoting from memory – "and contemplate the immense light"; and he continues to talk about the greatest joy which is that contemplation. But there are words like... let me just get my text... I'll just get my Latin-English⁴, I think that it is important to see if the words are actually related to passions.

2.

J.C. I think, by the way, that Descartes's Latin... Do you know this Latin-English edition (of *Meditations*)? It has facing page, so you have Latin on one side and English on another... I actually think Descartes' Latin is beautiful; there is something crystal clear about it which you don't always get in *The Passions of the Soul*.

⁴ *Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*. Facing page Latin-English edition, edited and translated by John Cottingham, with textual and philosophical introductions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

(The professor returns to the talk about the end of the Third Meditation)

“*Intueri, admirari, adorare*”⁵ – to gaze at, admire and adore. So certainly admiration is a passion, it is not just a pure, angelic perception. It’s an upwelling of wonder, which I think is probably central to the religious impulse in human beings. A religious outlook is not just a matter of assenting to propositions; it’s a matter of emotions like wonder and joy... So, it is interesting that there are words relating to the passions even in the most...

R.J. ... metaphysical context! This probably connects up with these passages from the *Passions* which I think are interesting, because they perhaps open up a possibility of interpreting *res cogitans* in some kind of, let’s say, non-minimalistic sense. Usually, if we think about *res cogitans* as a disembodied substance, we try to cut off all sensory perceptions in the wide sense – so both internal and external (sensory perceptions) and passions.⁶ We are thinking about some kind of substance which is known on the basis of modes and not immediately. That substance which is ourselves and which we don’t exactly know, acts; these acts have their objects, which are in fact ideas. This is the bare-bones structure of pure *res cogitans* on the usual view. But the moments such as the one we mentioned, from *the Third Meditation* as well as, passages from *Passions* – they all speak about some kind of disembodied emotions.

J.C. Let me get my copy of the *Passions*. I should have brought all the books in here; it’s good to have the text... Do you read French?

R.J. Just a little bit. I’m learning both French and Latin because of Descartes.

J.C. I think that *Passions* probably can be read in English just as well. Because it is a modern language, you get a closer match, really. So what passage are we looking at?

R.J. Let me just see. The first part, 18th article, titled *The Will*. He talks about volitions and then he states: “One conceives of the actions of the soul which terminate in the soul itself”. So obviously these should only apply in the context of *res cogitans*; but then he continues “as when we will to love God”. So, if this love was an embodied passion, how could it immediately terminate in the soul itself? So maybe, let’s say, this could be some kind of emotion which is disembodied. Obviously, we are scrambling our starting definitions here, but the love of God and this admiration or wonder of the natural light – maybe there is room for something more than the act-object structure of *res cogitans*⁸.

J.C. It’s possible, yes. But it’s not easy, because there is no, as it were, phenomenology to the movement of the will... What about the case where, say, you

⁵ AT VII 52; CSM II 36.

⁶ R.J. describes a frequent, “deflationistic” view of *pure res cogitans* here.

⁷ AT XI 343; CSM I 335.

⁸ The minimal structure R.J. was talking of two passages earlier.

contemplate an isosceles triangle and you work out some Euclidian property, and then the will “says”: “yes, that is true” or I present you with “ $2+3=5$ ” and you say: “yes, that must be true.” I think that these would be examples of the movements of the will which don’t end in a bodily movement; it just is purely, Descartes would think, immaterial.

R.J. Yes, probably.

J.C. That has lost its plausibility for us now, I think – because we now think that body (certainly the brain) is involved even in pure intuition.

R.J. But don’t great mathematicians have a lot of passions connected precisely to these kinds of objects? They are excited by them, they enjoy them, etc. Obviously, this isn’t an argument for⁹ but still there is some space, maybe.... This goes against the Descartes’ main stream of thought, which is defining passions as bodily.

J.C. Yes. There is a passage, you can probably remember it better than me, where he distinguishes between two kinds of joy. There is *laetitia animalis* and *laetitia intellectuallis*.

R.J. That is found in the second part probably.

J.C. There is a pure intellectual type of joy. I think it’s somewhere in *the Passions*, isn’t it?

R.J. Yes, in second part probably. Hmm...

(both looking for the paragraph for a minute or two)

R.J. Maybe somewhere in between the 17th and 19th article ...? Maybe the 93rd article? (talking about the 93rd article) That’s it! Yes, intellectual joy and sadness.

J.C. (reading the 91st article) “... pleasant emotion which the soul has when it enjoys a good which impressions in the brain represent to it as its own... Yes, then he says: while the soul is in the body, the intellectual joy can scarcely fail to be accompanied by the joy which is a passion.”¹⁰

Of course, on a certain sort of hyper-Cartesian view, you might think that in the next world, you know, in heaven, we will have purely intellectual joy. But Descartes might follow Aquinas there and say that the final destination of the soul in the afterlife is to be reunited with the body. It’s interesting to think how Descartes both differs and doesn’t differ from Aquinas. In one sense, he seems to want to say that the soul is a complete, self-sufficient substance; but in another, I think there is this sense in which it is incomplete, that the full human experience requires the union. Therefore, for us, if you hear a piece of good news, you could feel intellectual joy – you are pleased with the outcome. That could be a pure, calm, as it were, movement of the will. But, as he says in this passage, as long as we are embodied, it is always going to be followed by... there is always going to be a phenomenology to it, a bodily feeling of elation. And if someone simply had pure volitions without that

⁹ Disembodied passions independently of Descartes’ metaphysics.

¹⁰ AT XI 396-7; CSM I 360-1.

accompanying psycho-physical element, I think we'd think they were less of a human being. I mean, in order to love someone, it's not just a pure intellectual matter, it has to be...

R.J. For sure.

J.C. So he is an interesting figure, Descartes, in that respect. He doesn't privilege the passions in the way, perhaps, Hume does, but I think the overall impression we get from *the Passions* is, nonetheless, that they are a great good, they are an essential ingredient to human fulfillment.

R.J. I don't know if this is me but, maybe in the religious context, there is a kind of negative association – the negative implications of the passions are usually more in the spotlight... but for Descartes it's actually the opposite, they can be a great good; the one who can sense the most can enjoy the greatest goods of this life¹¹.

J.C. Yes, yes. I mean, the negative spotlight is there as well. He states that passions can make something seem better than it is, partly because of the immediacy and the urgency of the passions. The classic case being the fall of humanity and Eve in the Garden of Eden. She sees the apple, it looks good, it tastes good, and that is a Good, it is a genuine Good, but it is a lesser good than obeying the commands of God. So, the immediacy of the lesser good makes her lose focus on the greater.

R.J. So in this context, what do you think about the problem of *akrasia*. Where could we locate Descartes? Is it the fault of the intellect, the fault of the will? What is the source of the bad judgment?

J.C. I don't think any philosopher has really satisfactorily explained *akrasia*. I think we need to wait for Freud really. (R.J. laughs) Because I think the point is that when we are thrown off course by the passions, it's because some element has a charge of significance which we haven't fully processed.

R.J. Yes, I agree.

J.C. I discussed this in my book *Philosophy and the Good Life*. I don't know if you've come across that.

R.J. Yes, yes.

J.C. In the last chapter I go into the psychoanalytic perspective. And actually, I think Descartes to some extent anticipates Freud, for example when he discusses the case of the cross-eyed girl. So in adult life he finds himself unaccountably attracted to women with a squint. Why? He doesn't really fully understand the reason. But later, thinking it through, he remembers that as a child he was very attracted to a girl with a squint.¹² I mean, he doesn't have the Freudian apparatus of the subconscious, but that in fact is what is going on. Because he is drawn to something for reasons that are not fully transparent.

R.J. For sure.

¹¹ A reference to the final paragraph of *the Passions*; AT XI 488; CSM I 404.

¹² Letter to Chanut of 6 June 1647 (AT V 57; CSMK 323).

J.C. That seems to me as the classic case of *akrasia*. It is a case where people look back afterwards and say: how could I've made that mistake? It was staring me in the face and I was stupidly weak enough to do this, when I should've done that¹³. The reason is that there was something at a time which they didn't fully access, but was producing a powerful sort of glow or allure. So I think certainly neither Aristotle nor Descartes fully explain *akrasia*, but I argue in that *Philosophy and the Good Life* that the psychoanalytic apparatus is on the right lines (even though I don't buy in to all the details of Freud's or Jung's theories).

R.J. But how could we then, let's say, elaborate this – obviously there is no unconscious in Descartes, but there are some things we forget or we are confused about and so on...

J.C. ... Yes, yes...

R.J. ... In terms of Descartes ontology, what is happening in the case of *akrasia*? Is this something that is in the soul, these confusions, or all of these “akrasias” are actually introduced from/by the body? I don't know, maybe I try too hard to put everything that Descartes would accept as existing into these two categories, but that's what metaphysics is for, right?

J.C. Yes, I know, this is difficult, because we tend to think of the pure *res cogitans* as a kind of transparent goldfish bowl with all the thoughts inside (of it) open to view...

R.J. ... but it's not...

J.C. ... it's not like that. It is a constant fluctuation of thoughts...

R.J. ... Attention diverts...

J.C. ... Attention I think is the key...

R.J. ... Yes, yes...

J.C. ... I mean the classic metaphysical case is where while I am attending to $2+3=5$, I'm sure it's true, there is no doubt possible. But then the mind moves on; maybe I could've been wrong about what I was thinking about five minutes ago. So as long as we focus, it's clear, but passions can make us lose focus on x and concentrate instead on y which may be very close and we may be very attracted, very drawn to it. So there is a fluctuation of attention... and even without talking about the passions I think we can understand that. As Descartes says, I think it is in the *Conversation with Burman*: there is a very limited number of things the mind can focus on at any one time.¹⁴

¹³ See John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 4, section 7.

¹⁴ See Descartes' sixth reply to Burman. *Conversation with Burman* (1976), transl. by John Cottingham, Oxford University Press.

R.J. And what do you think about the possibility of passions representing? Because it seems to me they do; I wrote a paper in Serbian¹⁵ in which I argue that they represent, as I called it, “axiologically” i.e. they represent values. They don’t represent things but the value of things for the soul – things are good, bad or relevant because of the passions. However, it seems to me that this is kind of implicit in the *Passions* and that the main passages in which he writes about emotions are *motivational*.¹⁶ In other words, Descartes’ most explicit passages are the passages that emphasise motivational quality, but it seems to me that it could be said, or even must be said, that passions are representative as well. So they have both functions... and it even seems to me that the motivational function is dependent on the representative function.

J.C. I’m not sure what I think about that. I mean “representation” is often used by philosophers in a way which I think is bogus in a certain way. It purports to explain something but... Let’s consider just something like thirst. I could know intellectually that my body needs water and take the decision to drink. That would be more or less a purely intellectual and volitional process. But if I *feel* thirsty, then, in addition, there is this urgent sensation... Does it represent anything? Well, it’s certainly important in motivating me to drink. But I think Descartes would say it’s just obscure, confused... (difficulty in finding words)... what he calls in *the Sixth Meditation* “the I know what tugging feeling” that is the sensation of hunger. So, you could say it represents the need for food, or thirst represents¹⁷... But I think Descartes would probably say it doesn’t really represent anything, it just has, in modern terms you could say, the character of a *quale*... You know what it’s like, I know what it’s like, but we can’t really...

R.J. Yes, Descartes’ examples of hot and cold... “What does this represent?” Descartes asks. There is something that causes these, that corresponds, but can we know anything else?

J.C. Nothing, no.

R.J. Maybe in the case of hot and cold that is true... But let’s say that if I feel thirsty, my thirst represents the water as good. And it simultaneously represents my need for water... what comes first here? I think it’s not even possible to decide. Water

¹⁵ R. Jevtić, “Dekartova filozofija emocija,” *Theoria* 65, no. 1 (2022): 21–50.

¹⁶ See for instance, article 40 of *the Passions*: “... it must be observed that the principal effect of all the human passions is that they move and dispose the soul to want the things for which they prepare the body” (AT XI 359; CSM I 343); or article 52: “The function of all the passions consists solely in this, that they dispose our soul to want the things which nature deems useful for us, and to persist in this volition; and the same agitation of the spirits which normally causes the passions also disposes the body to make movements which help us to attain these things.” (AT XI 372; CSM I 349)

¹⁷ ... the need to drink.

is good because of my thirst, but I'm thirsty for the water as well. I mean, it's ok, it seems like a linguistic matter, but...

J.C. I don't know – I think that there is something very interesting philosophically in the question you are raising because it connects with this business of animal passions.

R.J. Yes...

J.C. Are animals just physiology?; Are they just mechanical? Descartes talks about animal fear, animal hunger... and clearly animals have color perception. He doesn't discuss this, but we know that some insects can differentiate colors, otherwise why would flowers, you know, make such an effort to display them? But what is going on in the animal "mind"? Well, it has no concepts, no language, therefore there really isn't any symbolical representational activity going on; there is just this "I know not what"... I am thinking of the passage...

R.J. Yes, Yes, the three grades of sensations... On your interpretation which I find really interesting, animals stop at the second grade.¹⁸

J.C. Yes.

R.J. So maybe what we call representation comes at the third grade?

J.C. Possibly. Because if you think back to the example of color, I think it's in the *Principles* maybe: when we say we see color an object, we are applying a label we don't understand to something we know not what¹⁹ – something like that anyway – it's almost as if we can't really say what redness is, but we have a very vivid sensation which clearly enables us to do things, to pick out objects and so on...

R.J. ... Maybe not to decide on the good and the bad in the moral sense, but definitely in the instrumental sense of the word?²⁰ This is what animals do – they just

¹⁸ Descartes writes about three grades of sensory response at AT VII 436-7; CSM II 294-5. However, the problem here is that Descartes himself contradicts the claim I made about professor's interpretation. It is impossible that Descartes' description of the second grade is completely adequate for animals since Descartes includes the mind-body union (which is exclusively human) as a condition for the second grade of sensory response. The matter is complicated though; my claim is not altogether false either since professor's view of ontology of animals does not consist in a simplistic negation of just any kind of consciousness and awareness. See "A Brute to the Brutes?": Descartes's Treatment of Animals," in *Cartesian Reflections: Essays on Descartes's Philosophy*, ed. John Cottingham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁹ 'When we say that we perceive colours in objects, this is really just the same as saying that we perceive something in the objects whose nature we do not know, but which produces in us a very vivid and clear sensation which we call the sensation of colour' (*Principles*, Part I, art. 70 – AT VIII A 34; CSM I 218).

²⁰ R.J. differentiates between two different possible functions of sensations. In one case, a sensation may contribute to a moral decision; in the other, a sensation may contribute to an instrumental decision. A moral decision is a decision that is connected to a morally relevant matter, in the broadest possible sense of the word, while an instrumental decision pertains

do it. It's actually trivial, there is no gap – they just do it. (laughter) Maybe they have some kind of natural light we don't have? (R.J. laughing) Our will needs to choose but...

J.C. We have no access to how they do it. Although we have all been through that stage as babies. We presumably, I guess, as babies, have raw sensations without any concepts. So we maybe ought to remember that, but we can't.

R.J. Yes, the blooming buzzing confusion, for instance.

J.C. Yes. But of course, even that is not a true case because from the very first hours of birth people talk to babies, so they immediately start to associate. That linguistic ability is clearly innate; while they don't have the ability to deploy the concept until they are two or three, nonetheless right from the start they are being inducted into a semantic world. Animals, on the contrary are not so inducted; there are borderline cases such as dogs and cats and to a limited extent horses, but most animals, I guess just have pure sensations, however we can define that philosophically.

So just to pause that, just give me an idea what your *telos*, your goal is in the thesis?

R.J. It's really to explain as deeply and as completely as I can what is the ontological status of the human being in Descartes's philosophy. The title of my dissertation is "The Metaphysics of Human Being in Descartes' Philosophy". I use "metaphysics" in a wide sense – I would like to answer both ontological and epistemological questions. For example: What is a human being for Descartes?; How far can we push descriptions of it below the surface of the text?; how is mind-body union known differently than these other innate notions²¹ – Descartes writes about in his correspondence with Elizabeth.

In the context of developmental psychology I wanted to ask: how structuring are the innate ideas of our sense experience in Descartes's philosophy, in your opinion? Maybe it's an anachronous question; it might seem Kantian, but some passages appear interesting in this regard. Maybe "the wax passage", "strangers in the street passage"²²...? I don't know, this seems interesting.

J.C. Right. So how do you mean exactly, "how structuring"?

R.J. (laughs) I am not sure I know.

J.C. Right...

solely to the utility of a thing. Also, R.J. is using "sensation" in the wide sense of the term which includes internal and external sensations, but passions as well.

²¹ R.J. refers to three kinds of primitive ideas Descartes writes of in AT III 691; CSMK 226-7.

²² AT VII 30-32; CSM II 20-22.

R.J. Let's formulate the question like this: are these innate notions only some kind of, let's say, data points which we access during meditation²³ and then we really understand what is going on in the world, or do they have some kind of function in commonsense, everyday sense-perception?

J.C. Right... Yes, that's a fascinating issue. Maybe there is something Kantian to pick up your point, but I'm thinking about that passage in the *Notes against the Programme* i.e. *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*...

(both looking for the passage)

There is something there.... It's been ages since I've looked to this. Oh yes...

R.J. Maybe 358²⁴?

J.C. Yes, 358, 359. "We make such a judgment not because these things transmit the ideas to our mind through the sense organs, but because they transmit something which, at exactly that moment, gives the mind occasion to form these ideas by means of the faculty innate to it. Nothing reaches our mind from external objects except certain movements..."²⁵. So the argument seems to be, if you trace the actual causal path, you just have movements, movements, movements, movements; there is nothing there which could explain an idea of color, for example. So on the occasion of that, the mind is preprogrammed to come up with the idea of red or of pain or whatever it might be.

R.J. Seems like a lot of content, actually...

J.C. Exactly! That leads straight through to Malebranche and occasionalism, which in turn leads us through to Kant, I think. The idea that the mind imposes a certain structure; as it were, the phenomenal world is already interpreted by the mind. And there is some stuff in Leibniz which is similar. So the mind is – you know Leibniz's image of the sculpture – just a block of marble but it is...

R.J. ... it's carved...

J.C. It's not actually carved! It's the veins...

R.J. ... Yes... it's marked...²⁶

J.C. Yes, there are patterns or veins in the marble. So when the sculptor comes along with his hammer, he is actually just revealing, on the occasion of the blows...

²³ I am not sure if I like the analogy with "data points" but it is what I came up with at that moment. Nevertheless, the meaning of the question should be clear enough: are innate ideas static entities buried inside our minds or dynamic entities that perpetually shape the surface of it?

²⁴ AT VIII B 358; CSM I 303.

²⁵ AT VIII B 359; CSM I 304.

²⁶ The term "marked" alludes to an artisan, while the "natural" description Professor Cottingham uses does not and is probably more in line with Leibniz's own description. See Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Translated by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1981).

R.J. ... what is already there...

J.C. Yes.... So I think that kind of innatism we find in Descartes, Malebranche, and Leibniz does prefigure the Kantian... not in the sophisticated way we find in Kant but it...

R.J. Maybe it's somewhat unorganized... Kant comes and then organizes all of these differently...

J.C. ... Yes...

R.J. ... innate things...

J.C. Kant is a great organizer with his wonderful tables (R.J. laughs) and technical terms... I mean, that is when philosophy suddenly becomes technical and maybe not.... But essentially, it's not new...

R.J. Well, I mean it's obviously not new because of the Aristotle's categories. There is always the fundamental question of whether this is a description of the world or the description of our conceptual framework.

J.C. ... Yes...

R.J. ... And obviously these two are interrelated in such a close way...

J.C. Indeed. And of course Aristotle makes the senses the source of the material, of the knowledge, but in a way the problem goes further back to Plato who clearly thinks the mind has innate knowledge. For example, we've never seen two exactly equal objects by the senses, but the mind has the idea of pure equality so it can't have gotten it from the world, therefore it must have gotten it in, in Plato's case, from a previous existence.

R.J. It's the same for the notion of unity...

J.C. Exactly. Plato's previous existence is just, in my opinion, a poetic way of saying that the mind is already structured in such a way that on the stimulus of sensory presentation it will come up with ideas... Of course, "idea" is a terrible term in philosophy, it can signify/denote/express so many things but...

R.J. I think that philosophy of mind is terminologically the most difficult, second to metaphysics obviously... It's a narrower area but with an identical problem – a same term means many different things in every author...

J.C. And I sometimes think that we can blame Descartes for this to some extent, for introducing the terminology of ideas. He didn't invent it, of course, but this invited many later thinkers to imagine they had explained how the mind works by saying "words stand for ideas", "ideas are triggered in the mind" ... then you have a whole sort of apparatus of intermediate entities, but actually we know nothing more than we knew to start with...

R.J. Yes.

J.C. There are two ways of describing you seeing that lamp. One is "you (i.e. a person) see a lamp" – the macro-language. The other way would be to give a physical description of all the atoms and molecules. My own view is that there isn't a third way which introduces ideas. We can't get further down than either the commonsense

description of you seeing a lamp or the physicists or biologists' description. There is no sort of intermediate thing of "intentional forms", "real qualities", "ideas representing". That is why I'm a bit skeptical of the representational language.

R.J. Yes, I understand. And I agree that there is some kind of epistemological gap which is hard to overcome. Maybe it's actually the mind-body gap which is at the core of the issue, but it seems to me that at least operationally it (representational language) has some value. Maybe all of these descriptions are false, maybe they are a lie in the strict sense of the term; maybe there is nothing there which we call ideas or concepts but maybe these help us perceive stuff. To put this in a more Cartesian way: representational language helps us focus our attention on, let's say, introspective materials; we wouldn't be able to, or we wouldn't know how to divert our attention to these things if we didn't have this conceptual framework. Maybe it's very useful, but it's a lie. Anyway, I agree that it is suspect, for sure... As a philosopher of science would put it: the state of cognitive science and the philosophy of mind shows that all these theories are underdetermined by data.

J.C. Yes...

R.J. And we cannot actually even define data to start with... What is "data" in this context?

J.C. Part of the problem, I think, is that modern philosophy of mind has become obsessed with this qualia business – the question of 'what it is like' for the experiencing subject. And then the question arises – there is supposed to be a mystery about how you get from movements in the brain to the sensation of red, let's say, or a taste of coffee. I think that there is something wrong with that whole way of framing it somehow...

R.J. I have a feeling that we wouldn't be satisfied with any kind of explanation. Because – is there actually anything to explain? If we actually traced the causal connection in its details, there is nothing to explain. From a false dichotomy view, maybe there is a gap, but is there really? Obviously, I have no idea what I'm talking about, but I agree with your sentiment.

J.C. Yes, I think a lot of this stuff about... there is a kind of privacy fallacy going on, I think, in stuff like David Chalmers's work. He conceives the mind as a sort of a private cinema screen. Personally, I am more sympathetic to the Wittgensteinian approach really, that we need to understand language, forms of life...

R.J. (laughing and provoking) But Descartes is more sympathetic to the Wittgensteinian approach as well, I think. Obviously, he's been straw manned to death. I think that all of this talk about mind-body union, passions and objective order which is imposed by God – it all just proves that there is some kind of special access to certain kinds of states, but they are not private at all.

J.C. Yes. Wittgenstein might talk about the community of language users and Descartes talks about the domain created by God to which we have a kind of a hotline, but in both cases it's not purely private...

R.J. ... Obviously...

J.C. That term, “Cartesian privacy”, I think has been greatly overused. Partly because this image of the solitary meditator is quite compelling. Yes, I think it’s been overdone. So, the meditator, although he is alone, very quickly has access to an objective domain which is not a matter of his own subjective *qualia*...

R.J. And if I may connect this to the inverted spectrum debate... Let’s say “qualia variations”, I think that is a better term. I’m not sure of your opinion. Obviously, I found these thoughts in your works but how arbitrary are qualia really?

J.C. Yes. (liking the question)

R.J. Because it seems to me that they may be even less arbitrary than it looks even from the perspective of John Cottingham²⁷ (laughing)... Why am I saying this? Because of these passages from *the Sixth Meditation*, the teleological passages.... I call these passages “the best of all possible sensations” passages²⁸. So, God has chosen sensations which will contribute to our health or our well-being. Obviously, this means that he chose some kind of specific constitution of body rather than a different one. And this is obvious even from the dropsy explanations, and phantom limb example... Does this mean that God even chose (the only possible) *qualia*, which is the second grade of sensory perception? Does this mean that even this second grade is not arbitrary? I think that this is a really interesting question. Would I really move my hand from the heated stove if it didn’t hurt – if it was pleasant? It seems to me that there is even more necessity²⁹ because of this.

J.C. I think that is a good point, a good point! Yes, qualia cannot be completely free-floating. They got to be hooked up to certain dispositions and they got to be positive or negative ones, for example. A baby for whom sweetness was disgusting and acid was pleasant would die very quickly. So it’s not as if God can say “I will give him this or that”. He has to give him one which is suitably configured, as you said in the beginning, for the welfare of the human being.

Inverted qualia, well.... Again, it’s not just like “put this here and put that there”.... Yellow has to be close to orange for various reasons and purple has to be close to red. So as soon as you start to think of the details of how the qualities...

R.J. ...there is a lot less space, a lot less freedom...

J.C. ... yes, I think so. Because they are linked to discriminations not just of “this is *x*”, “this is *y*”, but discriminations of similarity and difference. So it’s more like a spectrum; and then the only question becomes if you could flip the whole spectrum

²⁷ R.J. mentions the relativity of qualia J.C. seems to find in Descartes according to R.J.’s interpretation of J.C.’s paper “Descartes on Colour,” in *Cartesian Reflections: Essays on Descartes’s Philosophy*, ed. John Cottingham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁸ These passages are found in the second part of *the Sixth Meditation*.

²⁹ Necessity in qualia selection during creation and also necessity when some qualia are already selected to exist i.e. “assumed as existing”.

over. But there might be further reasons why you can't. For example, yellow has to be brighter than purple for various reasons connected to responses and contractions of the eye and so on... So it's one of these things that, you know, if you display the argument about the inverted spectrum to undergraduates who have never done philosophy they would go "Oh wow!"...

R.J. ... "it's fascinating"! (laughing)...

J.C. ... "it could all be switched around"... You will find many talks and blogs on the internet from neuroscientists and even philosophers who should know better, saying things like "your brain is lying to you – colour is all in your head"³⁰. I saw the lecture on YouTube the other day where the speaker was saying "we don't really see red tomatoes" and they showed a diagram of the brain etc. ... "we just create red tomatoes"...

R.J. ... "we construct" (laughing). It's even worse if we "socially construct" (laughing).

J.C. And you could see all the students in the audience drinking this in, as if they were thinking "oh wow, this is philosophy, this is really interesting"... But in reality it's full of confusions. It's rather like these questions "might I really be dreaming" "might a whole of life be a dream". I think the interesting questions are the ones you are considering, e.g. what it is to be a human being – the ontological nature of humanity. But these sorts of thought experiment question – they have certain glamour, but I think often dissolve on further scrutiny.

3.

R.J. If you don't mind, I would like to push this question of teleology further. I have a paper in progress³¹, but it's at the most boring stage of writing for me – when I know what I think about the problem and then I need to correct all these tiny things. I usually lose interest in the final phase; I want to do something different, something more interesting. Anyway, the paper is almost done.

I believe that I have found a contradiction in Descartes's philosophy. I am not sure if this is a big result or not; I guess that it is. It seems to me that it's a dilemma and one thing or the other needs to go. In these passages – "the best of all possible sensations" passages which I mentioned before – teleology is introduced. But this teleology, I believe, cannot be natural teleology. I borrow the term from the classification of Allison Simmons; she makes the distinction between the natural, rational and divine teleology. "Natural teleology is the attribution of ends to non-

³⁰ <https://www.cbc.ca/natureofthings/features/your-brain-is-lying-to-you-colour-is-all-in-your-head-and-other-colourful-f>

³¹ Soon to be published paper titled "Teleology, Sensory Perception and Contradiction in Descartes' Philosophy".

rational natural bodies and their parts”; “Rational teleology is the attribution of ends to finite rational creatures engaged in conscious deliberative actions” – obviously not the kind of teleology of sensations. “Divine teleology: the attribution of ends to God and in particular to God’s creative acts”³². So, if we follow this scheme, rational teleology is out of the question when it comes to sensation, and we are left with natural teleology and divine teleology. It seems to me that this kind of scheme is exclusive; it covers all possible options. You could talk about the teleology of an artisan/craftsman; but this is a sort of rational teleology. If we ask ourselves what the teleology of sense perception in Descartes actually is, I have an argument that it cannot be the natural teleology³³. Why? Because both mind and body are substances; and substances depend only on God on the basis of definitions from Principles I 51 and 52³⁴. My point is that the teleology of sense perception must be divine teleology, even though Descartes is not explicit about this. However, Descartes’ explicit, independent position on teleology is that we cannot know God’s purposes.

These two propositions contradict each other.

J.C. Exactly, exactly! I think that’s well worth bringing out. There are several passages where Descartes says that the search for final causes or purposes is useless in physics, and there are several reasons he gives for that. One is that purposes don’t give us any understanding of the nature of a physical thing. He doesn’t give this example, but saying that the Moon is there to give us light at night doesn’t help us to understand why the Moon got there (in the first place), and so it’s explanatorily useless.

Second, Descartes maintains that it’s presumptuous to try and know the purposes of God...

(R.J. was showing Descartes’ quote in the PowerPoint presentation at this moment)

Is that from the *Principles* or the *Meditations*?

R.J. Yes, I actually had a presentation on *Science, Faith and Superstition* seminar...

J.C. That’s right, we shouldn’t be so arrogant to think...

R.J. (talking about the presentation) Yes, it can go up and down?

J.C. ... Yes, all things are hid in the....

³² See p. 64 of Alison Simmons, “Sensible Ends: Latent Teleology in Descartes’ Account of Sensation,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (2001): 49–75.

³³ Descartes’ definition of “nature” is: God and the ordered system he created (See AT VII 80; CSM II 56). Thus, the meaning of “natural” in the context of the classification is non-Cartesian and leans towards contemporary naturalism.

³⁴ AT VIII A 24-5; CSM I 210.

We shouldn't pretend that some of God's purposes are more out in the open than others. All are hidden in the inscrutable abyss of his wisdom. Besides, he talks about that in the *Conversation with Burman*...³⁵

R.J. (talking about the presentation) These few slides up and down are the ones that ...

J.C. Does this slide go up and down...?

R.J. Yes, you can just do it like this.

J.C. Ok, great. So, there is a kind of theological reason that it's presumptuous, it's arrogant to claim to know. Second, we are finite, but God is infinite, so we can't grasp... And thirdly, we need to look at efficient causality and not final causality. Yes, there I believe he is thinking of how scholasticism was a dead end. It had given us all sorts of final causes but...

(looking at the R.J.'s PowerPoint presentation)

So it seems that divine teleology is ruled out. But then, is this the contradiction you mean, in the Sixth Meditation he seems to be saying...?

R.J. Yes, there is no other explanation of the purpose or the end of our sensory perception...

J.C. Yes...

R.J. And this is the argument, if you want to see... (navigating through the presentation)

And the justification of the premise comes after, so you can just press the down arrow... I haven't seen that this issue was explored anywhere.

J.C. No, I think that it would be an excellent topic for an article. How about this: supposing I say that the apparatus of the human being is configured for the survival of the human being. I mean you could give a Darwinian explanation for that, namely if it wasn't configured in such a way, the species would die out. So Descartes says that there is a divine underwriting for it. But it's the same argument, isn't it? It's saying that the organism must be functionally efficient.

R.J. Yes...

J.C. So your question, I guess, is the following: is that objectionable teleology which Descartes is not really entitled to?

R.J. Yes, it seems to me that he needs to let go of the teleology of sense perception – in that case he loses a lot: there would be no explanation of external senses, internal senses and passions. And if he doesn't, I believe that he needs to bite the bullet and say that we actually know some of God's purposes. And this doesn't mean that we know the most important of the purposes or, "even worse", all of them.

The situation is similar when it comes to any kind of artifact; I think that's an important analogy. If I see a car for instance, if I know anything, even a little bit, I

³⁵ See piece 29 on p. 19 of *Conversation with Burman*, trans. John Cottingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976)

can conclude the purpose of the maker of the car was to make a functioning transport vehicle or whatever. I don't know if his purpose was to spend the money he made on his wife, on his house... I don't know most of his goals. But I do know the purpose he had while making the car. If by analogy we could say that we know God's purposes, it's not really a deep insight, but I think that it can be allowed. God wanted us to be healthy! That is the purpose of God's creation of sense perception. When he created us, he had our purpose in mind, in the sense that his purpose during creation of human beings is our purpose while living: our well-being.³⁶

J.C. Right. Ok, now I am sort of playing devil's advocate; I think you've made a very powerful argument there, so I think it's well worth it. A possible reply might be: there may be some ultimate explanation in divine creation but I can see just by looking at this organism that it's functionally efficient. Here is an analogy, Descartes says somewhere, I think it is in *the Second Replies*, about clear and distinct perception. The question is: could it be mistaken? And he says: "here I simply assert that when we clearly and distinctly perceive, it is impossible for us to be wrong because there would be no higher faculty that could correct it".³⁷ Now you could ask: Why? Aren't you invoking a benevolent God there and how do you know God's purposes? But the reply might be: well, it's just as a matter of fact, if we didn't have some basic capacity to see the truth in very simple assertions of logic or mathematics, then we couldn't be having this discussion. We couldn't do any philosophy or science, but we do philosophy and we do science, therefore there is a presupposition of the accuracy of our clear and distinct perception. So it is a kind of a functional efficiency which we can see operating, without which...

R.J. ... maybe the question or the objection can be posed in the following formulation: should the principle of sufficient reason be applied to this? Is our functionality a brute fact, or it needs an explanation? But I think that Descartes would definitely belong to the "explanation camp". I mean, he tries to give an explanation.

J.C. Yes. "There is nothing here that does not bespeak of goodness and wisdom of the Creator". In a way it is a kind of theodicy, isn't it, that *Sixth Meditation*...

R.J. Yes, yes...

J.C. ... because the objector is saying: "look, how come we always go wrong?" and the reply is: "well no, with respect to these things, we don't go wrong, because it would be better that the senses operate as a universal instrument". So yes, I think you've put that very well. There are different levels of explanation. So we could just say that at the basic level we just see this kind of functional efficiency in human

³⁶ See AT VII 87-8; CSM II 60 for the crux of "the best of all possible sensations" doctrine.

³⁷ "In the case of our clearest and most careful judgements ... if such judgements were false they could not be corrected by any clearer judgement or by means of any other natural faculty. In such cases, I simply assert that it is impossible for us to be deceived." Descartes, *Meditations*, Second Replies, AT VII 144; CSM II 103.

faculties and then at some higher level we could ask: what is the reason for that? And then a Darwinian could say: “well, survival has triggered it; the demands of survival in a hostile world have just spewed forth these mechanisms which work”. Descartes will not use that argument obviously, but he will say: “it’s been configured by the benevolent agent”.

R.J. But, both of these figures actually accept the principle of sufficient reason in this case. So my answer to the objection would be: why wouldn’t we accept the principle of sufficient reason in this case? I mean, it is not the case of Russell-Copleston debate (laughing); it’s not that kind of case. It’s a question about the reason for a pretty simple³⁸ natural fact. It’s not something that could be transcendent in any way. Why not accept the principle of sufficient reason?

J.C. Yes...

R.J. (starting to say something simultaneously with J.C.) Sorry, sorry, please, I want to hear it.

J.C. No, no, I was just thinking of the importance of the goodness of God in Descartes. I think he does inherit from, as I said in that recent paper “Which Naturalism?”³⁹ – I don’t know if you’ve come across that, the Thomistic apparatus of the natural light, so there is a fundamental faith, in a way, in the ability of the human mind to perceive the truth, and goodness as well. So, the theistic world view is strongly influencing his framework, I think, even though he seems to be sweeping everything away and starting from scratch. And my general view of Descartes is that he is not at all a religiously subversive thinker, although the church has regarded him as subversive, as a modern, a danger to the faith. But actually, he is very much in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas. The natural God given light of reason is there almost from the very beginning. So it’s no surprise that the human being too... ; you know, the God looks at his creation in Genesis and finds it good, and that must include things like the way animals eat and drink, are hungry and thirsty, it’s all configured for that Good.

I think it’s a great question to raise; I have not seen it raised in the literature.

R.J. Yes, I don’t know what Descartes’s reason for the universal denial of divine teleology is. I am not sure. This could be interesting to check out: why did he want to say that we cannot know any of God’s purposes? I was thinking about some kind of objection along the lines of: “Yes, but these purposes we could know are kind of trivial, since we already know that God is Good. He configured that our purpose is to be healthy; the implication is that we know that our purpose on the basis of his attribute i.e. Goodness and not his own purpose.... Maybe the purposes become trivial

³⁸ Although “pretty simple” now seems like a mischaracterisation, the functionality of the senses remains *simply* a natural fact – one for which we ordinarily seek explanations.

³⁹ Cottingham, J. (2022), “Which naturalism?”. *New Blackfriars*, 103: 581-596. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765>

if you keep in mind God's attributes. That was the objection I was thinking I could pose to myself.

J.C. Yes. He says somewhere that this principle of arguing from purposes is Aristotle's greatest fault. So he is clearly targeting the scholastics there. A part of the reason, I think, concerns his new programme for science: it is based on mathematics, quantity and mechanisms. Once you see the mechanisms, you can see how things work and you don't need purposes anymore. Of course, he is even going to apply that to the biological realm. To the detriment of science I believe, because there are still many scientists who think that purposes are somehow not quite kosher.

R.J. Yes, in biology obviously...

J.C. Yes, of course we have, we must have natural teleology in biology. The roots go down to seek the water. A lot of scientists would say: "Oh no, they don't do that. That is just a short, convenient shorthand and once we have the mechanisms we don't need the purposes". So I think that is an unresolved question in modern science.

R.J. The Leibnizian position seems very good in that regard. Why choose a side? Generally, my sentiment is that usually both sides have something to offer so why not take the good from both sides.

J.C. Yes, I don't see anything wrong with Aristotle saying there are four different patterns of explanation: formal, material, efficient and final. They have different uses in different contexts. When we see a cat chasing a mouse, we know it's *in order to* get the mouse that it springs. There would be no question of eliminating that, that would be crazy. But of course, Descartes officially says that biology is just physics and I think he has sort of overdone it there...

R.J. (laughing) I went into some of his embryology that is really funny as well, because he talks about the position of the fetus determining their sex. However, there is something brave about being consistent in such a way about your own research programme.

J.C. Yes. Clearly, the opportunities opened up by this new mechanical and quantitative physics are amazing. We are all beneficiaries of that. But, as so often there is this human tendency to think this is the sole key and even Bertrand Russell makes that sort of mistake, I think. He says "this table looks rectangular, but the real table we know from science is different, is just an empty space..." Of course, it is atoms, but it's also a flat table. One isn't truer than the other. But there is this tendency to be programmatic, I think, and Descartes' is not immune from it.

R.J. Yes, I think an interesting way to look at it is that it in a way shows our arrogance, or the arrogance of our intellect. It seems to me that it's easier to be programmatic when you think that there is some kind of sentient, omniscient, benevolent and all-powerful being. Because it seems that we frequently think that the simplicity is "the way of this being", you know? So if you have one main research programme, the elegant, the rational solution would be for it to be applicable in every domain. I mean, that is even true in Kant!

J.C. Yes!

R.J. ... the natural laws are always simple. This is the rationalistic way, I guess. I haven't read a lot of Whitehead, but he is interesting because he talks of creativity as being the key principle of nature. He wouldn't say an attribute I guess, because he dislikes the substance-attribute distinction. But creativity means complexity and not simplicity...

J.C. Yes. No, but Descartes is clearly wedded to that... He explicitly says that in one of his letters: "*la nature ne se sert que de moyens qui sont fort simples*".⁴⁰– Nature only uses very simple means. Do you know Iain McGilchrist's superb book *The Master and His Emissary*?⁴¹ He talks a lot about left-brain versus right-brain modes of understanding. One of his arguments is that our culture has gone astray by excessive left-brain thinking. In other words: reducing everything to a form from which we are detached. So we look down on it, we can manipulate it, we feel superior, but we are not involved or engaged....

R.J. I guess that he blames Descartes for that as well. (laughing)

J.C. He does, exactly. So there are two modes of cognition, a kind of detached manipulative mode and an engaged mode. Actually, in my latest book, *The Humane Perspective*,⁴² I draw on that a little bit too, suggesting that we need really two epistemologies: there is an epistemology of detachment, where we are sort of looking down and trying to remain separate from the phenomenon we want to know about, but there is also room for epistemology of engagement or involvement, where we are a part of what we are investigating, in a certain way. So this brings in ideas like attunement and so on...

R.J. So do you think that this third primitive notion from the correspondence with Elizabeth makes room for this kind of knowledge?⁴³ It's Simmons, right?; She has this paper⁴⁴ in which she claims we cannot really have the metaphysics of embodiment because of the essential, inherent confusedness of sensory perception. She claims that we cannot have metaphysics of the unity, but can we have something else?

J.C. Yes, by experience we can engage with it, we can be attuned to it, we can know about it... So, ordinary life gives us acquaintance with these embodied properties. Yes, I think that is quite plausible...

⁴⁰ Letter to Huygens of 10 October 1642, AT II 797: CSMK 215.

⁴¹ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁴² John Cottingham, *The Humane Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

⁴³ R.J. refers to Descartes's conceptual scheme from AT III 691-2; CSMK 226-7.

⁴⁴ Alison Simmons, "Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics," *Philosophers' Imprint* 17 (2017).

R.J. It's unfortunate that Descartes died somewhat early because he would probably develop, or it seems he could develop, his system in this direction.

J.C. Yes, I think so...

R.J. ... Especially because of, you know, the tree metaphor... These are the....

J.C. ... the crowning fruits of his enterprise... Yes, absolutely... It's all great stuff. It sounds as if you have got a great thesis on your hands...

...

(discussion went into the domain of R.J.'s obligations on the faculty which are philosophically irrelevant; however, prof. Cottingham put forward a philosophically relevant conclusion)

J.C. I am a great believer in the connection between teaching and research. I think the two go together and it's a real shame in my opinion that there's been this separation, at least in Britain and America. Everyone wants not to teach, they want to go away, have endless sabbaticals and research grants and things... But I think that this is a mistake because apart from anything else it's by teaching that one learns to write and to think clearly...

So what about your own supervisors? Are they trained in the Anglo-American tradition?

R.J. Yes, of course. My mentor is prof. Radenović – she is the reason I am here. It is mostly because of her that we got the grant from Ian Ramsey Centre. She actually conducted research on the topic I focused on for my master's, i.e. the folk psychology. Nowadays, in the context of Descartes' philosophy, we are writing a paper on Descartes' Demon and its connection to medieval demonology⁴⁵. She had a great idea that Descartes' Demon is explored from epistemological perspective, but it is not really explored in the context of history of ideas and philosophy. The question we are most interested in is: how Descartes' Demon differs from the demons of the Middle Ages, for instance, descriptions of demons in Aquinas...

J.C. Alright, great!

...

J.C. I always think teaching is stimulating and good. And now I am retired from teaching, I still give a lot of papers and in fact that feedback you get when you're giving papers is tremendously valuable.

R.J. But there is something special about live conversation...

J.C. ... absolutely...

R.J. ... which I think cannot be substituted by anything....

J.C. Yes, I was thinking, this afternoon we've actually covered a lot of ground; if we just had a zoom session we probably wouldn't have gotten through so much. But

⁴⁵ L. Radenović and R. Jevtić, "Descartes' Demon and His Powers: The Break with Medieval Demonology," *Belgrade Philosophical Annual* 37, no. 2 (2024).

before we stop, is there anything you would particularly want to cover we haven't touched on?

R.J. Yes, I have many questions; I might ask this one. If we read Descartes fairly, we know that he believes there is some kind of unity... We know that trialism⁴⁶ is true... However, we know there is a very strong argument substantial trialism cannot stand – there is no third substance.

J.C. Yes, sure.

R.J. So I am trying to find my position somewhere between a kind of a nominalistic interpretation: there is only a concept of human being but nothing really there except (interaction between substances)... and substantial trialism... I think that I stand in the middle because I think there is something in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, different correspondences, etc. He explicitly acknowledges and asserts that there is some kind of composite i.e. unity, constituted by mind and body but that it is more than just their interaction.

J.C. Yes...

R.J. ... But how far can we... What other, uhm....

J.C. ... way of categorising it, way of classifying it?

R.J. Yes... Because it seems to me that one is ought to say more than just describe it as a *sui generis* unity with *sui generis* properties. I would like to say more.... And then, how far should we look into scholastic explanations and terminology? For instance, how beneficial is it to focus on Descartes's correspondence with Regius? And is unity really *ens per se*...?

Sorry, it's a final question so I try to express all the ideas at the same time... Is the investigation into, let's say, Suarez and further, into all these scholastic distinctions – could it help us with the ontological status of the human being – or is Descartes just rhetorically maneuvering through this political problem which he found himself in and didn't even want to be involved with? Is *ens per se* always a complete substance? Descartes' explicitly says that both mind and body are complete substances... how should one reconcile this with the claim that unity is *ens per se*?

J.C. Yes. This term *ens* I think is not very perspicuous in Descartes and it certainly doesn't necessarily carry substantial connotations. For example, a triangle is a *verum ens*; in the Fifth Meditation, he says that a triangle is a true entity which is not made up by me⁴⁷. So yes, what is it? It is certainly not a substance.

R.J. It should be a mode of *res cogitans*, for sure.

J.C. Yes, or it might be a concept, an idea in God's mind... But anyway... Its status as a genuine *verum ens*, a genuine entity, simply means that we can

⁴⁶ An interpretative position that claims that a human-being i.e. mind-body unity has a special status in Descartes' philosophy and is not simply an interaction of mind and body. It is a "third kind" of thing, different from the two finite substances.

⁴⁷ Professor is probably referring to AT VII 64; CSM II 44-5.

demonstrate or infer its genuine properties. So, its angles equal 180 degrees – you didn't make it up, I didn't make it up... The nature of the thing itself determines that, so it's a genuine entity. On the other hand, in terms of the ontology of the universe, we have souls, we have bodies... we don't have triangles, I think. I mean, some Platonists might say that, but Descartes does not want to say that...

R.J. Yes, for sure.

J.C. As for the human being, the term I prefer is attributive trialism. And I think that's more than just conceptual; it's not just saying that these are categories of thought, it's saying they are genuine attributes. An attribute is an ontological category, so in a way I think, so you could have ontology without substance. But to be a substance, you got to be capable of existing independently, or at least with God concurrence...

R.J. ... Yes, it's the same in this context...

J.C. ... Yes, it's the same... Attributes aren't in that sense real substances, they can only inhere in things, but they could inhere in a composite, as well as in a pure substance.

R.J. But why do you use the word attribute? Because the word "property" seems to me more adequate.

J.C. ... Oh yes...

R.J. ... you know, when I think of the term "attribute" I think of the essential property. I think of the essential property which is actually the substance, because Descartes' wouldn't allow for substratum. He wouldn't allow for something that exists and has no essential property. But okay, I understand.⁴⁸

What about these composite natures? He talks about a circle inscribed in a triangle that is a composite nature. And he explicitly says that this figure has its own nature, but the relation between the circle and the triangle seems less close than the relation between the mind and body... Why does he then insist that these are complete things? Has he just gone too far?

J.C. It may be... I am not sure... the terminology of property/attribute/predicate... I think it's unlikely that he always uses these terms completely consistently, so maybe we shouldn't worry too much about that. But as regards the ontological question... As you know, I have often used an analogy with water – you can't have water molecules unless they are hydrogen and oxygen – so in that sense those two elements are more fundamental. Nonetheless, water is in a way a genuine thing in its own right. Does it have independent existence? Well, no, because it depends on hydrogen and oxygen; but it has genuine properties or attributes. I'm not quite sure which we term

⁴⁸ In the first part of *the Principles of Philosophy* (e.g. para. 52 and 53) Descartes frequently uses the term "attribute" as we nowadays use the term "property": to refer to something that inheres in another thing in the most general sense. The reason for R.J.'s question is the frequent usage of "attribute" as a synonym for "principal attribute".

we should use. Properties... yes? I think there is some Aristotelian and scholastic stuff about that, possibly in Suarez, but my intuition is that is not terribly important. “Qualities” is another one to add to the mix. But certainly, to be human is to have these distinctive qualities/attributes/properties which we cannot have full access to using just the pure categories of abstract thought, nor can we explain them as matter in motion, but we can have intimate knowledge of them by experience – that’s what he told Elizabeth. And therefore, there is something real and genuine going on there. If we then on insist on pressing the substance question, I think Descartes would just fall back and say: well, no, they are not substances, the substances are just things which can exist on their own (apart from needing God’s concurrence), namely *res cogitans* and *res extensa*...

R.J. ... But a human being is an *ens per se*...

J.C. ... Yes...

R.J. ... But not a substance...

J.C. ... Yes.

R.J. Is this a break from the scholastic definition?

J.C. Well, scholasticism by that time had become so baroque that there were probably many...

R.J. ... Yes, everything goes...

J.C. And there are always these two questions in the history of philosophy. There is “the trying to locate it within the terminology of the time” which is very important; but it is also important I think, in my view anyway, that we should keep in mind what’s at stake philosophically. You know: why is this interesting for us? And I think these questions about human nature are still interesting, even though no one anymore uses terms like *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, and even very much substance... I mean, of course there are these Neo-Aristotelians who talk about substance and attributes.

R.J. Descartes is, in my opinion, great, because he, on the one hand, accepts the existence of the soul, and on the other hand, wants to push the natural (in the contemporary sense of the word) research of physiology further. In Spinoza and Leibniz we see a fallback position, or the position that requires less effort, because they don’t even try to explain interaction.

J.C. No! That’s right.

R.J. It seems to me that Descartes is the last one who actually tries to somehow make this connection.

J.C. Oh yes! And that’s his genius/brilliance. He is not content to rest with the dogmatic, official doctrine; he pushes it further.

R.J. Yes. Thank you, Professor!

J.C. Well, it’s been great. I really enjoyed our conversation.

R.J. Yes, me too. I am a bit younger so I could still go on... (J.C. laughing) Thank you very much, it’s been a great conversation!

J.C. It’s really been very enjoyable!

Rastko Jevtić
Institute for Philosophy
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

Razgovor sa Džonom Kotingemom
(*Apstrakt*)

Glavni cilj razgovora sa profesorom Kotingemom, jednim od najvećih živih autoriteta u pogledu Dekartove filozofije, bio je da se istaknu često zapostavljeni delovi Dekartovog sistema, kao i da se zauzmu nesvakidašnje interpretativne perspektive. Zbog toga se teme poput Dekartove metaetike, filozofije emocija, ontologije i teleologije ljudskih bića i životinja nalaze u prvom planu. Naravno, rasprava o janusovskom filozofu poput Dekarta zahteva da se uzmu u obzir uticaji koji sežu duboko u prošlost, sadašnjost i budućnost. Zato će biti reči i o njegovim antičkim i srednjovekovnim prethodnicima, njegovim savremenima i njegovim naslednicima. Prodornost Dekartovog uticaja je ujedno i povod za refleksije profesora Kotingema o savremenim temama, uključujući probleme (mentalnih) reprezentacija, obrnutog spektra, *qualia* itd. Sve u svemu, verovatno bi bilo lakše izdvojiti teme kojima se nismo bavili nego one kojima jesmo. Srpska (i svaka druga) čitalačka publika ima veliku sreću što se ovakva intelektualna poslastica našla ispred nas.