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One Peculiar Nut

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- *Cogito, Ergo Sum: The Life of René Descartes* by Richard A. Watson

For René Descartes, the problem of keeping body and soul together took three forms. First, how did thinking stuff keep company with material stuff? Soul was active, unextended in space and immortal; body was passive, extended and, if it made up the structure of a human being, distressingly mortal. And yet humans were unique hybrids, in which rational minds volitionally moved brute matter, making them something quite different from parrots, apes and ‘earthen statues’. In 1643, the young and charming Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia asked Descartes how such a thing was possible and, while Descartes responded by performing some of his fanciest philosophical footwork, he was unable fully to satisfy her on this point, hoping that egregious flattery of both her body and her soul would substitute for substance.

Second, Descartes was greatly concerned with keeping his own body and soul together for as long as his wits could enable him to do so. In the *Discourse on Method* of 1637 he promised that if he could get his philosophical system right – and he let it be known that he was pretty close to doing that – then amazing things would follow in mechanics, morals and, above all, medicine. The vast prolongation of human life was a real possibility, and Descartes assured friends that he was about to crack the secret of living for several hundred years, if not for ever. ‘It should not be doubted,’ he wrote, ‘that human life could be prolonged, if we knew the appropriate art.’ He told Constantijn Huygens in 1637 that ‘I have never taken greater care in looking after myself than I am doing at the moment.’ Descartes was then in an optimistic frame of mind, once believing that he was built to last only thirty or forty years, but now seeing the prospect of living ‘a hundred

years or more' if only he could produce that 'infallible' system of medicine he was known to be searching for. He tried to dampen some of the wilder expectations of what he was on the verge of achieving: he said that while he could not promise 'to render a man immortal', he was 'quite sure it was possible to lengthen out his lifespan to equal that of the Patriarchs' – say, a thousand years. So when he died in 1650 one of his friends wrote that 'he would have sworn that it would have been impossible for Descartes to die at the age of 54, as he did; and that, without an external and violent cause as that which deranged his machine in Sweden, he would have lived five hundred years, after having found the art of living several centuries.'

The third aspect of keeping Descartes's body and soul together is much more mundane and more central to this biography: if you were going to be a philosophical author – one who was not a professor (like Roberval), not a cleric (like Mersenne), not a physician (like Harvey), not a family retainer (like Hobbes), not a court philosopher (like Galileo), and definitely not a mechanic and schoolmaster (like Beeckman) – how did you go about living that life? How did you find the material resources to keep yourself going and the cultural resources to lay claim to a recognised and valued platform in the social world permitting you authoritatively to pronounce on mind, matter and philosophical method? It was, of course, a very good thing to have independent means, but many early modern philosophers who did have such financial independence, and the accompanying social standing, spent much of their time apologising for appearing in the person of a philosophical author: it wasn't the sort of thing a gentleman usually went in for. His family never considered the possibility that young René would spend his life writing books, and his father Joachim was alleged to have said that of his three sons René was the only one he was ashamed of – 'a son so ridiculous as to bind himself in calfskin'. The family were upwardly mobile Poitou professionals, aspiring to the *noblesse de robe*, and ultimately achieving patents of minor nobility in 1668. There were doctors on both sides of the family, but, more to the point, lawyers, judges, police and finance officers, and councillors in regional *parlements* who enriched themselves in the customary way by selling offices and taking their cut on legal and commercial transactions.

René was the second son. That was his misfortune and modernity's good luck, for had he been the eldest the odds on his becoming a philosopher would have been seriously reduced. His older brother, and later his younger half-brother, both did the right thing: offices were purchased for them and they added to the family's growing collection of farms and miscellaneous real estate. René was sent off to be educated by the Society of Jesus at the Royal College in La Flèche, where tuition was free, to make sure that the Jesuit fathers could get at the best available young talent, preparing him for the law degree he ultimately took at Poitiers. But at that point he turned awkward, and his father could not have been best pleased. René didn't want a legal or administrative career, so he lounged about for a few years in Brittany and Paris, deciding what he was going to do with himself.

As Descartes said in the partly autobiographical *Discourse*, he joined the army to see the world, and, as Richard Watson plausibly enough suggests, to get away from his father and Cartesian family values. The Thirty Years War had just begun, and it was an odd time for someone who so vigorously expressed his love of repose to become a soldier. But if it was a killing time, Descartes was mainly just killing time, and, while he was a notable fencer, there is no certain evidence that he was ever a fighter. A French Catholic, he chose the Protestant army of Prince Maurice of Nassau, and, while there were considerations of Realpolitik that could in themselves make such a decision wholly intelligible, Descartes might also have been intellectually attracted by Maurice's revolution in the mechanics of killing people – the invention of drilled soldiers, performing like massed and co-ordinated automata. In the event, there is some evidence that after a year or so with Maurice he was associated with a Catholic army.

The philosophical epiphany in the 'stove-heated room' occurred while Descartes was on his military travels, and, shortly after he had finished studying 'the great book of the world', he settled down to his philosophical vocation. If he ever got much money from having himself 'bound in calfskin', it would have made him practically unique among early modern philosophers. The Books that Made the Modern World were very rarely money-spinners: many were given

away in sumptuous editions; many were pirated; and philosophical authors typically kept body and soul together through clerical livings, medical practices, professorial chairs and fellowships, court pensions, or spending their families' accumulated capital. This last was Descartes's course of action. Turning 25, he came into his inheritance from his late mother and secured his father's permission to sell up an assortment of farms and houses in Poitou, possibly on the understanding that he'd use the proceeds to buy a lucrative victualling office in the French Army. But he did no such thing, and the income on the 40,000 livres realised from the Poitou properties and still more real estate sold off over the years – possibly six to seven hundred livres a year – was used to give Descartes that 'modest independence' which meant he need do nothing else but write philosophy for the rest of his life.

As he proudly stipulated in the *Discourse*, he 'was not, thank Heaven, in a condition which compelled me to make merchandise of Science for the bettering of my fortune'. Refusing to buy an office, showing no interest in marrying an heiress, Descartes became, as Watson says, 'a drone, a family parasite'. Perhaps, by 1628, he'd had enough of all that family disapproval, and, aged 32, he took the money and ran off to Holland, never to see his father again, or to have much to do with his older brother except when he needed more money. Descartes took as his motto: 'He who lives hidden, lives well.' But, while he described his life in Holland as one of sweet anonymity, he lived there on as public a stage as practically any other philosopher, and the only people he was effectively hidden from were members of his family. When his father died in 1640, the family had to get his Dutch address from a philosophical correspondent in Paris. The most French of the French moderns spent almost all of the rest of his life away from his own country, and none of the work published in his lifetime was written in France.

Descartes may have renounced his family, but he nevertheless bore their stamp and never forgot who he was. One of the properties he sold in the 1620s was a small farm called Le Perron, and in later life he intermittently styled himself *sieur du Perron*, possibly, as Watson suggests, trading on a likely confusion with an unrelated cardinal of

that name. To say that Descartes was a social snob is just to say that he was, after all, his father's son. If he did not actively seek suave and well-bred company, he certainly welcomed it when it was available. He could not do enough for Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, offering to cure both her metaphysical malaise and her constipation, and dedicating the *Principles of Philosophy* to this most Protestant of princesses – which was not the cleverest of moves if you wanted to ingratiate yourself with the Catholic universities. In 1648, he tore himself away from Dutch solitude to return to Paris, securing lodgings near the Court and the appropriate haberdashery. He had hopes of a royal pension, and, in Watson's judgment, was even prepared to become a courtier to secure it. When Queen Christina called in 1649, Descartes was flattered enough, or broke enough, to answer, even though he feared – quite rightly – that the Swedish winter (and 5 a.m. royal philosophy lessons) would be the death of him. The idea of teaching his philosophy to a queen, especially to a queen who was intellectually inclined, and who would be played on film by Greta Garbo, was irresistible.

What did Descartes want his life of exiled philosophical book-writing to achieve? Fundamentally, he wanted to be institutionalised, to be taught in the Schools, to supplant Aristotelianism, and to become himself 'the new Aristotle', building a new all-embracing philosophical system, with a new metaphysics and a new method that could deliver all the mechanical, medical and moral goods that Aristotelian philosophy purported to supply but spectacularly failed to. That was not an unusual aspiration for a 17th-century philosophical modern – Thomas Hobbes wanted much the same thing – and having this as a goal meant that you had to shape your new philosophy not just to cover everything that Scholasticism covered, but to slot smoothly into the Schools' curricular structure. And even if you were able to satisfy the systemic and curricular demands of replacing Scholasticism, you still had to show that your system was not just different and better, but, crucially, that it was also inoffensive to cherished articles of Christian faith and morality. Those criteria were exceptionally hard for any modern philosopher to satisfy, and still harder for Descartes.

Galileo's trial and condemnation in 1633 panicked Descartes. If this is what happened to philosophers who professed Copernicanism, then neither repose nor academic institutionalisation was going to be easy to come by. His great book on natural philosophy, *Le monde*, was virtually completed, but he now put it aside, telling Father Mersenne: 'I am quasi-resolved to burn all my papers, or at least to show them to no one . . . I never fancied myself as a maker of books, anyway.' He soon changed his mind about that, but in the early 1640s the opposition of Dutch Calvinist theologians, and the insinuation that he was an atheist, threw him into a state again. If you acquired that sort of reputation, no university, Catholic or Protestant, was going to teach your works. Descartes was well aware that his contemporaries used the man to gauge the matter: 'They who set themselves to give precepts must of course regard themselves as possessed of greater skill than those to whom they prescribe; and if they err in the slightest particular, they subject themselves to censure.' And if his completed system was ever going to prescribe in morals as well as in mechanics and medicine, then it would be useful if Descartes himself was seen to be virtuous as well as clever and healthy. It didn't help that he had a daughter in 1635 by a Dutch woman whom he almost certainly didn't marry – both the daughter Francine and her mother Helena Jans were dead by 1640 – so when he was accused several years later by a Dutch theologian of having illegitimate sons, Descartes's reply was worthy of the Jesuits: 'I am a man, and I have never made a vow of chastity,' he said, but then he denied – truthfully – that he had illegitimate sons. He advertised his philosophy as a guide to his own judgment and conduct, and, in so doing, offered himself for inspection as an embodied warrant for the power and virtue of his system.

That is the historical state of affairs which could give serious point and purpose to a biography of the quotidian bits of an intellectual life. The early moderns accepted – as we late moderns officially do not – that the philosophical physician should cure himself, that a well-lived life counted as a useful, if imperfect, index to the truth, power and virtuousness of the philosopher's knowledge. Richard Watson isn't much interested in tracing the intellectual career of *res cogitans*, *res extenso*, and the plausibility of the metaphysical system in which they

were embedded. He himself made his philosophical bones in the 1960s writing that sort of conceptual history. His first book, on the late 17th-century decline of Cartesian metaphysics, was written in the high history-of-ideas style, but the current biography is dramatic testimony to how far he's moved on, so far indeed that for the most part it's impossible to tell what the point of his book is. He certainly means to be funny – and the very idea of a funny biography of Descartes is wonderfully Pythonesque – though the book winds up far more funny-peculiar than funny-ha-ha, and much of its intended humour has a manic quality that stands as a vivid caution against playing the adolescent class clown at the age of 71. The index alone tells you what sort of funny man wrote this biography: there are entries for 'Shut up, only time RD had the sense to'; 'Up yours to the king'; 'Pop a pill'; 'Health nut, RD'; 'Broke, RD flat'; and 'Screw' (which is an awful tease in this context, since it turns out to be only the Archimedean variety). Speculating about his reasons for accepting Christina's invitation to Stockholm, Watson writes that Descartes was 'like a professor in the sticks, teaching at Podunk U.' – Podunk U. is usefully indexed – 'waiting for the fabled call from Harvard'. Noting Descartes's commendation of a recipe for an omelette of eggs that have been brooded for more than a week, Watson questions the philosopher's connoisseurship: 'Do you know what is inside eggs that have been brooded eight or ten days? Yech.' And so on in that vein.

This is one of those biographies where Biographer occasionally insists on sharing centre-stage with his subject. So Biographer and His Wife rent a cottage in Friesland to share Descartes's view; they eat many kinds of Dutch cheese to taste what Descartes would have tasted; they wander the lanes of Poitou to survey what it meant to be *sieur du Perron*; they practically kill themselves hiking an Alpine pass through which Descartes might have travelled (though almost certainly not on foot); Biographer alone – the Wife has now had enough – proposes to sail from Amsterdam to Stockholm in September to discover whether Descartes might have experienced mal de mer on the voyage, but that seems a sacrifice too far, and so he prudently flies SAS from his university in Missouri instead. If the biographical substance is not heroic, Biographer's method surely is – nice work if you can get it

funded by government grants.

Biographer tells us what he wants Descartes to be like: normal. True, he was ‘one of the greatest mathematical geniuses who ever lived’ and ‘the Father of Modern Philosophy’, but Biographer wants him to have had the normal range of homely virtues and vices. He was ‘a proud, excitable, egotistic little man’ – as in just over five feet tall – but he was more religiously tolerant than the family norm. In matters of academic politics, Descartes ‘was just one peculiar nut’, but Plato hasn’t got much company in thinking that philosophers make good politicians. His deference to Christina – comparing her to God – was ‘disgusting’, but ‘that’s the way you wrote to a queen in the 17th century’. He never enjoyed a normal domestic life, but then scarcely any early modern philosophers did, and Biographer defends Descartes from his earliest chroniclers who insisted that what was evidently his sole sexual relationship was ‘less a proof of his inclination for women than of his weakness: and God raised him above it promptly so the memory of his fall could be a subject of continual humiliation for him and that his repentance would be a salutary remedy for the elevation of his spirit’. Watson will have none of it, nor of the contemporary suggestion that Descartes got Helena pregnant as an anatomical experiment, because he was writing at the time on foetal development. ‘What this biographer wants is for Descartes, Helena and Francine to have had a jolly time,’ for Descartes to have had sex at least three times, and for this jolly, tolerant, egotistical, vindictive, nasty, short and extremely clever philosopher to have bounced mother and child together on his knees, to have glowed with contentment, and, his pineal gland hydraulically moved by the passion of sadness, to have shed buckets of tears at their deaths.

Watson’s purpose, in short, is to rescue the real Descartes, the Descartes for our cynically realistic times, from the hagiographers, from practitioners of the ‘edifying’ biographical tradition that began with Adrien Baillet’s *La Vie de monsieur Des-Cartes* of 1691, and that painted a portrait of the philosopher as ‘a paradigm of virtue, piety, heroism and genius’. Baillet, after all, was an ascetic priest who went on to become a professional hagiographer, publishing a book on the

lives of the saints. Descartes's friends knew their man when they picked Baillet to write the official biography. It's the 'Saint Descartes Protection Society' that Watson means to sort out, and to tell 'the story of the man, not of the monument'. But this is where the whole enterprise comes unstuck, where the gesture at historical realism becomes unhistorical, where the jokiness becomes pointless, and where a book which does indeed dig up a number of interesting facts about Descartes's life, and which could have been both profound and funny, just becomes a mildly embarrassing exercise in self-indulgence. Like any other early modern philosopher acting on a public stage, Descartes helped build his own monument, and it isn't at all obvious that he would have been displeased with the hagiographic commentary that developed not only after his life but also while he was alive.

If the author's virtuous life was a useful resource in warranting a philosophical system, so was a good death. When Descartes caught cold in Stockholm, he insisted on treating himself, declining the ministrations of Christina's court physician, who wanted to bleed him, and preferring his own remedy of tobacco soaked in wine to bring up the phlegm. That was a show of superior technical expertise, and it was in keeping with the man. But the physician could not cure himself this time, and Descartes soon realised that he was dying. According to his friend Claude Clerselier, his last words were these: 'Ah, my soul, it has been a long time that you have been captive; now is the hour that you can escape your prison and leave the embrace of your body; it is necessary to suffer this disunion with joy and courage.' It was now time for body and soul finally to go their separate ways. That does seem a mouthful for a dying man with gobs of phlegm in his lungs, and Watson refuses to believe Descartes said anything of the sort. But some such speech would have counted as a display of Stoic self-command, moral serenity and religious faith, and it's entirely plausible that the man who so greatly valued following the customs of 'the most judicious' understood very well what was expected of him in the hour of his death. It's not that easy to tell where the man ends and the monument begins.

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the history of early modern science. His next will be *The Life of Science: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation*.

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