

The Mind and the Method

The Origin of Subjectivity: An Essay on Descartes, by Hiram Caton, *New Haven: The Yale University Press, 1973. xvi + 202 pp. + appendices A and B. \$12.50.*

WHEN EDMUND HUSSERL undertook a "radical new beginning of philosophy" he advocated a return to the Cartesian *Meditations*, "not to adopt their content but, in not doing so, to renew with greater intensity the radicalness of their spirit . . ." Mr. Caton, too, would have us return to the *Meditations*, and he presents us with a radical new interpretation of their content. We are told that *Meditations*, which may be the best philosophical work Descartes turned out, can be correctly understood only by means of a new approach, which the book under review purports to make evident.

The phrase "the origin of subjectivity" demands clarification. Subjectivity is contrasted with subjectivism, or the view that all truth, beauty and goodness are relative to the opinions of the subject who makes judgments. Subjectivity, on the other hand, allows room for universal truth, beauty and goodness, but insists that human consciousness is the seat of these judgments, which consciousness all subjects share in common. Thus when Descartes analyzes (say) perception as a result of reflection on his own experience he claims that what is true for him is true *pari passu* for all other perceiving subjects.

According to Caton, Descartes' conception of the nature of the human soul, or consciousness, marks a radical departure from the traditional view of one substance with disparate faculties, each of which has a separate function to perform. This new view moves reason from being a modification (as in "man is a rational animal") to being an activity—not any activity, but *man's* activity, and when properly conducted reason is immutable. Thence arises a new self-consciousness in which certainty is guaranteed by the correct application of the mathematical method to the data of consciousness. As Caton puts it: "For Descartes, the principal methodological problem is the institution of empirical consciousness, mathematically conceived, as the principle of experience." Certainty is neither revealed nor grounded "out there" in the world: it is acquired by demanding clarity and distinctness of all that comes to mind. Herein lies what Caton calls "the origin of subjectivity" on which Descartes proposes "as a firm and solid base" a "lofty edifice" of absolute truth. "Descartes after a fashion repeats Socrates calling philosophy down from the clouds. He wants to plant truth and goodness squarely within the stress and adversity of human existence."

Caton finds the roots of Descartes' new philosophy in Stoicism. "The Cartesian transition to the mastery of nature occurs by expansion of the Stoic position." The rules for the direction of the mind, formulated in his work by that name, are a special application of the Stoic ethic to epistemology—withholding assent until certainty is assured. In Caton's view, the place of volition in Descartes' system is central—not so much for avoiding evil as for avoiding error (which may be the same thing, since Descartes embraced the Socratic maxim that "virtue is knowledge").

One of the major thrusts of Caton's interpretation would have us reject the metaphysical and theological dimension of Descartes' *Meditations* as merely "rhetorical." Beneath the rhetoric Caton takes great

pains to point out what he calls the "acroamatic" level which is Descartes' true meaning. There are two attacks on the standard interpretation of the *Meditations*, one external to the text and the other internal. The main purpose of the *Meditations*, says Caton, is political—to "neutralize the opposition by passing directly into the citadel (or cave) of the enemy under the flag of piety." Caton's case is most convincing, drawing as it does upon Descartes' correspondence with Marin Mersenne and the generally acknowledged concern on the part of Descartes not to share the fate of Galileo, who had to recant the truth of his new science before the inquisitors who refused even to look through his telescope.

The rhetorical level of the *Meditations*, which is designed to win over "the enemy," is related to the acroamatic level of meaning "by a masterpiece of prestidigitation." It is to reveal this sleight of hand that Caton takes us inside the *Meditations* to show that Descartes' system rests ultimately not on the veracity of God, as is usually supposed, but on Descartes' physics and chiefly his optics. As Caton puts it:

Penetrating the scholastic façade that obscures the [*Meditations*] requires approaching the work according to the rule of order, that is after physics; for it recapitulates the method after the fact of physics, especially optics and physiology.

It is here that I have some reservations about Caton's thesis. I do not doubt that there are two levels of meaning in the *Meditations*, but I doubt that Descartes' metaphysics, which appeals ultimately to the veracity of God, is merely rhetorical. It seems odd that Spinoza could have been duped by what is, in Caton's view, mere subterfuge. On the contrary, Descartes himself argues in the Third Meditation, after he has established his own existence, that "there is more reality in infinite substance than in finite, and therefore in some way I have in me the notion of God *before* that of myself" (emphasis added). The idea

“which I have of Him may become the most true, most clear, and most distinct of all the ideas that are in my mind.” Spinoza, of course, seems to have followed this line of reasoning to the point where thought becomes a mode of infinite substance, or God, rather than a separate substance. In his *Principles of the Philosophy of Descartes*, Spinoza shows that the axiom which Descartes introduces in the Third Meditation to prove God’s existence (after claiming to know *nothing* except that he, Descartes, exists), which axiom appears variously as “something cannot proceed from nothing,” and “there must be as much formal reality in the cause of an idea as there is objective reality in the idea itself,” is actually presupposed by, or equivalent to, the indubitable Cogito. As Spinoza puts it:

if anyone wanted to doubt whether something can come from nothing, he could at the same time doubt that we ourselves exist while we are actually thinking. For if I can affirm anything of nothing . . . I can at the same time and with equal right affirm thought of nothing and say that I am nothing while I am thinking.

The Cogito rests on both intuitive and demonstrative certainty. The demonstration of the Cogito rests on the *same* principle as the first demonstration of the existence of God, whose existence, unlike that of the Cogito, is necessary. Thus, as Descartes says in Principle XIX, “there is yet nothing which we know as clearly as [God’s] perfections.” It is difficult to agree with Caton, therefore, when he says that “the Cogito emancipates reason from all the restraints of piety: it empowers a self-consciously secular reason . . . the theological doctrine of the *Meditations* is a detachable episode.”

It would seem evident that the veracity of God, whose existence is proved by three different proofs in the *Meditations*, and whose existence is on a par with, if not more certain than, the Cogito, is fundamental. Indeed, Descartes requires knowledge of a God who will not deceive in order

to dispel the notion of the evil genius (and thereby restore our confidence in mathematics), to avoid solipsism, and to prove the formal reality of extended substance as something other than a self-originating idea.

Caton treats this issue briefly when he says:

some have maintained that . . . it is only from knowledge of God’s infinity that [Descartes] knows his own finite existence [and] . . . that in effect the argumentation of the Second and Third Meditations is a discursive explication of a single intuition in which the finite thinker knows himself in and through an infinite God.

His reply to this objection is:

the present interpretation can accommodate this view by equating divine infinite substance with extension and by replacing the hyperbolic doubt of the existence of the world by the authentic idealism of Cartesian optics, for which the existence of the world is a certainty.

But such an interpretation would make extension prior to, or as certain as, thought, which undermines the entire logic of the *Meditations* and runs counter to Descartes’ own statement in *Principles* I, paragraph 8:

we observe very clearly that there is [nothing] . . . that may be attributed to body that pertains to our nature, but only thought; and consequently this notion of thought precedes that of all corporeal things and is most certain.

There is a point beyond which interpretation cannot pass and remain true to its source, and it would seem that we have reached that point.

Caton’s suggestion that God might be equated with extension shows a preoccupation with the epistemological problem which regards extension as a representation or an idea, simply. It ignores the ontological problem of the real existence of ex-

tended substance, which Descartes establishes in the Sixth Meditation by means of his reliance on the veracity of God. Thus when Caton says that "if existence is established by recourse to the metaphysical principle, Descartes could conclude from corporeal attributes (extension) to the existence of body with the same certainty that he concludes his own existence," I am puzzled. It seems that Descartes does precisely that, since in the Sixth Meditation we find Descartes saying:

it is certain that although [sensation is] very dubious and uncertain, yet on the sole ground that God is not a deceiver . . . I may assuredly hope to conclude that I have within me the means of arriving at the truth even here.

The fact that extended substance exists apart from thinking substance is assured by the metaphysical principle, although knowledge *about* extended substance must proceed by way of a correct application of the mathematical method. As Descartes puts it: "We must allow that corporeal things exist. However, they are perhaps not exactly what we perceive by the senses . . ."

Descartes can only avoid solipcism by means of a bridge from the ego to the world "out there" provided by the existence of a Perfect God who cannot deceive. Hence God is essential to Descartes' metaphysics, which, in turn, seems an essential part of the argument in the *Meditations*.

Caton minimizes the problem by asserting that Descartes rejected the Aristotelian notion of an independently existing, fixed, "real" world—opting for a Kantian-like construct which views the world as phenomenal: "commensurate with the subjective conditions of Knowledge." But if Descartes is to avoid *subjectivism*, the problem of the ontological status of phenomena persists. And it would appear to this reader that the veracious God of Descartes functions much as the perceiving God functions in Berkley's philosophy: to

guarantee that what we know is *real* and is not merely the content of our own mind. Descartes may be a physicist and a physiologist, but he is also a metaphysician. To reduce the metaphysical dimension of the *Meditations* to mere rhetoric is to play down an aspect of Descartes' thought that seems central from a systematic point of view.

Whether or not one accepts Caton's interpretation of the *Meditations* as final, however, it certainly adds a dimension that is fascinating and enlightening. Caton puts it well in his final comment concerning "some incommensurables of Cartesian philosophy," when he characterizes these incommensurables as properly viewed "in the Socratic manner, as an occasion to philosophize." The same might be said of Caton's book. It is a difficult, but interesting and provocative commentary, and it bears close reading and careful thought.

Reviewed by HUGH MERCER CURTLER

The Wisdom of Old China

Masters of Chinese Political Thought,
edited by Sebastian de Grazia, *New York: the Viking Press, 1973. 430 pp.*
\$3.95 (paper).

HERE IS A COMPACT yet comprehensive collection of writings by ancient Chinese philosophers (all before the third century B.C.) that represent the very best in the rich cultural heritage of China. In a sense, this is not a book to read so much as a book to ponder over. The wisdom in it transcends both time and space, for it shows the universality of human intelligence. For the novice, the volume affords a panoramic view of the breadth of the minds of ancient Chinese thinkers. In the serious student, the selections as usual will not fail to evoke a