

Murray Miles. *Insight and Inference: Descartes's Founding Principle and Modern Philosophy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Pp. xviii + 564. Cloth, \$120.00.

This book reopens the question of the correct interpretation of 'cogito, ergo sum,' and considers the significance of Descartes's first principle for Western philosophy up to and including the twentieth century. The gist of Miles's interpretation is captured in the first three words of his title. The *cogito* is both insight and inference. How is it an inference, exactly? In the course of a process of selective attention to elements of thought, the *cogito* brings each person to the explicit knowledge of the fact of his or her existence (49). We have an implicit grasp of what the cogito makes explicit; and the passage from implicit to explicit knowledge amounts to a kind of inference. It is like an Aristotelian induction (cf. chapter 20).

Inference is the topic of Part Three. Part Two concerns certainty. The *cogito* is certain in Meditation Two not in the light of the thought that God is veracious, but in the light solely of reflection on one's actually occurring thoughts (47). As for what Cartesian thoughts are, Miles seems to suggest that they are rather like what Husserl gets out of his phenomenological reduction: "intentionally-structured or object-directed acts of thinking" that are the sole immediate objects of consciousness (45). Miles rejects, correctly I think, the attribution to Descartes of any of the usual forms of representationalism.

The diagnosis in Part Two of the certainty of the *cogito* seemed to me to be plausible on its face. It is in line with, although much more elaborate than, some reasonably familiar "psychologistic" interpretations clearing Descartes of the charge of circularity in the reasoning from clarity and distinctness to God's existence and nature and back again. (See A. Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of his Philosophy* [New York: Random House, 1968], chapter 8, and J. Tlumak, "Certainty and Cartesian Method" in M. Hooker, ed., *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978], 40–73. See also L. Loeb's article on the Cartesian Circle in J. Cottingham, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes* [New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992], 200–235.) To the extent that Miles departs from these interpretations, it seems to be by trying to base the authority of the *cogito* on the immutability of God (215–18). But this move seems ill-advised. Not only does it land Descartes in difficulties over the interpretation of pieces of scripture in which God changes his mind; it may also be in tension with the idea of omnipotence. On the whole, however, there is much in Part Two to admire—from the interpretation of the simple natures (chapter 10), to the differences between *scientia*, *persuasio*, and *notitia* (chapter 11).

Part One is less satisfactory, because Miles seems intent on reading Descartes through Husserl. Although he does not evade the objection that this approach is anachronistic (91–93), Miles does reinforce the impression, already created in the 55-page introduction, that he is unsure which interpretive perspective to use to control the book. Is he writing primarily as a twentieth century reader attracted to phenomenology, or is he someone who is keen to penetrate the seventeenth century and earlier and let the meanings of the early modern period infuse the text? Miles leaves the reader uncertain. In Part One we have a Husserlian Descartes. In the Introduction, the sixteenth and seventeenth century perspectives supply the preferred interpretation of

Descartes's metaphysics as something more or less traditional—concerned with the most certain, most universal, and the highest kind of being, the kind of being studied by theology.

It is hard not to be put off by Miles's very swift dismissals of mainstream Anglo-American interpretations of Descartes's metaphysics as having some special connection with his physics (27ff). Can this line of interpretation really be refuted by quoting passages in which Descartes says that metaphysics is more basic and more certain than physics? Surely not. In choosing the formulation of his first philosophy, Descartes was not forgetting either the shelved *Le Monde* or the fact that he had an audience keen to prosecute the theologically unorthodox in physics. The Correspondence of the late 1630s and 1640s is full of attempts to placate scientifically minded Jesuits in particular. The *Meditations* reflects all of these things. It shows that the capacity for *scientia* about the material world is a capacity of the same soul as survives the body at death, and that this soul has to know that God exists and is no deceiver if it is to have more than *persuasio* about the nature of the rainbow or light or matter in general. Perhaps it is going too far to suggest that there is a kind of fusion of metaphysics with physics in Descartes's writings. But by providing foundations for a physics whose content had been worked out in advance and whose consistency with theology had to be put beyond doubt, the *Meditations* is clearly at the service of *Le Monde*. It is not some self-contained science plucked from the pure intellect. But it is no recycled Aristotelian metaphysics, either.

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Steven Nadler. *Spinoza. A Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xiii + 407. Cloth, \$34.95.

Nadler's book is a comprehensive biography of Spinoza. It gives, within the limits of the information available, a full presentation of the life and personality of Spinoza; ample information about the different milieus in which Spinoza grew up and lived; about the vicissitudes of the public life which marked his life and work; about the ways in which Spinoza's work evolved and, although it is not meant to be an "intellectual biography" (xiii), a general description of his thought. It is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Spinoza.

The book begins with the story of the Jewish Portuguese community of Amsterdam, constituted by former Marranos who emigrated from the Iberian peninsula. Becoming in a very short time a flourishing community, it was unique in many ways, and the author nicely shows this. He explains how it had to rebuild its Judaism practically *ex nihilo*, and how this fact caused many of the inner tensions and rifts that marked its history. Nadler tells minutely the way that led to Spinoza's famous excommunication and the roles played by the main personalities involved in this dramatic event, which was not only a rupture with the community, but actually with Judaism in general.

The author proceeds to examine the life of Spinoza outside the Jewish community.