

Review of Richard Watson, *Cogito ergo sum* (Boston: David Godine, 2002).  
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Somewhere between hagiography and debunking lies truth. Or so we may think: the biographer's sources are almost always tipped one way or the other, and it is his or her job to establish, or divine, the way of authentic fact and, if facts fall short, then of sturdy sober hypothesis. In general the debunker has more fun, especially when the weight of tradition favors the ennobling, if not the beatification, of its subject.

Descartes is a case in point. Until a few years ago, there was in English no satisfactory biography. Now there are three: an "intellectual biography" by Stephen Gaukroger, the *Descartes* of Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, and Watson's. Gaukroger dwells on Descartes' natural philosophy, especially in the early years. Only after 300 pages does he reach the period of the *Discourse*, Descartes' first published work. Rodis-Lewis offers a more even-handed treatment, the fruits of a lifetime of study. Her Descartes resembles, not the modern scientist or professional philosopher, but the ancient sage for whom metaphysics is a once-in-a-lifetime affair, and even natural philosophy subordinate to wisdom. Watson's Descartes is an altogether more worldly type, born into a family of lawyers, well-connected, touchy about his place in social and scientific circles, and not all that interested in what we think of now as philosophy. Nor, for that matter, is Watson: you will look in vain for an analysis of the *Meditations*, a discussion of method, or a definition of *générosité*. (Watson does conclude, I should note, with a discussion of Descartes' doctrine on the soul, whose title might well have been "The future of an illusion" if Freud had not used it already.)

If you like your philosophy uncluttered by context, if you find it worthwhile to read or write about "Cartesian skepticism" or "Cartesian dualism" without troubling yourself to understand who the historical Descartes was, or what might have moved him to confront the skeptics and save the soul, then Watson is not for you. It is emphatically a *Life*, not a *Life and Works*. It is, moreover, a life in the manner of many modern biographers, in which the biographer, rather than conceal himself behind the curtains of scholarly convention, figures into the narrative, retracing the steps of Descartes' passage to Italy, examining the baptismal certificate of Descartes' illegitimate daughter Francine, eating lunch with at the Queen Kristina restaurant "next door to the house in which Descartes died" (303). The quality of a biography thus written depends in part on the personality of its author (and in the case of *Cogito ergo sum*, the author's wife, who intervenes more than once on the side of common sense during their peregrinations). Watson is, to my mind, an agreeable companion, dedicated to the search for biographical truth, impatient with hagiographic fog and time-hallowed error, down-to-earth in his assessment of Descartes' motives and circumstances.

One example to show the differences among the three biographies. In November 1618 Descartes met the future Latin schoolmaster Isaac Beeckman in Breda.

Beeckman records with enthusiasm their joint endeavors in physico-mathematics over the next few months (Gaukroger has the details). It seems clear that the impetus for studying the various problems mentioned in Beeckman's *Journal* came from Beeckman, who had been pondering physical questions since 1613 or before. Descartes' contribution, at least at first, was his immense mathematical skill. Their interests lay largely within the "mixed mathematics" of the period, especially hydrostatics and mechanics. They also discussed music, an aspect of the "new science" now often neglected (but see H. F. Cohen, *Quantifying music*, Dordrecht: Reidel, 1984). On New Year's day 1619 Descartes presented Beeckman with his *Compendium musicæ* (Gaukroger 74, Rodis-Lewis 51/29). A decade later, Descartes, having heard that Beeckman had appropriated the *Compendium* to himself, became angry and eventually, late in 1630, dismissed Beeckman with a masterpiece of *de haut en bas* invective. A year later the two were reconciled (Rodis-Lewis 128/87). When Beeckman died in 1637, the most Descartes could say was that he hoped that his former collaborator had died in a state of grace.

All three biographers mention this episode. All three credit Beeckman with having given the initial impetus to Descartes in applying geometry to physical questions. In none of the three narratives does Descartes come out entirely unblemished. Rodis-Lewis, characteristically, gives Descartes the benefit of the doubt, playing down Beeckman's likely contributions to physico-mathematics, but notes the "great violence" of the 1631 letter and Descartes' coldness in 1637 (128/89). Gaukroger, who analyzes the *Compendium* in some detail, holds that Descartes was "very indebted" to Beeckman in the earlier period, even regarding him as a "father figure", and suggests that the violence of his reaction later may have been "overdetermined" by Descartes' relation to his own father (224). Watson quotes some of the more abusive paragraphs of the 1631, takes note of Descartes' likely debts to Beeckman, argues that in 1619 "Descartes fell in love with Beeckman", though more as a father than in a homoerotic way, and appeals to his own experience as a teacher to account for both Beeckman's perhaps self-serving boasts on behalf of his star pupil and Descartes' outrage (89–92). I would add that, as in Descartes' falling-out with the lens-grinder Ferrier in the same period, issues of class were likely in play also.

Only indirectly are these events of properly philosophical interest. Amid the insults in the 1631 letter, Descartes writes that "if someone believes believes something not by anyone's authority nor by the reasons adduced for it, then even though he hears that thing from many [others], he has not been taught by them," not if he has proved it to himself: "if you know something, it is entirely yours, even if someone else has told it to you" (AT 1:158–159). What Descartes knows he has not been "taught" by Beeckman—nor by anyone. So much for a schoolmaster's pride! The method of doubt in the first *Meditation* is perhaps not so much a battle against skepticism as it is a battle for autonomy. The genuine knower is the rational cause of his or her own judgments. Why was Descartes so set on achieving autonomy? For this we must consult the life, to understand not only why Descartes himself made autonomy a cardinal virtue but what autonomy would have meant in the period—it did not, for example, entail nonconformity, and was very much indebted to ancient notions of

the master-slave relation—and why in *this* time, rather than say a hundred years before or after, a philosophy that made autonomy its goal and showed the way to that goal should have succeeded in capturing the attention of the learned world.

Watson's work, written for "general readers" (and therefore without footnotes: for scholarly detail, consult Gaukroger and Rodis-Lewis), is indeed "the story of the man, not the monument". I myself would give more weight to Descartes' work, not by way of embellishing the monument but because the life of Descartes the geometer, to mention just one of his careers, is his geometry: it is a life in which the "events" are thoughts and records of thoughts. That said, I think that *Cogito ergo sum* fulfills its project, dispelling along the way a number of oft-repeated myths. And who could resist, after all, a book whose [index](#) (very thorough) includes the entry "Health nut, RD"?

*A note on sources.* The biographies referred to above are: Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: an intellectual biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, *Descartes* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1995), Eng. trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1998). References to Rodis-Lewis include the French and English page numbers. 'AT' denotes the standard Adam-Tannery edition of Descartes' works: *Œuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1974–1986). A new edition of Descartes' *Correspondence*, under the direction of Theo Verbeek, will enrich considerably our understanding of the events of Descartes' life and their circumstances. A sample volume containing the letters of 1643 has been published (Utrecht: Publications of the Department of Philosophy, 2003).