



**Emanuela Scribano, "Descartes in Context: Essays"**

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**Emanuela Scribano.** *Descartes in Context: Essays.* Oxford University Press 2022. 272 pp. \$83 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780197649558).

At first glance, the organizational principle to *Descartes in Context*, a new collection of essays by Emanuela Scribano, sounds like a methodological truism for scholars working in the history of philosophy. As the title of the collection suggests, the essays deal with Cartesian philosophy ‘in light of the philosophical context and of the reference authors for Descartes’ philosophical training—and that of every seventeenth-century intellectual’ (1). Naturally, it is important to view a given thinker in the context of their time and place. Anything less is irresponsible scholarship. Yet, Scribano does not merely do her scholarly due diligence by placing Descartes in context. Throughout the essays, some of which are available in this volume for the first time in English translation, she brings under-explored oppositions to the forefront of our readings of Descartes. In so doing, Scribano makes Cartesian philosophy come alive.

Scribano deploys two deflationary strategies in her reading of Descartes. First, she shows that theses usually viewed today as original to Descartes were actually commonplace in the seventeenth century. This strategy prevents us ‘from mistaking enduring and long-standing concepts drawn from a widespread cultural substratum for significant novelties’ (2). The most prominent example of this strategy in the volume is in ‘Divine Deception in Descartes’ *Meditations.* There, Scribano argues that the doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths that Descartes formulates in the replies is not present in the program of doubt in the *First Meditation*. Instead, she argues, Descartes begins with the mind-related Aristotelian and Aquinian theories of abstraction that would have been known to anyone reading the *Meditations*, ‘in line, moreover, with the Cartesian project to guide the meditator on a path starting from common cultural knowledge’ (54).

Far from minimizing the radical implications of Descartes’ program of doubt, Scribano instead shows how the doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths is closely tied to Descartes’ view of mathematics developed in the *Fifth Meditation* in opposition to Suarez (62). The doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths remains a highly original Cartesian contribution to the history of philosophy, Scribano contends, but if commentators insert the doctrine into the *First Meditation*, mistaking Aristotelian and Aquinian mathematics for something novel, they lose sight of the meditative use that Descartes makes of the view in his program of doubt.

Scribano’s second deflationary strategy is to trace influence that is usually attributed to Descartes to someone else. One notable example is Scribano’s invocation of Aquinas as the source of the animal machines thesis in Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* (170-171). She writes ‘reading Cartesian texts in light of Aquinas allows us to discover many cases in which consolidated interpretations have been misread as original and typically Cartesian theses’ (4-5).

By invoking Aquinas, Scribano also establishes a dynamic opposition between Descartes and Augustine (21), arguing that Descartes endorses innatism in order to refute any claim that humans participate in divine knowledge through a vision or illumination in God. This argument sets Scribano up for the claim, running through Section V of the collection, that post-Cartesian Occasionalists such as Malebranche were in opposition to central theses in Descartes. If Scribano is right and Descartes



does not endorse an Augustinian vision in God, Malebranche makes a significant break from Cartesian epistemology.

Scribano deploys the second deflationary strategy when she explores Occasionalism in Section V, which includes the excellent essay ‘*Quod nescis quomodo fiat id non facis: Occasionalism against Descartes?*’ Scribano argues that the *Quod nescis* principle, which states that the power of causing an effect depends on knowledge of how the effect is caused, does not have its source in Descartes’ philosophy. Indeed, she claims, Descartes denies that knowledge is a condition for causality. Scribano does not argue for this claim—in fact, she cites Descartes very little in the three essays of Section V. Scribano elects to tell an alternative story about influence, ‘a completely different hypothesis’ (191) from those commentators who locate the origin of the *Quod nescis* principle in Cartesian philosophy.

Scribano proposes that the *Quod nescis* principle, which was popularized by Geulincx and Malebranche, originates with Galen, who ‘aimed at merging Aristotelian biology with Platonic metaphysics, introducing or rather reintroducing an intelligent mind, a demiurge, to account for the order of nature’ (196). Scribano thinks that the *Quod nescis* principle was useful for Geulincx and Malebranche to explain the interaction of mind and body. ‘Arguing for the *Quod nescis* principle, Malebranche points up the anatomical details barring the possibility that the will could have a causal effect on the body’ (191) and attributes that causal effect on the body to God. Furthermore, she argues, ‘dropping the original Cartesian context’ (190), Geulincx and Malebranche universalize the principle from mind-body causation to all causal relations. Section V is a helpful resource for scholars of early modern causation.

In ‘*The Replies to the Seventh Set of Objections, the Skeptic’s Duties, and the Circle,*’ Scribano’s general contextualist approach once again proves successful. This essay gives an answer to one of the most persistent objections against Descartes since the seventeenth century, that of his alleged circular reasoning in the *Meditations*. The objection is that Descartes only pulls the meditator out of radical doubt by appealing to the very idea that the meditator originally doubted, God’s goodness. Scribano focuses on the neglected *Seventh Set of Objections with the Author’s Replies*. She contends that ‘Descartes’ replies to Father Bourdin show that in order to get out of the circle and remove the skeptical threat, it is sufficient to refer to the pact to which the skeptic himself is supposed to have subscribed at the outset’ (81), namely, the principle of non-contradiction. The skeptic is bound by the rules of the meditative game, Scribano suggests. Thus, the skeptic cannot appeal to his reasons for earlier doubt once he has achieved clarity and distinctness: ‘if, at a given moment, a reason for doubt has been judged contradictory in the name of the axioms that the natural light imposes and that the skeptic has accepted by formulating his doubts, then it can no longer be brought into play’ (80). The contextualist approach is so successful here because by focusing on Descartes’ relation to his contemporary Bourdin, Scribano makes a simple and bold philosophical argument about skeptical reasoning in the *Meditations* while simultaneously shedding scholarly light on a neglected text. This essay was originally published in 2016 in French; the translation provides an invaluable resource to Anglophone scholars.

By revealing oppositions between Descartes and Augustine, Malebranche and others, Scribano complicates a simple story of influence in early modern philosophy. By placing Descartes in context, she achieves a subtle and lively reading of a canonical seventeenth century thinker.

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