

The peregrinations of a French philosopher

Descartes

The Life and Times of a Genius

A. C. Grayling

Walker, New York, 2006. \$26.95 (303 pp.). ISBN 978-0-8027-1501-2

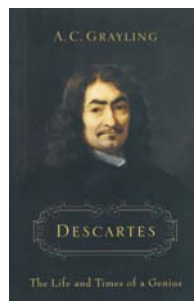
Reviewed by Roger Hahn

Anthony C. Grayling's *Descartes: The Life and Times of a Genius* is a lively new work that centers on the philosopher's life rather than his writings. Grayling, a professor of philosophy at Birkbeck College at the University of London, assumes correctly that his subject was a genius who needed no justification. Students everywhere take René Descartes (1596–1650) as the key thinker who ushered in the modern world of philosophy. What Grayling sets out to do is to offer the nonspecialist a biographical account that will reveal how intimately connected the French savant was to his times. Given Descartes' reputation as a thinker who craved solitude, writing a narrative about him is no obvious or simple task. The result, in Grayling's case, is both tantalizing and, ultimately, not fully successful.

In the first chapters, Grayling suggests, without ever fully demonstrating the point, that Descartes' peregrinations from France to the United Provinces (now the Netherlands), to Bohemia, and, later, to Italy were motivated by his activity as an intelligencer for the Hapsburg-allied Jesuits. The idea is plausible and novel, especially in light of the intrigues of western European politics in the age leading up to the religious Thirty Years' War (1618–48) that devastated much of central Europe. Taking readers by the hand, Grayling follows Descartes' movements and parallels them to the complex events surrounding attempts by Catholics to regain souls they had lost to the Reformation. He suggests

that the philosopher's peripatetic wanderings are best understood if we posit him as a spy. It is a good story, yet with many missing parts. We never know for sure who sponsored Descartes, how much he was paid, or if and where he filed his findings. Moreover, the argument that Descartes gave allegiance to Hapsburg Jesuits rather than the French Jesuits who had trained him as a youth is unconvincing. There are also unexplained motivations involving Descartes' association with the Protestant army in Breda, the United Provinces, and his sudden shift to the Catholic side, which took him to Prague and to Ulm, Germany. The irony of Grayling's account is that it is about a thinker who searched for truth by basing his philosophy on clear and indubitable ideas, but readers are left with speculations about the philosopher that may or may not be true.

Nevertheless, the author's attempt to explain Descartes' wanderings by following local events of the era is fruitful because it reminds us that not even the most abstruse thinker is shielded from his times. Most of the recent biographical studies on Descartes focus on intellectual history, which Grayling takes for granted. He selectively relies on the much fuller, more detailed analyses of Geneviève Rodis-Lewis and Stephen Gaukroger, who both mastered the philosopher's thought. By paying attention to the political context, Grayling can better explain why Descartes toyed with the Rosicrucian movement before rejecting its tenets. Later in his life, Descartes corresponded with and dedicated *The Principles of Philosophy* to Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, the daughter of Frederick V, who was the Protestant Elector Palatine. Readers would never fully comprehend Descartes' dedication if they didn't know that Descartes was a witness on the winning side at the 1620 Battle of White Mountain, in which Frederick V lost the Bohemian crown. The defeat pushed the princess into relative poverty and cut short her marital ambi-



tions, and then turned her into a valuable philosophic correspondent to Descartes.

Descartes' natural philosophy seems unproblematic to Grayling, who offers a conventional, nontechnical account for the general reader. Sections of the book explaining Descartes' ambiguous stand on Copernicanism after the Catholic Church's condemnation of Galileo are well presented, but the arguments for and against the new philosophy are unspoken. Grayling gives no account of Descartes' discovery of the principle of inertia, even though it was a turning point of historical significance. He barely explains Descartes' adamant belief that space is completely filled with matter and is unlimited, nor does he comment usefully about Descartes' attitude toward experimentation, which would have saved the philosopher from making gross errors about the collision of hard bodies.

In short, *Descartes* will not enlighten physicists about their craft and how it came to be so central to the scientific revolution. Rather, Grayling's study will reveal with a vengeance how difficult the passage from medieval cosmology to modern science was in the 17th century. Timeworn beliefs needed to be supplanted while new ones had to be carved out in a bewildering context of continuous political and religious strife. In the end, Grayling has penned a fascinating story that leaves readers yearning for clearer and more distinct answers.

Chaos and Complexity in Astrophysics

Oded Regev

Cambridge U. Press, New York, 2006. \$85.00 (455 pp.). ISBN 978-0-521-85534-1

Oded Regev's *Chaos and Complexity in Astrophysics* does an excellent job of

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