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A Portrait of Sartre as a Cartesian

by Yoann Malinge

According to Camille Riquier, the *Metaphysical Meditations* are the "secret" to understanding Sartrean thought. Yet, can this bold thesis be extended to Sartre's entire oeuvre?

About: Camille Riquier, *Métamorphose de Descartes. Le secret de Sartre*, Gallimard, 2022, 330 p., 22 €.

How does one demonstrate the importance of a philosophical oeuvre? A first method is to conduct an internal reading that reveals the power of its theses, concepts, and arguments. Another is to compare it with another oeuvre considered to be a "classic." Camille Riquier adopts the second approach in *Métamorphose de Descartes. Le secret de Sartre* (Descartes' metamorphoses: the secret of Sartre), in which he shows that the importance of Sartre's oeuvre lies mainly in its confrontation with the work of Descartes. In doing so, Riquier participates in the "Sartre revival"[1] that has been underway in France for the past twenty years.[2]

The book is divided into two parts: The first and shorter of the two begins by discussing 20th-century French philosophy's relation to Descartes, and then examines how French philosophers have returned to Cartesianism through the work of Husserl.

[1] As per the title of Annie Cohen-Solal's short essay, *Une renaissance sartrienne*, Paris, Gallimard, 2013. Due to lack of space, I cannot provide a bibliography of all the works published on Sartre in recent years. The reader may consult Grégory Cormann's important work for the journal *L'Année sartrienne*.
[2] There is no need for such a movement outside of France, where Sartre is currently being read, studied and discussed.

The second, which gives the book its subtitle, is concerned with the influence of Descartes on Sartre's oeuvre.

Descartes and French Philosophy

In the first part of the book, Riquier argues that French philosophers, more than their counterparts in the United Kingdom, Germany, or other countries, bear the stamp of Descartes' influence. Although not necessarily a reference for all French philosophers, Descartes is "a referent" for those who, without adopting his ideas, can borrow from him the framework necessary to construct their own oeuvre (p. 21). Rather than asserting the existence of a French spirit, Riquier defends the idea that a philosopher's work is determined by the context in which he or she writes: Beneath the universalism of ideas defended by many philosophers, there is, depending on one's geographic location, a specific way of doing philosophy, "a form" and "an order" in which one's ideas flow and unfold (p. 30).

Yet, in France, this form and order are, according to Riquier, drawn from the work of Descartes. Outlining a potential research program in the history of philosophy, Riquier distinguishes three paths taken by French philosophy in Descartes' aftermath: the path of the cogito, the path of the system, and the path of the moderns. While Descartes' oeuvre certainly marked a turning point in the history of philosophy, readers may wonder whether these three paths might not have existed without him: after all, each of them has also unfolded in the works of European (i.e., non-French) philosophers. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that a passage through Descartes (his ideas and method) is inescapable in France. Since Riquier recognizes, among other things, that Montaigne was a precursor of thinkers who combine "the narrative of the self with the pursuit of the universal" (p. 114), readers may also wonder whether one might not trace a lineage that would predate Descartes and in which Descartes would be a tutelary figure but not a foundational one.

The next chapter, devoted to Husserl's relation to Cartesianism, shows how important Descartes was as an interlocutor for the author of the *Cartesian Meditations*—more so, for instance, than Kant. In this chapter, Riquier draws an interesting dividing line between two paths of French phenomenology: the path of intentionality versus the path of reduction. This partition makes it possible to elucidate the relation of French phenomenology to a certain form of realism, and consequently to highlight the

originality of the phenomenological method in France compared to the works of the German precursors Husserl and Heidegger, particularly with respect to the critique of idealism. Here again, Riquier stresses the possibility for a genuine research program in the history of phenomenology.

Reading Sartre's Oeuvre in the Light of the *Metaphysical Meditations*

The second part, which makes up two-thirds of the book, initiates this research program on one of the most important thinkers of French phenomenology. Here, the author shows how the construction of Sartre's oeuvre echoes the structure of the *Metaphysical Meditations*. In reality, as the book progresses, Riquier's references to Sartre are mainly drawn from *Being and Nothingness*, *Nausea*, *The Imaginary*, and *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Some rare incursions are made into the existential biographies (*Baudelaire*, *Mallarmé*, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, and *The Family Idiot*) and very few into the *Critique of Dialectical Reason.* The influence of Marxism and the focus on issues of collective action make it more difficult to establish connections between the *Critique* and the work of Descartes. Nevertheless, the fact that the latter book plays little role in Riquier's argument should not deter us from embracing his ambition to conduct a unifying reading of Sartre's oeuvre.[3]

Based on specific elements, Riquier demonstrates that despite being discreet, Sartre's references to Descartes are frequent. This leads him to argue that the author of *Being and Nothingness* borrowed or adapted the Cartesian approach in his own work, in particular when it came to removing "God from the economy of reasons, even if it means disrupting the order in which these appear" (p. 111). However, does not this disruption of the order of reasons undermine the thesis that Descartes' work was, for Sartre, "the matrix of his ideas"? Did not the works of Heidegger and Kant play similar roles after all? While these last two authors did serve for Sartre as a philosophical influence or foil, Riquier maintains that Descartes' oeuvre alone provided the foundation for his approach.

[3] Arno Münster has conducted such a unifying reading in *Sartre et la praxis, Ontologie de la liberté et praxis dans la pensée de Jean-Paul Sartre*, Paris, Delga, 2017, p. 9 and p. 161. This is also the perspective I adopted in my doctoral thesis in philosophy *La réalisation de la corrélation. L'action dans la philosophie de Sartre*, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (unpublished).

One of the key moments in the book is the distinction established between Sartre's influences regarding the question of the cogito and the ego. Riquier demonstrates that while Husserl is obviously a privileged interlocutor in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, it is the Cartesian cogito that is being interrogated in this work, first to extend Descartes' gesture, and then to transcend it so as to achieve a pure, instantaneous reflection that does not posit an "I" behind acts of consciousness. Through this interrogation, Sartre has responded to Kantian critiques of the paralogisms (p. 157).

The book's "third meditation" (p. 168 ff.) is of great interest. Here, the author shows how Sartre criticized what he saw as the idealism of Husserl's *Ideen*, thereby rejecting the phenomenological reduction, and how, by defending intentionality, he was able to establish the reality of being through an "ontological proof" inspired by Descartes' (p. 179).

The "fourth meditation," devoted to temporalization and to the existence of the Other, mobilizes another of the Cartesian proofs of God. However, as Riquier points out: "Whereas Descartes showed how God maintains the ego in temporal existence, [for Sartre] it is a question of reaching, without God and without ego, the for-itself as present to itself and temporalizing itself beyond instantaneity" (p. 201). Indeed, beyond the Cartesian approach, it is through describing the for-itself as a power of nihilation that Sartre can account for temporalization, and in particular for the importance of projection into the future. More stimulating, in my view, is the lineage traced by Riquier from the Cartesian proof of God based on the idea of the infinite to the relation of the for-itself with the Other in Sartre's philosophy. The existence of the Other transcends that of the for-itself, rendering it elusive (p. 220). This same proof can be seen as having influenced the thought of Levinas, who in engaging with Descartes was responding to Sartre. As Riquier points out, the idea of the infinite is understood as desire in Levinas; it does not shame "my facticity," but "my freedom, its arbitrariness, its violence" (p. 313).

Lastly, the fifth and final meditation establishes the links between Cartesian and Sartrean ethics. Riquier examines Sartre's attempt to found an ethics in the *Notebooks for an Ethics* in order to reveal what Sartre's conception of generosity owes to Descartes: Generosity rests on the Other's freedom, whether recognized or claimed (pp. 250-251). However, although Riquier does point out that Sartrean generosity requires action in History, he does not develop the analysis of Sartre's view on this question. Ultimately, this change of perspective on Descartes leads the author of *Métamorphose de Descartes*

to address the motif of failure in Sartre's thought. Through re-reading Sartre's last texts and interviews and his autobiography *The Words*, Riquier offers a meditation on "he who loses wins" and "he who wins loses": By integrating and assuming failure, Sartre was able to produce a successful oeuvre.

Conclusion

To conclude, Riquier's book is in many ways a highly stimulating read: It revisits Sartre's thought without repeating the poorly founded accusation that he was a "bad reader" of Husserl or Heidegger, an accusation which overlooks the fact that his ambition was to build an original philosophy as opposed to merely interpreting the works of his predecessors.[4] On this point, Riquier clearly demonstrates the power of Sartre's theses. On several occasions, he emphasizes the inventiveness of Sartre's oeuvre beyond its Cartesian lineage—as evidenced by such ideas as the person's relationship to the situation, the contingency of existence, and the link between nothingness and freedom. In presenting these ideas as a metamorphosis of Descartes, Riquier does not seek to downplay their originality, but rather aims to place the author of the *Metaphysical Meditations* and *The Passions of the Soul* at the foundation of Sartre's project. Thus, one could argue that Riquier's method resembles that of a comparative and vertical history of philosophy more than it does Bergson's method,[5] which seems more concerned with revealing the philosophical intuition of the author studied. This could explain why some of the analogies with Descartes appear to be less convincing. Indeed, such analyses ultimately attribute Sartre's theses to a Cartesian inspiration instead of confronting them with the concrete reality that they seek to elucidate. While they have the merit of clarifying the question of Descartes' influence on Sartre far more systematically than has been done so far, they run the risk of explaining Sartre's oeuvre by his ambition to be a great philosopher, when in fact it was his existential and political commitment that drove his work and the progress thereof. In short, one might wonder whether Riquier's method—writing through reading Descartes rather than

[4] On this point, see Alain Renaut, *Sartre le dernier philosophe*, Paris, Grasset, 1993, p. 69, and Philippe Cabestan, *L'être et la conscience, Recherches sur la psychologie et l'ontophénoménologie sartrienne*, Bruxelles, Ousia, 2004, Chapter V.

[5] Henri Bergson, « L'intuition philosophique. Conférence faire au Congrès de Philosophie de Bologne le 10 avril 1911, » *La pensée et le mouvant*, Paris, PUF, 2013, pp. 117-142.

solving the philosophical problems of the time—does not end up substituting itself for Sartre's. Readers will be the judge of this demonstration.

This book, written in clear, distinct language and with a constant concern for precision, entails the disclosure of "a secret" that leads one to wonder whether this secret can ever be fully exhausted, or whether the tutelary figure of Descartes (as central as ever to philosophical studies in France) will continue to serve as a model with which every philosopher must compare him or herself when attempting to build an oeuvre.

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