

BOOK REVIEWS

Antonia LoLordo, *Pierre Gassendi and the Birth of Early Modern Philosophy*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. x + 283 pp.

It is indisputable that Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655) was highly regarded by his contemporaries. And yet he is not often included as one of the “heavy hitters” of early modern philosophy—the typical course in early modern philosophy (introductory or advanced) includes very few readings from Gassendi beyond the Fifth Objections to Descartes’s *Meditations*. What has Gassendi done besides act as a foil for Descartes? What else in Gassendi deserves our attention?

Antonia LoLordo has provided substantial and carefully argued answers to these questions. LoLordo sets for herself two objectives: first, to provide “an interpretation of Gassendi’s central metaphysical, epistemological, and natural philosophical views,” and second, to advertise their “philosophical and historical interest” (1). Those who study the period would undoubtedly benefit from an understanding of Gassendi’s philosophical system, given Gassendi’s influence among other philosophers of the period, but a case for the enduring philosophical interest of Gassendi’s system will be, it seems to me, the harder case to make. Nevertheless, LoLordo claims that Gassendi will have enduring interest (a) for his attempts to solve problems in causal theories of perception, (b) for his theories of perceptual and nonperceptual cognition, (c) for his antireductionist version of mechanical philosophy, and (d) for his “radical account” of creaturely activity.

LoLordo’s book is organized with these goals in mind. Chapters 1 and 2 provide insight into the historical interest of Gassendi, chapter 1 providing the biographical background, and chapter 2 providing background to the philosophical systems against which Gassendi is responding, which include Scholasticism, Neoplatonism, and Cartesianism. Here we get the picture, not of Gassendi as a foil for Cartesianism, but of Cartesianism as a foil “against which Gassendi could sharpen his own views” (55). The desired effect is to show that Gassendi’s philosophical system treats, with greater breadth, the different aspects of the intellectual culture of the seventeenth century.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide an account of Gassendi’s epistemology, which ground his natural philosophical arguments to follow (more on this below). Chapters 5 through 9 give the natural philosophy and the metaphysical underpinnings for Gassendi’s views on space and time, atoms and the void, composite body, causation, generation, and the corporeal soul. In my opinion, this is the heart of the book in more ways than one—the depth of LoLordo’s scholarship is evident throughout, and she has done a remarkable job of presenting Gassendi’s views with great clarity. She has done a favor to all of us who tire of Gassendi’s own genealogical method of presenting his views. (However, with the background she has provided in the earlier chapters, the genealogical method becomes a little less cumbersome.) Finally, chapter 10

BOOK REVIEWS

provides an account of the incorporeal soul and Gassendi's views on the relation of faith and reason.

I found this book philosophically rich, and, as usual, a review doesn't provide sufficient space to explore enough of it. For example, I cannot go into Gassendi's novel account of space that requires a significant revision of the Aristotelian theory of substance and the Aristotelian categories. Nor will I be able to address the interesting question of the relation of faith to reason and how this affects Gassendi's natural theories. Instead, I will focus on a more methodological problem that I believe has deep implications for Gassendi's system.

LoLordo provides an interesting and detailed account of Gassendi's causal theory of perception, which, she argues, is a version of direct realism. But the part that is of most interest to me is his move from claims about appearances to claims about what must underlie the appearances. How does he justify claims about unperceived or unperceivable objects on the basis of an empiricist theory of knowledge? LoLordo's reconstruction of Gassendi's theory of signs is designed to answer this question.

According to LoLordo, Gassendi was committed to the following thesis:

An inference from signs has three elements: a perceived object, property, or event x ; the idea of an unperceived object, [property, or event?] y ; and a premise, usually left implicit, to the effect that x can only exist when y exists or that y 's existence explains the existence of x . (95)

The third clause LoLordo calls the "bridge premise," the premise by which the existence of some unperceived or unperceivable object can be inferred by its effects.

We can raise some questions here about just how strong the bridge premise needs to be. Is it that y is *necessary* for x , or is it sufficient that y be *more probable* given x ? Gassendi appears to allow for the weaker, but then our acceptance of y will be conditional and sensitive to other factors, such as whether there are theological reasons for preferring y to some other option. But, as I understand it, Gassendi's considered metaphysical views, such as the existence of atoms, are supposed to be based on the stronger version—the bridge premise identifies a *necessary* condition.

On the basis of these bridge premises, it turns out that what can be said about the metaphysical underpinnings of what we observe is frustratingly little. And what *can* be said is largely limited to existential claims. The *existence* of atoms and the void is inferred from the bridge premise that perceivable motions would be impossible without a void (rehearsing an Epicurean argument). The most interesting *quality* of atoms, motive force (*vis motrix*), is entailed by a set of theological considerations having to do with preserving a coherent account of secondary causation.

BOOK REVIEWS

Further, LoLordo tells us, all properties and qualities of a composite body are a result of its *texture*, the arrangement and disposition of the atoms that constitute it. *Texture* is supposed to do all the heavy lifting in bridging the microphysical behaviors of atoms and the macrophysical behaviors of composite bodies. Lamentably, the notion of texture is left underspecified by Gassendi, and it is not clear what the bridge premises might be that would yield the conclusion that such textures exist (beyond the somewhat trivial claim that there needs to be *something* bridging the atomic motions and structures to the motions and properties of composite bodies, given the radical discontinuities between them). The particular examples that LoLordo provides us with in impressive detail—gravity, generation, the powers of the corporeal soul—don't give us much more to go on.

But, LoLordo argues, the account of texture is not supposed to provide the full story or even necessarily a true explanation. It is intended to be programmatic, making “a corpuscularian explanation *imaginable*” (169). The results are merely probable, and where multiple, equally probable bridge premises would do, the decision between them must be made on other grounds (if at all). LoLordo give us some examples of this. Gassendi believed that the Copernican and Tychonic systems are equally probable (69). Similarly, it is equally probable that the sensory powers of the corporeal soul are emergent as that they are divinely superadded (183, 199).

One wonders why the theory of atoms does not face the same problems. There are competing metaphysical pictures that account for the *same* body of empirical evidence (for example, an idealist theory à la Berkeley or Leibniz would be incompatible with Gassendi's philosophical system in a variety of ways). One would not object to this on the basis of some effects that were unaccounted for. Rather, the objection will have to be to the bridge principles *themselves*, the explanatory basis of the effects. And this will require a methodology that doesn't fit well into Gassendi's epistemology, as LoLordo herself argues. Gassendi needs some evidential basis for the bridge principles, which it is not clear that he has (96ff.).

These criticisms raise problems for Gassendi's philosophical system. However, they are primarily criticisms of *Gassendi*. Indeed, it is an indication of LoLordo's success that her readers will find Gassendi philosophically engaging on these points, if not entirely satisfying in his conclusions. Engagement with these problems is made possible by LoLordo's lucid presentation of Gassendi's views. Insofar as she has done this, she has accomplished her goal of showing the enduring philosophical interest of Gassendi.

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Philosophical Review, Vol. 117, No. 4, 2008
doi:10.1215/00000000-0000-006