

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rappe refers in a footnote (102 n. 32) to this last idea, which is important for the question of the passage from discursivity to nondiscursive thought.

<sup>2</sup> There are a few minor problems in the editing of the book, in particular some incorrect references to *Enn.* 5.3, cited as 5.2 (71, 74, 99).

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Dennis Des Chene, *Life's Form: Late Aristotelian Conceptions of the Soul*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Pp. viii, 220.

Perhaps the most lively area of historical research in philosophy today concerns the scholastic antecedents of modern philosophy. As studies of modern philosophy have become more historically rigorous, over the past twenty years, they have become increasingly concerned with understanding the antecedents to figures such as Descartes and Locke. Of course, inasmuch as these authors were notoriously and proudly ignorant of scholastic thought, it is not to be expected that a better understanding of medieval and Renaissance philosophy will unlock the hidden meaning of modern texts. Still, the very notion that such authors are somehow modern can be defended only on the basis of a decent understanding of their predecessors, something that few modern scholars can claim to have.

Dennis Des Chene is one of the leading figures in this movement, and his new book provides a window into a cluster of Renaissance authors—Francisco Suárez, Francisco Toletus, Petrus Fonseca, Roderigo de Arriaga, and the Coimbra commentators—who were among the most influential representatives of late scholasticism. The project of this new book is a fairly narrow one, in two ways. First, the focus is entirely on this small group of Spanish, Jesuit authors, all from around 1600, and all of whom shared very much the same Thomistic perspective (to the point that Des Chene often doesn't bother to indicate in the main text which author he is quoting from). Second, the focus is on theories of the soul in general, excluding those special problems that arise for the human soul. As a result, there is little here about the workings of intellect, freedom of the will, and the immateriality (and immortality) of the soul. Des Chene bypasses this well-trodden material in favor of such less-studied topics as the definition of life, the distinction between the soul's powers, and the divisibility of the soul. The goal is both "to understand the Aristotelian theories in their own right," and to provide "some background to the mechanistic revolution which was about to sweep them away" (2).

Few authors could save such material from being terminally tedious—certainly Suárez and Toletus themselves could not, and they were the best of the bunch. But Des Chene is an exceptional author: his writing is witty and vivid, and he is prodigiously learned. His references span the history of philosophy and science, largely centered on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but

#### BOOK REVIEWS

frequently going all the way back to the ancients and all the way forward to the likes of Fodor and Block. In what follows I will make a number of criticisms, but the main impression I want to leave is that this is a book well worth reading.

Des Chene is very quick to conclude that this scholastic material he has labored over for most of his career has little intrinsic philosophical value. With a nod to Myles Burnyeat, he writes that “Aristotelian biology is no longer an option; the prospects of Aristotelian psychology seem hardly better. But what is no longer a serious option retains its historical importance” (14). Indeed, Des Chene is at his best when he brings this material squarely into contact with modern views. A discussion of how his Jesuit authors individuate the senses leads to some interesting remarks on the difficulty that Descartes faces in this area (129, 141). Reflection on the debate over the soul’s divisibility leads to the thought that “only from a rather blinkered point of view can anyone hold—as Descartes does—that extension is a necessary consequence of materiality, or that the absence of extension is a necessary consequence of immateriality” (186). Then there is this striking claim, that “the new science of life was not, for the most part, arrived at on the basis of new or revised phenomena, but on a new conception of its aims and objects” (31).

These are some of the highpoints of *Life’s Form*. But Des Chene’s lack of faith in the intrinsic value of his Jesuit authors diminishes the value of his book. Since the credibility of the scholastic account has been dismissed from the start, Des Chene has little interest in the *arguments* that support the various doctrines under discussion. What matters are the conclusions themselves, along with the general methodology that yields those conclusions. Once that is set out, Des Chene proceeds to hunt around for something that will make his material seem interesting. We learn, for instance, that Arriaga rejected the univocity of ‘life’, holding that “intentional life,” as manifested by thought, will, and sensation, differs in kind from “physical life,” as manifested by the nutritive and locomotive operations. This is a fascinating claim, about which one would like to hear much more. But Des Chene, after saying only this much about Arriaga, proceeds to tell us about the Church’s position on the Incarnation, the Stoic conception of *anima mundi*, Henry More on infinite space, Newton on the universe, and then to surmise that there is perhaps a trace of all this in Descartes (64–65). If Arriaga is worth talking about at all, then we should take the time to find out what he is really saying, and why.

It seems to me that amidst all of this prodigious intertextuality, there is one very large missed opportunity. The Cartesian substitution of mind for soul has so dominated modern philosophy that we no longer have a clear sense of what the human soul might be, if not a mind. All of Des Chene’s Jesuits are persuaded that soul and mind are not identical—that the soul is one thing and its powers, including the mental powers of intellect and will, are something else. But we never get a very clear sense of what the difference is. Des Chene remarks that scholastic discussions of the soul’s essence, as opposed to its powers, are

## BOOK REVIEWS

“quite foreign to recent philosophy of mind,” and he invokes in rapid succession behaviorism, reductionism, functionalism, and teleological-evolutionary theories (110–11). But all of that is utterly irrelevant to the scholastic position, because an account of the soul’s essence would not yield a philosophy of mind in any sense. The whole point was that the soul is *not* the mind: we might have a complete philosophy of mind and still have no idea what the soul itself is. To understand scholastic conceptions of the soul, one needs to understand the scholastic theory of substantial form. That, rather than a mind, is what the soul is. But though Des Chene has elsewhere written perceptively about substantial form, here he seems so under the sway of the Cartesian conception as to be unable to pull mind and soul apart. At one point he describes a thought experiment proposed by Suárez: that we imagine God’s creating a human soul and then preventing that soul from developing any of its powers. Des Chene remarks that this stretches the Aristotelian scheme “to the limit of intelligibility” (150), but that will seem so only from the modern Cartesian perspective. For an Aristotelian, the soul is simply a certain sort of form, one that gives rise to certain sorts of powers when united to the right sort of body. Since its mental powers are immaterial, they cannot be naturally impeded in the way that its sensory powers can and sometimes are. But so long as one accepts the distinction between the soul and its mental powers (a controversial claim among scholastics, but one that Suárez accepts), there is nothing at all incoherent in God’s impeding the development of those powers.

*Life’s Form* will likely seem least impressive to readers familiar with the medieval background to Renaissance scholasticism. Des Chene inadvertently reveals from the start that his expertise is rather limited in that direction, when on the very first page he describes Averroes’s commentaries as “profoundly revisionary, and troubling,” and then goes on to describe Averroistic monopsychism as the doctrine that all human beings share a single agent intellect. But *that* doctrine was a commonplace among readers of Aristotle, and was accepted by many thirteenth-century Christian authors. What was troubling in Averroes was the doctrine that all human beings share a single *possible intellect*. Moreover, despite this point of intense controversy, Averroes’s commentaries were not in general revisionary or troubling, let alone profoundly so. The “Commentator” was relied on by countless students of Aristotle, well into the modern period, precisely because his readings of the text were largely sensible and measured. Many similar mistakes could be mentioned. For instance: Aquinas did not think there were two senses of touch (138), but only one; Ockham did not postulate two souls within a human being (153), but rather three; it was not the Council of Vienna (168), but of Vienne, and since it concluded in 1312 it could not have condemned the fifteenth-century work of Paulus Venetus. Still, such errors only slightly diminish Des Chene’s overall achievement.

ROBERT PASNAU

*University of Colorado*