

Élodie Cassan, *Le langage de la raison: De Descartes à La linguistique cartésienne* (Paris: Vrin, 2023), 278 pp., € 13.00 (paperback), ISBN 978 2 7116 3085 1.

While Cartesian studies are increasingly focusing on Descartes's anthropology, which pertains to the branches of the 'tree' of philosophy – namely, the theory of the passions and the corresponding conception of the human being as consisting of a distinct yet unified mind and body –, the main originality of Élodie Cassan's approach lies in her dual, correlative approach to Cartesian anthropology. On the one hand, she revisits the interpretation of the Cartesian thesis proposed by the linguist Noam Chomsky in his *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought* (1966), according to which speech is a sign of thought that is not organically determined. On the other hand, she demonstrates how this contemporary reading offers a framework for rethinking the relationship between logic and anthropology within Cartesian philosophy. In other words, her book *Le langage de la raison* seeks to demonstrate the relevance of a contemporary interpretation of a classical philosopher, insofar as such an interpretation serves to renew a central issue inherent in the philosopher's thought – namely, the logical stakes of anthropology.

Clearly structured, the book is divided into three parts. The first outlines the reasons why Chomsky associates Descartes with his rationalist theory in the field of linguistics; the second examines the doxological categories of rationalism and empiricism in contrast; the third shows how reading Descartes through the lens of Chomsky sheds light on the potential of the Cartesian conception of the human being.

Several salient points emerge from these various sections, each of them bearing witness to the author's scholarly rigor. First, she demonstrates the originality of Chomsky's approach to Descartes, insofar as grounding the study of language in a theory of mind reveals the role of language within the Cartesian concept of reason. By defining the human being as a rational being, Descartes engages with language. He presents it both as dependent on thought, which is logically prior to it, and as that which attests to what is proper to the human, namely, thought itself: "thought is the reason of language, but above all, reason has a language" (p. 73; our translation). Bringing to light the linguistic framework of reason also serves to elevate the role of logic within Cartesian philosophy, where it is often treated as peripheral. As the cognitive functioning of the mind is intrinsically linked to the mastery of linguistic meaning, so Descartes's criticism of Scholastic rhetoric – based on conventional forms – does not exclude the possibility of a rhetoric consistent with the art of invention. Thus, the main thread of the book reveals the intersubjective dimension

of Descartes's approach to language, particularly through the logical and rhetorical issues of persuasion: because it thinks, the *res cogitans* "has things to say and to hear being said" (p. 189; our translation).

The book also succeeds in demonstrating that Descartes's thesis on the correlation between language and thought goes beyond the category of rationalism. Indeed, this correlation, which is the focus of Chomsky's interest, must be situated within the context of modern philosophy, as it was exploited in various and even opposing ways by philosophers aligned with an empirical approach (Gassendi, Locke, Condillac, Rousseau). These philosophers, to whom the book devotes further attention, have established a new understanding of the Cartesian link between thought and language. While language remains the criterion of humanity, thought is subordinated to it and no longer serves as its explanatory principle, leading to the rejection of the "romance of the soul" – a phrase coined by Voltaire. The linguistic theme thus provides an argument for a more nuanced view of the relationship between empiricism and rationalism, one that suggests interaction rather than opposition.

In addition to establishing a genealogical foundation of a Cartesian type for his linguistic theory, Cassan shows that another key dimension of Chomsky's approach lies in the political application he makes of Descartes. This is evident notably through his appeal to a non-conformist use of linguistic creativity, grounded in Cartesian common sense. Chomsky mobilizes the inventive power of man in the political field, considering it as a foundational instrument for the rational analysis of social reality, thereby countering ideological distortion. This political application leads Cassan to address the question of the relevance of Chomskyan linguistics, underpinned by Cartesian anthropology. To what extent does a theory of man as a rational being make sense? Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of language is then employed as an evaluative tool, insofar as it entails a critique of Chomsky and his Cartesian legacy. Bourdieu criticizes Chomsky's linguistics, insofar as it claims to be Cartesian, for adhering to an imaginary conception of man, blind to the social conditioning that shapes the act of speaking, which is the product of the encounter between linguistic habitus and the linguistic market. Thus, Bourdieu develops an alternative theory of man, practical and attentive to the social context surrounding speech. Cassan demonstrates that this critique paradoxically underscores the political stakes inherent in a rationalist approach to human nature. This approach is not oriented towards a subject constituted by an internal dialogue, but rather towards a mode of life that actualizes human nature and its linguistic functioning. Reducing language to innate cognitive structures does not, neither for Descartes nor Chomsky, preclude the determination of the conditions necessary for their full exercise, aimed at achieving a happy and free life. While not

converging, the perspectives of both Chomsky and Bourdieu reflect a shared concern to speak correctly of man, taking into consideration the use of linguistic competencies, whether it involves a logic of knowledge or a logic of practice. It follows that this emphasis on the mode of life corresponding to the realization of human nature serves to liberate rationalist anthropology from a subject-centered theory, aligning it instead with the view that essence and existence are inseparable.

The book also opens several lines of inquiry, revealing its intellectual depth. First, the analysis of the linguistic deployment of reason in Descartes's thought, as identified by Chomsky, raises the technical question – specific to the economy of Cartesian thought – of how to interpret the operations of perceiving clear and distinct ideas, based on attention and meditation. If clear and distinct ideas cannot exist without words, yet retain logical priority over them, how should we conceive of what is at stake for the mind and its perception of truth? In other words, could not Chomsky's approach be discussed by relying on the classical understanding of the Cartesian idea in representational terms, which prioritizes its reference to reality and its essence over its linguistic formulation?

While the Cartesian distinction between humans and animals, moreover, is duly acknowledged, the question of the status of animals is set aside by the book (see pp. 66 and 72). Yet, one might wonder to what extent the Cartesian correlation between language and thought, as identified by Chomsky, does not inherently call for a reflection on the Cartesian conception of animals. This constitutes a line of inquiry opened by the book, rather than an omission. Indeed, Cartesian texts would likely benefit from being illuminated by contemporary works in the field of animal ethics. It is particularly important to address the hermeneutic legacy of the Cartesian decision to conceive of animals both as machines and as beings endowed with distinct sensitivity, albeit not associated with a form of thought which is reserved exclusively for humans.

Finally, from the perspective of the history of philosophy, one may ask how Chomsky's linguistic approach, situated within its Cartesian legacy, contributes to the historiographical category of Cartesianism. More specifically, to what extent can Chomsky be regarded as Cartesian, considering both the textual grounding of his approach (Descartes indeed leaves room for language within his cognitive theory) and the epistemological divergences between the two authors (reason, for Descartes, is not constituted as a faculty of language)? It is toward the end of the book (in the final part of the Chapter 3 and in the Conclusion) that a response to this question begins to take shape. Chomsky's interpretive gesture is described in terms of efficacy: what is at stake in Chomsky's work (and also in Bourdieu's) is an effective redeployment

of Cartesian concepts, insofar as their instrumental use helps to account for phenomena not originally targeted by Descartes – namely, linguistic and political ones. In this respect, the specificity of Chomsky's gesture – irreducible to mere 'intellectual tinkering' – lies in its hermeneutic utility: it brings into view Descartes's linguistic concerns. This model of efficacy, as the matrix of Chomsky's relation to Descartes, raises the further question of how it might be situated within the ongoing history of interpretations of Descartes that continue to shape the historiographical category of Cartesianism.

Let us conclude by emphasizing the book's main merit: unveiling the philosophical depth of Chomsky's use of Descartes. This approach facilitates a return to the very essence of Cartesian philosophy, which is rooted in the irreducibility of man – composed of a thinking soul and a body – to a mere machine.

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