DESCARTES AND THE ROSICRUCIANS

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The young Descartes became interested in the Rosicrucian movement when he was stationed in Germany. Some of the reasons why he was subsequently accused of belonging to the movement are considered in the light of contemporary evidence.

It is generally agreed that men donned new thinking caps in the seventeenth century, and this can be brought home very vividly by comparing Descartes’ lucid manifesto of rationalism in the Discourse on Method and the Principles of Philosophy with the outlook prevalent a few years earlier. For instance, in the concluding paragraph of the second part of the Principles of Philosophy, Descartes writes:

I frankly profess that I recognize no other matter of corporeal bodies beyond the one that can be divided, given shape and moved, namely what geometers call quantity and take as the object of their demonstrations. I consider nothing in this matter outside these divisions, shapes and motion about which I accept as true only what is clearly deduced from those common notions, whose truth cannot be doubted, such that a mathematical demonstration may be said to obtain. Since all natural phenomena can be explained in this way, as shall be apparent from what follows, I do not think that any other physical principles are to be accepted or even desired.

Less than three decades earlier, texts such as the following were widespread:

Sensible objects are useful to conceive Olympic ones: the wind indicates the spirit, motion temporal life, light knowledge, heat love, instantaneous action creation. Every corporeal form acts through harmony. There are more humid things than dry ones, and more cold things than warm ones, for otherwise the active things would win too soon and the world would not last long.\(^2\)

Or again: “The active force, love, charity, and harmony are all one.”\(^3\)

These quotations embody, for us, two profoundly different ways of looking at the world, and, if we perceive them as radically opposed, it is largely because we are the heirs of the Cartesian reform in philosophy. I chose them, however, not only to obtain clarification by contrast but because they are, in fact, by the same man. The last two quotations are also by Descartes and they were written around 1619 when he was in his early twenties. What happened between that time and 1637 when he published his first book, the *Discourse on Method* and the three treatises on optics, meteorology and geometry, at the age of forty-one, is a complicated story, and what I shall have to say about it will be largely tentative and exploratory. Descartes was in that felicitous, if and sadly obsolete phrase, “a gentleman of independent means”, and he did not have to publish for fear of perishing. In other words, he could wait until he had something really interesting to say before fouling the presses, and he did not have to live, like most of us, with juvenile papers that our research students ferret out to show that we too were once young, impulsive, somewhat grandiloquent, and none too deep.

The last two quotations come from a notebook that Descartes kept for many years and that was found among his possessions after his untimely death in Stockholm in 1650. Descartes’ papers were brought back to France by the French ambassador Hector-Pierre Chanut and turned over to his brother-in-law Claude Clerel, a friend of Descartes. When Leibniz visited Paris in 1675, he was shown the manuscript and he took copious notes. These were discovered by Foucher de Careil among the Leibniz papers in Hanover and were first published in 1859-1860.\(^4\)

It is, of course, not enough to state that “the active force, love,

\(^2\) A.T., X, 218.
\(^3\) *Ibid*.
\(^4\) They are reprinted in A.T., X, 213-248.