

BLACKFRIARS

REVIEWS

THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

ESSAI SUR LA MORALE DE DESCARTES. By Pierre Mesnard.
(Boivin, Paris; 25 frs.)

The works of René Descartes reveal an interest in ethical questions which is neither deep nor continuous. Between 1620 and 1628, he not infrequently paraphrases the conclusions of Neo-Stoics such as Justus Lipsius and du Vair: the chief importance of such texts is not, however, in the field of moral philosophy—from this point of view they merely demonstrate the power of a fashion—but derives from their possible influence in the genesis of Cartesian metaphysics. From 1628 until 1646, during which time most of Descartes' greatest work was produced, he touches but once upon the subject, and this reference (the *morale provisoire*) is deliberately sub-philosophical. In the last years of his life, perhaps rather from the accident of an interesting correspondence than from any real design, his mind was much exercised by problems of conduct; and the works of this period contain the germs of what he himself considered to be an original system of ethics.

Mesnard has reviewed the whole of this heterogeneous and rather unsatisfactory subject-matter, and if his professional attitude of reverence has caused him to take it all rather too seriously, that is perhaps a venial fault. Three texts receive his closest consideration: the Preface to the *Principia* (1647), the *Traité des Passions* (1649), and the *Correspondance* with Princess Elisabeth, Chanut and Queen Christina. The first posits the possibility of a Cartesian science of morals, presumably divorced from all finalist considerations: but the constitution of the tree of wisdom, as analysed in this passage, is governed by the tripartite division of the Stoics, and does not seem to correspond with any true fundamental principles of Cartesian thought. The *Passions*, in spite of all the learned and sympathetic efforts of its latest commentator, still appears to be little more than a *tour-de-force* of Cartesian physiology. There is a more damaging truth than Mesnard intended in his judgment that "le problème de la Morale cartésienne . . . c'est celui de l'UNION DE L'AME ET DU CORPS" (author's capitals). Mesnard concedes that Descartes borrowed the general scheme of his psychology proper from Thomist sources, and adapted this to a pre-existing mechanistic physiology. In this connection, it is unfortunate that Mesnard has contented himself with reading Gilson's (excellent) essay on the ethics of Saint Thomas, and failed to pursue any further this line of enquiry. The result is a misrepresentation of Thomism which is sometimes grotesque (as for instance on p. 119, where

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the *bonum* and *malum* which are the objects of the passions are mistaken for ethical qualities); and an uncritical acceptance of Descartes' prudential identification of his *habitude* with the scholastic *habitus* (the former is hardly even a *pli* or *dispositio*, and has almost nothing in common with the latter). As for the physiological data of the *Passions*, and the mumbo-jumbo which explains the union of body and soul by the local displacement of a gland, it is difficult to understand the almost complacent detachment with which Mesnard here follows the thought of the Master. A more serious suppression of the critical faculty appears in the treatment of the third text. Most of this part of the *Correspondance* is verbiage, and while Mesnard seems to have recognized this (since he sees fit to use block capitals for such words as *générosité* and *sagesse*), he writes as though he did not. None of the questions which would test the validity of this "Cartesian ethic" are asked; no remark is made of the absence of any consideration of moral criteria, conscience or law.

Among a number of tiresome misprints one of the most unfortunate is "nous appétons" for "nous appelons" (p. 75); but the use of the terms "intellectuelle" and "spirituelle" for a cerebral reaction (p. 100) must proceed from some more serious inattention. A somewhat laboriously picturesque form of the academic type of French prose does not make this *Essai* particularly readable.

NIGEL ABERCROMBIE.

LE LAIC THEOLOGIEN. Introduction à l'Etude de la Théologie.
By Denys Gorce. (Auguste Picard, Paris.)

Evangelical poverty of spirit is separate from mental vacuity and feebleness of will. Between becoming like to a little child and intellectual infantilism there is not the most tenuous link. The antithesis is true. For the Christ-way of childhood is one of receptiveness, docility, the wilful turning of the human mind towards the self-defined givenness of real things.

The mind inclines towards all being, in its infinity of possible forms. It realizes this inclination by a recipient-becoming of a finite number of actual beings, knowing them, not under this or that aspect, but for what they are in themselves. And it always holds this innate power. It is as incorruptible as the soul it nourishes. Wherever there is a human soul, it is present. A human soul means a human mind. And a human being means a human soul.

In short (reintegrating and applying), any member of Christ, by reason of his membership, is most emphatically and fully human, and consequently, however remote from academic altitudes, needs bread, needs intellectual unfolding into the content of his faith, that he himself may grow fully in the things of Christ, loving them and Him.