

Book Reviews

THOMAS McKEOWN, *The modern rise of population*, London, Edward Arnold, 1976, 8vo, [3 11.], pp. 168, illus., £7.95.

One of the major problems in historical demography, and yet the most difficult of solution, is to explain why the population of West Europe has risen in the last three centuries. Professor McKeown's solution is well known and he presents it here again, in greater detail and with more data. He argues that advances in therapy could not have been responsible, because certain diseases, such as pulmonary tuberculosis, were on the decline long before the introduction of modern therapeutic agents and procedures. Nor can increasing fertility be indicted. McKeown's claim is that a steadily improving state of nutrition, with a resultant increasing resistance to disease, is the factor.

The problem is, however, of great complexity because even though more food was available, there were also more people to eat it. Moreover, as Professor McKeown admits, we do not know if greater availability meant that individuals were actually better fed. He suggests that a declining birth rate, better and extended agricultural methods and improved environmental conditions all help to support his theory.

His book is provocative and will be attacked by economic and social historians and by demographers. They will complain that he has been too rigid in his concepts and overlooked additional responsible factors for population increases. Some may argue that he has dismissed certain medical procedures, such as inoculation, too readily, and others may not agree that pre-nineteenth-century vital statistics are altogether inadequate as is usually claimed. Nevertheless this is a thought-provoking book, and the first of its kind to attempt a comprehensive explanation for a phenomenon which is of importance to each one of us today.

JOHN COTTINGHAM, *Descartes' conversation with Burman*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, 8vo, pp. xl, 133, £6.50.

In 1648 the young Dutchman, Frans Burman (1628–1679), interviewed Descartes and questioned him closely on some of the vital issues of his philosophy. He raised more than eighty specific points and had prepared himself by selecting over seventy passages from the philosopher's writings. This unique encounter is of the greatest importance for the comprehension of Cartesian philosophy and it is surprising that the *Conversation* has never before appeared in English. Here Dr. Cottingham produces a comprehensive and detailed record of his own translation (pp. 3–51), with an excellent introduction and a lengthy commentary.

The works of Descartes they discussed were his *Meditations*, *The principles of philosophy* and *The discourse on method*. We usually think of Descartes as being very cautious and reticent, but the conversations recorded here reveal him to be quite open and uninhibited. However it must be remembered that the record presented here is by Burman, and its content must also be viewed with this in mind. Nevertheless many of Descartes' statements are new, or formulated differently from those in his written works, although they do not deviate from the Cartesian system as a whole. Most of the issues considered were non-theological for they involved the theory of knowledge, philosophy and mind, and philosophical psychology. This excellent book will be essential for all who study Cartesian philosophy.