

# René Descartes

## Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy

Translated by  
Gerald A. Cress

Third Edition



Discourse  
on  
Method  
*and*  
Meditations  
on  
First Philosophy  
*third edition*

RENÉ DESCARTES

Translated by  
DONALD A. CRESS

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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

René Descartes was born March 31, 1596, in a small town in Touraine called La Haye (now called La Haye-Descartes or simply Descartes). When he was about ten years old, his father sent him to the Collège Henri IV at La Flèche, a newly formed school which was soon to become the showcase of Jesuit education and one of the outstanding centers for academic training in Europe. Later in his life Descartes looked with pride on the classical education he received from the Jesuits, even though he did not always find agreeable what the Jesuits taught him. He especially found the scholastic Aristotelianism taught there distasteful, although he did cherish his training in many other disciplines—particularly mathematics.

Descartes left La Flèche in 1614 to study civil and canon law at Poitiers, and by 1616 had received the baccalaureate and licentiate degrees in law. In 1618 Descartes joined the army of Prince Maurice of Nassau as an unpaid volunteer, but apparently he never saw combat. He seems to have been more interested in using military service as a means of seeing the world.

During a tour of duty in Germany, events of lifelong importance happened to Descartes. In November of 1619 he was sitting in a *poêle*, a small stove-heated room, meditating on the disunity and uncertainty of his knowledge. He marveled at mathematics, a science in which he found certainty, necessity, and precision. How could he find a basis for all knowledge so that it might have the same unity and certainty as mathematics? Then, in a blinding flash, Descartes saw the method to be pursued for putting all the sciences, all knowledge, on a firm footing. This method made clear both how new knowledge was to be achieved and how all previous knowledge could be certain and unified. That evening Descartes had a series of dreams that seemed to put a divine stamp of approval on his project. Shortly thereafter Descartes left military service.

Throughout the early part of his life, Descartes was plagued by a sense of impotence and frustration about the task he had set about to accomplish: a new and stable basis for all knowledge. He had the programmatic vision, but he seemed to despair of being able to work it out in detail. Thus, perhaps we have an explanation for the fact that Descartes, during much of the 1620s, threw himself into the pursuit of the good life. Travel, gambling, and dueling seemed especially to attract his attention.

This way of life ended in 1628, when, through the encouragement of

Cardinal de Bérulle, Descartes decided to see his program through to completion. He left France to avoid the glamour and the social life; he renounced the distractions in which he could easily lose himself and forget what he knew to be his true calling. He departed for Holland, where he would live for the next twenty years.

It was during this period that Descartes began his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* and wrote a short treatise on metaphysics, although the former was not published during his lifetime and the latter seems to have been destroyed by him. Much of the early 1630s was taken up with scientific questions. However, Descartes's publication plans were abruptly altered when he learned of the trial of Galileo in Rome. Descartes decided, as Aristotle had centuries before, that philosophy would not be sinned against twice. He suppressed his scientific treatise, *The World or Treatise on Light*.

In 1637 Descartes published in French a *Discourse on the Method for Conducting One's Reason Rightly and for Searching for Truth in the Sciences*; it introduced three treatises which were to exemplify the new method: one on optics, one on geometry, and one on meteorology. Part IV of the introductory *Discourse* contained, in somewhat sketchy form, much of the philosophical basis for constructing the new system of knowledge.

In response to queries about this section, Descartes prepared a much lengthier discussion of the philosophical underpinnings for his vision of a unified and certain body of human knowledge. This response was to be his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, completed in the spring of 1640—but not published until August, 1641. Attached to the *Meditations* were sets of objections and queries sent by readers who had read the manuscript, plus Descartes's replies to each set.

The period following the publication of the *Meditations* was marked by controversy and polemics. Aristotelians, both Catholic and Protestant, were outraged; many who did not understand Descartes's teachings took him to be an atheist and a libertine. In spite of all of this clamor, Descartes hoped that his teachings would replace those of Aristotle. To this end he published in 1644 his *Principles of Philosophy*, a four-part treatise which he hoped would supplant the Aristotelian scholastic manuals used in most universities. The last important work to be published during his lifetime was his *Passions of the Soul*, in which Descartes explored such topics as the relationship of the soul to the body, the nature of emotion, and the role of the will in controlling the emotions.

In 1649 Queen Christina of Sweden convinced Descartes that he should come to Stockholm in order to teach her philosophy. Christina seems to have regarded Descartes more as a court ornament for her amusement

and edification than as a serious philosopher; however, it was the brutal winter of 1649 that proved to be Descartes's undoing. Of the climate in Sweden Descartes was to say: "It seems to me that men's thoughts freeze here during winter, just as does the water." Descartes caught pneumonia early in February of 1650 and, after more than a week of suffering, died on February 11.

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### A. STANDARD EDITION

*Oeuvres de Descartes*, publiés par Charles Adam et Paul Tannery, 13 volumes. Paris: Cerf, 1897–1913. (Vols. 1–11 contain Descartes's writings; vol. 12 contains Charles Adam's *Vie et oeuvres de Descartes*; vol. 13 is a supplementary volume containing correspondence, biographical material, and various indexes.) It has been updated (Paris: Vrin, 1964ff.), and additional correspondence has been appended to various volumes. More accurate identifications of dates and addressees have been supplied; especially important is the inclusion of Descartes's correspondence with Huygens. This edition is commonly cited as AT.

### B. ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

*The Philosophical Works of Descartes*. 2 volumes. Rendered into English by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross. 2nd edition, corrected. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931.

Until 1984 this often reprinted but error-plagued set of volumes was the standard translation of many of Descartes's central works. Virtually all twentieth-century Anglo-American scholars made use of Haldane-Ross. This edition was commonly cited as HR.

*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. 3 vols. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 1991.

This translation is a welcome replacement of HR. The first volume contains philosophical works other than those related to the *Meditations*; the second volume contains the *Meditations* and the *Replies to Objections*; the third volume contains Descartes's philosophical correspondence and much of the *Conversation with Burman*. This edition is commonly cited as CSM.

*Descartes, Philosophical Letters*, Edited and translated by Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970; reprinted Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1981.

Descartes's correspondence is an invaluable resource that complements his published works. For twenty years this was the standard English translation of Descartes's philosophical correspondence. Although the translations are reliable, references in the footnotes and the index should be used with care, as there are many errors in the Oxford edition, and they were not corrected in the later reprint. This volume was commonly cited as K. It has now been



incorporated into volume three of CSM; errors have been corrected, and additional correspondence has been included.

*Descartes' Conversation with Burman*. Translated, with notes, by John Cottingham. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Housed in the Library of the University of Göttingen is a manuscript that purports to chronicle a discussion between Descartes and the young Dutch theologian Francis Burman. Burman had chosen several texts from Descartes's writings for discussion. Sometimes he would criticize the doctrine in the text; sometimes he would simply ask for clarification. Descartes's (?) replies are always interesting and nearly always shed light on difficult passages in his published works. Cottingham's extensive commentary is both interesting and helpful. It is commonly cited as CB. Since volume three of CSM does not provide the complete text of the *Conversation with Burman*, this translation must continue to be consulted.

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This is the basic bibliographical tool of pre-1960 Descartes scholarship. It contains a large number of annotations and cross-references; it is well indexed by person and subject matter. Although somewhat weak in its coverage of twentieth-century Anglo-American analytical literature on Descartes, it is outstanding in its coverage of continental scholarship.

Doney, Willis. "Bibliography," in *Descartes: A Collectum of Critical Essays*. New York: Doubleday, 1967, pp. 369–386.

This bibliography largely rectifies Sebba's lack of coverage of pre-1960 analytical works on Descartes. It is concerned chiefly with English titles; it is divided by subject matter.

Chappell, Vere, and Willis Doney. *Twenty-Five Years of Descartes Scholarship, 1960–1984: A Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1987.

This volume, while neither complete nor adequately indexed, is still the best update of Sebba.

Cress, Donald A. "Canadian and American Dissertations on Descartes and Cartesianism: 1865–1984." *Philosophy Research Archives* 13 (April 1988).

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Discourse  
on  
the Method for  
Rightly Conducting  
One's Reason  
and  
for Seeking Truth in  
the Sciences

## NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

The translation is based on the original French version (1637) of the *Discourse on Method* found in volume six of the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes's works (Paris: Vrin, 1965). The numbers in the margins of this translation refer to the pagination of the Adam and Tannery edition.

D.A.C.

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# DISCOURSE ON THE METHOD FOR RIGHTLY CONDUCTING ONE'S REASON AND FOR SEEKING TRUTH IN THE SCIENCES

*If this discourse seems too long to be read at one sitting, one might split it into six parts. In the first, one will find various discussions concerning the sciences. In the second part, the chief rules of the method which the author has been seeking. In the third part, some of the rules of morality which the author has derived from this method. In the fourth part, the reasons by which the author proves the existence of God and of the human soul, which are the foundations of his metaphysics. In the fifth part, the order of the questions in physics which the author has sought—and particularly the explanation of the heart's movement and other difficulties which pertain to medicine, as well as the difference between our soul and that of animals. And in the final part, what things the author believes are required to advance further in the study of nature than the author has done, and what reasons moved him to write.*

## PART ONE

Good sense is the most evenly distributed commodity in the world, for each of us considers himself to be so well endowed therewith that even those who are the most difficult to please in all other matters are not wont to desire more of it than they have. It is not likely that anyone is mistaken about this fact. Rather, it provides evidence that the power of judging rightly and of distinguishing the true from the false (which, properly speaking, is what people call good sense or reason) is naturally equal in all men. Thus the diversity of our opinions does not arise from the fact that some people are more reasonable than others, but simply from the fact that we conduct our thoughts along different lines and do not consider the same things. For it is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to use it well. The greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices as well as of the greatest virtues. And if they always follow the correct path, those who move forward only very slowly can make much greater progress than do those who run and stray from it.

For myself, I have never presumed that my mind was in any respect more perfect than anyone else's. In fact, I have often longed to have as



quick a wit or as precise and distinct an imagination or as full and responsive a memory as certain other people. And I know of no other qualities that aid in the perfection of the mind. For as to reason or good sense, given that it alone makes us men and distinguishes us from animals, I prefer to believe that it exists whole and entire in each one of us. In this belief I am following the standard opinion held by philosophers who say  
3 that there are differences of degree only among accidents, but not among forms or natures of individuals of the same species.

But I shall have no fear of declaring that I think I have been fortunate; I have, since my youth, found myself on paths that have led me to certain considerations and maxims from which I have formed a method by means of which, it seems to me, I have the ways to increase my knowledge by degrees and to raise it gradually to the highest point to which the mediocrity of my mind and the short span of my life can allow it to attain. For I have already reaped from it such a harvest that, though as regards judgments I make of myself, I try always to lean toward caution, rather than toward presumption, and though, looking with a philosopher's eye at the various actions and enterprises of men, there is hardly one that does not seem to me vain and useless, I always take immense satisfaction in the progress that I think I have made in the search for truth; and I envisage such hopes for the future that if, among the occupations of men, as men, there is one which may be solidly good and important, I dare believe that it is the occupation I have chosen.

All the same, it could be that I am mistaken; and what I have taken for gold and diamonds may perhaps be nothing but copper and glass. I know how much we are prone to be mistaken in those things that deeply affect us, and also how judgments made by our friends must be held suspect when these judgments are in our favor. But I would be very happy to show  
4 in this discourse the paths that I have followed and to present my life as if in a picture, so that each person may judge it; learning what people commonly think about it may be a new means of teaching myself, which I shall add to those that I am accustomed to employing.

Thus my purpose here is not to teach the method that everyone ought to follow in order to conduct his reason correctly, but merely to show how I have tried to conduct mine. Those who take it upon themselves to give precepts ought to regard themselves as more competent than those to whom they give them; and if they are found wanting in the least detail, they are blameworthy. But, putting forward this essay as merely a history—or, if you prefer, a fable—in which, among the examples one can imitate, one also finds perhaps several others which one is right in not following,