

**René  
Descartes**

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

**Fourth Edition**

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 had 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 he 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 Well 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 was stricken with 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' writings for discussion. Sometimes he would criticize the doctrine in the text; sometimes he would simply ask for clarification. Descartes' (?) 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.

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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.

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**Discourse**  
**on**  
**the Method for**  
**Conducting One's Reason Well**  
**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' works (Paris: Vrin, 1965). The numbers in square brackets of this translation refer to the pagination of the Adam and Tannery edition.

D.A.C.

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

*If this discourse seems too long to be read at one time, it may be divided into six parts. In the first part, you will find various considerations concerning the sciences; in the second part, the chief rules of the method which the author has sought; in the third part, some of the rules of morality which he has derived from this method; in the fourth part, the arguments by which he 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 that he has investigated, and particularly the explanation of the movement of the heart and of other difficulties that pertain to medicine, as well as the difference between our soul and that of beasts; and in the final part, what things the author believes are required in order to advance further in the investigation of nature than the author has done, and what reasons have made him write.*

PART ONE

Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world, for everyone thinks himself to be so well endowed with it that even those who are the most [2] difficult to please in everything else are not at all wont to desire more of it than they have. It is not likely that everyone is mistaken in this. Rather, it provides evidence that the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false (which is, properly speaking, what people call “good sense” or “reason”) is naturally equal in all men, and that the diversity of our opinions does not arise from the fact that some people are more reasonable than others, but solely from the fact that we lead our thoughts along different paths and do not take the same things into consideration. For it is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to apply it well. The greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices as well as of the greatest virtues. And those who proceed only very slowly can make much greater progress, provided they always follow the right path, than do those who hurry and stray from it.

For myself, I have never presumed that my mind was in any respect more perfect than that of ordinary men. In fact, I have often desired to have as quick a wit, or as keen and distinct an imagination, or as full and responsive a memory as some other people. And other than these I know of no qualities that serve in the perfecting of the mind, for as to reason or sense, inasmuch as it alone makes us men and distinguishes us from the beasts, I prefer to believe that it exists whole and entire in each of us, and in this to follow the opinion commonly held by the philosophers,[3] who say that there are differences of degree only between accidents, but not at all between forms or

natures of individuals of the same species.

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

All the same, it could be that I am mistaken, and what I take for gold and diamonds is perhaps nothing but a bit of copper and glass. I know how much we are prone to err in what affects us, and also how much the judgments made by our friends should be distrusted when these judgments [4] are in our favor. But I will be very happy to show in this discourse what paths I have followed and to represent my life in it as if in a picture, so that everyone may judge it for himself; and thus, that, learning from the common response the opinions one will have of it, this may be a new means of teaching myself, which I shall add to those that I am accustomed to using.

Thus my purpose here is not to teach the method that everyone ought to follow in order to conduct his reason well, but merely to show how I have tried to conduct my own. Those who take it upon themselves to give precepts must regard themselves as more competent than those to whom they give them; and if they are found wanting in the least detail, they are to blame. But putting forward this essay merely as a story or, if you prefer, as a fable in which, among some examples one can imitate, one will perhaps also find many others which one will have reason not to follow, I hope that it will be useful to some without being harmful to anyone, and that everyone will be grateful to me for my frankness.

I have been nourished on letters since my childhood, and because I was convinced that by means of them one could acquire a clear and assured knowledge of everything that is useful in life, I had a tremendous desire to master them. But as soon as I had completed this entire course of study, at the end of which one is ordinarily received into the ranks of the learned, I completely changed my mind. For I found myself confounded by so many doubts and errors that it seemed to me that I had not gained any profit from my attempt to teach myself, except that more and more I had discovered my ignorance. And yet I was at one of the most renowned [5] schools of Europe, where I thought there must be learned men, if in fact any such men existed anywhere on earth. There I had learned everything the others were learning; and, not content with the disciplines we were taught there, I had gone through all the books I could lay my hands on that treated those disciplines considered the most curious and most unusual. Moreover, I knew what judgments the others were making about me; and I did not at all see that I was rated inferior to my fellow students, even though there already were some among them who were destined to take the place of our

teachers. And finally our age seemed to me to be just as flourishing and as fertile in good minds as any of the preceding ones. This made me feel free to judge all others by myself, and to think that there was no doctrine in the world that was of the sort that I had previously been led to hope for.

I did not, however, cease to hold in high regard the academic exercises with which we occupy ourselves in the schools. I knew that the languages learned there are necessary for the understanding of classical texts; that the charm of fables awakens the mind; that the memorable deeds recounted in histories uplift it, and, if read with discretion, aid in forming one's judgment; that the reading of all good books is like a conversation with the most honorable people of past ages, who were their authors, indeed, even like a set conversation in which they reveal to us only the best of their thoughts; that oratory has incomparable power and beauty; that poetry has quite ravishing delicacy and sweetness; that mathematics has [6] some very subtle stratagems that can serve as much to satisfy the curious as to facilitate all the arts and to lessen men's labor; that writings dealing with morals contain many lessons and many exhortations to virtue that are very useful; that theology teaches one how to reach heaven; that philosophy provides the means of speaking plausibly about all things and of making oneself admired by the less learned; that jurisprudence, medicine, and the other sciences bring honors and riches to those who cultivate them; and, finally, that it is good to have examined all these disciplines, even the most superstition-ridden and the most false of them, in order to know their true worth and to guard against being deceived by them.

But I believed I had already given enough time to languages, and also to the reading of classical texts, both to their histories and to their fables. For conversing with those of other ages is about the same thing as traveling. It is good to know something of the customs of various peoples, so as to judge our own more soundly and so as not to think that everything that is contrary to our ways is ridiculous and against reason, as those who have seen nothing have a habit of doing. But when one takes too much time traveling, one eventually becomes a stranger in one's own country; and when one is too curious about what commonly took place in past ages, one usually remains quite ignorant of what is taking place in one's [7] own country. Moreover, fables make one imagine many events to be possible which are not so at all. And even the most accurate histories, if they neither alter nor exaggerate the significance of things in order to render them more worthy of being read, almost always at least omit the baser and less noteworthy details. Consequently the rest do not appear as they really are, and those who govern their own conduct by means of examples drawn from these texts are liable to fall into the extravagances of the knights of our romances and to conceive plans that are beyond their powers.

I held oratory in high regard and was enamored of poetry, but I thought both were gifts of the mind, rather than fruits of study. Those who possess the strongest reasoning and who best order their thoughts in order to make them clear and intelligible can always best persuade others of what they are proposing, even if they were to speak only Low Breton<sup>1</sup> and had never learned rhetoric. And those who have the most pleasing rhetorical devices and who know how to express themselves with the most embellishment and sweetness would not fail to be the greatest poets, even if the art of poetry were unknown to them.

I delighted most of all in mathematics because of the certainty and the evidence of its reasonings. But I did not yet notice its true use, and, thinking that it was of service merely to the mechanical arts, I was astonished by the fact that no one had built anything more noble upon its foundations, given that they were so solid and firm. On the other hand, I compared the writings of the ancient pagans that deal with morals to very proud and very magnificent palaces that were built on nothing but sand and [8] mud. They place virtues on a high plateau and make them appear to be valued more than anything else in the world, but they do not sufficiently instruct us about how to recognize them; and often what they call by so fine-sounding a name is nothing more than a kind of insensibility, pride, desperation, or parricide.

I revered our theology, and I desired as much as anyone else to reach heaven; but having learned as something very certain that the road to heaven is open no less to the most ignorant than to the most learned, and that the revealed truths guiding us there are beyond our understanding, I would not have dared to submit them to the frailty of my reasonings. And I thought that, in order to undertake an examination of these truths and to succeed in doing so, it would be necessary to have some extraordinary assistance from heaven and to be more than a man.

Concerning philosophy I shall say only that, seeing that it has been cultivated for many centuries by the most excellent minds that have ever lived and that, nevertheless, there still is nothing in it about which there is not some dispute, and consequently nothing that is not doubtful, I was not at all so presumptuous as to hope to fare any better there than the others; and that, considering how many opinions there can be about the very same matter that are held by learned people without there ever being the possibility of more than one opinion being true, I deemed everything that was merely probable to be well-nigh false.

Then, as for the other sciences, I judged that, insofar as they borrow their principles from philosophy, one could not have built anything solid [9] upon such unstable foundations. And neither the honor nor the monetary gain they promised was sufficient to induce me to master them, for I did not perceive myself, thank God, to be in a condition that obliged me to make a career out of science in order to enhance my fortune. And although I did not make a point of rejecting glory after the manner of a Cynic, nevertheless I placed very little value on the glory that I could not hope to acquire except through false pretenses. And finally, as to the false doctrines, I thought I already knew well enough what they were worth, so as not to be liable to be deceived either by the promises of an alchemist, the predictions of an astrologer, the tricks of a magician, or the ruses or boasts of any of those who profess to know more than they do.

That is why, as soon as age permitted me to emerge from the supervision of my teachers, I completely abandoned the study of letters. And resolving to search for no knowledge other than what could be found within myself, or else in the great book of the world, I spent the rest of my youth traveling, seeing courts and armies, mingling with people of diverse temperaments and circumstances, gathering various experiences, testing myself in the encounters that fortune offered me, and everywhere engaging in such reflection upon the things that presented themselves that I was able to derive some profit from them. For it seemed to me that I could find much more truth in the reasonings that each person makes concerning [10] matters that are important to