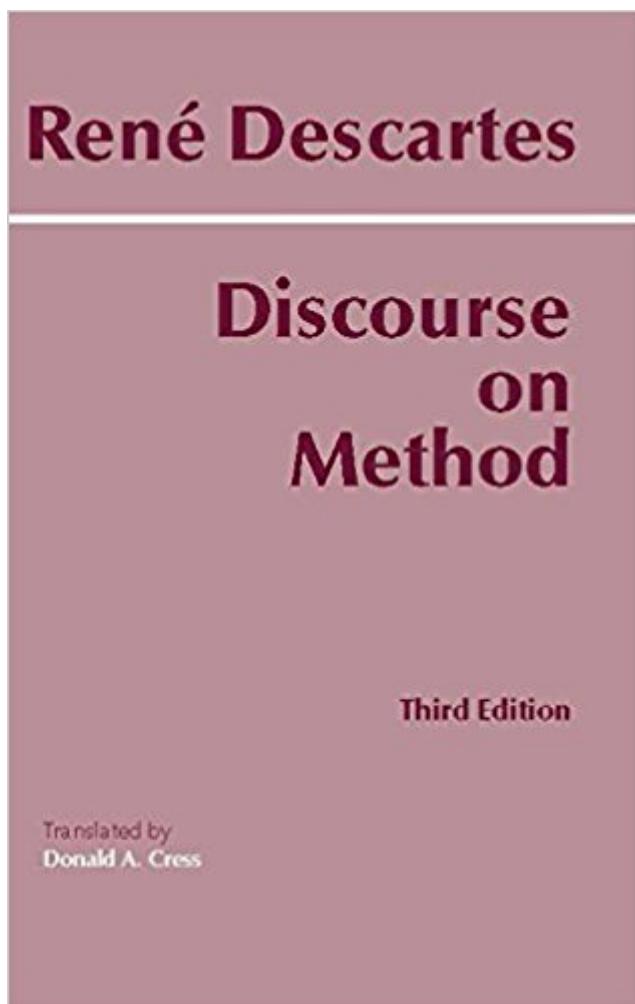


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# Discourse On Method (Hackett Classics)



## **Synopsis**

By far the most widely used translation in North American college classrooms, Donald A. Cress's translation from the French of the Adam and Tannery critical edition is prized for its accuracy, elegance, and economy. The translation featured in the Third Edition has been thoroughly revised from the 1979 First Edition and includes page references to the critical edition for ease of comparison.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Text: English (translation) Original Language: French

Donald A. Cress is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, University of Wisconsin, Parkside. His translations of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and *Discourse on Method* are also published by Hackett.

We are in 1637, Descartes is explaining his method to define a stable basis for all knowledge. Hats off to his frankness on mastering the mediocrity of his mind also aware of the short duration of life. The man was masterful creating ingenious analogies to explain ideas; making the whole thing a delicious read.

In the "Discourse on Method for Conducting One's Reason Well and for Searching for Truth in the

Sciences" (1637) Descartes suggests that perfect knowledge can be achieved by means of perfect, individual reasoning. According to Descartes, reason can only guarantee its truth-seeking value in the personal sphere, and even then only when it is gradually and systematically applied. Descartes demonstrates his own method for generating perfectly reasoned knowledge, but it is the model of this behavior and not the knowledge itself that ought benefit his readers. The text is in this sense a testament to Descartes' own progress as a practitioner of his own method. Descartes exerts himself as the ultimate critic whose default stance is one of doubt and who wishes to reform his own thought according to the most rigorous standards of reason possible. He does not succeed in following most of his maxims. Nevertheless, his experiment is a notable instance of the struggle for individual enlightenment. First, Descartes addresses the harms of the status quo organization of knowledge and its acquisition. He identifies the vector by which falsehoods propagate themselves undetected among the disciplines of human knowledge. The current realm of human knowledge is the product of "design by committee" in the sense that it is cumulative and collaborative, meaning that previous errors in reasoning may serve as the ostensibly firm foundations for the current order of knowledge. He alleges that no discipline of knowledge can be said to be entirely reasoned from empirical data. He criticizes even the apparently objective systems of mathematics and logic for a deficiency of application. Descartes points to controversies and inconsistencies between disciplines as evidence of imperfection among the sciences, for if they were perfectly conceived, they would be a single and uniform science. In theory, these unstable foundations could be reformed at the individual level with individual reason alone. To this end, Descartes performs his own experiment, isolating himself from the order of human knowledge to the best of his ability. He recommends that the individual reasoner enter a knowledge vacuum that is void of the mental constructs with which other humans think. Like Bacon, Descartes wishes to distance himself from the logic of syllogism and abandon the "Idols of the Theater." Starting from a single absolutely true concept, if one can reason it out, one might gradually construct knowledge by the sole mechanism of pure reasoning, resulting in trustworthy and verified blocks of knowledge which have been thought out by the individual reasoner and which ideally have empirical evidence in the world. Descartes performs this role to demonstrate the solvency of the method to himself. His first building block is perhaps the first warning signal with regard to the rest of his project, but it is also one of the only reasoning sessions to which the readers have detailed access. Descartes falls short even at this primary stage because he is unable to achieve a point zero of knowledge from which to start. Beyond this, it is evident from Descartes own writing that his "good sense" frequently makes reasoned but unreasonable leaps. Indeed, readers may only ponder the interim years in which Descartes moved from his starting point of "I

think therefore I am" to his much more specific "knowledge" concerning the heart. Descartes' task of operating solely by means of individual reason is both impossible and inadvisable. Furthermore, his project is a performative contradiction: the notion of individual reason opposes the adoption of collectively achieved knowledge, yet the text serves the very purpose of intruding upon the reader's individual sphere of reason. But, for all of this project's weaknesses in practice, Descartes' project shifts the responsibility and procedure of enlightenment away from the elite class of thinkers into the domain of the autonomous reasoner.

Please do not stop offering this.

Great

I must warn the reader in advance that this is a lengthy review of Descartes' Discourse on Method. I humbly welcome all feedback. The challenge I faced with great difficulty was in becoming acquainted with Descartes' writing style, which I was able to accomplish only by brute-force reading. His writing, at times, is plagued by run-on sentences, though that could be a matter of convention as it may have been the style during his time. Because of this, some parts were difficult to understand upon first reading and required repetitious reading to grasp fully his thoughts. At other times, he provides analogies in support and clarification of his concepts. As helpful as analogies may be at certain times, his were extensive. Often I would find myself lost in an analogy and upon reaching the end, I had forgotten the point he was attempting to convey, forcing me to backtrack. This was due, in part, to his verbosity, almost as if he was lost in his own world of contemplation. There are other parts where his writing is so pedestrian, so vivid, that I felt as though we were together in the same room, and I was listening to him speak; and on occasion drawn deep into his thoughts where I identified with him. If the book seems to be intermingled with various styles, perhaps that is because its writing took place over a period of years. Descartes' idea for the Method originated in November 1619, when he spent a full day cooped up in a small room. Its writing, however, occurred sometime between 1628, when Cardinal de BÃ©rulle encouraged him to complete his work, and 1637, when he courageously published it. Descartes' hesitancy in publishing Discourse on Method was due to the political and religious climate at the time, which was extremely hostile to any idea that appeared heretical or threatening to the Church, of which the trial of Galileo Galilei, in Rome, was an example. Fortunately, for Descartes, his six-part Discourse on Method posed no such threat for it dealt specifically with a process, one that fostered many conclusions including that of the existence of

God, something the Church could embrace. Although this may not be ordinary, Part One was more of a long introduction to the rest of his Discourse. It has an autobiographical aspect, giving us insight and understanding of what prompted his search for the Method. While reflecting on his education of the sciences and theology, he remained dissatisfied with it and found them wanting, both intellectually and in his most-inner questions of truth. No sooner had he completed his education, at one of the finest colleges in France, that he discarded all of it in exchange for self-discovery of life through traveling, social functions and living large. He loved truth and disdained ambiguity. In his quest for truth, he contends that mathematics, of all the sciences, was the only one that offered certainty. Then on a cold November day in 1619, he found himself in a small room having an epiphany, which he experienced as he was attempting to reconcile his education with certainty of knowledge. Being partial to mathematics, in Part Two he details how its principles served as the platform for his Method. Rather than build upon the other fields of knowledge or philosophy, or challenging their foundations, René Descartes believed that starting at the very beginning, building his own foundation, was the proper approach. This, he claimed, would avoid building a solid house on a faulty foundation of sand. Further, he accused the other sciences of philosophy of speculation, which created doubt and doubt was evidence of falsities, thereby defeating the purpose of his endeavor. Unlike the other disciplines of science, the logic and reason of mathematics can rightly lead to logical conclusions; and therefore was a means of sifting truth from untruth. Following this, he established the four rules that comprised the whole of his Method. "The first was never to accept anything as true that I did not plainly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid hasty judgment and prejudice; and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to call it in doubt. The second, to divide each of the difficulties I would examine into as many parts as possible and as was required in order better to resolve them. The third, to conduct my thoughts in an orderly fashion, by commencing with those objects that are simplest and easiest to know, in order to ascend little by little, as by degrees, to the knowledge of the most composite things, and by supposing an order even among those things that do not naturally precede one another. And the last, everywhere to make enumerations so complete and reviews so general that I was assured of having omitted nothing." If you find his Method or their rules difficult to comprehend fully, rest assured you are not alone in that state. In following those rules as rigidly and as logically possible, he concluded that they are capable of uncovering the most deeply hidden or difficult truth. Prior to applying his Method for truth mining, in Part Three he recognized the need for temporary moral guidelines to house his character and direct his conduct while he deconstructed the totality of his beliefs, down to and including their

foundations, and constructed new beliefs based upon his newfound truths. The first was to continue obeying the customs of his country, holding on to his present childhood religion, and conducting himself according to the status quo, while avoiding extremes. The second was to remain unyielding in his actions and follow all opinions as dictated by his Method, including the most doubtful, as if they were certain. The third was to focus his efforts towards self-control and change his inner desires rather than pursue fortune and fame in changing the world. Lastly, the fourth was to continue advancing his reason and quest for truth for the remainder of his life. Having established these guiding principles, in Part Four he systematically dismissed all of his beliefs, assuming them false if they contained the slightest doubt, and after applying his Method, those that remained he accepted as truth. He began by pretending nothing around him existed, until he finally reached the ultimate question of his very existence. Then he realized that the thing denying his existence, in essence, was something and that something exists. It is logical to believe that something can think of itself, while illogical to believe that something non-existent can think of itself. Thus, he concluded, "I think, therefore I am." This, he states, is so factually true that the harshest skeptics would be unable to shake its foundation. However, with this achievement he is not satisfied. Continuing in this line of reasoning, he stumbles upon the question over his doubt and his discovery for the existence of God. Doubting his existence is indicative of his imperfection, while to lack doubt is a sign of perfection. He asserts, the very notion of perfection cannot originate in an imperfect being; therefore, a perfect being must exist and is responsible for interjecting that notion of perfection into his mind, and that perfect being must be God. In Part Five, Descartes states he discovered other truths, using his Method and based upon his conclusion of the existence of the soul and God, which he determines are more useful and important than all his previous education. Rather than going into detail of those truths, Descartes merely speaks of them, from a distance, briefly about medicine, then extensively about the heart and its functions. He ends this part in arguing that the soul of man is different from animals or flies and insects, which have nothing to fear after this life, yet that man's soul is independent of the body and immortal, thereby it has an afterlife. In Part Six of his Discourse, he wanders through several subjects from a publication on physics to medicine, to health and concerns surrounding publication of his other meditations. He finishes by stating he will continue his experiments but will refrain from publication until such time that he is deceased or no longer in danger, either physically or publically. Foregoing any prospects for fame or fortune was more desirable than disrupting the tranquility of his life due to the barrage of attacks, disputes and controversies that might arise if he published his other books, as the religious and political forces at the time could be at odds with his findings and determination of truth. This book has two climaxes;

the first in Part Two with his revealed Method and the second in Part Four with his evidence for existence and his argument for the existence of God, the second being the most significant. Where Part One was merely an extended introduction, Part Three was a description of moral guidelines, and Parts Five and Six were tireless, stubborn rants, throwaways. Individually, Parts One, Three, Five and Six added little value, only Part One and Three, in the totality of Part Two and Four, were meaningful. There are only three subjects of real interest found in René Descartes Discourse on Method. The first is his Method, found in Part Two. Both the second and third, the arguments for the existence of the soul and of God, respectively, are found in Part Four. In choosing to read this book, I had hoped to strengthen my logic and reasoning skills. Sadly, that did not happen after discovering Descartes' Method, much to my disappointment. Perhaps in his time, the skills for logic and reason were still in their infancy and not as developed as they are today, so my expectations of someone from the 17th century were unreasonable. Nevertheless, I very much enjoyed reading his argument for the existence of the soul and discovering how he came to make the statement "I think, therefore I am." His argument is so powerful, so resolute with truth that it is revolutionary even today, and will remain as such, as long as man exists and questions his existence. Descartes' employment of his Method to demonstrate the existence of the soul was brilliant. His similar usage in attempting to prove the existence of God, however, simply exceeded the Method's limitation in scope, resulting in abject failure. In his attempt to reconcile the existence of God, he first determines that because we doubt we are imperfect, and being imperfect, we are incapable of holding an idea of a perfect being unless there was such a perfect being who interjected the idea of Himself into our being. The problem lies in his logic, which is faulty. There are those who believe in extraterrestrial life, that they are perfect and more technologically advanced than we are, yet for the lack of empirical evidence they do not exist. Man's ability to conjure perfect beings does not manifest them into reality. Greek mythology is another example. Thus, that line of logic is faulty because we can conjure up many such perfect beings. As a Christian, I believe that God exists, and although both Descartes and I arrive at the same conclusion, our reasons for such are incompatible. Though this book was among the most tedious I have read, there is more to reap from it when read methodically and contemplatively. If we judge Descartes' notions from our vantage point of advanced knowledge and science, we do so unfairly, for we must temper any judgment with historical contextual relevance.

Deep and fascinating

A classic.

all good

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