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# DESCARTES DISCOURSE ON METHOD



Translated with an Interpretive Essay by **Richard Kennington**

Edited with Introduction, Glossary, and Notes by **Pamela Kraus** and **Frank Hunt**

René Descartes

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## EDITORS' NOTE

The *Discourse on the Method of Conducting One's Reason Well and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* was published anonymously at Leiden in June of 1637 together with the *Dioptrics*, the *Meteors*, and the *Geometry*, which are called on the title page "essays in this method." Of the title of the *Discourse*, Descartes wrote: "I do not put *Treatise on the Method* but *Discourse on the Method*, which is the same as *Preface* or *Notice Concerning the Method*, in order to show that I do not intend to teach the method, but solely to speak about it. For, as can be seen from what I say about it, it consists more in practice than in theory. And I name the following treatises *Essays in This Method* because I claim that the things they contain could not have been discovered without it, and because one can know by them what it is worth. So too I have inserted something of metaphysics, physics, and medicine in the preceding *Discourse*, in order to show that the method extends to all sorts of matters" (letter to Mersenne, 27 February 1637 [?]; AT 1:349).

Richard Kennington prepared more than one version of this translation before his death in 1999. We have edited and revised the translation in comparison with the original as printed in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, revised edition, 12 volumes (Paris: Vrin, 1964-76; abbreviated AT), 6:1-78. Pages of AT, volume 6, have been supplied in square brackets in the text. Where we have had to choose between consistency of translation and a slightly more idiomatic English, we have generally opted for the former. (For example, the expression *j'ose dire*, which might have been conveyed more idiomatically by "I venture to say," has been translated "I dare to say," in conformity with the translation of *oser* by "dare" elsewhere.) Our intention is to allow readers to follow important terms through the text. To take only one example, readers should be able to connect the discussion of "masters" in the beginning of Part 2 with the project of making ourselves "masters and possessors of nature" articulated in Part 6.

We have supplied a glossary, an index, and notes, some of which are indebted to Étienne Gilson, *Discours de la méthode, texte et commentaire*, sixth edition (Paris: Vrin, 1987). The interpretive essay was originally a lecture delivered in the Collegiate Lecture Series in the Liberal Arts at the University of Chicago on February 21, 1980. It was published in Richard Kennington, *On Modern Origins: Essays in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 105-22, and is reprinted here by kind permission of the publisher.

The editors thank Janice Johnson, Terry and Annie Marshall, Sarah Navarre, Ron Pullins, Joe Sachs, John Tomarchio, Kathleen Blits, and an anonymous reader for Focus Publishing for their help with the translation and its publication.

Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt  
*Annapolis and Santa Fe*

## INTRODUCTION

The *Discourse on Method* (1637) is a brief writing that serves as a “preface” to three scientific essays (the *Optics*, the *Geometry*, and the *Meteorology*).<sup>1</sup> Of the writings of René Descartes (1596-1650), it is the most widely read and is often assigned in university courses, both graduate and undergraduate, and across various disciplines—humanities, history, literature, rhetoric, history of science—as well as philosophy. Its popularity is in part a consequence of its author’s renown. Descartes’s singular contributions to philosophy, mathematics, and physics place him among the luminaries of his time. He simplified and augmented the power of mathematics through his discovery of analytic geometry; he formulated an account of nature as matter, and of matter as having qualities primarily geometrical in character, rendering it susceptible of mathematical treatment; he enumerated three laws of nature, by which all motions whatsoever are governed, inspiring a line of development to Isaac Newton; he redefined the soul, bequeathing us the notion of mind or consciousness, a domain marked off from that of body or matter; he made prominent a conception of philosophy in which this endeavor to understand the whole of things required prior reflection on and evaluation of the cognitive powers; and he thereby established the good of inquiry as accessible to many rather than restricted to the province of a few, and as beneficial for mankind rather than directed beyond human capability. The *Discourse on Method* succinctly describes all these contributions and their relation to one another.

Yet the *Discourse* is perhaps as much appreciated—and as noteworthy—for its form and style. It is by design not a treatise, but a “discourse” (Fr. *discours*), a word with a wider significance in the seventeenth century than today, meaning “talk” or “conversation.”<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 The *Discourse* itself runs to 78 pages in the critical edition of Descartes’s works, AT 6.
  - 2 Anne Sancier-Chateau, *Introduction à la langue du xvii<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Éditions Nathan, 1993), 64.

Written in French, almost without technical terminology,<sup>3</sup> the *Discourse* addresses both philosophers or scientists and a popular audience, many of whom Descartes recognized would not either care to study or succeed in comprehending the accompanying scientific essays. As one commentator has put it, the *Discourse* is written “in two registers,”<sup>4</sup> and would seem to be a paradigm of the philosophy it espouses: nonacademic, productive, and available.

Yet the *Discourse* is not simply accessible. While its full title is *Discourse on the Method of Conducting One’s Reason Well and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, it lists without elaboration four rules of method and contains no sustained or developed arguments on any topic. Its longest continuous passage is that in Part 5 describing the circulation of the blood. Descartes tells his correspondent Marin Mersenne in 1637, “I do not put *Treatise on the Method* but *Discourse on the Method*, which is the same as *Preface or Notice Concerning the Method*, in order to show that I do not intend to teach the method, but solely to speak about it. For, as can be seen from what I say about it, it consists more in practice than in theory....I have inserted something of metaphysics, physics, and medicine...in order to show that the method extends to all sorts of matters.”<sup>5</sup> Descartes, then, designs his preface as a summary so that the full power of his method should become evident, but withholds from the reader a full or direct presentation of it. Instead he conveys his thought in an autobiographical account. The narrator is not a pure mind standing behind a treatise on a recondite or rarified subject, or a philosopher speaking only to other philosophers, but a man speaking to all men, highlighting his endeavor to “acquire a clear and assured knowledge of all that is useful for life.” As a man, of course, he is not just any man, as we quickly learn from Part 1 of the *Discourse*, but one whose great desire to learn and substantial particular gifts meet with good fortune and issue in significant if not revolutionary discoveries.

The *Discourse* is thus an interpretive challenge. Since it is not a treatise, it cannot be interpreted as if it were a treatise. Its discursive tone, its summary presentation, and its autobiographical character—all must be taken into account. For many it has proved to be difficult to do this, and thus to evaluate the *Discourse* and establish its place in Descartes’s philosophy. Readers have found it challenging, for example,

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3 A few Scholastic—that is, academic or scholarly—terms are italicized in the text.

4 Léon Brunschvicg, *Écrits philosophiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951), 308. See, by contrast, William Harvey’s introduction to his treatise on circulation, Galileo Galilei’s to the *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, and even Francis Bacon’s to the *New Organon*.

5 AT 1:349.

to connect the methodical rules of Part 2 with the moral rules of Part 3 or to see the logic in separating the methodical themes in Part 2 from the metaphysical ones in Part 4, which seem to follow upon the adoption of methodical rules. There are still other anomalies in the text: for example, in Part 1, there is a criticism of Stoic virtue, but in Part 3, praise of and agreement with the Stoics; reason appears in Part 4 as a power to grasp certainties and in Part 5 as a “universal instrument.” Some scholars account for these anomalies by arguing that the parts of the *Discourse*, or at least a version of them, were drafted at different times and only hastily put together in a preface. Indeed, many turn from the *Discourse* to the history of its composition and fill out or adjust the autobiography accordingly. Some even supplement this historical research by finding precedents in other authors for passages in the *Discourse*.<sup>6</sup> Frequently, however, these strategies substitute for an interpretation of the text, resulting in a reduction of the *Discourse* to a tissue of disparate strands held together only by the particular history of Descartes.

Yet even as a primarily historical record the *Discourse* is found wanting by some. It details the state of Descartes’s thought up to 1633, but, or so it is claimed, in 1633 Descartes’s philosophy was not in its definitive shape: however more comprehensive than other Cartesian writings the *Discourse* may be, it represents a stage on the way to his complete philosophy. This claim is usually based not on an interpretation of the *Discourse*, but on a preference given to later, more detailed, and more academic or traditionally “philosophical” presentations of Descartes’s thought, such as we find in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). From this perspective, the *Discourse* appears of less consequence and therefore as less in need of interpretation. It is to open up the matter of the interpretation of the *Discourse* that we publish this translation with the appended essay.

We may begin to address the need by pointing to the fact that the *Discourse* itself directs us to consider the circumstances in which it was written and the import of contemporary events, for instance, the ongoing religious wars and the condemnation of Galileo Galilei. Thus the question of “context” is prominent from the beginning of the text, and, since the *Discourse* is Descartes’s first publication, from the beginning of his public career, if we may use the word “public” of one

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6 Descartes made rather free use of the works of others, adapting them to his own purposes, almost always without citation.

so jealous of his privacy.<sup>7</sup> He presents himself within his circumstances seeking both to surmount and to master them: he seeks the certain and the useful.

Descartes was born into an unsettled, even tumultuous and skeptical time. The rupture of Roman Catholic Christianity, underlined in the condemnation of Luther's writings in 1521, had spawned numerous Protestant sects and sometimes violent quarrels between Catholics and Protestants. Powerful political entities were aligned with different religious groups, Lutherans and Calvinists, for example, so as to vie with the temporal power of Rome. The Thirty Years' War (1618-48), to which Descartes alludes in Part 2 of the *Discourse*, was in fact a series of wars fought between the Habsburgs—the Catholic Holy Roman Emperors—and their various opponents, thus pitting rival Catholic and Protestant forces against one another, bringing civil war to the principalities of Germany, and spreading continual fighting throughout Europe.

It was also a time of intellectual ferment. Niccolò Machiavelli's *Prince*, presented to Lorenzo de Medici in 1513 and widely circulated before being published posthumously in 1532, purposely departed from any idealizing political philosophy of the past and openly avowed a political realism that drew on pagan, mainly Roman, rather than Christian examples. By 1557, *The Prince* was entered on the list of forbidden books by the Roman Catholic Church, a list referred to often simply as the "Index."<sup>8</sup> Michel de Montaigne in his *Essays*, which first appeared in three stages between 1580 and 1595, practiced his immense learning on himself and transformed the Socratic problem of ignorance and self-knowledge into an intimate yet universal skepticism. Nicolaus Copernicus's *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbits* (1543) upended Ptolemaic astronomy by placing the sun instead of the earth at the center of the cosmos: the earth was no longer stationary, but revolved along with other planets. The Ptolemaic structure, and the Aristotelian cosmology in agreement with it, had reigned for over a millennium and had become wedded to theological and religious beliefs; furthermore, it

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7 Descartes begins an early fragment: "Actors, taught not to let any embarrassment show on their faces, put on a mask. I will do the same. So far, I have been a spectator in this theater which is the world, but I am now about to mount the stage, and I come forward masked" (AT 10:213). Commenting on the censure of Galileo, Descartes quotes Ovid to Mersenne in a letter of April 1634: "I desire to live in peace and to continue the life I have begun under the motto 'Who has hidden well has lived well'" (AT 1:285-86).

8 Descartes says of *The Prince* in a letter to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, "I find in it many maxims which seem excellent...But there are also many others which I cannot approve" (AT 4:486). Of Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, he says that he "found nothing bad in it" (AT 4:531).

was the framework that most accorded with ordinary perception. The Copernican theory overturned this framework and so destroyed for many their fundamental sense of place and proportion with respect to nature and to God. The invention of the telescope, probably in early 1600 in Holland, made it possible to provide heretofore unavailable evidence for heliocentrism; and Galileo announced just such evidence in *The Starry Messenger* (1610): he had observed moons revolving around Jupiter.

The revolution in the understanding of the heavens begun by Galileo and advanced by Johannes Kepler brought with it new understandings of terrestrial matters, that is to say, of bodies and their motions. In his classic *New Organon* (1620), Francis Bacon repudiated the order of inquiry established in the wake of Aristotle's natural science and logic, and proposed instead of a merely "theoretical" physics with no apparent concern to explain particular phenomena an experimental method geared to the controlled observation, recognition, and organizing of qualities common to many kinds of bodies and to the explanation of their behavior in terms of the motions of minimal parts. William Gilbert studied the extraordinary, and to some (including Gilbert himself) spiritual, properties of the magnet; and, in 1628, William Harvey published his account of the heart and its role in the circulation of the blood, replacing the Galenic theory that had dominated the course of study in medical schools.

Thus in the early seventeenth century, European political, religious, social, and scientific traditions were in the midst of a major transition and disruption that threatened to terminate their dominance. Philosophers took account of and participated in the new directions of thought—philosophy and science were not regarded as distinct at this time—and began to part with or reinterpret those elements of the philosophical tradition with which these directions were incompatible, primarily the theologico-philosophical development of Aristotelian metaphysics and physics that governed the universities or "Schools." That new departures were needed and being embarked upon; that new avenues of inquiry were being avidly pursued; that new possibilities of explanation and achievement were imagined; that the most fundamental issues, that is to say, those about nature and ourselves and God, were being rethought—all of this made the time both exciting and unquiet, and beckoning to Descartes, whose ability was of the first rank and whose desire for knowledge was "extreme."<sup>9</sup>

The *Discourse on Method* is Descartes's first publication but it is neither the first thing he wrote nor the first for publication. In

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9 See *Discourse*, Part 1 (AT 6:4.24).

1637 Descartes was forty-one years old—he died shortly before his fifty-fourth birthday—but he had been thinking and writing about science and philosophy since his early twenties and had attempted a comprehensive treatment of his thought in 1628. In the unfinished “little book,”<sup>10</sup> *Rules for the Direction of the Native Intelligence*, “method” is in a prominent place. Others had, of course, prescribed a method or general rules of thought before Descartes, and some, like Bacon, had combined it with a critique of traditional ways of inquiry, but Descartes’s *Rules* presented a critique of traditional learning that pointed to the need for method, proposed rules of method, and wedded the methodical reasoning to distinctively mathematical inquiries, which no one before him had done. In the *Rules*, he reflects on and reasons about the use of method in all domains of inquiry, so that some have even credited him with a decisive contribution to the mathematization of nature.<sup>11</sup>

Teachings in the *Rules* have some obvious correlations in the *Discourse*. The *Rules* begins with a statement of purpose, in which we see that from the earliest Descartes aimed at a comprehensive unification of the sciences that would allow both the pleasure of contemplation and practical benefit. The possibility of that unification was grounded in certitude, specifically in the natural ability of the mind to grasp truths that are present to it apart from the senses (the term in the *Rules* is “intuition”). This sort of certitude provided a basis for method, or methodical reasoning, as opposed to reasoning based on erroneous sources—“the fluctuating testimony of the senses or the deceptive judgment of the imagination.”<sup>12</sup> As early as the *Rules* Descartes saw that evident truths included not only arithmetical and geometrical propositions, but others relating to self-knowledge: he observes in Rule 3 that “everyone can mentally intuit that he exists, that he thinks,” but does not single out these propositions or endow them with more significance until they reappear in Part 4 of the *Discourse*.

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10 See Rule 4, where he refers to *hoc libello* (AT 10:379).

11 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences* (trans. David Carr [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970]), analyzes the transformation of nature we have called “mathematization” focusing primarily on Galileo, with whom, he says, “the idea in question appears for the first time, so to speak, as full-blown; thus I have linked all our considerations to his name, in a certain sense simplifying and idealizing the matter” (57). Galileo did not explicitly provide the conceptual framework or the theory of matter that underlies the transformation. See on this point Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, trans. Eva Brann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), and the essay on Klein by Burt Hopkins, “Meaning and Truth in Klein’s Philosophico-Mathematical Writings,” *The St. John’s Review* 48/3 (2005): 57–88.

12 See Rule 3 (AT 10:368).

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

*If this discourse seems too long to be read at one time, it can be divided into six parts. In the first will be found various considerations concerning the sciences. In the second, the principal rules of the method the author has sought. In the third, some of the rules of the morality that he has drawn from this method. In the fourth, the reasons by which he proves the existence of God and of the human soul, which are the foundations of his metaphysics. In the fifth, the order of questions of physics that he has sought, and particularly the explanation of the movement of the heart and some other difficulties that belong to medicine, as well as the difference between our soul and that of the beasts. And in the last, some things he believes required for advancing further in the study of nature than he has gone, and the reasons that have made him write.*

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## PART 1

Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world, for everyone thinks he is so well provided with it that [2] even those who are most difficult to content in all other things do not customarily desire more than they have.<sup>1</sup> In this it is improbable that all are deceived; rather,

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1 The thought expressed in this sentence is already cited as proverbial by Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) in *Essays* 2.17, "Of Presumption": "It is commonly said that the fairest division of her favors Nature has given us is that of sense; for there is no one who is not content with the share of it that she has allotted him" (*The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958], 499). Étienne Gilson's *Discours de la méthode, texte et commentaire*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1987), identifies other passages or terms in the *Discourse* that recall or adapt Montaigne (for example, "the great book of the world").

this testifies that the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false, which is properly what is called good sense or reason, is naturally equal in all men, and thus that the diversity of our opinions arises not because some are more reasonable than others, but only because we conduct our thoughts by different ways, and do not consider the same things. For it is not enough to have a good mind,<sup>2</sup> but the principal thing is to apply it well. The greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues, and those who only walk very slowly can advance much further, if they always follow the right path, than those who run and go astray.

As for myself, I have never presumed that the perfection of my mind was in any way uncommon; indeed I have often wished my thought was as quick, my imagination as clear [*nette*] and distinct, or my memory as wide and prompt as that of some others. And I know of no other qualities than these that make for the perfection of mind. For as to reason, or sense, inasmuch as it alone makes us men, and distinguishes us from the beasts, I would like to believe that it is complete in each of us, and in this regard to follow the common opinion of the philosophers, who say that there is more or less only among [3] *accidents*, and not among the *forms*, or natures, of the *individuals* of the same *species*.<sup>3</sup>

But I do not fear to say that I think I have had the good fortune during my youth to have fallen into certain paths that led me to considerations and maxims from which I formed a method<sup>4</sup> by which, it seems to me, I have a means of augmenting my knowledge by degrees, and of elevating it little by little to the highest point to which the mediocrity of my mind and the short duration of my life will permit. For I have already gathered such fruits from it that, although in the judgments I make of myself I always try to lean toward the side of mistrust rather than that of presumption, and although when looked at with the eye of a philosopher almost none of the diverse actions and enterprises of men do not seem to me vain and useless, I do not fail to receive an extreme satisfaction from the progress I think I have already made in the search for truth, and to conceive such hopes for the future that if, among the occupations of men purely as men, there is any that is solidly good and important, I dare to believe that it is the one that I have chosen.

Nevertheless, it may be that I deceive myself, and it is perhaps only a little copper and glass that I am taking for gold and diamonds. I know

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2 See Glossary, s.v. "Mind."

3 The words in italics are common metaphysical terms found in Scholastic philosophy and theology, the medieval tradition of learning dominant in the universities and colleges. See Glossary, s.v. "Schools."

4 See Glossary, s.v. "Method."

how subject we are to error in what concerns ourselves, and also how much we must suspect the judgments of our friends when they are in our favor. But I will be glad to show in this discourse [4] what paths I have followed, and to represent my life in it as in a picture, so that each may judge of it, and I will have, by learning the opinions about it from the common report, a new means of instruction to add to those I customarily use.

Thus it is not my intention here to teach the method that each should follow to conduct his reason well, but only to show in what fashion I have tried to conduct my own. Those who take it upon themselves to give precepts must regard themselves as more capable than those to whom they give them, and if they fail in the least thing, they are blamable. But since I offer this writing only as a history, or if you prefer, as a fable, in which, among some examples that can be imitated, there will perhaps be found also many others that it will not be right to follow, I hope that it will be useful to some without being harmful to anyone, and that everyone will be grateful for my frankness.

I was nourished on letters from childhood, and because I was persuaded that by their means one could acquire a clear and assured knowledge of all that is useful for life, I had an extreme desire to learn them. But as soon as I had finished that whole course of studies at the end of which one is customarily received into the ranks of the learned, I changed my opinion entirely. For I found myself embarrassed with so many doubts<sup>5</sup> and errors that there seemed to me to have been no other benefit in trying to instruct myself except that I had discovered more and more my own ignorance. And yet [5] I was in one of the most celebrated schools of Europe,<sup>6</sup> where I thought there must be some learned men if there were any in any place on earth. I had learned there all that others learned there, and not being content with those sciences<sup>7</sup> that they taught us, I had even looked through all the books that fell into my hands treating of the sciences considered most curious and most rare.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, I knew the judgments others made of me, and I did not see that I was esteemed inferior to my fellow students, although there were already some among them destined to fill the places of our masters.<sup>9</sup> And finally our age seemed to me as flourishing and as fertile in good minds as any of the preceding. Therefore I took the liberty of

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5 See Glossary, s.v. "Doubt."

6 Descartes attended the Jesuit college of La Flèche at Anjou for about nine years, beginning around 1606 or 1607.

7 See Glossary, s.v. "Science."

8 Descartes refers to alchemy, astrology, and other occult sciences.

9 See Glossary, s.v. "Master."

judging all others by myself, and of thinking that there was no doctrine in the world such as I had previously been led to hope for.

I did not, however, cease to respect the exercises that occupy one in the schools. I knew that the languages we learn there are necessary for the understanding of ancient books; that the gracefulness of fables awakens the mind; that the memorable actions of histories elevate it, and that if they are read with discretion, they help to form judgment; that the reading of all good books is like a conversation with the finest men of past ages, who are their authors, and even a studied conversation, in which they unfold to us only the best of their thoughts; that eloquence has incomparable powers and beauties; that poetry has [6] most enchanting refinements and sweetness; that mathematics has very subtle discoveries that are of great service, whether for contenting the curious or for facilitating all the arts and reducing human toil; that the writings that treat of morals contain many teachings and exhortations to virtue that are very useful; that theology teaches us how to get to heaven; that philosophy supplies a means of talking plausibly about everything, and of making oneself admired by the less learned; that jurisprudence, medicine, and the other sciences afford honors and riches to those who cultivate them; and, finally, that it is good to have examined them all, even the most superstitious and false, in order to know their just worth and to keep from being deceived by them.

But I believed I had already given enough time to languages, and even to the reading of ancient books, to their histories as well as their fables. For conversing with those of other ages is almost the same as traveling. It is good to know something of the morals of different peoples in order to judge more sanely of our own and not think that what is contrary to our modes is ridiculous and against reason, as those who have seen nothing usually do. But one who employs too much time traveling finally becomes a stranger in his own country, and one who becomes too curious about things practiced in past ages ordinarily remains very ignorant of those practiced in this one. Besides which, fables make us imagine many things [7] as possible that are not, and even the most faithful histories, if they do not change or augment the value of things in order to render them more worthy of being read, at least almost always omit the most base and least illustrious circumstances, so that what remains does not appear such as it is, and those who regulate their morals by the examples they draw from them are likely to fall into the extravagances of the knights-errant of our romances,<sup>10</sup> and to conceive purposes that surpass their powers.

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10 Knights-errant (*paladins*): originally, legendary heroes of the court of Charlemagne or King Arthur; by extension, any hero of a romance (Gilson, *Discours*, 123).

## GLOSSARY

**Algebra** (*algèbre*). See **Logic, Geometrical Analysis, Algebra**.

**Appetite** (*appétit*) is a classification for certain feelings or sensations (*sentiments*) such as hunger and thirst that impel us to seek what will benefit us and avoid what is harmful. It is distinguished from **Reason** and thus from **Clear and Distinct (Ideas)**. In the last paragraph of the *Treatise on Man* (1629-33; summarized in Part 5 of the *Discourse on Method*), appetites are attributed to the body-machine alone, but appetite also belongs to a **True Man**, Descartes tells us in the last paragraph of Part 5 of the *Discourse*. (See also **Passion**)

**Architecture** (*architecture*) is an image or model for the well-founded methodical approach; but the word “fruits” is also used to describe the results of the approach.

**Art** (*art*) is sometimes used pejoratively, as in Part 2, where native gifts are superior to instruction; but it is also an image of the project of Cartesian philosophy.

**Beasts** (*bêtes*). Descartes reserves this term for nonhuman animals, which do not possess soul but are only bodies or body-machines.

**Body** (*corps*). Descartes uses this word to denote (1) the human body in general or one’s own body in particular, as, for example, in Part 5 when he describes the circulation of the blood; (2) the “object of the geometers,” which he describes towards the end of Part 4 as “a continuous body, or a space indefinitely extended,” a meaning he often identifies with **Matter**, as in chapter 6 of *The World* (1629-33); (3) any corporeal object. (See also **Matter**)

**Certain, Certainty** (*certain, certitude*). Certainty is a condition of mind in which one is sure of what one thinks or believes. For Descartes, certainty belongs to what is impervious to doubt. In its most rigorous sense, it means what cannot be rationally doubted or doubted without contradiction. Descartes also recognizes a less rigorous sense, which he calls moral certainty or moral assurance, the kind of certainty we usually have for our actions in daily life, as in Part 4, paragraph 7. (See also **Clear and Distinct**)

**Clear and Distinct (Ideas)** (*clair or nette, distinct*). Descartes’s arrival at something indubitable in Part 4 leads him to identify characteristics of what is certain—it is clear and distinct. He does not explain these terms

in the *Discourse on Method*, and gives only a brief account in *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), section 45. By “clear” he means vividly present to mind; by “distinct” he means separated off from anything that does not belong to it or render it lucid. He often uses the adverb rather than adjective; what is more, he acknowledges degrees of clarity and of distinctness. The term “clear and distinct evidence” became a catchphrase for the Cartesian requirement of scientific knowledge. (See also **Certain, Certainty**)

**Content, Contentment** (*content, contentement*). Contentment is a feeling that reflects the general character of one’s life, one’s ability to remain calm and secure amid life’s disturbances. (See also **Satisfaction**)

**Deduce** (*déduire*). Descartes uses this term in both a strong and a weak sense. In the strong sense, it means (as a verb) an inferring from something that is known with certainty to something else that necessarily follows from it, or (as a noun, “deduction”) that which we know as a result of a necessary inference. There is a strong statement of this in Rule 3 of *Rules for the Direction of the Native Intelligence* (1628). Descartes also uses it in a weak sense, in the case of inferences in which the requirement of necessity does not appear to be as stringent, for example, in Part 5, where he acknowledges that particular effects can be deduced from general principles in “several different ways” and may require evidence from experiment.

**Disposition** (*disposition*). We have translated this word most often as “arrangement,” since Descartes usually means by it a particular organization or structure of the body (the human body most often), as in bodily organs. The term is used very frequently in the *Treatise on Man* (1629-33) and in Part 5.

**Doubt** (*doute*). In Part 1, Descartes uses this word in its most ordinary meaning, as uncertainty of mind, for example, when he confesses to having “many doubts” about what he had learned; however, because he employs doubt as a means of inquiry, we can distinguish two other, related senses of the word. In Part 2 he chooses to adjust all his opinions to the “standard of reason” and places that standard (clarity and distinctness) as the first rule of his methodical procedure; and in Part 4 he undertakes exactly this adjustment by means of doubt. This we can call methodical doubt. Late in Part 4, however, he states that the truth of what is clear and distinct depends on the existence and perfection of God, implying, perhaps, a doubt of the methodical principle itself, sometimes called metaphysical doubt. The possibility of that doubt is explored not here but in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).

**Evidence, Evident, Evidently** (*évidence, évident, évidemment*). To count as evidence, something must be obvious or conspicuous. Descartes most often restricts the term to matters that are obvious when present to the **Mind**; that is to say, matters that show themselves as obvious, and even undeniable, when simply thought about.

**Experience, Experiment** (*expérience*). The French word may mean either experience or experiment. Although experiment does not make an

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