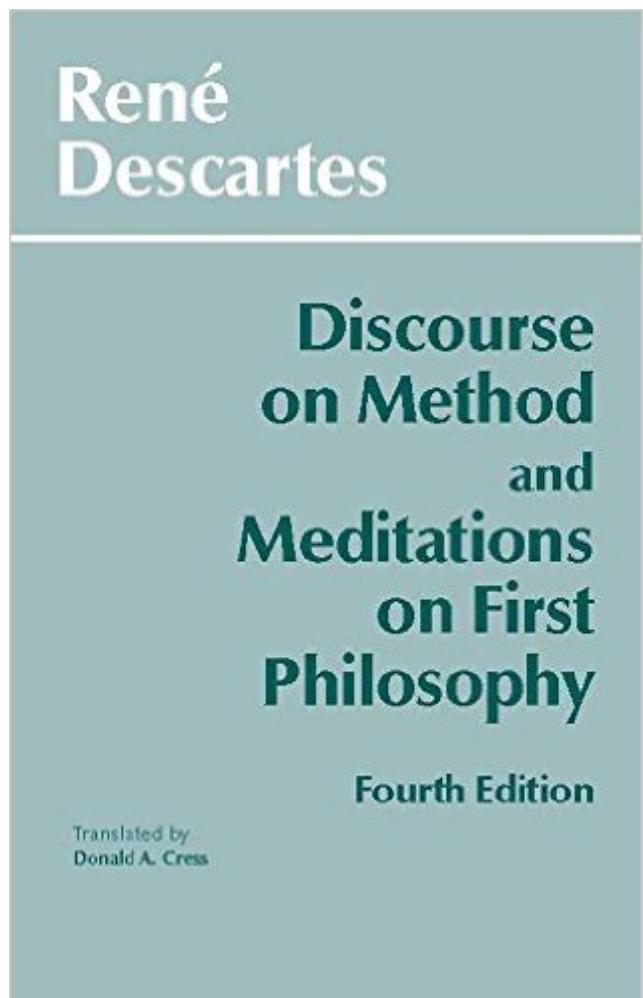


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Discourse On Method And Meditations On First Philosophy, 4th Ed.



Synopsis

This edition contains Donald Cress's completely revised translation of the *Meditations* (from the corrected Latin edition) and recent corrections to *Discourse on Method*, bringing this version even closer to Descartes's original, while maintaining the clear and accessible style of a classic teaching edition.

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Customer Reviews

Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* is one of the few works of philosophy that absolutely every educated person needs to read at least once. This is required reading for anyone interested in philosophy or its history, and honestly I don't see how this work can be ignored by anyone interested in the history of ideas. It's also a work that I'd recommend to anyone who wants to be introduced to philosophy by reading the work of a great philosopher. And don't worry: it shouldn't take you more than an afternoon to read through it. The *Meditations* has had an incalculable influence on the history of subsequent philosophical thinking. Indeed, according to nearly every history of philosophy you're likely to come across, this work is where modern philosophy begins. It's not that any of Descartes's arguments are startlingly original--many of them have historical precedents--but that Descartes's work was compelling enough to initiate two research programs in philosophy, namely British empiricism and continental rationalism, and to place certain issues (e.g. the mind-body problem, the plausibility of and responses to skepticism, the ontological argument for the existence of God, etc.) on the philosophical agenda for a long time to come. Moreover,

Descartes was capable of posing questions of great intrinsic interest in prose accessible to everyone. So the *Meditations* is a work of value to both newcomers to philosophy and to those with a great deal of philosophical background. The First Meditation is Descartes's implementation of his method of doubt. Descartes's aim here is to systematically doubt everything he believes that seems dubitable in any way and thereby to arrive at something that is absolutely certain and indubitable.

This is a review of the Donald A. Cress translation of *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy* by René Descartes. Philosophers disagree about everything: except about the fact that modern philosophy begins with Descartes. No contemporary philosophers agree with Descartes' positive views. However, Descartes left Western philosophy with a series of puzzles that it continues to wrestle with: how is it possible to know anything? (Descartes' "dream argument" and "evil genius" argument are powerful sources of philosophical skepticism.) What is the relationship between mind and body? (Descartes argues that there is a fundamental metaphysical difference between the two, so they cannot be identical.) Is there some certain, indubitable foundation for knowledge? (Descartes thought that we need one to escape doubt, and that he could provide it.) Some historical context helps to explain certain features of his writing. In 1521, Martin Luther was excommunicated, beginning the Protestant Reformation and dividing Christianity. Luther encouraged Christians to read the Bible translated into their own languages (e.g., the King James Bible) and use their own individual judgment to interpret it. In 1543, on his deathbed, Copernicus published his book arguing that the sun was the center of the solar system, not the earth (as had been taught by Aristotle). In 1633, Galileo was forced by the Inquisition to renounce his defense of the Copernican hypothesis. Given the sharp intellectual controversies of his era, it is not surprising that Descartes says he has "realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them" (59).

René Descartes is often considered the founding father of modern philosophy. A true Renaissance man, he studied Scholastic philosophy and physics as a student, spent time as a volunteer soldier and traveler throughout Europe, studied mathematics, appreciated the arts, and became a noted correspondent with royals and intellectual figures throughout the continent. He died in Sweden while on assignment as tutor to the Queen, Christiana. Descartes' *Discourse on Method* is a fascinating text, combining the newly-invented form of essay (Descartes was familiar with the *Essays* of Montaigne) with the same kind of autobiographical impulse that underpins Augustine's *Confessions*. Descartes writes about his own form of mystical experience, seeing this as almost a kind of

revelation that all past knowledge would be superseded, and all problems would eventually be solved by human intellect. In the Discourse, Descartes formulates logical principles based on reason (which makes it somewhat ironic that this came to him almost as a revelation). Descartes had some appreciation for thinkers such as Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, but he thought that Bacon depended too much upon empirical data, and with Hobbes he disagreed on what would be the criteria for ascertaining certainty. Descartes was a mathematician at heart, and perhaps had a carry-over of Pythagorean mystical attachment to mathematics, for his sense of reason led him to impute an absolute quality to mathematics; this has major implications for metaphysics and epistemology. Descartes method was a continuation in many ways of the ideas of Plato, Aristotle and the medieval thinkers, for they all tended toward thinking in absolute, universal terms in some degree.

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