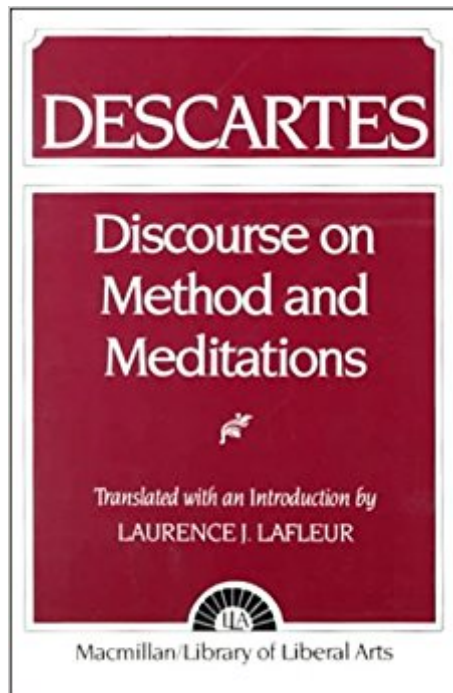




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Descartes: Discourse On Method And The Meditations



Synopsis

Is it possible to be certain of anything? If so, how? The father of modern philosophy and the founder of rational method in philosophical thought, René Descartes (1596–1650) sought the answers to these questions and in doing so, addressed the most important of methods of thinking and understanding truth. In *Discourse on Method*, he applies a scientific approach to philosophy that comprises four principles: to accept only what reason recognizes as "clear and distinct"; to analyze complex ideas by dividing them into smaller elements; to reconstruct the ideas; and to make accurate and complete enumerations of the data. His *Meditations* proceed according to this method, exploring the mind/body distinction, the nature of truth and error, the existence of God, and the essence of material things. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

There is no question that this book contains great philosophy, but I have some misgivings about the translation here. It's not just that the translation of the *Meditations* often seems somewhat misleading in the details that are likely to concern serious readers of this work, but that Lafleur's decision to translate various editions of the *Meditations* and to run them together wasn't a very wise one. Not only does it make the book somewhat harder to read than it should be, but it's questionable whether this provides one with an accurate picture of Descartes's thought. This is an especially important concern since one of the three editions of Descartes's *Meditations* on which Lafleur relies is a French translation of the *Meditations* that Descartes approved for publication. To the best of my knowledge, it's not known just how closely Descartes read this text before giving it his

approval. So relying on it in providing a translation of the work seems pretty dubious to me. (To his credit, Lafleur makes clear where he's providing material from each translation and he relies on Descartes's original Latin edition as the basic text. Material from the other editions is added in brackets.) Also, the book has a very out-of-date bibliography, one that doesn't appear to have been updated since the translation was first published in the 50s. That said, there is great philosophy on display here. 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.

Rene 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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