

Discourse on Method

- Date** ■ 1637
- Place** ■ Utrecht, Netherlands
- Type of Source** ■ Philosophical text (original in French)
- Author** ■ Rene Descartes
- Historical Context** ■ New scientific discoveries became impossible to reconcile with older theories of the world. Rather than accept the “wisdom of the ancients,” Rene Descartes, a French scientist and mathematician, defended the importance of doubt as a means of understanding the world. His method would become the outline for modern science and encourage an examination of society. As a result, Descartes is credited with sparking the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment.
- Internal Context** ■ Descartes’ method involved four steps. Never accept anything as true unless it has been proven. Divide any problems with an idea into smaller pieces for study. Examine the simplest pieces first and gradually add complexity. Finally, examine everything before reaching a conclusion.

Part VI

Three years have now elapsed since I finished the **treatise** containing all these matters; and I was beginning to revise it, with the view to put it into the hands of a printer, when I learned that **persons to whom I greatly defer**, and whose authority over my actions is hardly less influential than is my own reason over my thoughts, had condemned a certain doctrine in physics, published a short time previously by **another individual** to which I will not say that I adhered, but only that, previously to their censure I had observed in it nothing which I could imagine to be prejudicial either to religion or to the state, and nothing therefore which would have prevented me from giving expression to it in writing, if reason had persuaded me of its truth; and this led me to fear lest among my own doctrines likewise some one might be found in which I had departed from the truth, notwithstanding the great care I have always taken not to accord belief to new opinions of which I had not the most certain demonstrations, and not to give expression to aught that might tend to the hurt of any one. This has been sufficient to make me alter my purpose of publishing them...

Although my speculations greatly pleased myself, I believed that others had theirs, which perhaps pleased them still more. But as soon as I had acquired some general notions respecting physics, and beginning to make trial of them in various particular difficulties, had observed how far they can carry us, and how much they differ from the principles that have been employed up to the present time, I believed that I could not keep them concealed without sinning grievously against the law by which we are bound to promote, as far as in us lies, the general good of mankind. For by them I perceived it to be possible to arrive at knowledge highly useful in life; and in room of the **speculative philosophy** usually taught in the schools, to discover a practical, by means of which, knowing the force and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us, as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans, we might also

treatise

Descartes had been investigating planetary motion and was on the verge of publishing it when Galileo was condemned,

persons to whom I greatly differ

Descartes remained a committed Catholic and deferred to the Church's authority. He did not, however, believe that the Church's position on science was correct.

another individual

Galileo Galilei was condemned in 1633. Descartes was very uneasy about this development, despite living in a tolerant, Protestant country.

speculative philosophy

examining ideas based on reason

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apply them in the same way to all the uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature. And this is a result to be desired, not only in order to the invention of an infinity of arts, by which we might be enabled to enjoy without any trouble the fruits of the earth, and all its comforts, but also and especially for the preservation of health, which is without doubt, of all the blessings of this life, the first and fundamental one; for the mind is so intimately dependent upon the condition and relation of the organs of the body, that if any means can ever be found to render men wiser and more ingenious than hitherto, I believe that it is in medicine they must be sought for. It is true that the science of medicine, as it now exists, contains few things whose utility is very remarkable: but without any wish to depreciate it, I am confident that there is no one, even among those whose profession it is, who does not admit that all at present known in it is almost nothing in comparison of what **remains to be discovered**; and that we could free ourselves from an infinity of maladies of body as well as of mind, and perhaps also even from the debility of age, if we had sufficiently ample knowledge of their causes, and of all the remedies provided for us by nature. But since I designed to employ my whole life in the search after so necessary a science, and since I had fallen in with a path which seems to me such, that if any one follow it he must inevitably reach the end desired, unless he be hindered either by the shortness of life or the **want** of experiments, I judged that there could be no more effectual provision against these two impediments than if I were faithfully to communicate to the public all the little I might myself have found, and incite men of superior genius to strive to proceed farther, by contributing, each according to his inclination and ability, to the experiments which it would be necessary to make, and also by informing the public of all they might discover, so that, by the last beginning where those before them had left off, and thus connecting the lives and labours of many, we might collectively proceed much farther than each by himself could do.

I remarked, moreover, with respect to experiments, that they become always more necessary the more one is advanced in knowledge; for, at the commencement, it is better to make use only of what is spontaneously presented to our senses, and of which we cannot remain ignorant, provided we bestow on it any reflection, however slight, than to concern ourselves about more uncommon and **recondite** phenomena: the reason of which is, that the more uncommon often only mislead us so long as the causes of the more ordinary are still unknown; and the circumstances upon which they depend are almost always so special and minute as to be highly difficult to detect...

Superior men have no reason for any great anxiety to know these principles, for if what they desire is to be able to speak of all things, and to acquire a reputation for learning, they will gain their end more easily by remaining satisfied with the appearance of truth, which can be found without much difficulty in all sorts of matters, than by seeking the truth itself which unfolds itself but slowly and that only in some departments, while it obliges

remains to be discovered

Although Descartes was mainly a physicist and mathematician, he was clearly fascinated by recent discoveries in biology. The previous section of the Discourse included support for Harvey's theory on blood circulation. See Atlas of World History, page 94.

want lack

recondite obscure

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us, when we have to speak of others, freely to confess our ignorance. If, however, **they** prefer the knowledge of some few truths to the vanity of appearing ignorant of none, as such knowledge is undoubtedly much to be preferred, and, if they choose to follow a course similar to mine, they do not require for this that I should say anything more than I have already said in this discourse. For if they are capable of making greater advancement than I have made, they will much more be able of themselves to discover all that I believe myself to have found; since as I have never examined aught except in order, it is certain that what yet remains to be discovered is in itself more difficult and recondite, than that which I have already been enabled to find, and the gratification would be much less in learning it from me than in discovering it for themselves. Besides this, the habit which they will acquire, by seeking first what is easy, and then passing onward slowly and step by step to the more difficult, will benefit them more than all my instructions. Thus, in my own case, I am persuaded that if I had been taught from my youth all the truths of which I have since sought out demonstrations, and had thus learned them without labour, I should never, perhaps, have known any beyond these; at least, I should never have acquired the habit and the facility which I think I possess in always discovering new truths in proportion as I give myself to the search...

In conclusion, I am unwilling here to say anything very specific of the progress which I expect to make for the future in the sciences, or to bind myself to the public by any promise which I am not certain of being able to fulfill; but this only will I say, that I have resolved to devote what time I may still have to live to no other occupation than that of endeavoring to acquire some knowledge of Nature, which shall be of such a kind as to enable us therefrom to deduce rules in medicine of greater certainty than those at present in use; and that my inclination is so much opposed to all other pursuits, especially to such as cannot be useful to some without being hurtful to others, that if, by any circumstances, I had been constrained to engage in such, I do not believe that I should have been able to succeed. Of this I here make a public declaration, though well aware that it cannot serve to procure for me any consideration in the world, which, however, I do not in the least affect; and I shall always hold myself more obliged to those through whose favor I am permitted to enjoy my retirement without interruption than to any who might offer me the highest earthly preferments.

Following the Discourse, Descartes offers some practical examples of experimentation and its results with three appendices: Optics, Meteorology, and Geometry. Geometry created a system for explaining shapes mathematically now called the Cartesian coordinates system, which made later physics possible.

Source: Rene Descartes, "Project Gutenberg e-text of A Discourse on Method by Rene Descartes," *Project Gutenberg*, July 1, 2008, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/59/59-h/59-h.htm#part6>> (June 2, 2011).

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Descartes here is referring to Aristotelian philosophers, who opposed experimentation. They believed that the world of the senses is too deceptive and reason alone should be used to explain the world.