

DISCOURSE ON THE METHOD

FOR CONDUCTING ONE'S REASON WELL AND FOR SEEKING THE TRUTH IN THE SCIENCES

Rene Descartes. Published 1637.

My notes February 2018

Page: 1. If this discourse seems too long to be read at one time, it may be divided into **six parts**. In the first part, you will find various considerations concerning the sciences; in the second part, the chief rules of the method which the author has sought; in the third part, some of the rules of morality which he has derived from this method; in the fourth part, the arguments by which he proves the existence of God and of the human soul, which are the foundations of his metaphysics; in the fifth part, the order of the questions in physics that he has investigated; and in the final part, what things the author believes are required in order to advance further in the investigation of nature than the author has done, and what reasons have made him write.

PART ONE – concerning the sciences – Location 235

Page: 1. For it is not enough to have a good **mind**; the main thing is to **apply it well**.

Page: 2. I think I have been rather fortunate to have, since my youth, found myself on certain paths that have led me to considerations and maxims from which I have formed a method by which, it seems to me, I have the means to increase my knowledge by degrees and to raise it little by little to the highest point which the mediocrity of my mind and the short duration of my life will be able to allow it to attain.

Page: 2. Thus my purpose here is not to teach **the method that everyone ought to follow in order to conduct his reason well**, but merely to show how I have tried to conduct my own.

Page: 4. ...is good to have examined all these disciplines, even the most superstition-ridden and the most false of them, in order to know their true worth and to guard against being deceived by them.

Page: 4. I delighted most of all in **mathematics because of the certainty** and the evidence of its reasonings.

Page: 5. I deemed everything that was merely probable to be well-nigh false.

Page: 5. That is why, as soon as age permitted me to emerge from the supervision of my teachers, I completely abandoned the study of letters. And resolving to search for no knowledge other than what could be found within myself, or else **in the great book of the world**,

Page: 6. ...and thus I little by little **freed myself from many errors** that can darken our natural light and render us less able to listen to reason.

PART TWO – Rules of the Method – Location 339

Page: 7. I believe that if Sparta was at one time very flourishing, this was not because of the goodness of each one of its laws taken by itself, seeing that many of them were very strange and even contrary to good morals, but because, having been **devised by a single individual, they all tended toward the same end.**

Page: 8. ...but that, as regards all the opinions to which I had until now given credence, I could not do better than to try to get rid of them once and for all, in order to replace them later on, either with [14] other ones that are better, or even with the same ones once I had reconciled them to the norms of reason.

Page: 9. The single resolution to rid oneself of all the opinions to which one has heretofore given credence is not an example that everyone ought to follow;

Page: 9. I had learned in my college days that one cannot imagine anything **so strange or so little believable that it had not been said by one of the philosophers**, and

Page: 9. it is more custom and example that persuades us than any certain knowledge; and yet the **majority opinion is worthless as a proof** of truths that are at all difficult to discover, since it is much more likely that one man would have found them than a whole multitude of people.

Page: 10. the art of Lully,⁴ to speak without judgment concerning matters about which one is ignorant, than to learn them.

Page: 11. in place of the large number of precepts of which logic is composed, I believed that the following **four rules would be sufficient for me**, provided I made a firm and constant resolution not even once to fail to observe them:

Page: 11. 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.

Page: 11. 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.**

Page: 11. 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.

Page: 11. And the last, everywhere to make **enumerations so complete** and reviews so general that I was assured of having omitted nothing.

Page: 11. long chains of utterly simple and easy **reasonings that geometers commonly use** to arrive at their most difficult demonstrations had given me occasion to imagine that all the things that can fall within human knowledge follow from one another in the same way,

Page: 12.to keep them in mind or to grasp many of them together, I would have to explicate them by means of certain **symbols, the briefest ones possible**; and that by this means I would be borrowing all that is best in geometrical analysis and algebra,.

Page: 13. But having noted that the principles of these sciences must all be derived from philosophy, in which I did not yet find any that were certain, I thought that it was necessary for me first of all to try to establish some there and that, this being the most important thing in the

PART THREE – The rules of Morality – Location 470

Page: 13. I formulated a **provisional code of morals**, of but three or four maxims,

Page: 13. The first was to **obey the laws and the customs of my country**, constantly **holding on to the religion** in which, by God's grace.

Page: 14. My second maxim was to **be as firm and resolute** in my actions as I could, and to follow the most doubtful opinions, once I had decided on them, with no less constancy than if they had been very well assured.

Page: 14. My third maxim was always to try to **conquer myself rather than fortune**, and to change my desires rather than the order of the world, and generally to accustom myself to believing that there is nothing that is completely within our power except our thoughts, so that, after we have done our best regarding things external to us, everything that is lacking for us to succeed is, from our point of view, absolutely impossible.

Page: 15. spending my whole life **cultivating my reason and advancing**, as far as I could, in the knowledge of the truth, following the method I had prescribed to myself. I had met with such **extreme contentment** since the time I had begun to make use of this method, that I did not believe one could obtain any sweeter or more innocent contentment in this life, and, discovering every day by its means some truths that to me seemed quite important

Page: 16. And in all the nine years that followed I did nothing but wander here and there in the world, trying to be more a spectator than an actor in all the comedies that are played out there;

Page: 18. I have been able, without lacking any of the amenities to be found in the most bustling cities, to live as solitary and as withdrawn a life as I could in the remotest deserts.

PART FOUR – Existence of God, Soul; Metaphysics – Location 569

Page: 18. I do not know whether I ought to tell you about the first meditations I engaged in there, for they are so metaphysical and so **out of the ordinary** that perhaps they will not be to everyone's liking.

Page: 18. I reject as **absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt**, in order to see whether, after this process, something in my beliefs remained as entirely indubitable.

Page: 18. ...true, I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterward I noticed that, while I wanted thus to think that everything was false, it necessarily had to be the case that I, who was thinking this, was something. And noticing that this truth—**I think, therefore I am**—was so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.

Page: 18. from the very fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, **it followed very evidently and very certainly that I existed**;

Page: 19. From this I knew that I was **a substance the whole essence or nature of which is simply to think**, and which, in order to exist, has no need of any place nor depends on any material thing.

Page: 19. I judged that I could take as a general rule that the things we conceive very clearly and very distinctly are all true, but that there is merely some difficulty in properly discerning which are those that we distinctly conceive.

Page: 19. as a consequence, my being was not utterly perfect (for **I saw clearly that it is a greater perfection to know than to doubt**), I decided to search for the source from which I had learned **to think of something more perfect than I was**,

Page: 19. It thus remained that this idea had been placed in me by a nature truly more perfect than I was and that it even had within itself all the perfections of which I could have any idea, that is to say, to explain myself in a single word, that it was **God**.

My Note: Changed from identifying the existence of thought to the all powerful convincing power of thought

Page: 20. After this, I wanted to search for other truths, and, having set before myself the object dealt with by geometers, which **I conceived of as a continuous body or a space indefinitely extended** in length, breadth, and height or depth, divisible into various parts which could have various shapes and sizes and which may be moved or transposed

Page: 20. the great certitude that everyone attributes to these demonstrations is founded exclusively on the fact that they are plainly conceived,

Page: 20. ...but I **did not see anything** in all this to assure me that **there was any triangle** existing in the world.

Page: 21. God, who is this perfect being, is or exists, as any demonstration in geometry could be

Page: 21. ...neither **our imagination nor our senses could ever assure us of anything if our understanding did not intervene.**

Page: 22. But it does dictate to us that all our ideas or notions must have some foundation of truth, for it would not be possible that God, who is all-perfect and all-truthful, would have put them in us without that.

PART FIVE – Questions in Physics – Location 670

Page: 23. I have always remained firm in the resolution I had made not to suppose any principle [41] but the one I have just used to demonstrate the existence of God and of the soul, and not to accept anything as true that did not seem to me clearer and more certain than the demonstrations of the geometers had hitherto seemed.

Page: 23. I have noted certain laws that God has so established in nature, and of which he has impressed in our souls such notions, that, after having reflected sufficiently on these matters, **we cannot doubt** that they are strictly adhered **to in everything that exists** or occurs in the world.

My Note: Confirmed without even observing the world

Page: 23. But because I have tried to explain the principal ones among these truths in a treatise that certain considerations **prevented me from publishing**,⁷ I could not make them better known than by stating here in summary form what the treatise contains.

Note⁷. One of the considerations preventing the publication of *Le Monde* was the **trial in 1633** of Galileo by the Holy Office in Rome.

Page: 24. I showed what the laws of nature were, and, without supporting my reasons on any other principle but the **infinite perfections of God**, I tried to demonstrate all those laws about which one might have been able to have any doubt and to show that they are such that, even if God had created many worlds, there could not be any of them in which these laws failed to be observed.

Page: 25. Yet I did not want to infer from all these things that this world has been created in the manner I was proposing, for it is much more likely that, from the beginning, **God made it such as it had to be.**

Page: 25. ...their nature is much easier to conceive, when one sees them coming to be little by little in this manner, than when one considers them only in their completed state.

Page: 26. But I could not on that account find there any of those functions, which, being dependent on thought, are the only ones that belong to us as men, although I did find them all

later on, once I had supposed that God created a rational soul and joined it to this body in a particular manner that I described.

Page: 26. I would like those who are not at all versed in anatomy to take the trouble, before reading this, to have the **heart of some large animal** that has lungs dissected in their presence

Page: 32. ...on the other hand, there is no other animal at all, however perfect and pedigreed it may be, that does the like. This does not happen because they lack the organs, for one sees that magpies and parrots can

Page: 33. **our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body**, and consequently that it is not subject to die with it. Then, since we do not see any other causes at all for its destruction, [60] we are naturally led to judge from this that it is immortal.

PART SIX – Further investigations of nature – Location 890

Page: 34. I had never made much of the things that came from my mind, and so long as I had reaped no other fruits from the method I am using except my own satisfaction regarding certain problems that pertain to the speculative sciences or else my attempt at governing my moral conduct by means of the reasons which the method taught me,

Page: 35. thus render ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature. This is desirable not only for the invention of an infinity of devices that would enable one to enjoy trouble-free the fruits of the earth and all the goods found there, but also principally for the **maintenance of health, which unquestionably is the first good** and the foundation of all the other goods of this life, for even the mind depends so greatly on

Page: 35. For, having the intention of spending my entire life in the search for so indispensable a science, and having found a path that seems to me such that, by following it, one ought infallibly to find this science, unless one is prevented from doing so either by the brevity of life or by a lack of **experiments**,¹¹ I judged there to be no better remedy against these two obstacles than to communicate faithfully to the public the entirety of what little I had found and to urge good minds to try to advance beyond this by contributing,

¹¹. **Expérience** is used by Descartes to refer to a wide range of activities, from simple observations to sophisticated scientific experiments. *Expeérience* will be translated as “observations” or as “experiments,” depending on the context.

Page: 36. Moreover, I noticed, in regard to **experiments**, that they are the **more necessary as one is more advanced in knowledge**.

Page: 36. First, I have tried to find in general the principles or first causes of all that is or can be in the world, without considering anything but God alone, who created the world, and without deriving these principles from any other source but from certain seeds of truths that are naturally in our souls.

My Note: “I Have No Need of that Hypothesis” in 1814, Pierre-Simon Laplace