



René Descartes (1596–1650)



René Descartes was born in a village near Tours in France in 1596. At the age of eight, he entered the Jesuit college La Flèche in Anjou, where he would study classics, logic and Aristotelian philosophy, as well as mathematics from the books of Clavius. Descartes studied at the college until 1612, and despite his Jesuit education, continued to maintain the importance of separating reason and faith.

Descartes went on to obtain a degree in law from Poitiers, then enlisted in the Dutch military as military service was tradition in his family. When the Thirty Years War began, he was encouraged to volunteer to serve in the Bavarian army under Count de Bucquoy. In his leisure time, he studied mathematics, having been influenced by the Dutch mathematician and scientist Beeckman.

Descartes dates his first new philosophical ideas (and his analytical geometry) as arising from three dreams that he had while campaigning on the Danube. He saw November 19, 1619, the date of these dreams, as a landmark moment in his life. It was around this time that he may have started *Rules for the Direction of Mind*, his first major philosophical treatise, which would remain unfinished. This work discussed the proper method for engaging with science and rational theology.

From 1620 to 1628 Descartes travelled through Europe, moving from Bohemia, to Hungary, Germany, Holland and France. In 1623, he was in Paris where he met Mersenne, who would keep him in contact with his contemporaries in science. After Paris, Descartes spent time in Venice, returning to France in 1625. In 1628 he met the Cardinal de Berulle, the founder of the Oratorians. Berulle was impressed by his conversation with Descartes and he encouraged Descartes to devote his life to the study of truth. In 1629 Descartes moved to Holland where he would live in seclusion for the next 20 years.

During his first four years in seclusion he wrote *Le Monde*, a thesis on physics defending a heliocentric view of the universe. 1633 was the year that Galileo's *Dialogue* was condemned by the Catholic Church, and although Descartes' book had been completed, he put off its publication out of concern that his views might too be censured. The incomplete manuscript of *Le Monde* was finally published in 1664. In 1637 Descartes published *Optics, Meteorology, and Geometry*, as a collection of essays. The preface to this collection entitled *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, was largely written before 1633. A conclusion to the preface, added later, explained that Descartes would publish despite of the risks because he needed readers to help confirm his scientific theories. In *Discourse*, Descartes insisted on the use of deductive reasoning, countering Francis Bacon's induction as introduced in *Novum Organum* (1620). The work from these



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years formed the basis of some of Descartes most important contributions to mathematics and physics, including the introduction to what is now known as analytic geometry.

In 1640 Descartes expanded on the metaphysical themes from his collection of essays in his *Meditations on the First Philosophy: In which the Existence of God and the Distinction Between Mind and Body are Demonstrated*. The six Meditations of the book are: Of the Things that we may doubt; Of the Nature of the Human Mind; Of God: that He exists; Of Truth and Error; Of the Essence of Material Things; Of the Existence of Material Things; and Of the Real Distinction between the Mind and the Body of Man. In *Meditations*, Descartes argues that the mind and body are distinct substances. He writes that humans are spirits and that their essential attributes are exclusively of the spirit (for example thinking, willing, and conceiving). The human spirit occupies a mechanical body, made up of extended substance. Attributes like sense perception, movement and appetite are of the body and not the spirit, so they do not comprise human essence. *Meditations* was published in Latin 1641, and translated into French in 1642.

In 1644, *Principia Philosophiae* was published in Amsterdam. Its four sections, entitled The Principles of Human Knowledge, The Principles of Material Things, Of the Visible World and The Earth, are a study of mechanics, developing a mathematical foundation of the universe. The book concentrates on physical science, specifically the laws of motion and theory of vortices. In 1647 the French court granted Descartes a pension to honour his work.

In 1649 Descartes moved to Stockholm to tutor Queen Christina in philosophy. The work, combined with the harsh climate, had ill effects on Descartes' health. He died of pneumonia in 1650.

Perhaps Descartes' most well known philosophical ideas are his method of hyperbolic doubt, and the idea that though one may doubt, one may not doubt that one exists. The method of hyperbolic doubt is the refusal to accept either the authority of previous philosophers or information gleaned from one's own senses. He decided that in developing a foundation for philosophy anything that might be doubted must be rejected. Only what is beyond doubt is acceptable and may lead to truth. He finds that all that remains is the fact of doubting itself, and that something must exist to doubt, namely the philosopher himself.

Descartes always refused the Aristotelian and Scholastic traditions that had been the dominant shape of philosophy throughout the Medieval times, and he rejected religious influence in his scientific and philosophical studies. Throughout his life and afterwards, his work was condemned by the Catholic Church, and was officially prohibited in 1663. Nonetheless, Descartes was a devout Catholic, despite being influenced by the Reformation's challenge of Church authority. He saw reason as the foundation and guide in the pursuit of truth, and he was relentless in his search for absolute certainty.



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Descartes is considered a revolutionary figure, especially for his attempts to change the relationship between philosophy and theology, and his desire to integrate philosophy with the new forms of science. He is respected for his attempts to create a form of philosophical argument akin to science or mathematics, his emphasis on perspective of consciousness in epistemology, and his work on methodology. Descartes was highly influential in the thinking of several philosophers throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, including Spinoza, Malbrache, Locke and Leibniz.

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