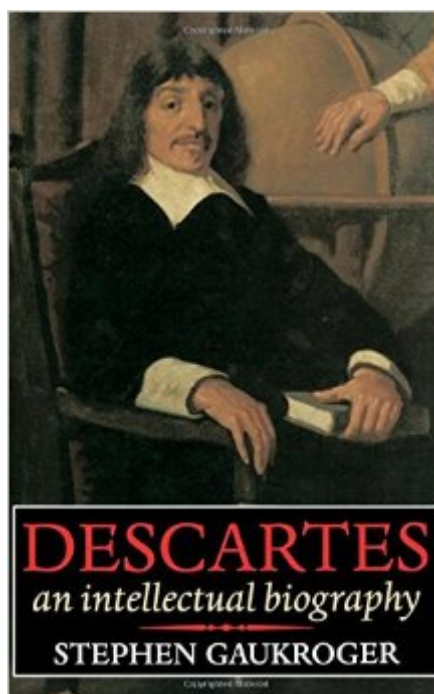


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Descartes: An Intellectual Biography



Synopsis

René Descartes's insights into the nature of knowledge and the mind have inspired awe and debate through the centuries. But while philosophers have sought to understand the ramifications of his theories, they have paid much less attention to how, exactly, he arrived at his ideas. What twists and turns of his intellect brought him to his epochal conclusions? How did his personal ambitions and the social conditions of his era shape his thought? These questions and more are masterfully answered in Stephen Gaukroger's *Descartes*, a fascinating look at this most influential of all Renaissance thinkers. In his quest to retrace Descartes's development as a scientist and philosopher, Gaukroger leaves no stone unturned. From the great man's first book on music theory (*Compendium Musicae*) to his masterworks *Discours*, *Essais*, *Meditationes*, and *Principia*, from his study of mathematics while attending a Jesuit college at age ten, through his dying days in the service of Christina, Queen of Sweden, Descartes brims with penetrating and often surprising insights into the philosopher's life and work. We discover, for example, that he wasn't as concerned with developing an all-encompassing theory of knowledge as he was with establishing a natural philosophy that supported the teachings of Copernicus, a man whose work he deeply admired. We also learn that Descartes was willing to alter his publicly stated views to accommodate church doctrine--especially after witnessing Galileo's condemnation in 1633. We observe how his personal triumphs and failures--from his rumored nervous breakdown in 1614, to his joy at the popular reception of *Discours* and *Essais*, to his protracted and very public dispute with the implacable professor Voetius--affected his intellectual development. Along the way, Gaukroger details how Descartes's theories of metaphysics, mechanics, cognition, and cosmology have been both championed and distorted by philosophers of all stripes for over three hundred years. Packed with helpful diagrams and in-depth interpretations of Descartes's most celebrated works, the book also includes a useful chronology that highlights his important accomplishments and personal milestones. *Descartes* is an exhaustively detailed, magisterial look at the dazzling intellectual achievements of the father of modern philosophy. Splendidly written by a renowned authority on the subject, it will serve as the definitive guide to Descartes's thoughts, works, and life for years to come.

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Customer Reviews

Gaukroger ends his introduction with the words: "An intellectual biography forces one to think in very specific terms, hopefully yielding a kind of understanding which historians of philosophy of science have missed". This point of view marks one of the strengths as well as one of the weaknesses of this work on Descartes. This intellectual biography offers a detailed exposition on the intellectual development and evolution of thought of René Descartes. The book strictly follows the chronology of events in Descartes' intellectual life and starts with his early childhood and education at La Flèche. This chapter excels in providing insight in 17th-century Jesuit education systems and the influence they had on Descartes' methodology and fields of study. Chapter 3 focuses on Descartes' apprenticeship with Isaac Beeckman in Holland and the decisive influence the latter's corpuscularian thinking had on the natural philosophy of Descartes. Starting from this corpuscular theory, Descartes developed an arithmetical account of consonance in music and alternative explanations for the kinematics of falling bodies and the problems of hydrostatics. During this period, Descartes discovered the proportional compass (mesolabe), which led him to the ambitious idea of a general theory of mathematics. In chapter 4 Gaukroger puts forward the interesting thesis that Descartes' search for a general theory of "method" was partly influenced by the contact he had with the Rosicrucians in Germany and he was to share in something like the generality and the delusions of grandeur of their vision of a universal language, generating all truths from basic premises. Later, on returning to France, Descartes had to defend himself against charges of being a Rosicrucian, which was considered to be a political threat.

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