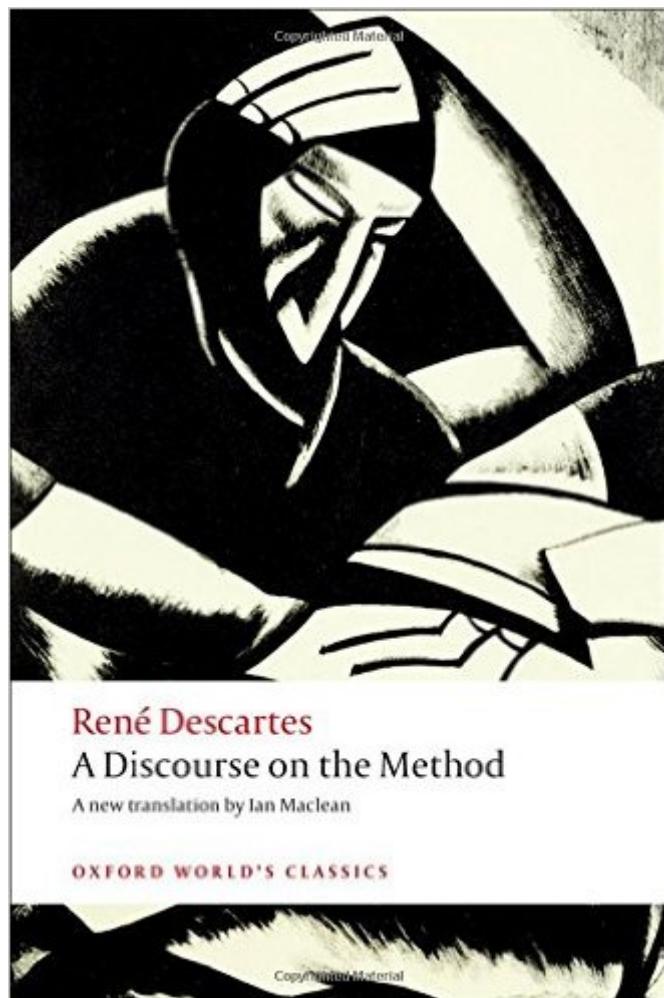


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# A Discourse On The Method (Oxford World's Classics)



## Synopsis

Descartes' Discourse marks a watershed in European thought; in it, the author sets out in brief his radical new philosophy, which begins with a proof of the existence of the self (the famous "cogito ergo sum"). Next he deduces from it the existence and nature of God, and ends by offering a radical new account of the physical world and of human and animal nature. Written in everyday language and meant to be read by common people of the day, it swept away all previous philosophical traditions. This new translation is an ideal introduction to Descartes for the general reader. It is accompanied by a substantial introductory essay from Renaissance scholar Ian Maclean that is designed to provide in-depth historical and philosophical context. The essay draws on Descartes' correspondence to examine what brought him to write his great work, and the impact it had on his contemporaries. A detailed section of notes explain Descartes' philosophical terminology and ideas, as well as historical references and allusions. Any reader can feel comfortable diving in to this classic work of Renaissance philosophical thought.

**About the Series:** For over 100 years Oxford World's Classics has made available the broadest spectrum of literature from around the globe. Each affordable volume reflects Oxford's commitment to scholarship, providing the most accurate text plus a wealth of other valuable features, including expert introductions by leading authorities, voluminous notes to clarify the text, up-to-date bibliographies for further study, and much more.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is quintessential Descartes, and a concise, eloquent and candid expression of the main themes

of his philosophy. In my review I wish to stress a particular aspect of Descartes's method which is neglected in most commentaries, including that of the present translator, namely the fact that it is directly modelled on the axiomatic method of Greek mathematics, and Euclid's *Elements* in particular. Descartes makes it quite clear that his intention is to widen the scope of the mathematical method to philosophy in general: "I was most keen on mathematics, because of its certainty and the incontrovertibility of its proofs; but I did not yet see its true use. Believing as I did that its only application was to the mechanical arts, I was astonished that nothing more exalted had been built on such sure and solid foundations." (9 = AT 7) Indeed, Descartes's definitive statement of his method is such an apt description of the *Elements* that it could easily have been written by Euclid himself as a preface to this work. Here I quote it in its entirety and point out the obvious parallels with Euclid. "The first [principle of my method] was never to accept anything as true that I did not incontrovertibly know to be so; that is to say, carefully to avoid both prejudice and premature conclusions; and to include nothing in my judgements other than that which presented itself to my mind so clearly and distinctly, that I would have no occasion to doubt it." (17 = AT 18) This is of course a perfect description of the way Euclid bases his entire work on a few evident postulates and common notions. "The second was to divide all the difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible, and as many as was required to solve them in the best way.

This is a new translation of Descartes's well-known 1637 essay introducing the three treatises "Meteors", "Dioptrics", and "Geometry". While few people read these treatises nowadays, most still find the "Discourse" intriguing, probably because of its autobiographical style and sections on method and ethics, the early version of the "Meditations" it contains, and the glimpses it imparts of Descartes's unpublished initial physics. Given that Ian Maclean is an eminent Renaissance scholar, what he says about the background to the "Discourse" (in his 75-page introductory essay) is particularly valuable, especially the sections on 'Galileo, Mersenne, and the Church: Authority and Truth', 'The Publication of the Discourse', and 'Descartes as a Writer'. Still, one can quibble about various details in his account of Descartes's life. For example, Maclean accepts uncritically the story that Descartes slept until noon, even during his schooldays (p. ix), and the authenticity of the skull said to be Descartes's kept at the *Musée de l'Homme* (p. xxi), neither of which is at all likely. He refers to Descartes's mistress as "a maid servant known only to posterity by her first name, Helena" (p. xv). This overlooks a fair amount of good scholarship. Maclean claims that Descartes "was put off by any whiff of occultism; the current vogue for alchemy and magic [...] repelled him" (p. xiii). This is much too strong.

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