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René Descartes
Discourse on Method

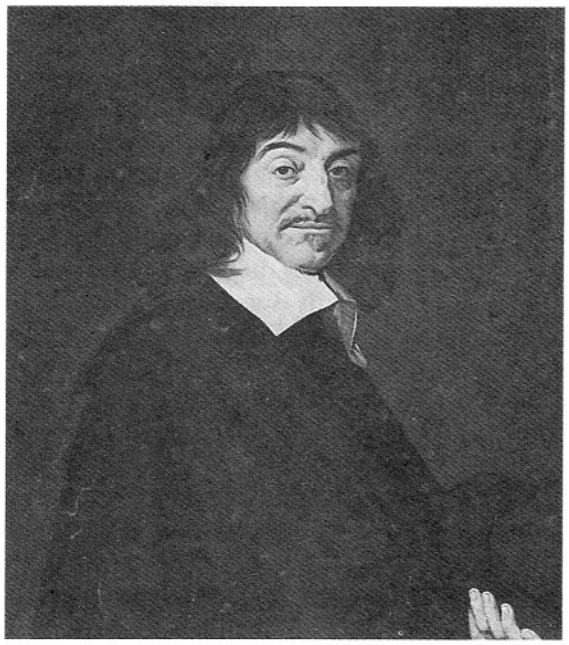
(1637)

René Descartes (1596–1650) was the son of a French provincial lawyer and judge. He was schooled by the Jesuits and attended university at Poitiers, where he took a degree in canon law. Although his father expected that young René would follow in his footsteps, Descartes decided, instead, to see the world. He enlisted in the military and fought in the Thirty Years' War in Germany. But mostly he continued his mathematical studies and contemplated. One night in an army camp he had a dream of devising a universal intellectual system. He moved to Holland in 1628 and spent most of the rest of his life there, writing and studying. Descartes became an international figure after the publication of his *Discourse on Method.* He died in 1650 while in residence at the Swedish court.

The system Descartes presents in *Discourse on Method* combines the rigorous principles of reasoning found in mathematics with the central problems of moral philosophy. He propounds the view that all the universe is either matter or mind; this dualist idea tries to reconcile the new science and traditional authorities such as the Church.

Good sense is of all things in the world the most equitably distributed; for everyone thinks himself so amply provided with it, that even those most difficult to please in everything else do not commonly desire more of it than they already have. It is not likely that in this respect we are all of us deceived; it is rather to be taken as testifying that the power of judging well and of distinguishing between the true and the false, which, properly speaking, is what is called good sense, or reason, is by nature equal in all men; and that the diversity of our opinions is not due to some men being endowed with a larger share of reason than others, but solely to this, that our thoughts proceed along different paths, and that we are, therefore, not attending to the same things. For to be possessed of good mental powers is not of itself enough; what is all-important is that we employ them rightly. The greatest minds, capable as they are of the greatest virtues, are also capable of the greatest vices; and those who proceed very slowly may make much greater progress, provided they keep to the straight road, than those who, while they run, digress from it.

For myself, I have never supposed my mind to be in any way more perfect than that of the average man; on the contrary, I have often wished I could think as quickly, image as accurately and distinctly, or remember as fully and readily as some others. Beyond these I know of no other qualities making for the perfection of the mind; for as to reason, or sense, inasmuch as it is that alone which renders us men, and distinguishes us from the brutes, I am disposed to believe that it is complete in each one of us; and in this I am following the common opinion of those philosophers who say that differences of



Portrait of Descartes by Frans Hals.

more and less hold in respect only of *accidents,* and not in respect of the *forms,* or natures, of the *individuals* of the same *species.*

Thus my present design is not to teach a method which everyone ought to follow for the right conduct of his reason, but only to show in what manner I have endeavored to conduct my own. Those who undertake to give precepts ought to regard themselves as wiser than those for whom they prescribe; and if they prove to be in the least degree lacking, they have to bear the blame. But in putting forward this piece of writing merely as a history, or, if you prefer so to regard it, as a fable, in which, among some examples worthy of imitation, there will also, perhaps, be found others we should be well advised not to follow, I hope that it will be of use to some without being harmful to anyone, and that all will welcome my plain-speaking. . . .

I came to believe that the four following rules would be found sufficient, always provided I took the firm and unswerving resolve never in a single instance to fail in observing them.

The first was to accept nothing as true which I did not evidently know to be such, that is to say, scrupulously to avoid precipitance and prejudice, and in the judgments I passed to include nothing additional to what had presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I could have no occasion for doubting it.

The second, to divide each of the difficulties I examined into as many parts as may be required for its adequate solution.

The third, to arrange my thoughts in order, beginning with things the simplest and easiest to know, so that I may then ascend little by little, as it were step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex, and, in doing so, to assign an order of thought even to those objects which are not of themselves in any such order of precedence.

And the last, in all cases to make enumerations so complete, and reviews so general, that I should be assured of omitting nothing.

I then proceeded to consider, in a general manner, what is requisite to the truth and certainty of a proposition. Having found one—*I think, therefore I am*—which I knew to be true and certain, I thought that I ought also to know in what this certainty consists; and having noted that in this proposition nothing assures me of its truth save only that I see very clearly that in order to think it is necessary to be, I judged that I could take as being a general rule, that the things we apprehend very clearly and distinctly are true—bearing in mind, however, that there is some difficulty in rightly determining which are those we apprehend distinctly.

Reflecting in accordance with this rule on the fact that I doubted, and that consequently my being was not entirely perfect (seeing clearly, as I did, that it is a greater perfection to know than to doubt), I resolved to inquire whence I had learned to think of something more perfect than I myself was; and I saw clearly that it must proceed from some nature that was indeed more perfect. As to the thoughts I had of other things outside me, such as the heavens, the Earth, light, heat and a thousand others, I had not any such difficulty in knowing whence they came. Remarking nothing in them which seemed to

render them superior to myself, I could believe that, if they were true, they were dependencies of my nature in so far as my nature had a certain perfection; and that if they were not true, I received them from nothing, that is to say, that they were in me in so far as I was in some respects lacking in perfection. But this latter suggestion could not be made in respect of the idea of a being more perfect than myself, since receiving the idea from nothing is a thing manifestly impossible. And since it is no less contradictory that the more perfect should result from, and depend on, the less perfect than that something should proceed from nothing, it is equally impossible I should receive it from myself. Thus we are committed to the conclusion that it has been placed in me by a nature which is veritably more perfect than I am, and which has indeed within itself all the perfections of which I have any idea, that is to say, in a single word, that is God. And since some perfections other than those I myself possess were known to me, I further concluded that I was not the only being in existence. There must of necessity exist some other more perfect being upon whom I was dependent, and from whom I had received all that I had. For if I alone had existed, independently of all else, in such wise that I had from myself all the perfection, however small in amount, through which I participated in the perfections of Divine Existence, I should have been able, for the same reason, to have from myself the whole surplus of perfections which I know to be lacking to me, and so could of myself have been infinite, eternal, immutable, omniscient, all-powerful—in short, have been able to possess all the perfections that I could discern as being in God.

Consequently, in order to know the nature of God (in extension of the above reasonings in proof of His existence) so far as my own nature allows of my doing so, I had only to consider in respect of all the things of which I found in myself any idea, whether the possession of them was or was not a perfection; thereby I was at once assured that none of those which showed any imperfection was in Him, and that all the others were—just as I had learned that doubt, inconstancy, sadness and such like, could not be in Him, seeing that I myself should have been very glad to be free from them. In addition to these latter I had ideas of things which are sensible and corporeal. For although I might suppose that I was dreaming, and that all I saw or imaged was false, I yet could not deny that the ideas of them were indeed in my thought. But because I had already very clearly discerned in myself that the intelligent is distinct from the corporeal, and since I had also observed that all composition witnesses to dependence and that dependence is manifestly a defect, I therefore judged that it could not be a perfection in God to be composed of two natures, and that He was not so compounded. At the same time I likewise concluded that if there be in the world any bodies, or even any intelligences or other natures, which are not wholly perfect, their being must depend on His power in such a way that without Him they could not subsist for a single moment.

I then set myself to look for other truths, and having directed my attention to the object dealt with by geometers, which I took to be a continuous body, a space indefinitely extended in length, breadth, height and depth, which allowed of diverse shapes and sizes, and of their being moved or transposed in all sorts of ways (for all this the geometers take as being in the object of their studies), I perused some of their simple demonstrations; and while noting that the great certitude which by common consent is accorded to them is founded solely upon this that they are apprehended as evident, in conformity with the rule above stated, I likewise noted that there is nothing at all in them which assures me of the existence of their object. Taking, for instance, a triangle, while I saw that its three angles must be equal to two right angles, I did not on this account see anything which could assure me that anywhere in the world a triangle existed. On the other hand, on reverting to the examination of the idea of a Perfect Being, I found that existence is comprised in the idea precisely in the way in which it is comprised in the idea of a triangle that its three angles are

equal to two right angles, or in that of a sphere that all its parts are equally distant from its center, and indeed even more evidently; and that in consequence it is at least as certain that God, who is this Perfect Being, is or exists, as any demonstration of geometry can possibly be.

The reason why many are persuaded that there is difficulty in knowing this truth, as also in knowing what their soul is, is that they never raise their minds above the things of sense, and that they are so accustomed to consider nothing except what they can image (a mode of thinking restricted to material things), that whatever is not imageable seems to them not intelligible. Even the philosophers in their schools do so, as is sufficiently manifest from their holding as a maxim that there is nothing in the understanding which was not previously in the senses, where, however, it is certain, the ideas of God and of the rational soul have never been. Those who employ their power of imagery to comprehend these ideas behave, as it seems to me, exactly as if in order to hear sounds or smell odors they sought to avail themselves of their eyes—unless, indeed, there is this difference, that the sense of sight does not afford any less truth than do hearing and smell. In any case, neither our imagination nor our senses can ever assure us of anything whatsoever save so far as our understanding intervenes.

Finally, if there still be men who are not sufficiently persuaded of the existence of God and of their soul by the reasons which I have cited, I would have them know that all the other things which they think to be more assured, as that they have a body and that there are stars and an Earth, and such like things, are less certain. For though the moral assurance we have of these things is such that there is an appearance of extravagance in professing to doubt of their existence, yet none the less when it is a metaphysical certitude that is in question, no one, unless he is devoid of reason, can deny that we do have sufficient ground for not being entirely assured, namely, in the fact that, as we are aware, we can, when asleep, image ourselves as possessed of a different body and as seeing stars and another Earth, without there being any such things. For how do we know that the thoughts which come in dreams are more likely to be false than those we experience when awake? Are not the former no less vivid and detailed than the latter? The ablest minds may treat of this question at whatever length they please, but I do not believe that they will be able to find any reason sufficient to remove this doubt, unless and until they presuppose the existence of God. For, to begin with, even the maxim which a short time ago I adopted as a rule, viz., that the things we cognize very clearly and very distinctly are all true, is reliable only because God is or exists, because He is a Perfect Being, and because all that is in us comes from Him. Thereupon it follows that our ideas or notions, as being of real things, and as coming from God, must in so far as they are clear and distinct be to that extent true. So that, though quite often we have ideas which contain some falsity, this can only be in the case of those in which there is some confusion or obscurity, i.e., owing to their participation, in this respect, in nothingness; or, in other words, that in us they are thus confused because we are not wholly perfect. And it is evident that it is not less repugnant that the falsity or imperfection, in so far as it is such, should proceed from God, than that truth or perfection should proceed from nothing. If, however, we did not know that whatever in us is real and true comes from a Being perfect and infinite, our ideas, however clear and distinct, would yield us no ground of assurance that they had the perfection of being true.

1. How is Descartes's philosophy affected by the ideals of new science?
2. What are the four main principles of Descartes's method?