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John Cottingham and Robert Stoothoff
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DESCARTES
Selected Philosophical Writings

Based on the new and much acclaimed two-volume Cambridge edition of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* by Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch, this anthology of essential texts contains the most important and widely studied of those writings, including the *Discourse* and *Meditations* and substantial extracts from the *Regulae*, *Optics*, *Principles*, *Objectives and Replies*, *Comments on a Broadsheet*, and *Passions of the Soul*.

In clear, readable, modern English, with a full text and running references to the standard Franco-Latin edition of Descartes, this book is planned as the definitive one-volume reader for all English-speaking students of Descartes.

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translated by

JOHN COTTINGHAM

ROBERT STOOHOFF



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General introduction

René Descartes is universally acknowledged as the father of modern Western philosophy. It is to the writings of Descartes, above all others, that we must turn if we wish to understand the great seventeenth-century revolution in which the old scholastic world view slowly lost its grip, and the foundations of modern philosophical and scientific thinking were laid. The range of Descartes' thought was enormous, and his published work includes writings on mathematics, physics, astronomy, meteorology, optics, physiology, psychology, metaphysics and ethics. No one volume can hope to do justice to such an *oeuvre*, but the present selection includes the most famous and widely studied texts, and a good bit more besides. We hope it will be a serviceable and reasonably representative anthology for those who wish to study for themselves one of the most important and fascinating philosophical systems ever produced.

The first work included below (in extracts) is the *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence* (*Regulae ad directionem ingenii*). This was the first major piece of philosophy that Descartes composed. It was written in Latin, probably in 1628 or a few years earlier, but was never completed, and was not published during Descartes' lifetime. A Dutch translation appeared in Holland in 1684, and the first Latin edition was published in Amsterdam in 1701. The *Regulae* (to use the title by which the work is generally known) reveals much about Descartes' early project for establishing a universal method for arriving at the truth, and it presents a conception of knowledge which is strongly influenced by mathematical standards of certainty.

The Discourse on the Method, written in French, was the first book that Descartes published; it appeared anonymously in Leiden, Holland, in June 1637. The full title is *Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting one's reason and seeking the truth in the sciences* (*Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*). By writing in French rather than Latin, Descartes aimed to reach beyond the narrow confines of an academic audience, and the *Discourse* is no scholarly treatise, but a delightfully readable and informal work, containing Descartes' reflections on his early years and education, notes on a 'provisional

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General introduction

moral code' for the conduct of life, and discussion of a number of controversial scientific issues in areas ranging from cosmology to physiology. Some of this scientific material incorporates the results of an earlier book on physics, *The World (Le Monde)*, which Descartes had hoped to publish in the early 1630s, but which he cautiously withdrew on hearing of the condemnation of Galileo in 1633 (Descartes' book, like Galileo's, strongly supported the Copernican model of the solar system). But perhaps the best-known portion of the *Discourse* is Part IV, where Descartes provides a lucid summary of his metaphysical views, and introduces the famous pronouncement *Je pense donc je suis* – 'I am thinking, therefore I exist'.

The first edition of the *Discourse* also included three 'specimen essays' illustrating Descartes' method, namely the *Optics (La Dioptrique)*, the *Meteorology (Les Météores)* and the *Geometry (La Géométrie)*. Extracts from the first of these essays are included in the present selection. Descartes had begun work on the *Optics* in the late 1620s, and its publication in 1637 aroused considerable scientific interest. The work provides a good example of Descartes' application of mathematical techniques to problems in physical science, and also has much of interest to say about the nature of sense-perception and the relation between mind and body.

Descartes' philosophical masterpiece, the *Meditations on First Philosophy (Meditationes de prima philosophia)* was written in Latin during the period 1638–40, when the philosopher was living in North Holland. The work was completed by April 1640, and was first published in Paris in 1641. A second edition appeared in Amsterdam the following year, and a French translation (by the Duc de Luynes) was released in 1647. The subtitle of the 1642 edition tells the reader that the work contains a demonstration of 'the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and the body', but Descartes makes it clear in a letter that he chose the title 'Meditations on First Philosophy' to indicate that the discussion 'is not confined to God and the soul, but treats in general of all the first things to be discovered by philosophizing'. The *Meditations* is a vividly dramatic account of the rejection of preconceived opinions and the search for the foundations of a reliable system of knowledge. Descartes wrote in the Preface to the volume, 'I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously along with me'; and as the title suggests, the book is not a static exposition of finished doctrines, but a set of mental exercises that each individual must follow for himself. By so doing, Descartes maintained, each of us can become indubitably convinced first of his own existence, then of the existence of God, and finally of the essence of material things and the true nature of the human mind.

Descartes later wrote of the *Meditations* that 'although this work is not

very large, the size of the volume was increased and the contents greatly clarified by the addition of the objections that several very learned persons sent me on the subject, and by the replies I made to them'. The first edition of the *Meditations* contained six sets of Objections, with Descartes' Replies. The first set is by the Dutch theologian Johan de Kater (Caterus); the second and sixth sets were compiled by Descartes' friend and principal correspondent Friar Marin Mersenne; the third set is by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who had fled to France for political reasons in 1640; the fourth set is by the brilliant theologian and logician Antoine Arnauld (then only in his late twenties); and the fifth and most detailed set is by the celebrated philosopher Pierre Gassendi. The second (1642) edition of the *Meditations* included a very long and very hostile seventh set of Objections by the Jesuit Pierre Bourdin. The Objections and Replies (from which brief excerpts are included in this selection) help to pinpoint some of the major philosophical difficulties in the *Meditations*, and Descartes' Replies are often of great value for the interpretation of his views. (Readers should note that the arrangement of Objections and Replies by topic has been done specially for the present volume, and does not correspond with the order to be found in the original texts.)

Descartes' *magnum opus*, the *Principles of Philosophy* (*Principia philosophiae*) was written in Latin during the early 1640s and published in Amsterdam in 1644. A French translation by Claude Picot was issued with Descartes' approval in 1647. The work runs to four parts, each divided into a large number of short sections or 'articles'; there are five hundred and four in all. Part One expounds Descartes' metaphysical doctrines (though they are presented in a very different fashion from that of the *Meditations*); Part Two gives a full account of the principles of Cartesian physics; Part Three provides a detailed explanation in accordance with those principles of the nature of the universe; and Part Four deals similarly with a wide variety of terrestrial phenomena. A further two parts were originally planned, to deal respectively with plants and animals, and with man, but these were never completed. The present selection comprises the whole of Part One, and excerpts from Parts Two and Four. The great length of the original work reflects Descartes' ambitious project of providing a complete university textbook which would rival and, he hoped, eventually replace the traditional texts based on Aristotle. The *Principles* remains the most comprehensive statement of the Cartesian system, and is a particularly valuable source for students of his philosophy of science.

The *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* (often referred to in English as the 'Notes against a programme' – a virtual transliteration of the original Latin title *Notae in programma quoddam*) was published in Amsterdam early in 1648. This short work (from which extracts are provided below)

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was Descartes' response to a broadsheet published anonymously in 1647 by Henri de Roy (Henricus Regius), Professor of Medicine at the University of Utrecht. Regius had earlier been an enthusiastic supporter of the Cartesian system, but when he published his *Foundations of Physics* in 1646, Descartes complained that the book shamelessly lifted and often distorted many of his ideas (some from unpublished material on physiology to which Regius had gained access). The *Comments* provide a good illustration of the type of bitter academic controversy in which Descartes often became embroiled during the 1640s; they also give some interesting insights into his views on the nature of the mind, and in particular his doctrine of innate ideas – a topic which was to become a major philosophical issue during the century following Descartes' death.

Descartes' last philosophical work, *The Passions of the Soul*, was written in French, printed in Holland, and published in Amsterdam and Paris in 1649 under the title *Les Passions de l'âme*. This work, like the *Principles*, is composed of a large number of short articles (two hundred and twelve in all); the first fifty articles, which form Part One of the work, are translated below. Defying the narrow classifications of the modern academic world, the *Passions* is a treatise on physiology-cum-psychology-cum-ethics, and was written at the urging of Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, who, in a letter of 6 May 1643, had raised the crucial question 'how can the soul of man, being only a thinking substance, determine the bodily spirits to perform voluntary actions?' A long correspondence ensued, and in response to Elizabeth's further acute questioning, Descartes produced a short treatise which became the nucleus for the final published work. Very few have been satisfied with Descartes' theory of the interaction of the soul and body via the pineal gland in the brain, but the *Passions* nonetheless gives us a vivid picture of Descartes' view of human nature – that mysterious compound of two incompatible substances, mind and body. It also has much to say about the achievement of happiness – something which Descartes saw as the most precious fruit to be gathered from a sound philosophical system. Two months before the publication of the *Passions*, Descartes set sail on his ill-fated voyage to Stockholm, in response to the invitation of Queen Christina. Suffering from the rigours of the Swedish winter and the tedium of his courtly duties (which included giving lessons to the Queen at five o'clock in the morning), he contracted pneumonia and died on 11 February 1650, just over a month short of his fifty-fourth birthday.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS

The translations which appear below are taken from our two-volume translation, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1985 (known as CSM). We have taken the opportunity of making a number of minor revisions and corrections for the present edition. The translations are based on the texts to be found in the standard twelve-volume edition of Descartes by Adam and Tannery (known as AT),¹ and the reader will find running marginal references to the relevant volume of AT throughout the present work. (The marginal references are placed within brackets where they do not mark the beginning of a page in AT.) In each case our translations of Descartes' work are made from the original language in which they were composed; where subsequent translations approved by Descartes provide important additional material this has also been translated, but in footnotes or within diamond brackets to distinguish it from the original material. The work of translation is divided as follows: John Cottingham is responsible for the *Meditations* and *Principles*, Robert Stoothoff for the *Discourse*, *Optics* and *Passions*, and Dugald Murdoch for the *Rules* and *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*. All the members of the team have, however, scrutinised each other's work and made numerous suggestions, many of which have found their way into the final version. We have included a short chronological table of Descartes' life and works, and we hope that the comprehensive index to be found at the end of the volume will be of assistance to those working on particular topics in Descartes.

J.C.

1 *Oeuvres de Descartes*, eds. Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (revised edition, Paris: Vrin/CNRS 1964-76).

Chronological table of Descartes' life and works

- 1596 born at La Haye near Tours on 31 March
 1606–14 attends Jesuit college of La Flèche in Anjou¹
 1616 takes doctorate in law at University of Poitiers
 1618 goes to Holland; joins army of Prince Maurice of Nassau;
 meets Isaac Beeckman; composes a short treatise on music,
 the *Compendium Musicae*
 1619 travels in Germany; 10 November: has vision of new mathe-
 matical and scientific system
 1622 returns to France; during next few years spends time in Paris,
 but also travels in Europe
 1628 composes *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence*;
 leaves for Holland, which is to be his home until 1649, though
 with frequent changes of address
 1629 begins working on *The World*
 1633 condemnation of Galileo; abandons plans to publish *The*
World
 1635 birth of Descartes' natural daughter Francine, baptized
 7 August (died 1640)
 1637 publishes *Discourse on the Method*, with *Optics*, *Meteorology*
 and *Geometry*
 1641 *Meditations on First Philosophy* published, together with
Objections and Replies (first six sets)
 1642 second edition of *Meditations* published, with all seven sets
 of *Objections and Replies* and *Letter to Dinet*
 1643 Cartesian philosophy condemned at the University of Utrecht;
 Descartes' long correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of
 Bohemia begins
 1644 visits France; *Principles of Philosophy* published
 1647 awarded a pension by King of France; publishes *Comments*
on a Certain Broadsheet; begins work on *Description of the*
Human Body
 1648 interviewed by Frans Burman at Egmond-Binnen (*Conversa-*
tion with Burman)
 1649 goes to Sweden on invitation of Queen Christina; *The*
Passions of the Soul published
 1650 dies at Stockholm on 11 February

¹ Descartes is known to have stayed at La Flèche for eight or nine years, but the exact dates of his arrival and departure are uncertain. Baillet places Descartes' admission in 1604, the year of the College's foundation (A. Baillet, *La vie de M. Des-Cartes* (1691), vol. 1, p. 18).