

Descartes' Discourse on Method - Irfan Ajvazi



Descartes procedure of thought initially requires him to doubt everything in order to free his mind of any previous convictions and assumptions. By following a set of steps and principles, Descartes, clears his mind by doubting all earlier held beliefs other than his own existence, because the act of being able to doubt ones existence, proves the existence of ones mind, therefore ones existence. This is how Descartes arrives at his conclusion "I think, therefore I am" which he considers an important and necessary truth.

Descartes believes that the method he prescribes will lead us to properly differentiate truth from falsity and will result in arriving at other truths about the natural world.

Dualism: the idea of separation, articulation, and demarcation, specifically into a binary framework, is the essential construct grounding "Western" progressive thought (kind of like binary mathematics is the language of digital machines; the parallel is not coincidental). The essence of dualism lies in making a distinction, differentiating between two. Such distinctions seem at first, superficially, to occur naturally in lived experience: night and day, woman and man, left and right, cold and hot, future and present; historically these differentiations have been embedded in habitual actions and ideas about morality: good and bad, moral and immoral. Upon closer inspection, of course, experience is not dual in the least: sex is not binary, our perception of space is constituted of more than directionality, while our experience of time is bound up in the present and encompasses both history (past) and hope (future). Yet dual interpretations of experience have reigned in our imaginations for thousands of years.

The Age of Reason. In its essence, dualistic thought makes distinctions; such distinctions constitute the mechanics of "Western" reason. Logical versus irrational thought, knowledge versus opinion, empirical fact versus experience: reason is born of and enabled by an intricate delineation of opposing forces, one of which is always considered superior: mind over body, logic over poetry, linear argument over cyclical interrogation. Thus at the core of dualism lies an inherent judgment, that one of the two is differentiated as inadequate, unnecessary, superfluous, or inferior. Knowledge wins over Meaning. Reason over Art. Mind over Body. Man over Woman. Analysis over Synthesis.

The dualism which punctures Western reason has furthered an almost compulsive race for the "truth" (versus semblance, or illusion); the truth is pursued through the collection of distinguishable facts, labeled "knowledge,"

which is to be empirically verified, quantitatively measured, objectively classified, and so forth. In the classrooms of today, for example, this belief manifests as standards centered on collections of knowledge to be mastered, as quantitative measures of student progress and teacher effectiveness, and as the glorification of "cognitive" tasks over social, emotional, or bodily experiences. Dualism reigns at every level of our social, cultural fabric and material realities – it's not just a philosophical remnant of a time long past.

Linear Time. Rational thought requires orderly linearity as it seeks to collect knowledge and use it to explain causes and effects; linearity implies that in following a course of action, one progresses towards a goal, end, or objective; as G. W. Hegel wrote, human history is constantly developing through conflict. This mode of temporal understanding is so embedded in our daily acts that it is difficult to imagine alternatives: we operate by the dictates of a 24 hour clock, 7 hour week, etc, we imagine career and educational "paths" which lead towards an ultimate goal, and we have come to see the course of life itself in a similar way.

Descartes, of course, was one of the world's greatest philosophers and mathematicians. For those interested in the philosophy of Descartes you will immediately notice the heavy emphasis on rationalizing. He was known as the Father of Rationalism after all. Descartes was also a scientist and there is an excellent chapter where he describes how the circulatory system works, but Descartes' philosophical ideas are the most quotable and memorable.

According to the Aristotelian tradition, the mind proper—what is exclusively "inside the head"—is limited to reason and understanding. Sensory perception, imagination, will, and so on, make reference to things outside the mind and so are not purely mental. Rather, they are the link that connects us to the outside world. According to Aristotle, there is no distinction between what I perceive and what is "out there." Thus, sensory experience gives us direct and immediate knowledge of objects in the world.

Science, in this worldview, is a matter of taking the immediate evidence of sensory experience and deducing certain conclusions from it. The sensory experience is indubitable, and the deductions are logical, so all scientific knowledge is based on absolute certainty.

One of Descartes's most significant contributions to the scientific revolution is his conception of sensory experience, imagination, and will as being just as much subjective mental phenomena as reason and understanding. His systematic doubting questions how it is that we can be certain about what we perceive. Descartes draws a sharp distinction between what our senses report to us and what is "out there."

This re-conception of the mind shakes the foundations of Aristotelian scholasticism. If sensory experience is no longer self-evident, then we can no longer deduce certain scientific truths from these observations. Essentially, Descartes makes us sharply aware of what goes into a scientific observation. It is not a purely neutral and objective act of seeing the world as it is; it is an interpretive act that must be undertaken with great care and circumspection.

The turning point in Descartes's intellectual development occurred on November 10, 1619. He had attended the coronation of Ferdinand II in Frankfurt, and was returning to serve in the army of Maximilian of Bavaria. Due to the onset of winter, he holed himself up for a day, alone in a stove-heated room. With nothing else to occupy him, he set about thinking.

Descartes is very careful, first of all, to point out that this method is meant only on an individual level, and he strongly opposes those who would try to topple a public institution and rebuild it from the ground up. Second, he reminds us that he only wants to discuss his method with us; he is not telling us to imitate him. In particular, he notes that there are two types of people for whom this method would be unsuited: those who think they know more than they do and who lack the patience for such careful work, and those who are modest enough to think that they are more capable of finding out the truth if they follow a teacher. Descartes would count himself among this second group if he hadn't had such a number of teachers and embarked on so many travels as to realize that the opinions of even learned men vary greatly.

An obvious starting place was in the mathematical sciences, where a great deal of progress and certain knowledge had been achieved by means of demonstration. Descartes found his work made considerably easier if, on the one hand, he considered every quantity as a line, and, on the other hand, developed a system of symbols that could express these quantities as concisely as possible. Taking the best elements of algebra and geometry, he had tremendous success in both these fields.

It is important, of course, that Descartes does not simply scrap everything he knows, or else he would have no

guidance in rebuilding his knowledge. The four rules he lays out are meant as guidelines, so that he will be able to rely on them, and not on unnoticed prejudices. Descartes had initially collected twenty-one rules entitled Rules for the Direction of Our Native Intelligence in 1628, but left the manuscript unpublished. The four rules we find here can be read as a major abbreviation of that effort. Essentially, they demand that an inquiry proceed slowly and carefully, starting with basic, simple, self-evident truths, building toward more complex and less evident propositions.

Descartes assumes a certain kind of theory of knowledge that was pretty much unquestioned in his day. In modern philosophical language, we call this a foundationalist epistemology. It sees knowledge as built up from simple, self-evident propositions, to higher and more complex knowledge. The theory states that if we were to analyze any complex proposition, we could break it down into increasingly smaller, simpler pieces until we were left with simple, non-analyzable propositions. These basic propositions would be either self-evidently true or self-evidently false. If they were all true, then we would know that the original complex proposition was also true. Of course, there are different variations of foundationalist epistemology; for example, the epistemology will shift depending on how the analysis is supposed to take place or on what the basic propositions are supposed to look like. But the general idea can be applied to Descartes easily. Knowledge is built up like a skyscraper, with the higher, complex knowledge built on simple, sturdy foundations.

The reason that a foundationalist epistemology seems natural to Descartes at this point is that this is the epistemology that philosophy had inherited from Aristotle. As we have noted already in other sections of this SparkNote, Aristotelian scientific method works according to a system of syllogism and demonstration, where complex truths are logically deduced from simpler ones. This method implies a theory of knowledge according to which complex truths are built upon simpler ones that serve as an unquestioned bedrock of knowledge.

is significant that Descartes should choose mathematics to study according to this method. Mathematics has had far more success than any other field (except logic) with deductive reasoning. Math is built upon simple, self-evident axioms that are then used, along with some rules of inference, to derive proofs of more complex propositions.

Descartes is not only one of the greatest philosophers of the modern world, he is also one of its greatest mathematicians. His discussion of algebra and geometry alludes to his discovery of analytic geometry that brought those two fields together. Until Descartes, algebra and geometry were two totally separate fields of study. He invented the Cartesian co-ordinate system that every math student knows and loves. That's the co-ordinate system with the x-axis and the y-axis that allows you to plot lines and curves and whatever other shapes you please. Geometrical figures could be plotted onto the co-ordinate grid, and since every line and curve on the grid corresponds to an equation, geometrical figures can be expressed as equations. Geometrical figures become algebraic equations, and algebraic equations can be graphed as geometrical figures. This all seems pretty commonplace to us today, but if you try to imagine solving math problems without graphing anything you'll begin to understand the colossal contribution Descartes made to mathematics.

Discourse on Method seems like a book prepping the reader for Meditations. This is unfortunate since I read Meditations first. In a way it's good though because I might not have made it through if I didn't know that Meditations was better. He talks about how he traveled all over Europe seeing sights and meeting new people. Sounds fun! His theory about animals being automations and not having any real feelings is interesting but disturbing. Darwin's theory of evolution pretty much blows that idea out of the water. We are not nearly as separate from or different than animals as Descartes claimed. The part where he talks about how the heart pumps blood almost bored me to tears. I didn't know if I was going to make it through that part. Then we get to the part where he calls out his critics. I really liked the writing here because he's basically saying that they are not real philosophers like he is and he's putting them in their place. In the end, he just wants everyone to leave him alone so he can chill out and write Meditations. I was just glad to be done with this so that I could put it up and move on to something else.

The first half of the book, divided into the first three sections, is comprised of Descartes' intellectual background and the origins of his method, as well as the range of his education and experiences abroad. In these sections, he stresses the importance of a search for truth being elegant, providing several analogies for this, including: the aesthetic superiority of newer buildings built by one architect, over older buildings which have been maintained, remodeled, and "improved" by many different architects progressively less familiar with the original architect's purpose; how while it more convenient to take the long winding path of a mountain, which is smooth and well-traveled, the most certain path to "truth" must necessarily be straight, though it is comparably untraveled, rocky, and passing through arduous heights and perilous precipices; the importance of one who is lost in the forest, to stay

to one side of a forest, as it is better to come out of the forest on the wrong end, than to perpetually wander in indecision, never coming out of the forest. Accordingly, he endeavors to, once he discovers the method by which to derive truths immune to doubt (dubbed by modern philosophy as the "doubting methodology"), be resolved in its application to the improvement of himself, and the acquisition of new knowledge.

After determining that his thoughts confirm his existence (which would make him, at that point, effectively a solipsist, since the only knowledge he held with certainty was the existence of his own mind), Descartes confidently draws upon much of the knowledge that he had previously already doubted, including such axioms as the existence of perfection, the verification of ideas by virtue of being clearly known (basically, the perceived reliability of intuition), the notion that perfection and imperfection cannot coexist, the certainty that something cannot come from nothing, nor a lesser perfection come from a greater perfection. Building on these assumptions, which Descartes supposedly derived from his certainty of existence, he "proves" the absolute existence of God, that the attributes Descartes believed him to possess, were doubtlessly possessed by God, and the ones which Descartes was certain were contrary to God, he did not possess. This dramatic shift from rigid skepticism to a religiously and philosophically biased authoritarianism, greatly undermines the validity of Descartes's "Discourse on the Method".

Descartes explores two sciences, algebra and geometry, and shows what I take to be the instructions to a visual reasoning palace, akin to Ramon Lull; Giordano Bruno; and who knows how many others in their versions of the memory palace technique. For Descartes, it is using the lines, planes, and eventually one must assume, structures themselves, in combination with meaningful symbols to achieve an algebraic method of reasoning out every problem, from every angle, and to weigh each problem out according to its temperance. Those with the most temperance are to be sought after first, because they are the least likely to lead one astray, lest that "hypothesis" turned out to be a miscalculation. This, I believe he says, can only be felt in the heart. So essentially he's found a method to approach every problem by having it correspond directly to his heart, and thus making the ultimate existential choice of freedom.

This is an answer to Socrates. A formula to answer the fool's guise that threatens us with our own inner logic. It reads rather a bit too optimistic at times, as the proof in God is very simplistically glossed over, as well as the immortality of the soul. This is certainly not the existentialism of Sartre, but one can see how existence preceding essence led up to the eventual conclusion that God is not necessary to philosophy, at least to the atheistic existentialists. And it is possible that Descartes may have eventually come to this conclusion had he lived long enough to come against some kind of life-altering ordeal.

Rene Descartes was a French philosopher, mathematician, scientist, and writer. Descartes was one of the main characters in the scientific revolution. The world wide Aristotelian scholasticism was based on the Catholic Church reason, and logical deduction. However, it was demolished by the discoveries of Galileo and Descartes that were based on hypotheses, experiments, and mathematics. Descartes aimed to find knowledge, truth, and certainty. In Discourse of Methods, Descartes builds his outline by stating that all humans are equally well gifted with reason. He writes, "Our opinions differ not because some of us are more reasonable than others, but solely because we take our thoughts along different paths and don't attend to the same thing"(1). He claims that all humans are equal and have equal reason, and our opinions and success in life may vary from one individual to another, because of the way we apply reason. He mentions that natural sense is what differentiates humans from animals. Descartes writes, "As for reason or good sense, I'm inclined to believe that it exists whole and complete in each of us, because it is the only thing that makes us men and distinguishes us from the lower animals"(1).

So, the opinions that people have are created according to what they have experienced through their lives, and according to sources they took knowledge from. He defines humans as being a rational animals that differ from each other through our experiences in life because we apply our equal reason but in different ways.

Descartes shares with his readers a method that describes the way he lived, in an autobiographical form. He says, "Ever since my youth I have been lucky enough to find myself on certain paths that led me to thoughts and maxims from which I developed a method... that enables me to increase my knowledge gradually (2). He begins by describing his childhood, and how he was promised to gain the certain knowledge of everything useful in life. However, when he ended the course of study, he ended up doubting every thing. The only thing he learned was the awareness of his own ignorance. He writes, "For I found myself tangled in so many doubts and errors that I came to think that my attempts to become educated had done me no good except to give me a steady widening view of my ignorance"(2). Descartes examined some of the old theories, but did not find a certain truth in them. He writes, "when I cast a philosophical eye on the various activities and undertakings of the mankind, I regard almost all of them as pointless and useless"(2).

He was unable to achieve his aim, and he was not satisfied about the results in his search for truth. However, he did not regret going to school. He says, "But I have never lost my respect for the curriculum of the college." (3) He started to doubt that his disappointment was the result of not having such certain knowledge rather than not getting what he was promised. His first doubt did not make him give up. Instead, it led him to leave his school and to travel around the world seeking the indubitable knowledge and truth. Seeing new people and different cultures had widened his horizon and caused him to mistrust things he learned and trust his own reason.

In a winter day in Germany, he was alone held in a heated room with no cares or passions to trouble him. He describes his situation by writing, "I was completely free to talk with myself about my own thought" (5). In this experiment, Descartes decides to pursue research within himself rather in the world. He wants to disregard all of the innate ideas and knowledge and analyzing things within him by the use of reason. In this experiment he feels greater success in finding truth more than in school nor in travelling.

The first thought came to his mind was that anything is made better when it comes from single mind. He argues, "there is usually less perfection in works composed of several parts and produced by various different craftsmen than there is in the works of one man" (5). He gives examples to support his argument. He writes, "Thus we see a building started and completed by a single architect will usually be finer and better organized than one with several people" (5). He also mentions religion by writing, "Similarly the true religion, whose rules are purely God's work, must certainly be ever so much better ordered than any other religion" (5). He cites God's to be an example of certainty, which is the opposite of doubt.

He outlines his method on his individual basis and asked us not to imitate him. He says his method does not suit two types of people. The ones who are impatient and think they know more than they do, and the ones who think they will find the truth if they followed a teacher. He sets up four rules for his experiment. The first rule is not to accept anything as true, unless it is evident, this shall prevent rushed conclusions. His second rule is to divide any given problem into the greatest possible number of parts, to simplify its analysis. Descartes thinks mathematical science would lead him for certain knowledge. He claims that work become easier if we considered every quantity as a line and developed a system of symbols that could express these quantities. The third rule is to start with the simplest objects and to slowly advance to the more difficult objects of study. Regularly review the advancement that is made, in order to be certain nothing is missing.

His aim of this experiment is to reach a solid certain knowledge. Descartes says that it is important to doubt everything we know. He writes, "I decided to pretend that everything that had ever entered my mind was no more true than illusions of my dreams" (15). This radical way of doubting may seem unreasonable. However, he suggests that in order to find an undoubted believe or certain knowledge, we must temporarily pretend to believe that everything we know is questionable. Descartes argues that his act of doubting could be justified by two arguments. The first one is based on deceptive sense experience, whether being awake or dreaming. Because our senses could deceive us, he argues that we shall not have sense experience as basis for certain knowledge. For example, in dreams, we believe things occur often with the same sense of certainty as we do when we are not dreaming. Descartes claims that we can't tell whether it is being real experience in the real world or we are dreaming. The second argument is based against our reasoning abilities. We cannot trust our reasoning abilities, because we cannot be certain they are true. We can never be certain that a circle is perfect or that there is three sides for a triangle. There is nothing to guarantee us that we are not being deceived by a great deceiver. He keeps on doubting everything, even his own body. He questions the presence of a great deceiver, who deceives us about our own beliefs. However, one thing the great deceiver cannot deceive us about which is the act of doubting or thinking. he observes that he must exist in order to doubt. To doubt, it requires thinking, and thinking proves his that he exists.

He says, "I am thinking, therefore I exist" (15). After he was certain he exists, this reflected on the fact that he was doubting, which means he is imperfect; and there is something more perfect than he is. Descartes writes, "I get my obvious conclusion that this ability to come from _had to be caused by_ something that was in fact more perfect than me" (15). He also thought that the objects around him as delusions of the mind. He claims that it is not the same for God. An imperfect mind could come up with thoughts of imperfect objects. However, an imperfect mind could never come up with the idea of the perfect God. He writes, "the idea had been put into me by something that truly was more perfect than I was, something indeed having every perfection of which I could have any idea, that is to explain myself in word_by God" (15). Descartes declares that all of the perfection in him and in other objects is because of God's perfections.

Descartes wanted to seek other truths, so he took the subject as a matter of geometry. He says, "I returned to the scrutiny of the idea I had of a perfect being, I found that this idea of a perfect being included existence in the same way as... the idea of triangle includes the equality of its three angles to two right angles" (17). Descartes shows the geometers proving the certain geometric fact that the summation of the triangle angles equals to one eighty degrees.

This assures that the triangle exists. He claims that existence is an fundamental God's property that is as certain as the existence of the triangle.

As a conclusion, Descartes believed that he could accomplish something and he did. He used theoretical doubt to demolished uncertain knowledge, and he questioned earlier foundations. He did this because he was eager for truth. He built a solid foundation that made him the father of modern philosophy by using theoretical doubt and mathematics to reach certainty that he seek.

Part 1:

In this part, he claims that we are essentially rational animals, that we are equally endowed with reason. And that since we are equally humans, we must also be rationally equal.

Descartes proposes his methods that he learned in his youth, that he believes helped him to acquire the extent of knowledge that he gained . He shows how he attempted them himself and that he find them useful. While he don't want everyone to follow them just because he believes in them.

Part 2:

He starts with telling how single individuals efforts are more perfect the group efforts. He also talks about the rules he developed to guide his reasons, that worked well for him.

1. The first was never to accept anything for true unless it is evident.
2. Second, to divide any given problem into as many parts as possible to make the problem simple for analysis.
3. Third, to start with the simplest of objects and to slowly progress towards more complex or difficult objects of study.
4. Fourth, to constantly review the progress made in order to be sure that nothing has been left out.

Part 3:

In this part he outlines his moral codes he used during his period of skeptical doubted, these as he called them \"Four-Maxim\".

1. First maxim, to remain faithful to laws and customs of his country and his religion
2. Second maxim, to remain firm and deceive in his actions. he explains this with an example.

Travelers who, when they have lost their way in a forest, ought not to wander from side to side, far less remain in one place, but proceed constantly towards the same side in as straight a line as possible, without changing their direction for slight reasons, although perhaps it may be chance alone which at first determined the selection; for in this way, if they do not exactly reach the point they desire, they will come at least in the end to some place that will probably be preferable to the middle of a forest.

3. Third maxim, to endeavor always to conquer himself rather than fortune, and change his desires rather that the order of the world.
4. Fourth maxim, to find best possible occupation in life.

Part 4:

Well he started getting involved in his theology , here he talked about existence of God. And in this part he declared his famous words, *\"I think, therefore I am\"*.

Part 5:

Discussion of differences in human and animal souls, I literally lost my interest here. He talked about working of human circulatory system :/

Part 6:

I didn't take the trouble of reading this, after reading fifth part and few lines of sixth part :P
No idea!

So to conclude, I'll say Descartes is enjoyable as a rationalist philosopher. I liked his ideals of learning. And I would recommend the first 4 parts of this book to everyone who want to read philosophy and first three parts, to those who wants to read philosophy and are totally against the idea of existence of God.

And indeed, simple is what defines Descartes' Discourse on the Method. I went into this, expecting the standard sort of treatise; one which tells of it's philosophy and explains in full every gear of the system; or a detailing of some. But I was instead greeted with what could be best described as a \"philosophic memoir\". Given, for most of the first half; it tells almost exclusively of his early life; on his studies in France in early travels and pursuit of truth found within. And even in the most essaic second half; wherein his famous argument is found; the familiar tone of a memoir remains.

But it isn't without flaws, not many mind you; it's low in comparison to some others; but it's faults stand out to me. Even though *\"I think, therefore I am.\"* might be decent for seeing existence as real; it doesn't work for Descartes' other use of it. Given, if the whole argument is used with the forthcoming material after the initial aphorism is said; it would go *\"I think, therefore I am, therefore God is.\"*

For the theist, this might work for you; but for the atheist like myself; it's pitiful. It fails at one major level, that on account of our existence, it does not prove the existence of a deity who rules us all. And it proves less so for the Abrahamic God of Catholicism that Descartes' believed in. All it proves is that we were being, we are a something. The argument does not show with proof, that because we are existent, God too is existent.

In Part 1 - Descartes explains the purpose behind the book, to set out his methodology to building a firm foundation for philosophy but his aim is not to create a system that every one must follow; he aims to create a system which is useful to him and he hopes others may see merit in it. Here, the book bridges into the biographical, with Descartes describing his childhood, education and his experiences which led him to conclude that he could learn more from the *\"great book of the world\"* rather than sitting in the library and theorizing endlessly. It is interesting to see how unfulfilled Descartes was from education and study and that he wanted to formulate a new/independent route in order to form his *\"good judgments*.

Part 2 - Descartes explains how he formulates his personal methodology which is used within his philosophy. This is the epistemological methodology of skepticism as Descartes believes that true knowledge can only be derived from complete certainty. He uses an architectural metaphor to display his viewpoint of individual reasoning - arguing that a system of logic/reasoning, like a city, is better when it is designed by one individual; rather than multiple people.

Part 3 - Descartes departs from the idea of methodology for this part, explaining that, in order to have the correct system for formulating method, one must live by certain rules of conduct in order to assure one's comfort in life. He sets out some provisional moral rules that he argues one may live by:

- 1) To attempt to live to the moderately held customs of the society in which you live.
- 2) To act with confidence on your opinions, even if you accept there may be some methodological doubt.
- 3) To focus on changing yourself, rather than attempting to change the world.
- 4) To select a job/occupation which is consistent with you leading a happy life.

Part 4 - Cartesian dualism is explained here, with his argument that the only thing that survives the method of doubt is the fact that we are a thinking being - *\"cogito, ergo sum.\"* Because this is an indubitable belief for Descartes he then states that the existence of God is a necessity for his argumentation to work. He then lays out his ontological argument again, which was seen in the Meditations; I do not find the ontological argument that he lays out particularly convincing (as critiqued by Kant and the fact ontological arguments tend to employ circular reasoning [i.e. the Cartesian circle criticism])

Part 5 - Continues on from his claim in the metaphysical existence of a God, he reconciles this with the experiential claim for the existence of God. He then goes into a pretty big discussion into the differences between human and

animal, talking about the differences in anatomy. Descartes compares the idea that if you were faced with a fake animal and a real one you may not adequately be able to tell which is which but, for a human being, a fake could be distinguished for the reason that the real can display thoughts and emotion. This is because, he argues, "real humans" have souls given by God which makes them unique when compared to animals or "fake humans." (Kind of gives me Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? vibes).

Part 6 - Back to biographical, he discusses his fears of publishing large versions of his treatises due to the punishment faced by many due to the Church condemning investigations into science. By the end, he states he is unwilling to make any further promises as to what further progress he has made in terms of science but that he will venture on his own path within his investigation.

Rene Descartes is an eloquent dude. He ought to be, as he states eloquence is something that he "esteemed highly." It is clear from the first page that this guy can talk circles around the average person, and that is perhaps why he has always been considered highly convincing. Early on in this book, I did a lot of highlighting because I felt like what this guy had to say was pretty important. He had a way of speaking that made it sound that way. Philosophy is sort of a dreamy subject. When you're knee deep in Descartes, you can't help but to nod your head feverishly and feel that you're reading something groundbreaking. When you come up for air, though, you realize that a lot of what he says is pretty meaningless to real life. It is only in navel gazing that his style can truly be appreciated.

Descartes writes at length about his from-the-ground-up philosophy. Basically, he tossed aside everything he thought he knew based on what he was taught, and relearned it all through discovering it on his own. The most basic conclusion, obviously, was his most famous. He thinks, therefore he is. Next, he delves into the conclusion of God's existence, which makes sense for his time period; when science and religion were not seen as distinct subjects in the way they are today, and a "scientific" methodology to explain whether or not it existed was totally reasonable.

After his arguments for the existence of God, he goes into some human anatomy stuff that is a little odd and not nearly as well put together as the first few chapters, before rounding it out with a last chapter that reads like a humble brag.

Despite its obvious flaws, and the fact that a modern reader might disagree with some of his conclusions straight out the gate, I would consider this a good read, and an essential piece of philosophical history for those interested in such a thing. Descartes is remarkably influential, and in an era of blindly reposting articles and lax fact checking, his "don't believe anything unless you know it to be true yourself" advice is incredibly apt. This tiny book takes little more than an hour to read all the way through, and provides enough quote-worthy content to be worth the time.

On the other hand, the sentencing of Galileo by the Vatican on grounds of blasphemy, for putting forward a Heliocentric theory of the solar system, made Descartes hesitant on publicising his results and observations which he thought might go against the Church's views. He eventually settles for the option of publishing his works posthumously.

A remarkable contradiction in the application of his method, arose from Descartes himself. When pondering over the nature of the human soul and sense experiences, Descartes was willing to let go of all premises regarding the nature of body and the mind. He was willing to admit the possibility that the entire world of sense-perception is an elaborate trick of some devious entity.

The four rules to his method were:

- (1) "not to accept anything as true which I did not clearly know to be true"
- (2) "divide each difficulty ... into as many parts as possible... to resolve it"
- (3) "conduct my thoughts in an orderly way, beginning with the simplest/easiest to know, so that little by little I could ... climb up ... to the most complex"
- (4) "make my calculations ... so complete and my review so general that I would ... not omit anything"

Using this method, Descartes attempted to find the basic knowledge claim that could be rendered certain and upon which all other claims could be built. The famous phrase "I think therefore I am" was that claim. Which opens up the problem of mind-body dualism (ie the mind and body exist as separate things that can and do work together).

Each reader must wrestle with Descartes premises and his method. Even Descartes admits he could be wrong. it could be the case that I am wrong and that perhaps what I have taken for gold and diamonds is only a little copper and glass.

Descartes advances his own version of the ontological argument for the existence of God. Anselm of Canterbury (St Anselm) was the first to express it in the 11th century. Thomas Aquinas refuted it for the Church in the 13th century. Hume and Kant took it apart and rent it a' sunder in the 18th century. Also, In another section Descartes presents an argument against scholastics as dogmatic, curious. Er