

DESCARTES'
DISCOURSE ON METHOD

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DESCARTES'
DISCOURSE ON METHOD

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'AFTER men have been teaching and studying philosophy, upon divers principles, for these three thousand years together, there starts up a little fellow in a corner of the world, who changes the whole face of it, and undertakes to show, that all those who went before him understood nothing of the principles of nature. Wherein there is something more than empty boasting. For it must be acknowledged that this new philosopher gives us more light into natural things, than all the other together. Nevertheless, how happy soever he has been, to discover the weakness of the principles in the common philosophy; he has left in his own some obscurities, which the wit of man cannot clear up.'

(*Discourses, translated from Nicole's Essays,*
by JOHN LOCKE, pp. 56, 57.)

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PREFACE

THE *Discourse on Method* is generally looked upon as the introduction to Descartes' philosophy as elaborated in his later writings. This, although 'formally', is not 'materially' true. Both *Meditations* (epitomized in *Discourse 4*) and *Principles of Philosophy* (which is only a modified edition of the suppressed *Monde* described in *Discourse 5*) are in reality prior to the *Discourse* as a whole, while its concluding chapter, the sixth, rounds off the preceding account of Descartes' aims by an exposition of the difficulties he found in their execution. The *Discourse* is thus both a history and a criticism of Cartesianism as it presented itself to its author. It is a retrospect, a summing up of a life's achievement, rather than the laying down of a programme. Although Descartes' first published work, it is in effect his last.

The *Discourse* is therefore the primary document for the understanding of Cartesianism, and I have sought to use it as such. For its interpretation I have profited from the standard commentary of M. Gilson (as well as from his other books), and I have learnt much from the writings of such other recent French scholars as I have been able to study.¹

¹ See the select bibliography in Mr. S. V. Keeling's recent *Descartes* (Oxford University Press, 1934), and the exhaustive survey of the whole literature, grouped round the principal problems involved, by Prof. F. Olgiati, *Cartesio*, Milan, 1934. The striking volume of M. Ch. Serrus, *La Méthode de Descartes et son application à la Métaphysique* (Alcan, 1933), reached me too late for use. I am glad to find in it confirmation of my view that the

After their admirable work there are no new facts to adduce. I can only hope to suggest an emphasis which may be novel. Historically, the point at issue is that of the nature and fate of Cartesianism; but there is involved the whole problem of the value of the mathematical outlook and the general competence of the mathematical mind.

The book was seen in manuscript by Mr. J. S. Bentwich, Professor H. Bergmann, and Professor J. L. Stocks, and my thanks are due to them for their encouragement and comment. Some pages of chapters 1, 7, and 8 are taken from material which appeared originally in *Mind* and are reproduced by kind permission of the Editor.

JERUSALEM,
April 1937.

L. R.

originality of Descartes lies in the logic, the theology of the *Meditations* being a relapse: our estimates of the value of the logic would seem, however, to differ.

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