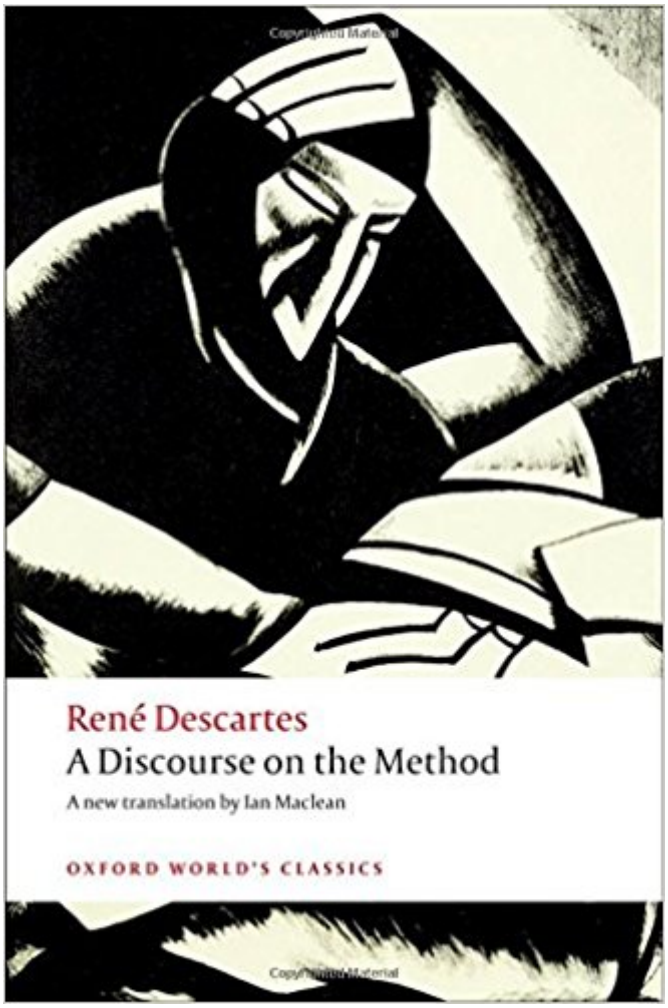
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A Discourse On The Method (Oxford World's Classics)



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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 A detailed section of notes explain Descartes' philosophical terminology and ideas, as well as historical references and allusions.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

Series: Oxford World's Classics

Paperback: 160 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (June 15, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199540071

ISBN-13: 978-0199540075

Product Dimensions: 7.6 x 0.4 x 4.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #48,147 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #3 inÃ Â Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Methodology #100 inÃ Â Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Modern #121 inÃ Â Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > History & Surveys

Customer Reviews

’The care and accuracy of Ian Maclean’s new translation are immediately apparentThis edition is remarkable for the ample introductory material which will be of great use to beginners and specialists alike[it] displays impeccable erudition and exemplary clarity.’ s ...what sets this edition apart is its substantial introduction...its copious explanatory notes...The translation is clean and clear. Overall the work is to be recommended. * Roger Ariew, Modern Languages Review, vol 102, part 1 *

Ian Maclean, Professor of Renaissance Studies, University of Oxford.

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 Musee 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. Descartes had an early flirtation with the Rosicrucians (not mentioned in Maclean’s introduction); he dabbled in alchemy and tried to account for "the most rare and marvelous effects", including "how the wounds of a dead man can be made to bleed when his murderer approaches; how to excite the imagination of those asleep, or even of those awake, and impart to them thoughts that warn them of things to come, at a distance, by having them feel the great pains or great joys of a close friend, the evil intents of an assassin, and similar things" (Principles, iv, Article 187).

This is a review of this particular edition/translation, not of the original work.This is an excellent edition to study with if you’re just coming to the Discourse, for several reasons:--The translation is

very readable and flows nicely. In some places I even found the translation made more sense than the translation in Cottingham, et al. (which is also good)--The explanatory notes are enormously helpful, and there's usually at least one note about something said in each paragraph. (They don't summarize the whole paragraph, btw, so don't be expecting that.)--There's a sizable & informative introduction.

Even more than the Meditations, this work can be used to introduce undergraduates to the thought of Descartes. The basic parts of the Cartesian revolution are here--the Cogito, mind/body duality, starting philosophy anew--without the detailed justifications that have been proven wrong by later developments.Cartesianism is obviously, as a system, fraught with errors and so this work is of real interest only in the history of ideas. Wittgenstein answered the Cogito in one sentence, "But how does Descartes know that there is such a thing as a personal I if he doubts everything?" And modern developmental psychology understands the rudiments of knowledge in a way impossible in Descartes' time. A fortiori mind/body dualism. Nobody can now assert the separation between the body and the mind that Descartes makes.Yet, the doubt was not only important in philosophy but also in the development of science. Descartes, along with others, had to eliminate the pseudoscientific part of Aristotle's physics if the scientific revolution was to begin. Thus, even though Cartesianism is of interest only in the history of ideas, this work should be read by every undergraduate simply to understand the course of Western civilizationAs an aside, it's interesting to speculate on why the Cogito found such contemporary success. For centuries Europeans had been willing to submit their reason to divine authority, both that of the Bible and the Church, and suddenly a meme spreads that everything should be doubted and only that which is in conformity with reason should be obeyed.Perhaps the wars of religion, the Inquisiton's persecution of Galileo and the celebration in Rome of the St. Bartholemew's day massacre had sufficiently eroded trust in the divine authority of the Church that a new civilization was able to emerge founded not on faith but on reason. if the Catholic Church had recognized this new civilization coming into being and not fought the new ideas with the old tools of the Inquisition and military force the need to doubt everything might not have spread like it did. But since the new ideas were met with nothing but force the authority of the Church was obviously itself open to question.In other words, if the Church had allowed the most outstanding minds of the pre-enlightenment era to think and write freely within the Church universal doubt might not have found such success and Western thought would not have been burdened with such false premises.

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