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PHILOSOPHY

Descartes

An Introduction

Written and compiled by **Ross Burman**

Read by **Jonathan Oliver**

with **Roy McMillan**



NA489812D

1	René Descartes has often been described...	6:02
2	Descartes left the army and returned to Paris...	5:55
3	Introduction to <i>Discourse on the Method</i>	4:08
4	Discourse on the Method	6:09
5	'I esteemed eloquence highly.'	6:25
6	'It is true, however, that it is not customary...'	5:18
7	'But the chief ground of my satisfaction with this method...'	5:17
8	'Having thus provided myself with these maxims...'	5:55
9	'After this, I inquired in general...'	8:35
10	Introduction to <i>Meditations on the First Philosophy</i>	1:39
11	Meditation I – Of the Things which We May Doubt	5:46
12	'Let us suppose, then, that we are dreaming...'	3:23
13	'Nevertheless, the belief that there is a God...'	7:19
14	Introduction to <i>Meditation II</i>	1:52
15	Meditation II – Of the Nature of the Human Mind	5:26
16	'What then did I formerly think I was?'	4:50
17	'The question now arises, am I aught besides?'	5:38
18	'From this I begin to know what I am...'	6:26
19	'But meanwhile, I feel greatly astonished...'	6:31
20	Introduction to <i>Meditation III</i>	1:42

21	Meditation III – Of God: That He Exists	3:58
22	‘But when I considered any matter in arithmetic...’	6:04
23	‘What I have here principally to do...’	5:55
24	‘Now it is manifest by the natural light...’	5:30
25	‘But among these my ideas...’	5:44
26	‘There only remains, therefore, the idea of God...’	5:03
27	‘Yet, on looking more closely into the matter...’	5:33
28	‘All that is here required therefore...’	4:42
29	‘There remains only the inquiry as to the way...’	4:13
30	Introduction to <i>Meditation IV</i>	1:12
31	Meditation IV – Of Truth and Error	2:45
32	‘And there would remain no doubt on this head...’	3:33
33	‘Considering this more attentively...’	7:29
34	‘From all this I discover, however...’	5:29
35	‘And finally, I ought not also to complain...’	5:18
36	Introduction to <i>Meditation V</i>	1:45
37	Meditation V – Of Material Things	4:59
38	‘But now, if because I can draw from my thought...’	6:54
39	‘But indeed, whatever mode of probation I in the end adopt...’	6:19
40	Introduction to <i>Meditation VI</i>	1:27

41	Meditation VI – Of the Existence of Material Things	5:06
42	‘But I am accustomed to imagine many other objects...’	5:49
43	‘But afterward, a wide experience by degrees...’	4:23
44	‘Moreover, I find in myself diverse faculties of thinking...’	6:27
45	‘Besides this, nature teaches me that my own body...’	5:04
46	‘But I have already sufficiently considered how it happens...’	4:42
47	‘To commence this examination accordingly...’	6:28
48	‘Whence it is quite manifest...’	4:59
49	Introduction to <i>Principles of Philosophy</i>	2:50
50	Principles of Philosophy (Selections)	0:55
51	Why we may doubt of sensible things.	0:59
52	Why we may also doubt of mathematical demonstrations.	1:22
53	That we possess a free will.	0:36
54	That we cannot doubt of our existence...	1:02
55	That we hence discover the distinction...	0:59
56	How we can know our mind more clearly than our body.	1:42
57	How it happens that every one does not come...	0:55
58	In what sense the knowledge of other things...	2:01
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60	That necessary existence is not in the same way comprised...	0:45

61	That we are not the cause of ourselves...	1:15
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63	That in passing from the knowledge of God...	1:03
64	That we must believe all that God has revealed...	0:40
65	That we must examine...	1:03
66	That God is not the cause of our errors.	0:46
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78	How, although we never will to err...	1:09
79	That we shall never err...	0:52
80	What constitutes clear and distinct perception.	0:57

81	It is shown from the example of pain...	0:49
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83	What substance is...	0:49
84	That the term 'substance'...	1:05
85	That of every substance there is one principal attribute...	1:31
86	How we may have clear and distinct notions...	1:12
87	The grounds on which the existence of material things...	2:30
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95	How our sensations, affections...	1:16
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97	How in these things...	1:29
98	That magnitude, figure and so on...	1:03
99	That we may judge of sensible things...	1:56
100	That the chief cause of our errors...	3:54

101	That the second cause of our errors...	1:03
102	The third cause is...	1:47
103	The fourth source of our errors is...	1:23
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Total time: 5:13:03

Descartes

(1596–1650)

An Introduction

René Descartes is usually one of the first philosophers to be read by students of philosophy and is arguably one of the best known, with his pithy ‘Cogito ergo sum’ quotation (‘I think, therefore I am’) even appearing on 21st-century T-shirts and coffee mugs. Written for the everyman, the student, and the philosopher alike, the ideas and concepts in the *Discourse on the Method*, *Meditations* and *Principles of Philosophy* are still part of modern culture. The three *Matrix* films used the idea of a massive computer controlling every aspect of reality, remarkably similar to Descartes’s evil demon. But whereas the films retain the evil nature of the computer, Descartes makes his demon a benevolent God to aid the (rather weak) rebuilding of trust.

Listeners to these essays may be left a trifle confused, asking themselves, does Descartes actually answer anything? It almost seems that, in dismissing all that cannot be trusted, Descartes writes himself

into a corner. He dismisses the teachings of others, the evidence of the senses, and the truths of mathematics until there seems to be nothing left to build reality upon, apart from his ‘Cogito’ catchphrase, and God. It could also be said that one reason for his obsession with the existence of God is that it gives him a hasty scaffold with which to shore up his ruined house.

This is, however, doing Descartes a disservice. In his defence it should be mentioned that it is a common error to hold that ‘all that can brought into doubt’ does not exist or should be disregarded; one should merely be aware of their poor foundations. Also, ‘I think, therefore I am’ (or rather ‘I am a thinking thing’) is a fundamental truth to Descartes’s epistemology, or theory of knowledge. It started a journey of argument that ran from the medieval to the modern. Thinkers such as Locke (1632–1704), Berkeley (1685–1753) and Hume (1711–

1776) argued that knowledge came from either external sense data (empiricism) or, as Descartes argued, from the mind (idealism). (That was until Kant (1724–1804) came along and in careful prose steered a winding course between the two.) It was Descartes's idealism that would force him to his separation of the mind and body, which he could only align through the arbitrary use of the pineal gland.

The Renaissance is seen as this moment of change from the medieval world to the modern, when learning stipulated by religious dogma was rejected. The proliferation of Gutenberg's printing press with movable type, invented 200 years earlier, allowed books to become more available, taking the control of knowledge and learning away from the Church and diluting its authority over people's thoughts. This power and control can still be detected throughout Descartes's almost obsessive revisiting of his 'proofs of the existence of God', showing, if not a terror of the power of the Church then a desire to reconcile his thinking with the authority of the time.

Descartes was a renaissance man, a true polymath, a brilliant mathematician whose workings and theories hold more practical use today than his philosophy. He was also a physicist and biologist who had written extensively on the workings of the eye, and, among much else, a soldier and popular (by all accounts) 'man about town'. No dusty academic then. He had the time and the money to think, write and apply himself at a time of great intellectual change. He sought a return to an era when logic and argument ruled intellectual life, rather than dogma and dictum. He makes it clear throughout his philosophical works that his is a personal journey, one which everyone should make. We should not take his conclusions as fact or 'the answer'. The *Discourse on the Method* is just that, a means by which we can all make a journey through our own intellect; the *Meditations* are an account of his journey, a travelogue of the mind; and the *Principles of Philosophy* form a corpus of his thoughts, considered and documented.

In the abridged section from the *Discourse*, presented here, we find his

reasons for starting on his journey: having spent a cold, disturbed night in the 'oven' of a house in the Bavarian village of Ulm, Descartes wakes with a need to reorder and redefine his understanding. This is an interesting and personal image, explained by the fact that ovens in houses at that time, and from that area in Europe, were large room affairs where the fire of the house was constantly tended. Although not philosophically important, it does, however, throw up a significant point about Descartes: that it is the style and intimacy of his writing that makes him so accessible. He is, like all philosophers, careful in his construction; it is easy for an argument to be lost or dismissed on linguistic or semantic grounds. There is, though, a vibrancy and immediacy to his style that places the reader next to Descartes as he sits in his chair and ponders, say, his piece of wax. It is this immediacy, rather than a lofty, careful, almost pedantic style of writing, that gives Descartes his accessibility today. Only David Hume matches him for sheer *brio*.

This is one reason why Descartes is still so widely read; but why is he still

such a potent force in the philosophy of today? Descartes holds more weight and importance than an entertaining, some might say superficial, style might deserve. We have seen his scepticism destroy his certainty of the world. We have seen his constant 'proofs of God' become more placation than restoration. What answers does Descartes have left? The answer is: it's not important. What is important is the journey – i.e. the means, not the end. Descartes is important not because he found the answers but because he went looking for them. The doubt and scepticism is what we should take from Descartes and apply to our own existence. In this superficial, media- and celebrity-obsessed world of political intrigue, religious uncertainty and alternative medicines, a mote of doubt and investigation would not go amiss. Descartes has shown us that this is not only possible but essential, given that we are able to use our own minds to create our own existence.

But that's only my opinion. What do you think?

Notes by Ross Burman



A graduate of Manchester University, **Jonathan Oliver** has appeared in theatre throughout the UK in productions ranging from *Julius Caesar* (for the English Shakespeare Company) to Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. Widely experienced in television, film and radio, he has, for a decade, also recorded audiobooks for the Royal National Institute for the Blind. He has read *Frankenstein* and *Ivanhoe* for Naxos AudioBooks.



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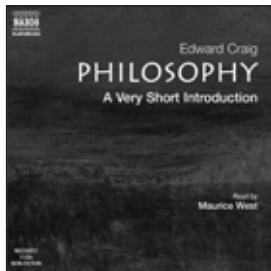
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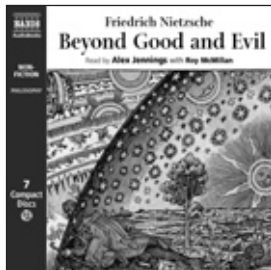
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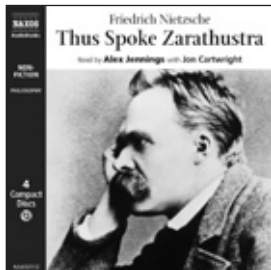
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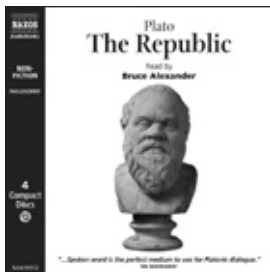


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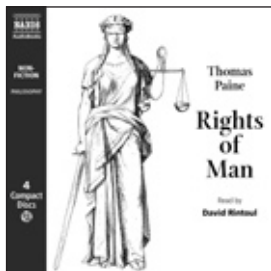
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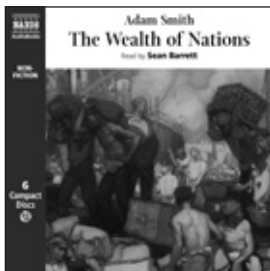
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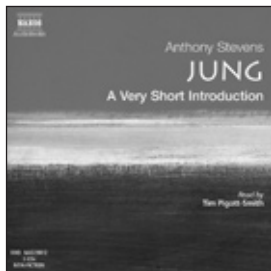
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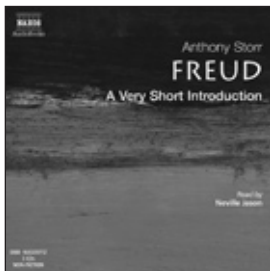
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An Introduction

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Writing for the everyman, the student and the philosopher alike, René Descartes (1596–1650) is one of the first philosophers to be read by students of philosophy and is arguably one of the best known.

Containing *Discourse on the Method* (abridged), selections from *Principles of Philosophy*, and a complete version of his philosophical masterpiece, *Meditations*, this audiobook covers the sceptical method, the formation of his now famous 'I think, therefore I am' quotation, the existence of God, and the reconstruction of his doubted world.



Jonathan Oliver's theatre credits include *War and Peace*, *The Homecoming* and the role of Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*. His television credits include *Eskimo Day*, *House of Eliott* and *Hannay*. He has read *Frankenstein* and *Ivanhoe* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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Produced and
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Ross Burman

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