

DESCARTES AND HIS DISCOURSE

Rene Descartes, the French thinker, has been called the founder of modern philosophy. Descartes had given the world a whole new system of reasoning, clearing a way many of the accumulated prejudices of centuries. He was born in 1596, of a prosperous Breton middle-class family. Although he always had a private income, which helped leave him free for his philosophies and scientific studies, he often complained of inadequate means. It was feeling this pinch that set him to writing. But first he studied law and medicine at the University of Poitiers, spent some years in travel about Europe, and even served a term as a volunteer soldier. When he finally decided to take up writing as a profession, he spent nine years in study before he produced his first published work, the "Discourse on Method."

In his day, learned works were nearly always composed in Latin. Descartes broke with tradition by writing the "Discourse" in French. He intended it not merely for scholars, but for the average educated person of his day. The book's unaffected, colloquial style and narrative form make it still easy to read, and it has a warm, personal touch.

Because of this deceptive easiness of style and the fact that the methods of reasoning Descartes recommends are accepted in the main without question today, it is sometimes difficult to keep in mind that in his time he was a startlingly original thinker. For he dared to suggest that an intelligent man should begin his mental processes by doubting everything he has been taught on the subject he wishes to examine.

In Part I of the "Discourse," Descartes makes the

famous statement: "It is not enough to have a good mind; the principal requirement is that we should apply it in the right way." He himself, he adds modestly, has only an average mind, but has had the good fortune in early youth to form a method of thinking which has increased his knowledge step by step and raised it gradually to its highest possible point.

Disillusioned with book learning, Descartes tells how he then turned entirely to practical matters, traveling widely and serving terms in courts and armies, to learn from "the great book of the world."

Finally, he decided to study his own nature. This decision was the result of a kind of revelation, or flash of spiritual insight.

Descartes went about his mental reformation with the precision of a born mathematician. He drew up a set of four rules to steer him by:

1. "The first rule was to accept as true nothing that I did not know to be evidently so; that is to say, to avoid, carefully, precipitancy and

prejudice and to apply my judgment to nothing but that which showed itself so clearly and distinctly to my mind that I should never have occasion to doubt it.

2. "The second was to divide each difficulty, I should examine into as many parts as possible, and as would be required the better to solve it.

3. "The third was to conduct my thoughts in an orderly fashion, starting with what was simplest and easiest to know, and rising little by little to the knowledge of the most complex, even supposing an order where there is no natural precedence among the objects of knowledge.

4. "The last rule was to make so complete an enumeration of the links in an argument, and to pass them all so thoroughly under review, that I could be sure I had missed nothing."

In these four rules Descartes produced a blueprint for the modern scientific approach to investigation of all kinds.

Next, Descartes tells how he applied his method to both geometry and algebra, in order to "correct the de-

fects of the one by the other." The result, known as analytical geometry, is one of Descartes' great contributions to the science of mathematics.

In Part III of the "Discourse" Descartes tells how, in case he should fall into moral error during this time when he was clearing his mind of preconceptions, he formulated a "provisional morality" for himself, based on a few simple maxims. He resolved that he should obey the laws and customs of his country and adhere to the religion he had held since childhood (he was a devout Roman Catholic). He would be firm and resolute in his actions and, once he had made up his mind on a subject, he would adhere to his views strongly. Finally, he would accept the belief that "there is nothing that lies wholly within our power save our thoughts."

During the period of nine years when Descartes was emptying his mind, then refilling it with ideas which he had, by using his own method of analysis, decided were true, he lived in Holland. He deliberately exiled himself so that he could live the soli-

tary life of a man wholly devoted to mental exercises.

In Section IV of the "Discourse" he reveals the foundation on which he built all his new philosophical reasoning — the "Cogito ergo sum."

"As I strove to think of everything as false," he says, "I realized that, in the very act of thinking everything false, I was aware of myself as something real; and observing that the truth: 'I think, therefore I am,' was so firm and so assured that the most extravagant arguments of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I concluded that I might have no scruple in taking it as that first principle of philosophy for which I was looking . . . I concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists in thinking."

The next step was to examine why he should have doubts; why, in other words, his thinking was not always perfect and, consequently, his nature was not perfect. He came to the conclusion that his sense of doubt and imperfection sprang basically from the fact that somehow he knew, in his innermost

being, what perfection should be — and therefore how far he fell short of it.

This idea of perfection could come to him only from some outside source more perfect than he, Descartes reasoned. Therefore it must come from God. In this fashion, by analysis back to first causes, he proved entirely to his own satisfaction (if not to that of later thinkers) that God does indeed exist, and is the source of all perfection and truth.

Because Descartes was preoccupied with mathematics, and because so many mathematical propositions stood up to the tests of logic he had evolved — and so could be proved to be “true” — it is not surprising that he appears to have thought of God in one sense as the ultimate and sublime mathematician, and that he looked for a mathematical order underlying all creation. This sense of the orderly one-ness of the universe is one of Descartes' significant contributions to Western thought.

He began to write a long treatise to illustrate his mechanistic views, and this he describes briefly in Part V of

the “Discourse.” He tells how he discussed the motions of the heavenly bodies and the nature of inanimate bodies and plants. Using the English physician William Harvey's recent discoveries on the circulation of the blood, Descartes deduces that the heart is a type of machine. Indeed, all living bodies are machines, he says, motivated by mechanical laws. The important difference between man and the rest of the animal kingdom, however, is that man also has an immortal soul, which has an independent existence. In proposing this dualism between body and mind or soul in man, Descartes launched an argument which has continued among European philosophers ever since.

So far, in a few brief pages, Descartes has proposed several new concepts. But now comes the bombshell. In the final, Part VI of the “Discourse” he tells how he has given up all idea of publishing the treatise he has described. It might give offense to certain persons to whose authority he defers, he says. — *T. Van Sommers, from Variety.*