

Meditations on First Philosophy

Written by W.J.Pais

By: [René Descartes](#) (1596-1650)

The foundations of modern skepticism and objective thinking are thought to be rooted in the philosophy of Rene Descartes, the French mathematician, philosopher and writer. This great sixteenth century thinker also gave us theories on mind-body dualism and the concept of ethics as the highest form of science. He is considered the Father of Modern Western Philosophy.

His theories also led to the emancipation of humanity from the doctrine that the Church is the sole authority over Man and led to a more autonomous idea of the human condition. He also wrote extensively on subjects as diverse as music, the search for truth, geometry, discourse as a method of scientific investigation, philosophy, biology and psychology. He had a profound impact on the age he lived in and also on future generations. He was a teacher and counselor to several heads of state in Europe and guided them in their political and ethical actions. His most famous maxim, "I think, therefore I am" became the guiding principle of modern Western thought.

Meditations on First Philosophy was first published in 1641. The original Latin title also had the subtitle: *In Which the Existence of God and the Immortality of the Soul are Demonstrated*. The treatise was translated into French in 1647. The work essentially consists of six separate meditations. In each one, Descartes abandons all belief in things that are not absolutely certain and then tries to replace these beliefs with those that are more certain. The book is designed as a series of meditations that took place over six days in his life, and in each one, he talks about "yesterday's meditation."

It is important to remember that Rene Descartes was writing at a time of great scientific discoveries which were in conflict with the Church. Galileo's fate was dreaded by all pioneering philosophers. Descartes' *Meditations* follows a new yet cautious approach which would not be in direct confrontation with the powerful Catholic Church. In *Meditations*, Descartes seeks to go beyond Aristotle's philosophy which dominated Western thinking till then. Here, the Greek philosopher posited that all knowledge comes via the senses, hence the outside world is but a mirror image of our inner thoughts. In the First Meditation, Descartes provides bizarre examples

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of our thoughts and questions whether we can assume that reality in any way resembles these. This forms the root of his skepticism and his ideas on the mind/body divide, the existence of God and human perception.

Meditations on First Philosophy follows the tradition of St Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises. For the modern reader, it is a thought-provoking and interesting read.

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