

DESCARTES

A BIOGRAPHY



DESMOND CLARKE

DESCARTES

A Biography

René Descartes is best remembered today for writing “I think, therefore I am,” but his main contribution to the history of ideas was his effort to construct a philosophy that would be sympathetic to the new sciences that emerged in the seventeenth century. To a great extent he was the midwife to the Scientific Revolution and a significant contributor to its key concepts. In four major publications, he fashioned a philosophical system that accommodated the needs of these new sciences and thereby earned the unrelenting hostility of both Catholic and Calvinist theologians, who relied on the scholastic philosophy that Descartes hoped to replace. His contemporaries claimed that his proofs of God’s existence, in the *Meditations*, were so unsuccessful that he must have been a cryptic atheist, and that his discussion of scepticism served mainly to fan the flames of libertinism. Descartes died in Stockholm in obscurity but soon became one of the most famous philosophers of the seventeenth century, a status that he continues to enjoy today. This is the first biography in English that addresses the full range of Descartes’ interests in theology, philosophy, and the sciences and that traces his intellectual development through his entire career.

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Descartes

A Biography

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Those who were best equipped in the past to write a biography of Descartes embarked on the project with great reluctance and explicit apologies. This pattern was set by the first major biographer, Adrien Baillet, in the late seventeenth century. As he began the task, he had on his desk more original documents by Descartes and his contemporaries than anyone has ever collected since then. Nonetheless, he suggested that Chanut, Clerselier, or Legrand would have been a more suitable biographer than himself.¹ Charles Adam was equally hesitant about writing his *Life of Descartes* (1910), even though he had just completed editing the eleven-volume edition of Descartes' works with Paul Tannery. 'In the current state of our knowledge', he wrote, 'it will not be possible for a long time to complete such a work properly.'² Adam thought that a good biography would require preparatory studies of philosophical and scientific topics in the early seventeenth century, and more research on those who influenced Descartes and on his personal relations with contemporaries.

When the late Terry Moore asked me if I were interested in writing a biography of Descartes, I answered too quickly in the affirmative. I did not appreciate adequately the unsatisfactory state of Descartes' correspondence, although I believed that many of the studies that Adam talked about had been done during the past century. My colleague in Utrecht, Theo Verbeek, was much better informed about these matters and told me with benevolent kindness that I was a fool! However, he also agreed to compensate as much as possible for my ignorance and temerity by sharing with me his wealth of knowledge about Descartes' life in the Netherlands, and about the Dutch authors in the seventeenth century who were significant for his biography.

I am particularly grateful to Theo Verbeek for making available his work in progress on Descartes' correspondence. I also thank Erik-Jan Bos and Theo for reading the first draft of the whole text and for making many valuable suggestions and necessary corrections. Dolores Dooley likewise read the full text and made detailed comments. Des MacHale and Oliver Ranner read various chapters and offered helpful suggestions. Jeroen van de Ven provided information about Helena Jans, and I borrowed extensively from the two-volume bibliography of Descartes' works prepared by Matthijs van Otegem. Letizia Panizza and John Sutton obliged with suggestions and material about the libertines and Digby. I consulted colleagues in the Departments of French and Ancient Classics at University College, Cork, for assistance with translations, including Matthew MacNamara, Patrick O'Donovan, and Keith Sithwell, and I am very grateful for their help.

Most of the research for this book was completed during the 2003–04 academic year, during which I had a Government of Ireland Senior Fellowship from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. I am grateful to the council for the financial assistance that made this work possible. I also acknowledge financial support from the Arts Faculty, University College, Cork, during the years 2002–04, which enabled me to consult material at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and at the British Library, London. During the past year, I also relied on the professional advice of Charles Shinkwin and David Pearson, each of whom contributed indirectly but significantly to the timely conclusion of this project.

Cork

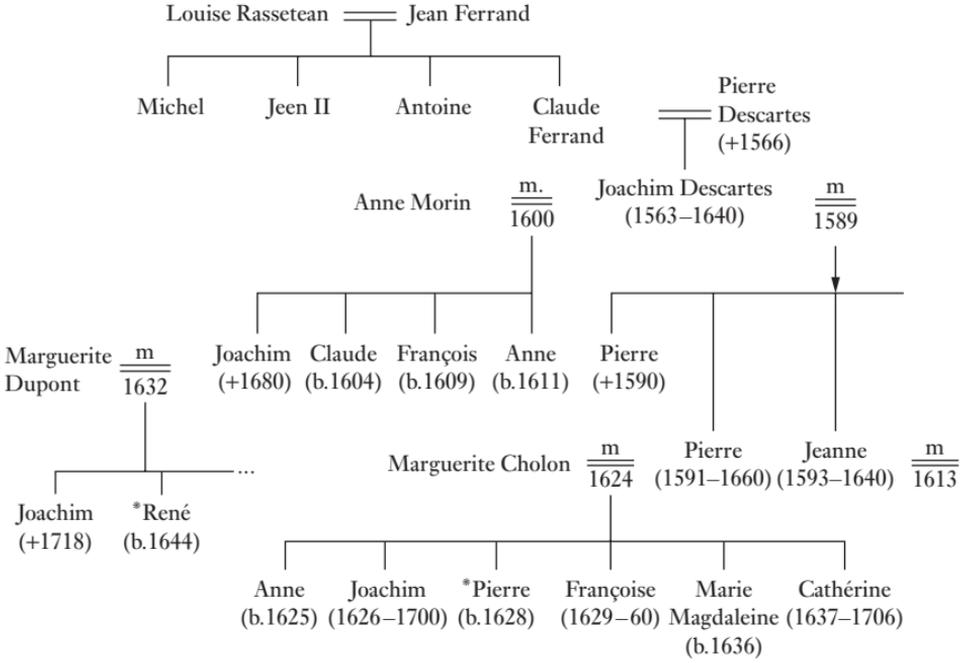
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Note on Texts and References

Most references to Descartes are to the eleven-volume edition of his *Oeuvres*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, which was subsequently reissued with additions and corrections. Although this edition is usually identified in the literature as ‘AT’, I have simplified references by omitting this acronym and by providing only the volume and page numbers. Where I refer to alternative editions of Descartes’ works, I use the same style of author/date that is used for other authors. I have used the usual prefix, ‘CM’, to refer to the standard edition of Mersenne’s correspondence. Some relevant details of Descartes’ correspondence remain uncertain, such as the date or addressee. I have followed the tentative suggestions of Adam and Tannery, indicating uncertainty by square brackets, unless the ambiguities have been resolved in Descartes (2003) or elsewhere.

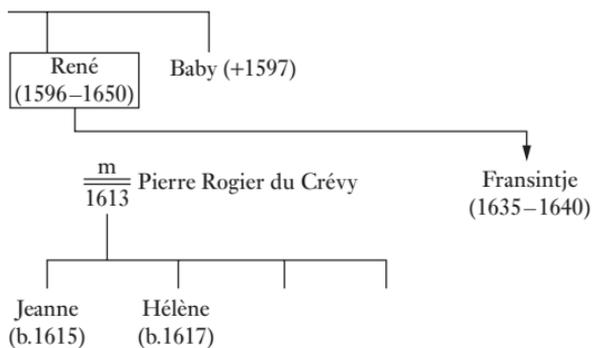
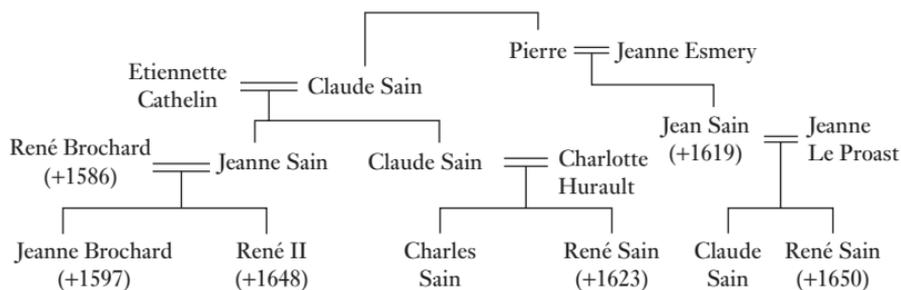
The notes use the author/date system of reference. The corresponding entries in the bibliography refer to the editions that I managed to consult, rather than to first editions. Where there are standard English editions of primary texts readily available, I have also provided information on such editions.

Finally, I have translated into English the titles of all works that are mentioned in the body of the text.



*René Descartes was godfather.

Descartes family tree.



Introduction

DESCARTES died in Sweden in 1650, a few weeks before his fifty-fourth birthday. He had spent most of his adult life in relative seclusion in what is now the Netherlands, while the Thirty Years' War waxed and waned around him. By 1667, when some French Cartesians arranged for the return of his remains to Paris, they had begun to publicize his works, to develop a characteristically Cartesian philosophy, and to be identified by critics as a 'sect'. These early supporters included many philosophers who, apart from Nicolas Malebranche, are probably remembered today only as marginal figures in the history of Western thought. The name of Descartes, however, remains readily recognizable. He has entered the canon of Western philosophy so securely that that there is no longer any dispute about his significance.

Why was he important? Hardly for the phrase by which he is popularly remembered today, both by students of philosophy and by other readers: '*I think, therefore I am*'. This was not an original insight on his part, and it had a relatively minor role in his work. During the past century, Descartes has often been read as a metaphysician or, perhaps as frequently, as a philosopher who took seriously the arguments of sceptics. Alternatively, he is classified as a philosopher of subjectivity, as someone who outlined an internal map of the human mind and defended the irreducibility of conscious experiences. Finally, there are those, especially feminist critics, who think of Descartes as having exaggerated the significance and capacity of reason at the expense of the emotional life. For them, Descartes was a mere 'rationalist'.

Descartes' life reveals a much more complex and interesting character than any of these labels suggests. As an intellectual in the early seventeenth century, he might have directed his energies toward political

philosophy (as Hobbes did), to theological disputes (as Pascal did), or to the renewal of humanistic and classical learning for which Erasmus had earlier provided an outstanding model. Alternatively, he might have channeled his genius exclusively into mathematics (as his contemporaries Fermat and Roberval did); had he done so, he would surely have exceeded by far the novelty and ambition of their achievements. Although all these interests featured to some extent in his life, Descartes' primary focus was elsewhere. He is best characterized as a philosopher of the Scientific Revolution.

Two major events that helped define his intellectual odyssey occurred in the sixteenth century, one of them in Poland and the other in Trent, at the southern limits of the Holy Roman Empire. In Poland, Nicholas Copernicus published *The Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* as he lay dying in 1543. Although it appeared with an unauthorized Preface by Andreas Osiander that seriously misled readers about the author's intentions, this book moved the Earth from its traditional place at the centre of the universe and relocated it as a relatively small planet circulating about the Sun. However, Osiander invited readers to minimize the significance of Copernicus' work by describing it merely as an 'hypothesis'. He compounded the mistake by reminding readers that 'hypotheses need not be true nor even probable. On the contrary, if they provide a calculus consistent with the observations, that alone is enough.'¹

Osiander's cue reflected a tradition of instrumentalism that had been applied to astronomy since the time of Ptolemy. On this reading, astronomers do not try to describe or explain the real world. They merely construct mathematical devices for predicting regular changes in the apparent positions of the planets and for calculating, for example, when eclipses occur. This nonrealist reading of Copernicus was supported to some extent by the fact that he offered no physical explanation of why the Earth moves around the Sun. He assumed that the planets rotated on invisible but mechanically effective concentric spheres.

However, it was clear from other features of his book that Copernicus was doing much more than constructing a mathematical model. One sign of his realist intentions was his speculation about the dimensions of the universe, and about the infinitesimally small particles of matter from which visible bodies are composed. Although he stopped short of claiming that the universe extends to infinity, he acknowledged the change of scale required in the traditional picture of the 'world'.

This reasoning certainly makes it quite clear that the heavens are immense by comparison with the earth and present the aspect of an infinite magnitude, while on the testimony of the senses the earth is related to the heavens as a point to a body, and a finite to an infinite magnitude. . . . For that proof establishes no conclusion other than the heavens' unlimited size in relation to the earth. Yet how far this immensity extends is not at all clear. At the opposite extreme are the very tiny indivisible bodies called 'atoms'. Being imperceptible, they do not immediately constitute a visible body when they are taken two or a few at a time. But they can be multiplied to such an extent that in the end there are enough of them to combine in a perceptible magnitude.²

With these tentative steps, Copernicus introduced a genuine revolution in astronomy. Although he was a respected canon of his diocese at Cracow, he also raised a fundamental question about the role of biblical and other religious texts as sources of scientific knowledge.

Kepler was among the first to recognize the significance of the new theory. He concluded, in his *New Astronomy* (1609), that 'only Copernicus' opinion concerning the world (with a few small changes) is true, [and] that the other two views [those of Ptolemy and Brahe] are false.'³ This unequivocal language, unmitigated by Osiander's qualification, made explicit the apparent conflict between the new astronomy and the Bible, which, on a literal reading, implied that the Sun moved around the Earth. Kepler addressed the problem directly. 'Now the Holy Scriptures, too, when treating of common things (concerning which it is not their purpose to instruct humanity) speak with humans in the human manner, in order to be understood by them. They make use of what is generally acknowledged, in order to weave in other things that are more lofty and divine.'⁴ In other words, the Bible was never intended to teach astronomy. Instead, it spoke to people in a language that they understood. In the process, the Bible assumed the same views about the universe as its original readers. Kepler wrote this as a Lutheran, under the protection of the Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolph II, at Prague. The same issue arose in the Catholic world, and was addressed by Galileo in his *Letter to the Grand Duchess Cristina* (1615):

I question the truth of the statement that the Church commands us to hold as matters of faith all physical conclusions bearing the stamp of harmonious interpretation by all the Fathers. I think this may be an arbitrary simplification of various Council decrees by certain people to support their own opinion. . . . the Bible . . . was not written to teach us astronomy.⁵

This challenge from the new astronomy to a literal reading of the Bible coincided with a wider European discussion about the authority of the

Bible even as a source of religious faith. While the reformed churches, in general, encouraged Christians to read the Bible as the revealed word of God, Catholic bishops claimed to have exclusive, collective authority to interpret the Bible, and, in doing so, they relied on tradition and the teaching of the early fathers of the church. This appeal to tradition and authority was defended by the Council of Trent (1545–63) in uncompromising terms.

Furthermore, to control petulant spirits, the Council decrees that, in matters of faith and morals pertaining to the establishment of Christian doctrine, no one, relying on their own judgment and distorting the Sacred Scriptures according to their own conceptions, shall dare to interpret them contrary to that sense which Holy Mother Church (to whom it belongs to judge of their true sense and meaning) has held and does hold, or contrary to the unanimous agreement of the Fathers, even if such interpretations are never to be published. Those who do otherwise shall be identified by the ordinaries [i.e., bishops or religious superiors] and punished in accordance with the penalties prescribed by the law.⁶

This set the stage for an inevitable confrontation between proponents of the new astronomy and the Vatican that resulted notoriously in Galileo's condemnation and subsequent house arrest in Florence. Those who defended Galileo publicly – and there were only two who did so – were also condemned by the church.⁷ Paolo Antonio Forcarini wrote his famous *Letter* in 1615, and it was promptly condemned by the Congregation of the Index the following year. Tommaso Campanella was tortured by the Inquisition and spent almost thirty years in prison, some of it in solitary confinement, before escaping to France in 1634.

Descartes inherited from Copernicus and Galileo the intellectual conflicts involved in attempting to develop the new astronomy and, at the same time, to remain within the Catholic Church. He avoided church censure of his astronomy for almost two decades by dissimulation, self-censorship, and astuteness. However, his ambiguous support for Copernicus was merely a symptom of a much more radical problem that could not be camouflaged as easily. Descartes challenged the fundamental philosophy in terms of which both Catholic and Reformed theologians had expressed their teaching of Christian dogmas for centuries. That could not be marginalized, as a technical question in astronomy that only experts might be expected to understand. It went to the heart of the matter and eventually earned Descartes a delayed but almost inevitable listing in the *Index of Forbidden Books* in 1663.

Apart from the merits or otherwise of scholastic philosophy, Descartes was dispositionally querulous, a combative defender of his own ideas, and an unsympathetic critic of other people's theories. He fought consistently with mathematicians, philosophers, theologians, and anyone else who failed to acknowledge the significance or originality of his work. In fact, the dominant pattern of his life was combat, or, in his own words, an unrelenting intellectual 'war'.

This 'war' resulted in part from Descartes' sensitivity to criticism and the certainty that he claimed, prematurely, for his own views. However, the underlying reason for the extensive rows that distracted him for more than two decades was a conflict of cultures between a desiccated, obsolete scholasticism and the emerging philosophy of the Scientific Revolution. Descartes' major contribution to the history of ideas was made in articulating that conflict. He addressed many of the inherent weaknesses of traditional philosophy and championed a new way of thinking that implied the redundancy of earlier theories. In particular, he claimed that natural phenomena are explained ultimately by small particles of matter and their properties, rather than by the philosophical entities that his critics assumed.

The conceptual tension between the new ideal of scientific explanation proposed by Descartes and the moribund philosophy of the schools is much clearer in retrospect than it appeared during the early decades of the seventeenth century. This is especially obvious when Descartes falls back on many of the key concepts of traditional philosophy, such as the concept of a substance, even in the process of arguing for its replacement. He thus emerges from this revolutionary period as a reluctant participant in the Galileo controversy, as a very discreet critic of Catholic theology, and, especially, as a philosophical innovator who continued to exploit many of the scholastic concepts that his own work rendered problematic. He was a Frenchman who lived most of his adult life outside his native land. He was a recluse who kept in touch with intellectual developments all over Europe, mostly by correspondence with Mersenne. He lived alone, read few books, did his own scientific research, and fought with almost everyone he encountered while constantly announcing that all he wanted was 'the security and tranquility' required to complete his intellectual project. His less appealing personal characteristics did not prevent him from becoming the most original French thinker of the seventeenth century, and one of the most famous contributors to the history of Western philosophy.

A Lawyer's Education

I have been nourished by books since I was a child.

(Discourse on Method, vi. 4)

BREAD and wine, and the seasonal changes that affect their production, were among the most familiar features of life in the Loire valley, in central France, in the sixteenth century. The appearance of the 'plague', although an infrequent event, was much more prominent in public consciousness. None of these realities was well understood. The range of grapes cultivated in this region was very extensive, and the wines produced were equally diverse. Growing grapes and producing wine relied on traditional techniques that had been passed on for generations. Those involved in viticulture could easily recognize a good season, with the right combination of spring rain and intense heat in midsummer, and they succeeded admirably without a scientific oenology. Likewise, the production of bread and other familiar foods did not presuppose biochemistry and any of its cognate sciences.

The plague, however, was a different story. In one province alone, in 1631, it killed 40,000 people.¹ No one understood what it was, how it arrived in a town, or why it eventually abated, although they noticed that it tended to vary in intensity with the seasons, being worst in summer. They also knew that it was likely to cause a very large number of painful deaths and that the best defence was to flee, preferably before the plague arrived in a town. Here was a natural phenomenon, then, that urgently required an explanation, with a view to providing a cure.

Bread and wine, of course, were not simply familiar foodstuffs that exemplified established French culinary traditions. They were also central to the Christian liturgical tradition that originated with the last supper of Christ. Their role in the Eucharistic service was one of the most

contentious issues among different Christian churches and it was best left to the theologians of each church, who expounded at length the meaning of the words attributed to Christ in the gospel account of the last supper: 'This is my body', 'This is my blood'.

While it may have been possible for aspiring philosophers in the early 1600s to avoid any mention of bread and wine or their liturgical uses, it was almost impossible to avoid all controversy. Cautious philosophers repeated the well-worn formulas of their own local churches, especially if they coincided with the official views of the kingdom in which they lived. Those who challenged the received theological wisdom of the church or kingdom often paid a heavy price. Giulio Cesare Vanini, a wandering priest-scholar, was accused of atheism and other crimes in Toulouse in 1618. Having been imprisoned for six months, he was condemned to have his tongue cut out by the public executioner, and then to be strangled and burned at the stake. The immediate and very public implementation of the *parlement's* judgment was meant to discourage others from similar obstinacy.

Vanini was not unique. There were many examples of the barbaric penalties that were applied to those who expressed dissident views in the early seventeenth century. Giordano Bruno's public burning was even more notorious, while Tommaso Campanella, who avoided execution, spent the best part of twenty-five years in jail for similar offences, during some of which he was tortured. However, Galileo is probably the most famous example of ecclesiastical punishment in the early 1600s; his case will be discussed in more detail.² The extraordinary penalties often imposed on those who expressed heterodox views might have been enough to persuade any sensible scholar to remain within the boundaries of what was locally tolerated. In the Loire valley, however, it was not as easy to do this.

Although most of the king's subjects were Roman Catholic, a significant minority was Huguenot. This made it difficult for philosophers to avoid theological controversy, either with one's own church or with those of another denomination, unless they observed a selective silence about contentious issues. However, any genuine attempt to understand a phenomenon such as the plague encouraged adventurous minds to question the traditional learning of the schools that had failed so signally to provide satisfactory explanations of natural phenomena.³ At the same time, every inquiring mind of the period, whether described as a natural philosopher, theologian, or astronomer, was acutely conscious of the penumbra of theological controversy within which they had to work, and of the