

Study Guide for René Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*

What is Descartes proposing in the *Discourse*? What is the general purpose of the work?

- What does Descartes mean by proposing this work “merely as a history or, if you prefer, a fable . . .” (7).¹ In what way is it a fable? Does it have a plot? A moral? If so, what are they?
- How does the *Discourse* compare with what he says about fables in general?
 - “The politeness of fables animates the mind” (8). Does Descartes intend to animate the minds of his readers? How so, and to what end?
 - “Moreover, fables make us think that many things are possible when they are not . . .” (8). Does Descartes’ fable make impossible things seem possible?

What is the purpose or end of knowledge, in Descartes’ mind? What is this end opposed to? Why should we see this as the end—for example, what benefits will come from this kind of philosophy? (See especially p. 44; also 46–47.)

Is everything that Descartes proposes possible, or are some proposals impossible?

- Descartes speaks of the necessity to “reject as absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the slightest doubt . . .” (24). Does this involve an act of the will? If so, is it possible truly to will this?
 - If it is possible, is it natural, or is it against the intellect’s natural inclination?
 - Does this have any effect on whether or not we ought to proceed this way?
- Is it possible to “remove . . . [all previous beliefs] all at once” (13)? Is it possible to adopt methodic doubt as a temporary habit?

¹ René Descartes. *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*. Translated with an introduction by Desmond M. Clarke. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



How does Descartes' provisional morality aid him in his new quest for truth? Do these rules require some assumptions taken from his "prior beliefs"? If so, does this mean Descartes has not completely forsaken his old beliefs?

What is the role of experience in Descartes' method, as laid out in the *Discourse*?

- Consider the following passages:
 - "I also noticed, about experiences, that the more we advance in knowledge, the more necessary they become" (45). What are experiences more necessary for? Why are they needed more as we learn more?
 - "For it seems to me that the arguments are interconnected in such a way that, as the last ones are demonstrated by the first which are their causes, the first arguments are demonstrated reciprocally by the last which are their effects" (53). Explain what Descartes means by this passage. How do experiences tie in to causes and effects?
- Also consider these passages:
 - "Without basing my reasons on any other principle apart from the infinite perfections of God, I tried to demonstrate all the laws that may have seemed to be doubtful . . ." (31). Does this demonstration take place outside of experience, or within it?
 - If without, does this mean experience is irrelevant?
 - If within, where does experience come into play?
 - "But since I did not yet have enough knowledge about this topic to speak in the same way as about the rest – i.e. by demonstrating effects by causes . . ." (33).
- How do the two pairs of passages above fit together? Are they contradictory, or can they be resolved to the same principles?
- Also, how do the passages above fit with Rule I (p. 16)? Consider what Descartes would say appears "clearly and distinctly to my mind" (16). Does this include experience? Causes? Effects?

At the beginning of Part Four (24 ff.), Descartes rejects sensation and demonstrative argument, having deemed them deceptive. Yet he then gives a certain sequence of thoughts by which he came to know that God exists (25 ff.). Is this inconsistent? Once Descartes has doubted his ability to reason to truth, what remains as a means to know the existence of God?



How does Descartes' understanding of the purpose of knowledge inform and direct his method?

- What is man's relation to nature (44)? Consider, for example, how Descartes would respond to the following: Is nature useful? Is it worth knowing in itself? Do we control nature, or do we learn from it? Does it guide us in any way, or do we only guide it?
- Is Descartes' end for knowledge better served by his method of moving from simple to complex objects (*cf.* 16, 45)? How so, or how not?
- What good, and what corresponding type of knowledge, does Descartes say is to be sought above all others (44, 54)?
 - Does this seem consistent with the general flow of Descartes' *Discourse*?
 - Does it fit, for example, with his account of animal bodies (40 ff.)? Explain how this understanding of bodies might influence Descartes' objectives.

What does Descartes think about faith and religion (see p. 19)? Is faith at all relevant to his philosophical system? Is it relevant to any other aspect of his life? If so, how does Descartes think this aspect is related to his intellectual life?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about René Descartes' *Discourse on Method*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

