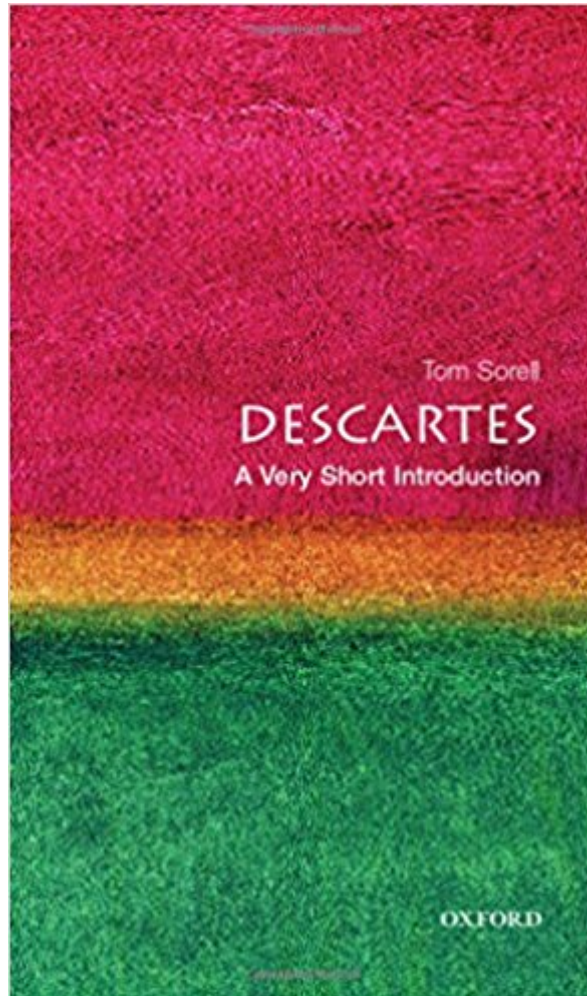




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Descartes: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Descartes is perhaps best known for his statement, "Cogito, ergo sum," the cornerstone of his metaphysics. But he did not intend the metaphysics to stand apart from his scientific work, which included important investigations into physics, mathematics, and optics. In this book, Sorell shows that Descartes was, above all, an advocate and practitioner of the new mathematical approach to physics, and that he developed his philosophies to support his discoveries in the sciences. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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Customer Reviews

'Sorell's account well portrays the intensely personal character of Descartes's thought, and in doing so tells us much about the thinker himself. The pages ... devoted to the *Meditations* surely constitute the best available introductory sketch of Descartes's classic.' *Times Higher Education*

Supplement 'concise and lucid ... it radiates authority' J. V. Field, *Mathematical Reviews*

Tom Sorell is Lecturer in Philosophy at the Open University. His books include *Knowledge and Descartes*, both published by the Open University Press.

This was an interesting book but also was equally confusing. The author didn't do a great job in

writing in a way that reflects a progression of Descartes' own writings. For example, adding a timeline of when Descartes wrote what book to show evolution would have been helpful. As it is now, it jumps around all over the place and I can barely remember what happened when. I have thus far read 6-8 of these Oxford Press books. This is one of the most interesting, but by far the most confusing. If you want a general intro that you won't really remember (beyond that Descartes was a smart fellow and influenced many areas of thought) then this is a good primer. If you want something more, then I would consider passing entirely... Unless you plan to read several books about Descartes then maybe it's OK to include this.

Brief, clear and non-technical introduction to Descartes and current literature about his multiple contributions to our modern world. Lays out contributions without worship and notes some of the shifts in scholarship about Descartes. Great Biblio. included.

Thoughtful and well written and well researched. This is a very helpful introduction. This book is a good preparation for reading the original.

Let me begin by listing the strengths of this little book. Sorell provides an effective, workmanlike exegesis of Descartes's intellectual development. To this end, he uses Descartes's publications; carrying us through the gestation, still birth, and fragmented "afterlife" of "Le Monde", how Descartes tested the theological waters with the "Discourse", and finally why he managed to upset everyone with his overly subtle ramblings in the "Meditations". Sorell does well to guide us through such difficult works at this introductory level. His analysis is lucid and had Descartes's contemporaries had access to it, much misunderstanding might have been prevented! "In expecting people to be able to follow the strange style of the Meditations", says Sorell, "Descartes overestimated the capacities of even his most sympathetic readers" (p. 61), and not all of them were even very sympathetic. Descartes was, of course, educated by the Jesuits, at La Flèche. This sequestration from the world, which was part and parcel of the old Jesuit method, marked Descartes for life and goes a long way to explain why he lived in awe, not to say fear, of the Jesuits. Indeed, this book clearly testifies, if not explicitly, to the Jesuit influence on Descartes's intellectual development. This influence was perceived and sneered at by some of Descartes's contemporaries, particularly Protestants like Thomas Hobbes. Sorell shows just what mental hoops Descartes put himself through in order to ensure that his work would be acceptable to the Jesuits. Chapter 12, titled "Doubt without Scepticism", demonstrates one such hoop of the

yes-that's-what-I-said-but-I-didn't-really-mean-it-like-that variety. Descartes's conclusion to his "Principles" is another example: "At the same time recalling my insignificance, I affirm nothing, but submit all these opinions to the authority of the Catholic church, and to the judgment of the more sage...". Unfortunately, introductory texts of just over 100 pages directed to a wide audience must either be couched in terms so broad as to be almost meaningless, in which case they need lots of pictures, or the author must be selective. This selection is, inevitably, guided by the author's specialization. Sorell is a philosopher, so philosophical analysis takes pride of place; Descartes's mathematics, practical optics, and physiology receive scant attention. This is a pity, but the fault, if fault there be, lies not with Sorell himself, but with the Very Short Introduction series' editorial policy. It should be noted that the 14-page entry on Descartes in the "Dictionary of Scientific Biography" required three authors writing separately on his life and works, his mathematics, physics, and his physiology. One author, then, and 100 pages to give a perfectly balanced picture of someone as complex as Descartes, is a tall order indeed. Given these constraints, we can perhaps forgive Sorell for describing Descartes (on p. 1) as being "... best known, perhaps, as the man who said 'Cogito, ergo sum'...". Admittedly, it was this axiom on which Descartes built his Universe, but perhaps the first page is revealing too much too quickly.

This is an enjoyable and informative introduction to Descartes, his work, and his philosophy. Some may hesitate to delve into Descartes work because of its complexity and denseness of thought, but this "very short introduction" comes to the rescue, orienting us to Descartes' major ideas, their developmental history, and the context in which he developed them. The book is greatly interesting to read, and even the discourses on some of Descartes' more conceptual thought are treated with exceptional clarity. Although the book focuses on the developmental history of Descartes' investigation into the sciences (particularly in optics), the book also discusses his contributions to mathematical geometry, as well as some of his thoughts on faith and reason. If you are looking for an introduction to Descartes, it is hard to go wrong with this well-written and enjoyable pocket volume.

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