

Descartes and His Audience

Descartes has the reputation of being the quintessential individualist thinker. And indeed, the Cartesian meditator, modelled on Descartes himself¹, declares: “I am here quite alone and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions”². In *Meditation II*, the same meditator wonders whether he “see[s] any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons”³. And in *Meditation IV*, we learn that “since [his] decision to doubt everything, it is so far only [him]self and God whose existence [he] [has] been able to know with certainty”⁴. What is less appreciated is the importance of Descartes’ relation with the intended audience of his works. This paper aims to fill this gap in the secondary literature by showing that Descartes carefully considered issues related to the generation, communication, transmission, replicability and applicability of his insights and results (metaphysical, scientific but also practical).

A careful survey of Descartes’ published works brings to light how aware of and sensitive to the role of those to whom he was addressing his works, Descartes was. In fact, the thematic content of Descartes’ works, the style used, the tone and the reading instructions provided (co)-vary with the type of readers Descartes envisages for each of his published works. Descartes took into account the age⁵, the educational background (including the language skills)⁶ and the emotional make-up of his potential readers (with special focus on these potential readers’ views of their own abilities and ideas of self-worth)⁷. Furthermore, conditions (of accessibility⁸ and of satisfaction/success⁹) and qualifications attached to statements explicitly made account for the different predictions Descartes makes about the reception of his works, about how likely his readers are to correctly grasp his views¹⁰.

An in-depth look at Descartes’ published works also reveals that Descartes provided his diligent readers with examples to be guided by and to follow. In the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*, the narrator of each of these work plays this role¹¹; in the Latin *Principles*, Princess Elizabeth is presented as the person readers should model themselves on¹². Readers are encouraged to identify with these exemplary characters via attention to and engagement with the text. In the *Meditations*, pursued far enough, engagement takes the form of collaboration (by filling in the blanks Descartes acknowledges were left in the text¹³) and culminates in the appropriation of Descartes’ views. In the *Principles* (both the 1644 Dedicatory Letter and the 1647 French Preface), Descartes assures his attentive and committed readers that his recommendations, properly applied, will yield positive consequences, e.g. wisdom which involves character improvements. These improvements, epitomized in the *Passions of the Soul* by the

¹ (AT I, 354; CSMK 560); (AT VII, 122, CSM II, 87); (AT VII, 257; CSM II, 179); (Michael Campbell, "Time, Causality and Character in Descartes' Meditations", *Parrhesia* 24 · 107-126, 2015).

² (AT VII, 18; CSM I, 12)

³ (AT VII, 32; CSM II, 21)

⁴ (AT VII, 56; CSM II, 39)

⁵ (AT III, 276; CSMK 167)

⁶ (AT VI, 77-78; CSM I, 151); (AT I, 350; CSMK 53); (AT I, 354; CSMK 56); (AT VII, 7; CSM II, 6-7).

⁷ (AT VIII A, 3; CSM I, 191); (AT XIB, 12-13; CSM I, 185); (AT XI, 453; CSM I, 387 a.161); (AT XI, 450; CSM I, 386 a. 159); (AT XI, 449; CSM I, 385 a. 157).

⁸ (AT I, 475; CSMK 77); (AT I, 411; CSMK 61)

⁹ (AT VI, 77-78; CSM I, 151); (AT VII, 131; CSM II, 94); (AT XIB, 12-13; CSM I, 185)

¹⁰ (AT VII, 11; CSM II, 8); (AT VIII A, 2-3; CSM I, 191); (AT XIB, 12-13; CSM I, 185).

¹¹ Although the *Discourse* leaves the extent of imitation and emulation up to the reader.

¹² (AT VIII A, 1; CSM I, 190)

¹³ (AT VII, 156; CSM II, 110)

virtue of generosity¹⁴, also take the form of the “model of humanity realized” that Descartes presents in the *Discourse 15*.

The paper concludes that Descartes’ views are entwined with issues of value (e.g. the type of human being worth becoming¹⁶), and thus have a marked and important applied side: Descartes invites the reader to transform herself by customizing and making her own Descartes’ insights.

¹⁴ (AT XI, 446; CSM I, 384 a. 153)

¹⁵ (Paul Trainor, “Autobiography As Philosophical Argument: Socrates, Descartes and Collingwood”, *Thought* 63, December 1988: 378-392).

¹⁶ (See Matthew Jones, “Descartes's Geometry as Spiritual Exercise”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2001).