

Descartes and Education Deschooling in the *Discourse on Method*¹

Descartes knew that schooling is an inescapable component of human socio-biological development. It cannot be abolished and there is no practical alternative. It is a key to the socialization of children and to entry into viable professions for young adults. Well-educated people of his time in most cases got the greater part of their education at school, so the prevailing view of it as an institution was a favourable one. Such an attitude is still conventional today.

Not that school is ever perfect. And educators are expected to entertain, if not always to welcome, suggestions about how it may be improved. Descartes is known to have made a few such suggestions regarding the schooling he received at La Flèche, often accompanied by words of thanks to his teachers, and praise for La Flèche. There are also recommendations of a self-serving kind, such as those encouraging his former teachers to adopt some of his writings as textbooks. I shall refer to this indulgent attitude toward school as *meliorism*.

In my experience, readers, whether scholarly or casual, seldom dwell on Descartes' educational views. But when the subject arises they typically recall meliorism as his predominant attitude. However, because meliorism is such a conventional view of school it is small beer in the history of education, eliciting few comments from those who so much as notice it in DM or elsewhere in Descartes' writings.

But there is a different, far more interesting view of education that Descartes espouses and that his readers typically overlook. He puts school itself in question and, at least where he alone is concerned, rejects it. He commits himself to unlearning all he has been taught and breaking the spell of school's authority. *Deschooling* is the name I give to this little-noticed project of Descartes.

It is unquestionably a project, at least for Descartes himself. He is uncertain, however, whether, in its radicalism, it ever can be a project in the same way for anyone else. He doubts that it can. Yet on the other hand he hopes to solicit moral and financial support for *his* project from every reader of DM, even though very few of them will possess the degree of dispassionate objectivity necessary to entertain the concept of deschooling, let alone the courage to implement it in their lives.

Writing DM therefore becomes an exercise in philosophical tact in which radical deschooling must be presented as an option to everyone, but in such a way that those incapable of imagining it (and Descartes suspects that will turn out to be *everyone else*) never feel that they are in any way falling short. So well did Descartes achieve his rhetorical goal that his radical critique of education has gone almost unnoticed, whether by casual readers or by scholars.

But Descartes calls it "the most important thing in the world."

¹ Abbreviated henceforward as: DM

This paper is about Descartes' important, astonishing and neglected project of deschooling: its philosophical and personal context, its rhetorical structure, and its indispensability for understanding Cartesian philosophy.