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DESCARTES

René Descartes (1596–1650), the principal founding father of modern philosophy, and well known as a mathematician, deserves the eminent place accorded to him on two accounts. First, because of his single-minded search for method in all branches of human enquiry; secondly, because he introduced into philosophy, largely on account of that search, many of the concepts and arguments which have since served as its foundation.

A contemporary of Bacon and Galileo, and immediate predecessor of Newton (many of whose thoughts he anticipated), Descartes was a perfect representative of the new scientific spirit. While he feared and respected the censure of the Church (as is shown by his withholding from publication the *Treatise on the Universe*, 1633, upon hearing of Galileo's condemnation), he deferred to no intellectual authority other than the 'natural light' of reason. This set him apart both from the scholastic traditions to which we have referred and also from the worldly preoccupations of the Renaissance humanists. For Descartes the results of all previous speculation had to be set aside or suspended, until clear and indubitable principles could be established against which to measure them. Without the aid of such principles, no system, scientific or metaphysical, could warrant assent. Descartes could not find these basic principles in the works that he had read. He therefore embarked on a programme of radical intellectual reform, which resulted in a change of philosophical perspective so great that scholasticism fell into lasting disrepute. Even now medieval philosophy is rarely studied in our universities and yet more rarely understood.