Praise for *Socrates Meets*

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"In this brilliant series, Peter Kreeft, like a modern-day Virgil, guides us into corners of purgatory where the father of philosophy, Socrates, instigates conversations with eight of the most provocative minds in Western history. We are in Kreeft's debt for reminding us that philosophy is not essentially a college or university subject, a strange if not grotesque discipline we undergo in pursuit of a degree, but live mind encountering live mind in live conversation in pursuit of truth—and that the most fruitful conversations are often with the live minds of the dead. The humor and plainspokenness of this series make it ideal for beginning students of philosophy, whether in formal courses or in independent study, but the intellectual vigor of these dialogues will remind even the most seasoned thinkers that a bracing engagement with

Socratic questioning is the best way to shake up the complacency that too often obstructs the quest for wisdom."

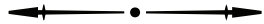
—**Daniel McInerny**, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy, Christendom College, and author of *Beauty & Imitation: A Philosophical Reflection on the Arts*

"Among the most formative influences on my development as a philosopher has been Peter Kreeft. When I first encountered his work when I was in college I could not believe that someone could make philosophy so accessible and so alive. Although I never took a formal class from Professor Kreeft, I have been a student of his for many decades. Through *The Unaborted Socrates* I was persuaded to embrace a sanctity of life ethic; through *The Best Things In Life* I was taught how to think about virtue, vice, intrinsic goodness, and practical Thomism (though the genius of Kreeft is that he never explicitly tells you he's doing that). Later, when I was journeying back to the Church, it was Kreeft's explication of the *Catechism* and his commentary on Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* that helped me to see how Catholicism made sense and that much of what I believed as a lapsed-Catholic Evangelical was an inheritance from Rome and not something I had discovered by exercising my rational powers on Scripture alone. I thought I had hit a triple, but Kreeft showed me that I had been born at third base. What you will encounter in this series of cross-examinations of the world's most important modern philosophers is Kreeft at his best. Through the character of Socrates and his famous interlocutors, you are introduced to some of the most influential and difficult thought in the history of philosophy, but in a way that requires no prior philosophical background. In the hands of this master teacher, you will come to appreciate both the strengths and the weaknesses of these towering figures and how the intellectual tradition of the Church ought to engage them."

—**Francis J. Beckwith**, Professor of Philosophy and Associate Director of Graduate Studies in Philosophy, Baylor University

SOCRATES MEETS DESCARTES

SOCRATES MEETS DESCARTES



THE FATHER OF PHILOSOPHY CROSS-EXAMINES THE FATHER OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY

PETER KREEFT

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For Joseph Flanagan, SJ

Contents

Preface

This book is one in a series of Socratic explorations of some of the Great Books. Books in this series are intended to be short, clear, and nontechnical, thus fully understandable by beginners. They also introduce (or review) the basic questions in the fundamental divisions of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology, ethics, logic, and method. They are designed both for classroom use and for educational do-it-yourselfers. The *Socrates Meets* books can be read and understood completely on their own, but each is best appreciated after reading the little classic it engages in dialogue.

The setting—Socrates and the author of the Great Book meeting in the afterlife—need not deter readers who do not believe there is an afterlife. For although the two characters and their philosophies are historically real, their conversation, of course, is not and requires a "willing suspension of disbelief." There is no reason the skeptic cannot extend this literary belief also to the setting.

Introduction

Socrates and Descartes are probably the two most important philosophers who ever lived, because they are the two who made the most difference to all philosophy after them. Socrates is often called "the Father of Philosophy," and Descartes is called "the Father of Modern Philosophy." The two of them stand at the beginning of the two basic philosophical options: the classical and the modern.

At least seven features unite these two philosophers and distinguish them from all others.

First, each was an initiator, a revolutionary, virtually without predecessors. No other philosophers depended so little on previous philosophers, and no other philosophers made subsequent thinkers depend so much on them. Socrates' method, Socrates' questions, and Socrates' answers differed almost totally from the so-called pre-Socratic philosophers; and Descartes tried to begin philosophy all over again as if the two thousand years of it before him simply had not existed. No one else in the history of thought has ever done this as thoroughly as these two did.

Second, each began by doubting and questioning everything, or nearly everything, even the commonplaces everyone else took for granted. Both understood that the first and most important step of a truly scientific method is to assume nothing, or at least to question all assumptions, to get prejudices out, out from the subjective side of consciousness and into the objective side, where they can be part of the examinees rather than part of the examiners.

Many other philosophers agree with this, of course, but none ever did it more thoroughly or originally than these two. Socrates had few books, no schools, and little philosophical tradition

before him to work with; Descartes had much, but deliberately doubted it all (or tried to). Thus, both relied on the direct experience and thinking of the individual, not the authority and tradition of the community.

Third, each made the quest for the knowledge of the self the central philosophical quest, though they meant somewhat different things by it. What Socrates meant by "Know thyself" was "Know man's essence; know universal human nature." What Descartes meant was "Know your own existence as an individual."

They also undertook this quest for different reasons. Socrates' reason was obedience to the command of the god of the Delphic oracle, over whose temple "Know thyself" was inscribed. Descartes' reason was to overcome the skepticism of many of the best thinkers of his time (especially Montaigne) by discovering the one absolute certainty that could be used as the starting point of a new, more certain philosophy: "I think, therefore I am." But both men turned to the "I," the self, the soul, the mind, as their fundamental interest, much more than any other philosophers had. (Descartes' only rivals here are Augustine, twelve centuries before him, and Pascal, his contemporary; Socrates had no preceding or contemporary rivals at all.)

Fourth, each identified the self with the soul rather than the body. Each was a "dualist"; that is, they believed that reality is dual (twofold): matter (including our bodies) and spirit (including our souls). No philosophers were more famous dualists than Descartes and Socrates (via his disciple Plato).

Fifth, each focused on the epistemological question, or the "critical problem" of "How do you know?" Socrates asked this question about every particular claim anyone made to know anything, while Descartes asked it about knowledge in general. Unlike Socrates, Descartes demanded a reason for trusting reason itself before using reason to construct a philosophy, as a carpenter

might check his tools before building a house. Perhaps this is an answerable question, perhaps not. But in any case, no two philosophers ever focused more attention on the question "How do you know?" than these two.

Sixth, each offered a new method to philosophy, though both came to traditional conclusions through their new methods. In both cases, the new method demanded more severe criteria, tighter, stricter grounds for our beliefs and opinions. Each philosopher narrowed "reason." Before Socrates, it had included myth, intuition, and tradition. Without rejecting any of these older things, Socrates demanded something new: clear definitions and logical arguments. Descartes narrowed "reason" further: from "wisdom" to "science," from philosophical logic to scientific logic, from Socrates' "dialectical" (dialogue) method to the scientific method. No other philosophers ever offered new methods that changed philosophical thinking itself as much as these two. And no philosopher's method ever proved more popular, more universally imitated by his successors, than these two.

Seventh, each believed he was divinely commissioned to philosophize by a supernatural sign. For Socrates, it was the Delphic oracle, who, by announcing to Socrates' friend Chaerephon that no one was wiser than Socrates, spurred Socrates to question others to find someone wiser than himself, and in so doing spurred Socrates to develop the Socratic method of philosophizing by logical cross-examination.

Socrates also confessed that he had a private "spiritual sign" or "divine voice," which often stopped him from some course of action but never specifically commanded any. Like most idealistic Athenian citizens of his time, Socrates had aspired to a political career, but the "divine voice" forbade him. So together, the Delphic oracle and the "divine voice" led him into philosophy. In his *Apology*, he defends not only himself but his troublemaking vocation of philosophizing; and every single time he mentions

philosophy in that speech, he mentions "the god" as the source of his vocation to philosophize.

Descartes, too, became a philosopher due to a supposed divine intervention. Already at age twenty-three he was clearly a scientific genius, and he delayed publishing only because of the condemnation of Galileo. On the night of November 10, 1619, he had a life-changing dream in which he believed that the divine Spirit of Truth came to him and directed him to philosophize.

I need not add that this is not how most philosophers and philosophies begin. Socrates and Descartes are strikingly unusual and strikingly similar in these seven different ways. Yet they are also strikingly different from each other, as different as the ancient (classical) and modern (scientific) worldviews of which they were major founders.

So a dialogue between Socrates and Descartes is a dialogue between the two fundamental stages in the history of philosophy, the history of consciousness, and the history of Western culture.

1

The Meeting

DESCARTES: I must be dreaming. I thought I was dying, but now I seem to be very much alive. I know I was middle-aged and ill, but now I feel young and healthy. I thought I was in a cold bed in the damp, dark winterland of Sweden, but now I seem to be riding this magnificent white horse down this sunny road in a beautiful land that looks like the south of France.

And there is someone ahead, waving for me to stop. Is it an angel? Oh, no; no angel could look like *that*. It looks like a pig . . . it looks like a frog . . . it looks like Socrates—by Jove, it seems to *be* Socrates!

SOCRATES: Right the third time, René. "Third time's the charm," as we used to say back in Greece.

DESCARTES: Are you—an angel?

SOCRATES: Hardly!

DESCARTES: Is this—heaven?

SOCRATES: Not yet. But this is the road.

DESCARTES: Were you sent to meet me—by Higher Authorities?

SOCRATES: I was.

DESCARTES: So I *am* dead. Or, rather, my body is.

SOCRATES: Your old body, anyway.

DESCARTES: Then what is riding this horse? I have a right to know!

SOCRATES: My Higher Authorities do not allow me to answer questions about that now.

DESCARTES: What would your Higher Authorities have me to do?

SOCRATES: Get down off your high horse.

DESCARTES: Oh. All right. There! It's done. What next? Will you lead me to heaven?

SOCRATES: I must send your horse to heaven first. There, off you go!

DESCARTES: He seems to know the way; look at him fly! But why must I wait? Why does my horse go to heaven before me?

SOCRATES: Because we make no mistakes here. And everyone knows that it is a mistake to put Descartes before the horse.

DESCARTES: You may make no mistakes here, but you certainly make terrible puns. And why are we speaking English, not French or Greek?

SOCRATES: Because that is the language of the man who is writing this book that we are in.

DESCARTES: Oh. I hope he does not have an addiction to puns.

A pun is the lowest form of humor, don't you know? A kind of literary disease. Is that his pitiful idea of a joke?

SOCRATES: No, it is His.

DESCARTES: Whose?

SOCRATES: The Author of the author of the book we are in. The Creator.

DESCARTES: Oh. Perhaps my sense of humor needs to get down off its high horse. Apparently the transcendent Creator stoops to rather low depths of humor.

SOCRATES: Oh, he has stooped to far lower depths than that.

DESCARTES: Is he a comedian, then?

SOCRATES: But of course!

DESCARTES: Excuse me for being surprised and even a bit skeptical. That pun was not the mark of a great comedian. It did not seem to have the style and grace of . . .

SOCRATES: Of a French aristocrat? No. Does it surprise you to learn that God is not a French aristocrat?

DESCARTES: Well, no. But the *Creator* . . .

SOCRATES: And have you ever carefully observed his creations? Have you ever gazed into the face of an ostrich? Or observed the play of meerkats? Or, for that matter, of French aristocrats?

DESCARTES: Touché, Socrates. You *are* the real Socrates, aren't you?

SOCRATES: As much as you are the real Descartes.

DESCARTES: Are you playing with me?

SOCRATES: No, I am testing you. Do you doubt your own existence?

DESCARTES: No.

SOCRATES: Then do not doubt mine either.

DESCARTES: Actually, I *did* doubt my own existence, and everything else as well. Universal doubt was the first step of the method I taught.

SOCRATES: So you do not practice what you preach?

DESCARTES: No, no, I did not preach skepticism. Skepticism means doubting all things at all times. My method was my *answer* to skepticism. Once we pass through universal doubt, we may rightly claim certain knowledge of any idea that proves indubitable—first of all, the idea of our own existence.

SOCRATES: I think I see an analogy here. Your universal doubt functions rather like death, and the idea of your own existence is rather like the soul, and its indubitability is rather like the soul's immortality, and the certain knowledge thus attained is rather like heaven's beatific vision, and passing through your philosophical method is rather like a resurrection. Is this not so?

DESCARTES: That sounds a bit . . . a bit much! I never quite thought of it that way.

SOCRATES: How did you think of it?

DESCARTES: Simply as a way to overcome debilitating skepticism so as to lay a foundation for the sciences. As I explained in my *Discourse on Method*—

SOCRATES: This book, you mean?

DESCARTES: Is it here?

SOCRATES: See for yourself.

DESCARTES: Then—there are books in heaven?

SOCRATES: Did I say this was heaven? I thought you made no assumptions. Isn't that the very first step of your method?

DESCARTES: I never recommended the practice of my method in daily life. In fact . . . perhaps I have a riddle for you, Socrates. How does Descartes differ from the Blessed Virgin?

SOCRATES: Tell me.

DESCARTES: She made only one Assumption.

SOCRATES: If punning is "the literary disease," this disease seems to be infectious.

DESCARTES: So this is not heaven?

SOCRATES: Not yet. Not for you, at least.

DESCARTES: Not for me—as distinct from my horse?

SOCRATES: As distinct from me. This is heaven for me but

purgatory for you. For you must endure my cross-examination of your book.

DESCARTES: Oh, that is a far, far more pleasant purgatory than I had ever dared to hope for. Examine away, then, Socrates. I have had many delightful conversations and correspondences on earth in pursuit of the truth, but this is a far, far better thing I do than ever I have done.

SOCRATES: And if you are in pursuit of the truth, you shall go to a far, far better place than ever you have been.

2

The Main Point

SOCRATES: Before we explore and evaluate your book, we should understand your reason for writing it. What need did it address? It must have been a great need, because it had a great success, for many centuries after your death. It was one of the most thought-changing books ever written.

DESCARTES: So you can see the future here?

SOCRATES: It is not "future" here. All is present.

DESCARTES: You know everything, then?

SOCRATES: Of course not.

DESCARTES: How much, then?

SOCRATES: As much as we need to.

DESCARTES: But not as much as you want to?

SOCRATES: Not so. That is the difference between this world and the old one: gaps are gone, the gap between present and future and also the gap between wants and needs.

DESCARTES: That must be the secret of your happiness, then, as Marcus Aurelius taught. Say, is he here?

SOCRATES: There will be plenty of time later for such questions.

DESCARTES: But you were saying that in this place the gap is gone—the gap between wants and needs. And I *want* to know about Marcus Aurelius.

SOCRATES: You do *not* have a good memory. For you do not remember my saying that this is heaven only for me. For you it is purgatory.

DESCARTES: Oh. What must I do . . . ?

SOCRATES: For now, you must help me to explore the questions in your book rather than the questions in your mind about this world.

DESCARTES: Why are *you* sent to me?

SOCRATES: Because your book revolutionized philosophy, and that was the enterprise I had the good fortune to begin, or rather to be used as a divine instrument to help others to begin. So please begin by telling me what need you saw in your world and how you tried to supply that need in your book.

DESCARTES: Gladly. I think I can summarize that in two images: the decline of philosophy and the rise of all the other sciences.

When I surveyed the philosophical scene, I saw only three options, none of them healthy ones with a future. First, there were the late medieval Scholastic philosophers, obsessively disputing about purely verbal differences, mindlessly mouthing traditional formulas, endlessly multiplying hair-splitting distinctions,

and treating abstractions as the only realities. Second, there were the nature mystics, the occultists and alchemists and astrologers. I thought of both these and the Scholastics as comic figures. Serious philosophical minds were becoming skeptics, like Montaigne. And that was the third option, skepticism. I wanted to offer a radical alternative to all three, beginning with a refutation of skepticism and proceeding to a philosophy that was truly scientific.

SOCRATES: What did you mean by "scientific"?

DESCARTES: That is indeed a key concept. While philosophy was languishing in the doldrums, every one of the sciences had been making remarkable progress. In fact, there had been more progress in the sciences in one century than in all previous centuries combined. So I asked myself the obvious question: Why? Why this tremendous progress in all sciences except philosophy? And my answer, in one word, was "method." The scientific method was the greatest discovery in the history of science, because it was the skeleton key that opened all the doors in all the sciences. Every door, that is, except one: philosophy. That is why I decided to write my *Discourse on Method*. It was an experiment to test the hypothesis that this method could revitalize philosophy as well.

SOCRATES: Your experiment sounds most reasonable. You understand the assumption behind it, of course?

DESCARTES: I made no assumptions. It was an *experiment*; I did not assume any particular result beforehand.

SOCRATES: But you assumed that philosophy is a science, in assuming that it could use the scientific method, did you not?

DESCARTES: Oh, of course—that it is a science in the generic

sense: an organized body of knowledge, explaining things through causes and proving truths through rational demonstrations. I know it is not like the other sciences in that it does not have some particular field of data. But it takes as its field all fields, and it does not confine itself to sensation for its data. In that way it is like mathematics, though it does not use quantitative measurement as mathematics does. But I hoped to find the very essence of the scientific method that was common to the empirical sciences and the mathematical sciences—*and* the philosophical sciences. If I could find that, and define it, and summarize its basic rules, then I would supply what was needed: the single essential method that could be applied to philosophy just as effectively as it had been applied to the other sciences.

That is why the most important word in my title *Discours de la méthode* is the word that was omitted in the English translation *Discourse on Method*: the word "the." This *one* method transformed *all* the sciences, and so I hoped it could also transform philosophy.

SOCRATES: Your hope seems quite understandable. But surely you realized how revolutionary and radical this idea was? For you had a very extensive education in the history of philosophy, and you surely had learned there that Aristotle, the most influential philosopher in the world (and the most commonsensical) had taught that each science required a different method because method is relative to subject matter and each science dealt with different subject matter.

DESCARTES: Of course. But since Aristotle had proved to be wrong in many other points in the sciences, I thought it likely that he had been wrong about method too. Or, at least, that he had missed something. Of course methods in the sciences must vary by subject matter, but is there not something common to all these somewhat different methods that lets us call them all

scientific methods? And if I could isolate this common essence and formulate its basic principles, I would do for the scientific method what Aristotle did for the principles of logic. I would abstract the common from the specific, the general from the particular.

SOCRATES: Isn't that really what *all* rational thinking does?

DESCARTES: Yes, but my point was not just theoretical—to find the most general principles of the method that had already been used so successfully in the sciences—but practical. Having found and formulated these most general principles, I wanted to apply them to philosophy as no one had ever done before and thus to enable philosophy to do what it had never done before while all the other sciences were doing it—namely, to decide issues definitively, to resolve controversial questions with finality, to arrive at certain answers that end all reasonable doubts, and thus to end the sad divisions between the different schools of thought.

You see, philosophers in my time were still divided over the very same issues that had divided them in the past, in your time in Greece and later in Rome and again in medieval Christendom. But scientists were no longer so divided. They had learned how to settle the issues they had always argued about in the past, because they had discovered this wonderful tool for ending disagreements: the scientific method. So I hoped that if I could use that tool in philosophy, I would get the same results there. And this would be even more important, as philosophy is more important than the other sciences and deals with the most important of all questions. But in order to use the tool, I had to first isolate it and define it. That is the purpose of my book.

SOCRATES: You have made the single purpose of your book admirably clear. Can you next explain its division into six subplots, its six parts?

DESCARTES: Yes. This is how I summarized them in my preface: "In the first part, you will find various considerations concerning the sciences." Here, I explain how I came to discover the method. I give the reader a little autobiography.

"In the second part, the chief rules of the method which the author has sought." The search is explained in part 1; the treasure I found is explained in part 2.

"In the third part, some of the rules of morality which he [the author] has derived from this method." This is my first application of the method: to morality, in a very preliminary and temporary way.

"In the fourth part, the arguments by which he proves the existence of God and of the human soul, which are the foundations of his metaphysics." This is my second application of the method: to philosophy and philosophical theology. I later expanded this short chapter into an entire book, the *Meditations*.

"In the fifth part, the order of the questions in physics that he has investigated." This is my third application of the method: to the physical sciences, especially medicine—again, in a very preliminary way.

"And in the final part, what things the author believes are required in order to advance further in the investigation of nature." This is my prognosis, or prediction, or prophecy, of how much can be accomplished in the future by this marvelous tool.

SOCRATES: How perfectly clear and orderly it sounds! So let us begin our exploration of this extraordinary book.

DESCARTES: Where do you want to begin?

SOCRATES: Why, at the beginning, of course.