

**HALF-HOURS WITH
THE FREETHINKERS,
NOS. 1-24**

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Half-Hours with the Freethinkers, Nos. 1-24 by J. Watts & A. Collins & "Iconoclast"

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J. WATTS & A. COLLINS & "ICONOCLAST"

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HALF-HOURS
WITH THE
FREETHINKERS.

EDITED BY

J. WATTS, 'ICONOCLAST,' AND A. COLLINS.

CONTAINING A SKETCH OF THE LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY OF
DES CARTES, VOLNEY, LORD BOLINGBROKE, SHELLEY, VOLTAIRE,
ANTHONY COLLINS, SPINOZA, PAINE, SHAFESBURY,
MIRABAUD AND D'HOLBACH, HUME, HOBBS, PRIESTLEY, TINDAL, CONDORCET,
EPICURUS, FRANCES WRIGHT D'ARUSMONT, TOLAND, ZENO, HELVETIUS,
BLOUNT, BARKER, TAYLOR, AND BURNET.



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HALF-HOURS WITH THE FREETHINKERS.

EDITED BY 'ICONOCLAST,' ANTHONY COLLINS, & JOHN WATTS.

No. 1.]

Wednesday, October 1, 1856.

[Price 1d.]

EDITORS' PREFACE.

In these pages, appearing under the title of 'Half-Hours with the Freethinkers,' it is our intention to collect in a readable form an abstract of the lives and doctrines of those who have stood foremost in the ranks of Freethought in all countries and in all ages; and we trust that our efforts to place in the hands of the poorest of our party a knowledge of works and workers—some of which and whom would otherwise be out of their reach—will be received by all in a favourable light. We shall, in the course of our publication, have to deal with many writers whose opinions widely differ from our own, and it shall be our care to deal with them *justly*, and in all cases to allow them to utter in their own words their essential thoughts.

We lay no claim to originality in the mode of treatment—we will endeavour to cull the choicest flowers from the garden, and if others can make a brighter or better bouquet, we shall be glad to have their assistance. We have only one object in view, and that is, the presenting of free and manly thoughts to our readers, hoping to induce like thinking in them, and trusting that noble work may follow noble thoughts. The Freethinkers we intend treating of have also been Free Workers, endeavouring to raise men's minds from superstition and bigotry, and place before them a knowledge of the real. If, therefore, each of our readers will erect, from these men, a standard, and strive to raise himself or herself to it, we shall be well repaid for any trouble our little work may give us, believing that as men make themselves wiser and happier, wisdom and happiness will spread through their several circles, exercising an elevating influence over all.

The extent of our work will depend much upon the encouragement we receive, but to prevent disappointment, we will state that it is our intention, in any event, to issue sufficient numbers to form a complete volume.

We commence in this paper with Des Cartes, but if the papers are continued as we wish, we shall also give sketches of thinkers anterior to his time. The present volume will treat, amongst others, of Spinoza, Bacon, Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, Hobbes, Volney, Voltaire, Paine, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Comte, Diderot, Byron, Shelley, Taylor, Carline, Owen, R. Cooper, Southwell, Barker, Holyoake, etc.

We have been the more induced to issue the 'Half-Hours with the Freethinkers' in consequence, not only of the difficulty which many have in obtaining the works of the Old Freethinkers, but also as an effective answer to some remarks which have lately appeared in certain religious publications, implying a dearth of thought and thinkers beyond the pale of the Church. We wish all men to know that great minds and good men have sought truth apart from faith for many ages, and that it is because few were prepared to receive them, and many united to *crush* them, their works are so difficult of access to the general mass at the present day. It will be our duty to remove this difficulty, trusting to our readers for support.

[Published Fortnightly.]

DES CARTES.

RENE DES CARTES DUPERRON, better known as Des Cartes, the father of modern philosophy, was born at La Haya, in Touraine, of Breton parents, near the close of the sixteenth century, at a time when Bacon was like the morning sun, rising to shed new rays of bright light over the then dark world of philosophy. The mother of Des Cartes died while he was but a few days old, and himself a sickly child, he began to take part in the battle of life with but little appearance of ever possessing the capability for action on the minds of his fellows, which he afterwards so fully exercised. Debarred, however, by his physical weakness from many boyish pursuits, he devoted himself to study in his earliest years, and during his youth gained the title of the young philosopher, from his eagerness to learn, and from his earnest endeavours by inquiry and experiment to solve every problem presented to his notice. He was educated in the Jesuits' College of La Flèche; and the monument erected to him at Stockholm informs us 'That having mastered all the learning of the schools, which proved short of his expectations, he betook himself to the army in Germany and Hungary, and there spent his vacant winter hours in comparing the mysteries and phenomena of nature with the laws of mathematics, daring to hope that the one might serve as a key to the other. Quitting, therefore, all other pursuits, he retired to a little village near Egmont, in Holland, where spending twenty-five years in continual reading and meditation, he effected his design.'

In his celebrated 'Discourse on Method,' he says, 'As soon as my age permitted me to leave my preceptors, I entirely gave up the study of letters; and, resolving to seek no other sciences than that which I could find in myself, or else in the great book of the world, I employed the remainder of my youth in travel—in seeing courts and camps—in frequenting people of diverse humours and conditions—in collecting various experiences; and, above all, in endeavouring to draw some profitable reflection from what I saw. For it seemed to me that I should meet with more truth in the reasonings which each man makes in his own affairs, and which, if wrong, would be speedily punished by failure, than in those reasonings which the philosopher makes in his study upon speculations which produce no effect, and which are of no consequence to him, except perhaps that he will be the more vain of them, the more remote they are from common sense, because he would then have been forced to employ more ingenuity and subtlety to render them plausible.'

At the age of thirty-three Des Cartes retired from the world for a period of eight years, and his seclusion was so effectual during that time, that his place of residence was unknown to his friends. He there prepared the 'Meditations,' and 'Discourse on Method,' which have since caused so much pen-and-ink warfare amongst those who have aspired to be ranked as philosophical thinkers. He became European in fame; and, invited by Christina of Sweden, he visited her kingdom, but the rudeness of the climate proved too much for his delicate frame, and he died at Stockholm in the year 1650, from inflammation of the lungs, being fifty-four years of age at the time of his death.

Des Cartes was perhaps the most original thinker that France had up to that date produced; and, contemporary with Bacon, he exercised a powerful

influence on the progress of thought in Europe; but although a great thinker, he was not a brave man, and the fear of giving offence to the church and government, has certainly prevented him from making public some of his writings, and perhaps has toned down some of those thoughts which, when first uttered, took a higher flight, and struck full home to the truth itself.

¶ The father and founder of the deductive method, Des Cartes still proudly reigns to the present day, although some of his conclusions have been overturned, and others of his thinkings have been carried to conclusions which he never dared to dream of. He gave a strong aid to the tendency of advancing civilisation, to separate philosophy from theology, thereby striking a blow, slow in its effect, but firm and effectual in its destructive operation, on all priestcraft. In his dedication of the 'Meditations,' he says, 'I have always thought that the two questions of the existence of God, and the nature of the soul, were the chief of those which ought to be demonstrated rather by philosophy than by theology: for although it is sufficient for us, the faithful, to believe in God, and that the soul does not perish with the body, it does not seem possible ever to persuade the Infidels to any religion, unless we first prove to them these two things by natural reason.'

Having relinquished faith, he found that he must choose an entirely new path in which to march with reason; the old ways were so cumbered with priests and Bibles, that progression would have been impossible. This gave us his method. He wanted a starting point from which to reason, some indisputable fact upon which to found future thinkings.

'He has given us the detailed history of his doubts. He has told us how he found that he could, plausibly enough, doubt of everything except his own existence. He pushed his scepticism to the verge of self-annihilation. There he stopped: there in self, there in his consciousness, he found at last an irresistible fact, an irreversible certainty. Firm ground was discovered. He could doubt the existence of the external world, and treat it as a phantasm. He could doubt the existence of God, and treat the belief as a superstition. But of the existence of his own thinking, doubting mind, no sort of doubt was possible. He, the doubter, existed if nothing else existed. The existence that was revealed to him in his own consciousness, was the primary fact, the first indubitable certainty. Hence his famous *Cogito, ergo Sum*: I think, therefore I am.'—(Lewes's *Bio. Hist. Phil.*)

Proceeding from the certainty of his existence, Des Cartes endeavours to find other equally certain facts, and for that purpose presents the following doctrine and rules for our guidance:—The basis of all certitude is consciousness, consciousness is the sole foundation of absolute certainty, whatever it distinctly proclaims must be true. The process is, therefore, rendered clear and simple: examine your consciousness—each distinct reply will be a fact.

He tells us further that all clear ideas are true—that whatever is clearly and distinctly conceived is true—and in these lies the vitality of his system, the cause of the truth or error of his thinkings.

The following are the rules he gave us for the detection and separation of true ideas from false (*i.e.*, imperfect or complex):—

'1. Never to accept anything as true but what is evidently so; to admit nothing but what so clearly and distinctly presents itself as true, that there can be no reason to doubt it.

'2. To divide every question into as many separate parts as possible, that each part being more easily conceived, the whole may be more intelligible.

'3. To conduct the examination with order, beginning by that of objects the most simple, and therefore the easiest to be known, and ascending little by little up to knowledge of the most complex.

'4. To make such exact calculations, and such circumspections as to be confident that nothing essential has been omitted. Consciousness being the basis of all certitude, everything of which you are clearly and distinctly conscious must be true: everything which you clearly and distinctly conceive, exists, if the idea of it involve existence.'

In these four rules we have the essential part of one half of Des Cartes system, the other, which is equally important, is the attempt to solve metaphysical problems by mathematical aid. To mathematics he had devoted much of his time. He it was who, at the age of twenty-three, made the grand discovery of the applicability of algebra to geometry. While deeply engaged in mathematical studies and investigations, he came to the conclusion that mathematics were capable of a still further simplification, and of much more extended application. Impressed with the certainty of the conclusions arrived at by the aid of mathematical reasoning, he began to apply mathematics to metaphysics.

His ambition was to found a system which should be solid and convincing. Having searched for certitude, he had found its basis in consciousness; he next wanted a *method*, and hoped he had found it in mathematics. He tells us that 'Those long chains of reasoning, all simple and easy, by which geometers used to arrive at their most difficult demonstrations, suggested to him that all things which came within human knowledge, must follow each other in a similar chain; and that provided we abstain from admitting anything as true which is not so, and that we always preserve in them the order necessary to deduce one from the other, there can be none so remote to which we cannot finally attain, nor so obscure but that we may discover them.'

Acting out this, he dealt with metaphysics as we should with a problem from Euclid, and expected by rigorous reasoning to discover the truth. He, like Archimedes, had wished for a standing place from which to use the lever, that should overturn the world; but, having a sure standing place in the indubitable fact of his own existence, he did not possess sufficient courage to put forth the mighty power—it was left for one who came after him to fairly attempt the overthrow of the world of error so long existent.

Cartesianism was sufficiently obnoxious to the divines to provoke their wrath; and yet, from some of its peculiarities, it has found many opponents amongst the philosophical party. The Cartesian philosophy is founded on two great principles, the one metaphysical, the other physical. The metaphysical is Des Cartes' foundation-stone—the 'I think, therefore I am.' This has been warmly attacked as not being logical. Des Cartes said his existence was a fact—a fact above and beyond all logic; logic could neither prove nor disprove it. The *Cogito, ergo Sum*, was not new itself, but it was the first stone of a new building—the first step in a new road: from this fact Des Cartes tried to reach another, and from that others.

The physical principle is that nothing exists but substance, which he makes of two kinds—the one a substance that thinks, the other a substance extended. Actual thought and actual extension are the essence of substance, so that the thinking substance cannot be without some actual thought, nor can anything be retrenched from the extension of a thing, without taking away so much of its actual substance.

In his physical speculations, Des Cartes has allowed his imagination to

run very wild. His famous theory of vortices is an example of this. Assuming extension to be the essence of substance, he denied the possibility of a vacuum by that assumption; for if extension be the essence of substance, wherever extension is, there substance must be. This substance he assumes to have originally been divided into equal angular particles, each endowed with an equal degree of motion; several systems or collections of these particles he holds to have a motion about certain equi-distant points, or centres, and that the particles moving round these composed so many vortices. These angular particles, by their intestine motions, he supposes to become, as it were, ground into a spherical form; the parts rubbed off are called matter of the first element, while the spherical globules he calls matter of the second element; and since there would be a large quantity of this element, he supposes it to be driven towards the centre of each vortex by the circular motion of the globules, and that there it forms a large spherical body such as the sun. This sun being thus formed, and moving about its own axis with the common matter of the vortex, would necessarily throw out some parts of its matter, through the vacuities of the globules of the second element constituting the vortex; and this especially at such places as are farthest from its poles; receiving, at the same time in, by these poles, as much as it loses in its equatorial parts. And, by these means, it would be able to carry round with it those globules that are nearest, with the greater velocity; and the remoter, with less. And, further: those globules which are nearest the centre of the sun, must be smallest; because, were they greater, or equal, they would, by reason of their velocity, have a greater centrifugal force, and recede from the centre. If it should happen that any of these sun-like bodies, in the centres of the several vortices, should be so incrustated and weakened, as to be carried about in the vortex of the true sun: if it were of less solidity, or had less motion than the globules towards the extremity of the solar vortex, it would descend towards the sun, till it met with globules of the same solidity, and susceptible of the same degree of motion with itself; and thus, being fixed there, it would be for ever after carried about by the motion of the vortex, without either approaching any nearer to, or receding from the sun, and so become a planet. Supposing, then, all this, we are next to imagine that our system was at first divided into several vortices, in the centre of each of which was a lucid spherical body; and that some of these being gradually incrustated, were swallowed up by others which were larger, and more powerful, till at last they were all destroyed and swallowed up by the biggest solar vortex, except some few which were thrown off in right lines from one vortex to another, and so became comets. It should also be added, that in addition to the two elements mentioned above, those particles which may yet exist, and be only in the course of reduction to their globular form, and still retain their angular proportions, form a third element.

This theory has found many opponents; but in this state of our work we conceive our duty to be that of giving a simple narrative of the philosopher's ideas, rather than a history of the various criticisms upon those ideas, the more especially as our pages scarcely afford room for such a mode of treatment.

Having formed his method, Des Cartes proceeded to apply it. The basis of certitude being consciousness, he interrogated his consciousness, and found that he had an idea of a substance infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, omniscient, omnipotent. This he called an idea of God: he said, 'I exist as a miserably imperfect finite being, subject to change—ignorant, incapable of creating anything—I find, by my finitude that I am not the

infinite; by my liability to change that I am not the immutable; by my ignorance that I am not the omniscient: in short, by my imperfection, that I am not the perfect. Yet an infinite, immutable, omniscient, and perfect being must exist, because infinity, immutability, omniscience, and perfection are applied as correlatives in my ideas of finitude, change, etc. God therefore exists: his existence is clearly proclaimed in my consciousness, and therefore ceases to be a matter of doubt any more than the fact of my own existence. The conception of an infinite being proved his real existence, for if there is not really such a being I must have made the conception; but if I could make it I can also unmake it, which evidently is not true; therefore there must be externally to myself, an archetype from which the conception was derived.' * * * * * 'All that we clearly and distinctly conceive as contained in anything is true of that thing.'

* Now, we conceive clearly and distinctly that the existence of God is contained in the idea we have of him: *ergo*—God exists.'—(Leaves's *Bio. Hist. Phil.*)

Des Cartes was of opinion that his demonstrations of the existence of God 'equal or even surpass in certitude the demonstrations of geometry.' In this opinion we must confess we cannot share. He has already told us that the basis of all certitude is consciousness—that whatever is clearly and distinctly conceived, must be true—that imperfect and complex conceptions are false ones. The first proposition, all must admit, is applicable to themselves. I conceive a fact clearly and distinctly, and, despite all resistance, am compelled to accept that fact; and if that fact be accepted beyond doubt, no higher degree of certainty can be attained. That two and two are four—that I exist—are facts which I never doubt. The *Cogito, ergo Sum*, is irresistible, because indubitable; but *Cogito, ergo Deus est*, is a sentence requiring much consideration, and upon the face of it is no syllogism, but, on the contrary, is illogical. If Des Cartes meant 'I' am conscious that I am not the whole of existence, he would be indisputable; but if he mean that 'I' can be conscious of an existence entirely distinct, apart from, and external to, that very consciousness; then his whole reasoning from that point appears fallacious.

We use the word 'I' as given by Des Cartes. Mill, in his 'System of Logic,' says, 'The ambiguity in this case is in the pronoun I, by which in one place is to be understood *my will*: in another *the laws of my nature*. If the conception, existing as it does in my mind, had no original without, the conclusion would unquestionably follow that "I" had made it—that is, that the laws of my nature had spontaneously evolved it; but that *my will* made it would not follow. Now, when Des Cartes afterwards adds that I cannot unmake the conception, he means that I cannot get rid of it by an act of my will, which is true; but is not the proposition required. That what some of the laws of my nature have produced, other laws, or those same laws in other circumstances, might not subsequently efface, he would have found it difficult to establish.'

Treating the existence of God as demonstrated from the *a priori* idea of perfection and infinity, and by the clearness of his idea of God's existence, Des Cartes then proceeds to deal with the distinction between body and soul. To prove this distinction was to him an easy matter. The fundamental and essential attribute of substance must be extension, because we can denude substance of every quality but that of extension; this we cannot touch without at the same time affecting the substance. The fundamental attribute of mind is thought; it is in the act of thinking that the consciousness of existence is revealed: to be without thought would be to be without consciousness.