

**Reading Questions: Descartes, Preface to *Principles of Philosophy*;  
Correspondence between Descartes and Elisabeth; and Selections from *Passions  
of the Soul***

1. How much does Descartes think his philosophy explains or “encompasses?” Is it useful for individuals’ daily lives or only for understanding the natural world?
2. What are the four ways to wisdom? What is the fifth way?
3. How did Descartes discover the principles of his philosophy?
4. Who does Descartes think can grasp the new philosophy? How does his view compare with Plato’s?
5. How does Descartes conceive of morals and how does it relate to other branches of knowledge?
6. How does Elisabeth feel about her life when she is not reading philosophy? How does this preoccupation affect her expectations for what Descartes’s philosophy should be able to do?
7. What school of ancient philosophical thought do Elisabeth and Descartes discuss (though not by name)? How does Descartes revise or adapt this school of thought in his account of the passions?
8. For what purpose does Elisabeth suppose we require an “infinite science?”
9. What is Descartes’s conception of virtue? What is the role of knowledge in living the best life, according to Descartes?
10. To what does Descartes compare the workings of the human body in the *Passions of the Soul* in comparing a live to a dead body?
11. What kind of explanation does Descartes offer regarding the movement of the body? Does it rely upon invisible forces? What are “animal spirits?”
12. How does Descartes define the passions? Where do they come from?
13. How does the soul affect and control the body? Why does the soul fail to have full control over the passions?
14. Does Descartes think the soul is divided in to higher and lower parts? If not, how does he explain feelings of internal conflict?