For most readers of Descartes, the topic of Descartes’ relations with the scholastics brings to mind his disparaging comments about the philosophy he was taught: “in my college days I discovered that nothing can be imagined which is too strange or incredible to have been said by some philosopher.”1 Descartes, in the *Discourse on Method*, seemed to find little worthwhile in his education, including his schooling in scholastic philosophy and the sciences; at best, “philosophy gives us the means of speaking plausibly about any subject and of winning the admiration of the less learned,” and “jurisprudence, medicine, and other sciences bring honors and riches to those who cultivate them”;2 but “there is still no point in [philosophy] which is not disputed and hence doubtful” and, “as for the other sciences, insofar as they borrow their principles from philosophy . . . nothing solid could have been built upon such shaky foundations.”3

Obviously, the Descartes of the *Discourse* represented himself as dissatisfied with school learning in general. When reading his correspondence, however, one can catch a glimpse of a different Descartes. In 1638, approximately a year after the publication of the *Discourse*, Descartes wrote a letter responding to a request for his opinion about adequate schooling for the correspondent’s son. In the letter, Descartes attempted to dissuade the correspondent from sending his son to school in Holland. According to Descartes, “there is no place on earth where philosophy is better taught than at La Flèche,” the Jesuit institution in which he studied. Descartes gave four reasons for preferring La Flèche. First, he asserted, “philosophy is taught very poorly here [in Holland]; professors teach only one hour a day, for approximately half the year, without

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1 AT VI, 16: CSM I, 118. The statement is ambiguous, of course, between Descartes having been taught the Ciceronian phrase and having come to realize the matter himself. The pronouncements of the *Discourse* are formulae that echo standard skeptical assertions; for the literary background to the *Discourse*, see Gilson, *Discours de la méthode texte et commentaire*.

2 AT VI, 6: CSM I, 113.

3 AT VI, 8–9: CSM I, 115.
ever dictating any writings, nor completing their courses in a determinate time.” Second, Descartes advised, “it would be too great a change for someone, when first leaving home, to study in another country, with a different language, mode of living, and religion”; La Flèche was not far from the correspondent’s home, and “there are so many young people there from all parts of France, and they form such a varied mixture that, by conversing with them, one learns almost as much as if one traveled far.” Descartes then praised as a beneficial innovation the “equality that the Jesuits maintain among themselves, treating in almost the same fashion the highest born and the least.” Most importantly, Descartes asserted that although, in his opinion, “it is not as if everything taught in philosophy is as true as the Gospels, nevertheless, because philosophy is the key to the other sciences,” he believes that “it is extremely useful to have studied the whole philosophy curriculum, in the manner it is taught in Jesuit institutions before undertaking to raise one’s mind above pedantry, in order to make oneself wise in the right kind [of philosophy].”

Of course, preferring La Flèche to a Dutch educational institution is not the same as giving an unqualified endorsement to La Flèche. On the other hand, some of Descartes’ pronouncements, especially his last assertion, do seem inconsistent with those of the Discourse. How can the Descartes of the Discourse recommend learning scholastic philosophy as preparatory to the sciences and to his own philosophy? Is not the study of scholastic philosophy antithetical to the Cartesian project to cleanse oneself of the effects of years of dependence on the senses? Would not the study of scholastic philosophy merely reinforce those bad habits? Still, Descartes’ advice in his letter seems open and frank, and Descartes’ first three assertions in the letter correlate very well with what one can discover to have been the case in seventeenth-century Jesuit education.

Descartes was right in suggesting that students would have been taught more philosophy, and would have been taught it more rigorously at La Flèche than at a Dutch college or university. The philosophy curriculum at La Flèche is fairly well-known, and the daily routine of its students well-documented. At La Flèche, as in other Jesuit colleges of the time, the curriculum in philosophy would have lasted three years (the final three

4 AT II, 378.
5 For more information concerning La Flèche and its curriculum, consult Rochemonteix 1899; a popular exposition of the same material can be found in Sirven 1987.
6 For other colleges, as well as for general Jesuit educational theory, see: Wallace 1984; Monumenta Paedagogica Societatis Jesu 1901; Dainville 1987; and Brockliss 1981 and 1987.