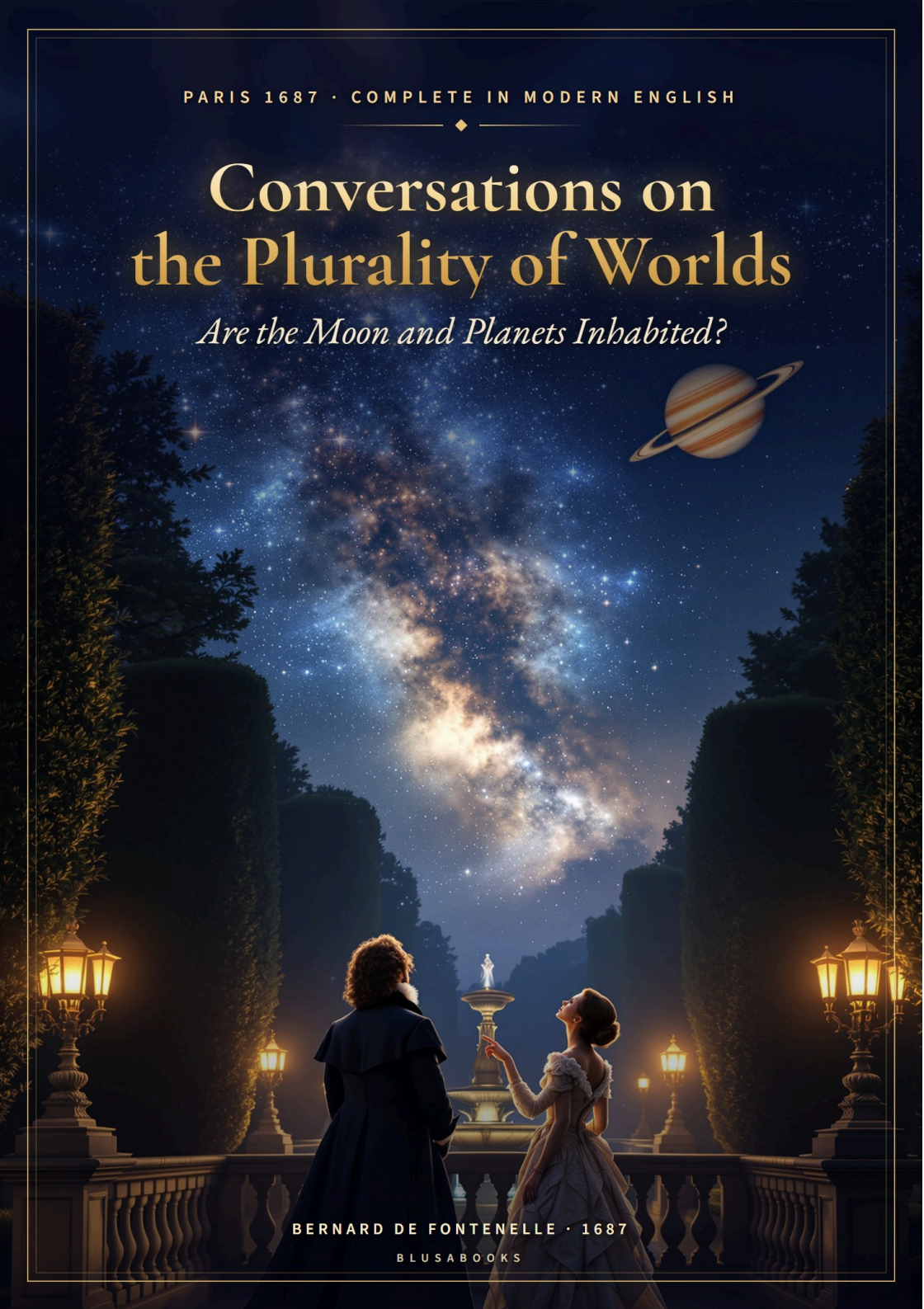
PARIS 1687 · COMPLETE IN MODERN ENGLISH

# Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds

*Are the Moon and Planets Inhabited?*



BERNARD DE FONTENELLE · 1687

BLUSABOOKS

BOOKS OF WISDOM · OTHER WORLDS

# Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds

*Are the Moon and Planets Inhabited? (1687)*

Six evening conversations with a young Marquise in a château park: on the turning Earth, the inhabitants of the Moon and the planets, and the stars that are other suns. Complete in modern English from the French edition of 1687

BlusaBooks · MMXXVI

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# PREFACE

**Conversations by moonlight.** One autumn a young philosopher is staying at a country château, and his only company is the lady of the house, the young Marquise. On a warm evening after supper the two of them walk in the park, the moonlight falls through the branches, and the talk turns, almost by chance, to the stars. So begin six evenings of conversation. On the first evening the philosopher explains to the Marquise that the Earth is a planet which turns on itself and around the Sun. On the second he argues that the Moon may well be an inhabited earth just like ours. On the third he admits himself that the Moon seems to have neither clouds nor water, yet he will not give up its inhabitants and leads the Marquise further, to the other planets. On the fourth evening the two of them imagine who lives on each one: on Venus, gallant and passionate lovers; Mercury is the "madhouse" of the universe, where the heat has driven people out of their wits; and on distant, cold Saturn live phlegmatic creatures who never laugh and answer a question only the next day. The fifth evening brings the great leap: the fixed stars are suns, and each of them may light a world of its own. The sixth evening takes place long after the others and brings the latest discoveries made in the heavens.

**Who Fontenelle was.** Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle was born in Rouen in 1657 and died in Paris in 1757, only a little before his hundredth birthday. His mother was the sister of the playwrights Pierre and Thomas Corneille. As a young man Fontenelle wrote poems, plays and opera librettos, and in 1683 he published his witty *Dialogues of the Dead*, but it was this book that made him famous. In 1691 he was elected to the Académie française, and from 1697 to 1740 he was the permanent secretary of the Paris Academy of Sciences. For almost half a century he told the public about the work of scientists and wrote the memorial eulogies of

academicians who had died, and he is often called one of the first popularisers of science.

**A book for ladies.** The *Conversations* appeared in Paris in 1686 and became one of the first works of popular science in Europe. They were written not in Latin for learned men but in French, in the tone of a salon conversation, and meant also for readers who had never opened a book of astronomy. In his preface Fontenelle says that he asks of ladies no more attention than they need to read the fashionable novel *The Princess of Cleves*. There are no formulas here: the motion of the Earth is explained by a ball rolling along a garden path, the workings of the universe by the stage machinery of the opera, and other worlds by the view from the towers of Paris towards distant Saint-Denis.

**The Marquise.** His companion is not just a listener. The Marquise objects, teases, demands simpler proofs and sometimes guesses more than she has been told. Fontenelle writes that the only thing she lacks is books — an unusual thing to say about a woman's mind at the time. It is often thought that the model for the Marquise was Marguerite de La Mésangère, an acquaintance of Fontenelle's from Normandy, but this has never been proved.

**Descartes' universe.** Fontenelle still explains the world as René Descartes did: space is filled with a fine "celestial matter" that turns in vast vortices, and these carry the planets along as a river carries boats. By a curious coincidence, Isaac Newton's *Principia*, which replaced the vortices with gravity, came out in the same year, 1687, as this enlarged edition. In France Newton's ideas won only in the middle of the eighteenth century, and Fontenelle remained faithful to Descartes to the end of his life.

**Inhabitants who are not men at all.** Fontenelle peoples the Moon and all the planets, but in his preface he warns at once that these are inhabitants who are not men at all. In this way he steps around the dangerous question of whether the people of other worlds would be descendants of Adam. Caution was needed. In 1633 Galileo had been condemned in Rome for defending the system of Copernicus, and Giordano Bruno, who taught that there are countless worlds,

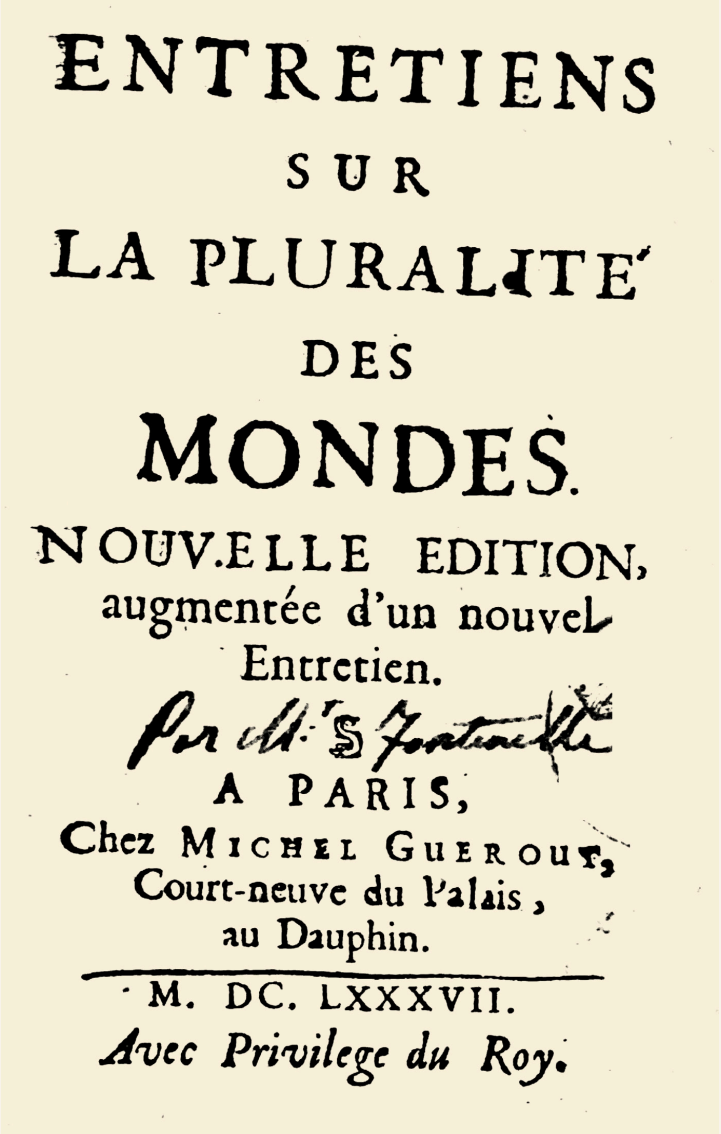
had been burned in 1600. So Fontenelle presents it all as a light game of the mind, which the philosopher believes only because it gives him pleasure.

**The new edition.** The first edition had five evenings. For the "new edition" of 1687 Fontenelle added a sixth, with a short introduction saying that this conversation took place long after the others.

**Influence.** The book was reprinted and translated throughout the eighteenth century. In English it appeared as early as 1688, in two translations at once: Aphra Behn's *A Discovery of New Worlds* and the translation by John Glanvill.

**Our series "Other Worlds".** Before Fontenelle, the heroes of Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1638; our No. 87) and Cyrano de Bergerac's *The World in the Moon* (1659; No. 88) flew to the Moon on the wings of fantasy. Fontenelle turns the same question into a conversation about science. After him, Christiaan Huygens in *Cosmotheoros* (1698; No. 91) reasons seriously about the inhabitants of the planets, Voltaire's *Micromegas* (1752; No. 92) brings visitors to Earth from Sirius and Saturn, and Emanuel Swedenborg in *Earths in the Universe* (1758; No. 93) tells of the spirits of other planets.

**Our edition.** This is the complete text, sentence by sentence, rendered into modern English from the pages of the French edition of 1687; nothing has been left out or retold. The words and views of the period are kept as in the original; the footnotes explain them. The evening titles and their subtitles come from the original. At the beginning of the book is the title page of the 1687 edition, at the end of the Third Evening the woodcut vignette from the same edition, and at the start of the evenings and within the text there are modern colour illustrations. At the end of the book each evening has a commentary — "In plain words" and "What science says".



ENTRETIENS
SUR
LA PLURALITE'
DES
MONDES.
NOUVELLE EDITION,
augmentée d'un nouvel
Entretien.
Par M.r S Fontenelle
A PARIS,
Chez MICHEL GUEROUT,
Court-neuve du Palais,
au Dauphin.
M. DC. LXXXVII.
Avec Privilege du Roy.

*The original title page: "Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds. New edition, enlarged with a new Conversation", Paris, 1687*

# THE AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I find myself in very nearly the same position as Cicero[1], when he undertook to set out in his own language matters of philosophy that until then had been treated only in Greek. He tells us that people said his works would be quite useless, because those who loved philosophy, having already taken the trouble to seek it out in Greek books, would not afterwards care to look for it in Latin books, which would not be the originals; while those who had no taste for philosophy would not bother with it either in Latin or in Greek. To this he replies that the very opposite would happen: those who were not philosophers would be tempted to become so by the ease of reading Latin books, and those who already were philosophers, through reading Greek books, would be glad to see how these things had been handled in Latin.

Cicero was right to speak so. The excellence of his genius and the great reputation he had already won guaranteed the success of this new kind of work he was giving the public; but I am far from having the same grounds for confidence in an undertaking almost like his. I have tried to treat philosophy in a manner that is not philosophical at all; I have tried to bring it to a point where it would be neither too dry for people of the world[2] nor too playful for the learned. But if I am told, much as Cicero was, that such a work suits neither the learned, who can learn nothing from it, nor people of the world, who will have no wish to learn anything from it, I shall take good care not to answer as he did. It may very well be that, in seeking a middle ground where philosophy would suit everyone, I have

1. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC), Roman orator and philosopher; he recalls this story at the opening of his treatise "On the Ends of Good and Evil".
2. French "gens du monde": polite society, the people of the court and the salons, cultivated but not scholars; it is for them, and for the ladies, that Fontenelle writes.

found one where it suits no one. Middle grounds are too hard to hold, and I do not believe I shall ever feel the urge to put myself to the same trouble a second time.

I must warn those who read this book and have some knowledge of physics that I have not in the least claimed to instruct them, but only to entertain them, by presenting to them in a somewhat more pleasant and lively manner what they already know more thoroughly; and I warn those to whom these matters are new that I believed I could instruct and entertain them at the same time. The first will be going against my intention if they look here for usefulness, and the second if they look for nothing but pleasure.

I shall not waste time saying that I have chosen, out of the whole of philosophy, the subject best able to excite curiosity. It seems that nothing ought to interest us more than knowing how this world we live in is made, and whether there are other worlds like it, which are inhabited too. But after all, let whoever wishes trouble himself about all that; those who have thoughts to waste may waste them on such subjects, but not everyone is in a position to afford this useless expense.

In these conversations I have placed a woman who is being taught and who has never heard such things spoken of. I thought this fiction would serve me both to make the work more capable of charm, and to encourage the ladies by the example of a woman who, never stepping outside the bounds proper to a person with no tincture of science, nevertheless understands what she is told, and arranges in her head without confusion the vortices[3] and the worlds. Why should there be women who would fall behind this imaginary Marquise, who understands only what she cannot help understanding?

It is true she applies herself a little; but what does applying oneself mean here? It is not penetrating by dint of meditation something obscure in itself or obscurely explained; it is only never reading without clearly picturing what one

3. Descartes' theory (1644): the universe is filled with a subtle matter whirling in vast vortices around each star and carrying the planets along. Today we know the planets are held in orbit by gravity, as Newton showed in 1687.

reads. For this whole system of philosophy I ask of the ladies no more than the same attention one must give to *The Princess of Clèves*[4] if one wants to follow its plot properly and appreciate all its beauty. It is true that the ideas in this book are less familiar to most women than those of *The Princess of*

*Clèves*, but they are no more obscure, and I am sure that after a second reading at the most, nothing will have escaped them.

Since I did not mean to build a system in the air, with no foundation at all, I have used real arguments from physics, and as many of them as were necessary. But it happens, fortunately, that in this subject the ideas of physics are delightful in themselves, and that at the very moment they satisfy reason, they offer the imagination a spectacle that pleases it as much as if it had been made expressly for it.

Where I found some pieces that were not quite of this kind, I gave them borrowed ornaments. Virgil did the same in his *Georgics*[5], where he redeems the substance of his subject, which is entirely dry, by frequent and often very pleasant digressions. Even Ovid did as much in the *Art of Love*[6], although the substance of his subject was infinitely more agreeable than anything he could mix into it. Apparently he thought it tedious to talk always of one and the same thing, even were it love-making. As for me, who needed the help of digressions more than he did, I have nevertheless used them with considerable restraint. I have justified them by the natural freedom of conversation; I have placed them only where I thought the reader would be glad to find them; I have put most of them at the beginning of the work, because at that point the mind is not yet sufficiently used to the main ideas I am offering it. Finally, I have taken them from my subject itself, or from somewhere quite close to it.

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4. Madame de La Fayette's novel (1678), then the most widely read book in every Paris salon; often called the first French psychological novel.
5. Publius Vergilius Maro (70–19 BC), Roman poet; the *Georgics* is a poem on farming, vines, cattle and bee-keeping, which he enlivens with myths and vivid scenes.
6. Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BC – c. AD 17); the *Ars amatoria* is a playful verse guide to winning and keeping a lover.

I did not want to imagine anything about the inhabitants of the worlds that would be entirely impossible and fanciful. I have tried to say everything one could reasonably think about them, and even the visions I have added to this have some real foundation. The true and the false are mixed here, but they are always easy to tell apart. I do not undertake to justify so odd a compound; that is the most important point of this work, and it is precisely the one I cannot account for.

All that remains for me in this preface is to address one sort of person, but they will perhaps be the hardest to satisfy — not that one has no very good reasons to give them, but because they seem not to accept, unless they choose to, any reason however good. These are the overscrupulous, who may imagine there is some danger to religion in placing inhabitants anywhere other than on the Earth. I respect even the excessive sensitivities people have in matters of religion, and I would have respected this one too, to the point of not wishing to offend it in this work, if it were contrary to the opinion I have taken up. But — and this may surprise you — it does not even touch this system, in which I fill with inhabitants an infinity of worlds. One need only untangle a small error of the imagination. When you are told that the Moon is inhabited, you at once picture men there made just like us, and then, if you are a bit of a theologian, you are full of difficulties. The posterity of Adam cannot have spread as far as the Moon, nor sent colonies to that country. So the men who are in the Moon are not sons of Adam. Now it would be awkward in theology for there to be men who were not descended from him[7]. There is no need to say more; every imaginable difficulty comes down to this, and the terms one would have to use in a longer explanation are too worthy of respect to be put into a book as little serious as this one. The objection, then, rests entirely on the men in the Moon; but it is those who raise it who put men in the Moon — I put none there. I put inhabitants there who are not at all men. What are they, then? I have not seen them; it is not because I have seen them that I speak of them. And do not suspect that it is an evasion I am using

7. In Church teaching all humanity descends from Adam, and the doctrines of original sin and redemption rest on this; men in other worlds would complicate it. Hence Fontenelle's careful insistence that his inhabitants are not "men".