

MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY¹

*in which are demonstrated the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and the body*²

by Rene Descartes

originally published in Latin, 1641

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AT 17

FIRST MEDITATION

*What can be called into doubt*³

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.⁴ But the task looked an enormous one, and I began to wait until I should reach a mature enough age to ensure that no subsequent time of life would be more suitable for tackling such inquiries. This led me to put the project off for so long that I would now be to blame if by pondering over it any further I wasted the time still left for carrying it out. So today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions.

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But to accomplish this, it will not be necessary for me to show that all my opinions are false, which is something I could perhaps never manage. Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. And to do this

¹Descartes is following Aristotle in using the phrase “first philosophy” to mean metaphysics. Metaphysics is the study of what there really, fundamentally is in the world.

²This is the subtitle to the Meditations that Descartes added in a later edition. In it Descartes mentions two important things that he thinks he proves in the Meditations.

³Descartes’s overall plan for these Meditations is to put aside all of his beliefs and attempt to build up a system of beliefs from nothing. He is going to only believe those things that are certain, that cannot be doubted. He thinks that he can start from nothing, justify certain simple beliefs, and from those justify more complex ordinary beliefs. In this first meditation he is going to cease to believe anything that can be doubted, anything that can be “called into doubt”. So, this meditation is an attempt to say which beliefs can be doubted.

⁴This is what he is going to do in these Meditations.

I will not need to run through them all individually, which would be an endless task. Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested.⁵

AT 18

Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses.⁶ But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.⁷

AT 18

Yet although the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses - for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine?⁸ Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.⁹

AT 19

A brilliant piece of reasoning!¹⁰ As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake - indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events - that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire - when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!¹¹ Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly

⁵In this paragraph, Descartes lays out the standard that he will use throughout this meditation: he will cease to believe those things that can be doubted. If he can doubt it at all, then he will withhold belief in it. But he isn't going to go through each individual belief and check to see whether it can be doubted. He has a more efficient method, which he can employ because many beliefs are based on "basic principles". He will see if he can doubt these basic principles, and if he can, then he will have doubted all the other beliefs that rely on them. This way, he can "demolish" whole swaths of beliefs at a time.

⁶Here is considering whether he can doubt beliefs that he has based on his senses. So we might say that the first "basic principle" that he considers is something like: '*trust whatever my senses tell me*'. Now the question is whether he can doubt this basic principle. Does it ever, or could it ever, lead him astray?

⁷That was quick. He rejects the principle '*trust whatever my senses tell me*' because his senses have led him astray in the past.

⁸Even though his senses have deceived him in the past, they have deceived him about things that are small and far away. For instance, you might look at a dark spot on the wall and think that it is a spider. But when you look closer you see that it is only a smudge. So your senses deceived you. But, Descartes thinks, maybe the senses only deceive when it comes to small and distant things. So we get a new basic principle, which we might state with something like '*trust whatever my senses tell me about large and nearby things*'. Now the question is whether he can doubt this basic principle and all the beliefs that are based upon it. Surely, he says, he can trust anything his senses tell him about large and nearby things, right?

⁹Here, starting with "Unless...", we have a little discussion of the possibility that Descartes is insane. It is very interesting and Descartes seems to conclude that this possibility—the possibility that he is insane—is not something that it makes sense for him to consider. It is hard to say why exactly he rejects this possibility, but let's put this issue aside for the moment and try to get a grip on the main situation in this first meditation. So, for now, ignore the whole section starting with "Unless..." and going to the end of the paragraph. Remember, Descartes has suggested that he can trust anything his senses tell him about large and nearby things.

¹⁰This sentence is sarcastic. Descartes is referring to the line of thought that he laid out in the last paragraph—that he can trust whatever his senses tell him about things that are not small and distant. As we see in the next few sentences, Descartes thinks that he can reject this principle as well because of the possibility that he might be dreaming. So when Descartes says "A brilliant piece of reasoning!", referring to the idea that he can trust his senses about anything that is large enough and close enough, he is being sarcastic. There is another sentence in this paragraph—a short one, so short that it may not even be a full sentence—that is meant sarcastically. Figure out which one it is.

¹¹Descartes has introduced the possibility that he is dreaming. We can call this "dream skepticism". The idea is that Descartes might be dreaming, and if he is, then all of the things that his senses tell him, even about large and nearby things, is false. If it is possible that he is dreaming, then he can doubt the truth of those things that his senses tell him.

wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep.¹²

AT 19

Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars - that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands - are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all. Nonetheless, it must surely be admitted that the visions which come in sleep are like paintings, which must have been fashioned in the likeness of things that are real, and hence that at least these general kinds of things - eyes, head, hands and the body as a whole - are things which are not imaginary but are real and exist. For even when painters try to create sirens and satyrs with the most extraordinary bodies, they cannot give them natures which are new in all respects; they simply jumble up the limbs of different animals. Or if perhaps they manage to think up something so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before - something which is therefore completely fictitious and unreal - at least the colours used in the composition must be real. By similar reasoning, although these general kinds of things - eyes, head, hands and so on - could be imaginary, it must at least be admitted that certain other even simpler and more universal things are real. These are as it were the real colours from which we form all the images of things, whether true or false, that occur in our thought.¹³

AT 20

This class appears to include corporeal nature in general, and its extension; the shape of extended things;

¹²This sentence is a joke. He can never tell if he is dreaming or not. That's a crazy fact, so crazy that it makes him lightheaded. Which makes him think that he must be asleep and dreaming. Maybe it's not the funniest joke of all time, but you get it, right?

¹³Okay, but even supposing that he is dreaming, there are some things he can be sure are true. For instance, if he is dreaming, then he can't be sure that there is a red book in front of him. But surely, he thinks, there is such a thing as *the color red*. The existence of colors is not ruled out by dream skepticism.

the quantity, or size and number of these things; the place in which they may exist, the time through which they may endure, and so on.¹⁴

AT 20

So a reasonable conclusion from this might be that physics, astronomy, medicine, and all other disciplines which depend on the study of composite things, are doubtful; while arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides.¹⁵ It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false.¹⁶

AT 21

And yet firmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature that I am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now?¹⁷ What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable?¹⁸ But perhaps God would not have allowed me to be deceived in this way, since he is said to be supremely good.¹⁹ But if it were inconsistent with his goodness to have created me such that I am deceived all the time, it would seem equally foreign to his goodness to allow me to be deceived even occasionally; yet this last assertion cannot be made.²⁰

AT 21

Perhaps there may be some who would prefer to deny the existence of so powerful a God rather than be-

¹⁴We get a list of some more of the things that he thinks are not cast into doubt by dream skepticism. First, there are some words in here that might need defining. “Corporeal” means having to do with body, or a body. It comes from the same root as “corpse”. “Extended” means having spatial shape and dimensions (breadth, length and depth). And “extension” is just the noun form of “extended”. So extension is just the quality that all extended things have, the quality of taking up space, being extended in space. Okay, so Descartes thinks that some simple, general things are not cast into doubt by dream skepticism. One of them is, as he says, “corporeal nature in general, and its extension.” What he means by this is that it is in the nature of corporeal stuff—material stuff—that it is extended. Without being able to trust his senses he might not be able to know the particular dimensions of particular corporeal objects—like how thick a particular book is—but he can still know that all corporeal things are extended—that the book has some thickness. So that is one belief that escapes dream skepticism: that corporeal things are extended. And he mentions others, e.g. that extended things have shape.

¹⁵Like general, simple truths about the nature of corporeal objects, Descartes also thinks that arithmetic and geometric truths don’t get cast into doubt by dream skepticism.

¹⁶So dream skepticism has ruled out most beliefs about the external, material world, but Descartes thinks that there are whole swaths of beliefs that are safe from dream skepticism. So we can think of these as a new principle. Maybe something like: ‘*trust truths of arithmetic and geometry, as well as the general nature of corporeal objects, the existence of shapes and numbers, etc.*’ This is the final basic principle that Descartes considers. If he can call it into doubt, then he will have doubted away all of his former beliefs.

¹⁷Here Descartes considers the possibility that even his beliefs of the nature of extended things, that they have shape, etc. are false because he might be being deceived by God, or some creature as powerful as God.

¹⁸And truths of arithmetic and geometry can also be cast into doubt. Also, this is a very interesting sentence because Descartes seems to doubt mathematical truths without supposing a malicious force deceiving him. He just appeals to the fact that other people seem to be convinced that they know something perfectly even though, in Descartes’s opinion, they are mistaken.

¹⁹So Descartes has been entertaining the possibility that God has chosen to deceive him about everything, even his beliefs about arithmetic and geometry. But in this sentence he considers an objection, a little argument for why it may be impossible for God to be deceiving him about that.

²⁰And Descartes then objects to the previous objection. In this sentence he says why it is possible for God to be deceiving him about lots of things, including arithmetic and geometry.

lieve that everything else is uncertain. Let us not argue with them, but grant them that everything said about God is a fiction.²¹ According to their supposition, then, I have arrived at my present state by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events, or by some other means; yet since deception and error seem to be imperfections, the less powerful they make my original cause, the more likely it is that I am so imperfect as to be deceived all the time. I have no answer to these arguments, but am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised; and this is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons. So in future I must withhold my assent from these former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods, if I want to discover any certainty.²²

AT 22

But it is not enough merely to have noticed this; I must make an effort to remember it. My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom. I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions, so long as I suppose them to be what in fact they are, namely highly probable opinions - opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny.²³ In view of this, I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary. I shall do this until the weight of preconceived opinion is counter-balanced and the distorting influence of habit no longer prevents my judgement from perceiving things correctly. In the meantime, I know that no danger or error will result from my plan, and that I cannot possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude. This is because the task now in hand does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge.²⁴

AT 22

²¹In the last paragraph, Descartes was able to call all of his remaining beliefs into doubt by considering the possibility that God was deceiving him. But this argument will not be convincing to atheists. Here, and in the following sentence, Descartes attempts to extend the point in such a way that it is convincing even to atheists. He will try to say why even atheists should doubt all of their remaining beliefs.

²²So Descartes seems to conclude that he can doubt all of his beliefs. He will treat all of these beliefs that he can doubt as if he knew for a fact that they were false—that is, he will cease to believe them.

²³Descartes has determined, at least for the moment, that he can doubt all of his beliefs. And as a result he has decided to treat these doubt-able beliefs as if they “were obvious falsehoods”. But, of course, all of these doubt-able beliefs are not obvious falsehoods. So what justification is there for Descartes treating them as if they were obvious falsehoods? This paragraph discusses this.

²⁴It make sense to treat probably true but doubt-able beliefs as if they were obviously false because of the purpose of these meditations is not just to determine what to believe, but to determine what can be known with a higher-than-usual standard of warrant or justification.

I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me.²⁵ I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things.²⁶ I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree.²⁷ But this is an arduous undertaking, and a kind of laziness brings me back to normal life. I am like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep; as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can. In the same way, I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised.²⁸

²⁵Here Descartes repeats and gives a more vivid description of the final skeptical possibility that he has considered. The “malicious demon” is a very powerful creature that might be deceiving him about everything that he believes. Since this is a possibility, it seems, at least for the moment, that none of Descartes’s beliefs are free from doubt.

²⁶This is a limited review of some of the things that Descartes will cease to believe because they are cast into doubt by the malicious demon skeptical hypothesis.

²⁷Descartes is going to guard against believing falsehoods by refusing to believe anything that the malicious demon could deceive him about. At the moment it is looking like the malicious demon could deceive him about anything.

²⁸Okay. That’s the First Meditation. Here is a good way to both test your understanding and reinforce your understanding so that you remember it: write down or say out loud, in your words, a summary of what Descartes has claimed in this meditation and what his reasons for claiming those things. In order to do this successfully, you will almost certainly have to go back and read through the meditation again. Go on. It’s not long. Go do it. Also, at this point you might think, “Well, that sounds like good advice—this whole summarize-the-central-ideas-in-the-text thing. Of course, I am not going to *actually* write down this summary, or, even worse, say it out-loud. That would be silly. I will just think through it quickly in my head.” No! That’s a big mistake. What makes sense to you when to think it silently in your head might not make sense when you try to articulate it and express it. The standards are way lower in there. If you want to be sure you understand something you have to try to say it. You will probably find that it does not come out as clearly and well-organized as it was in your head. It seems like you had a clear, organized thought and now you can’t express it. Here is the hard truth: if this happens, then you never had a clear, organized thought in the first place. Go back. Reread the text. And try again.