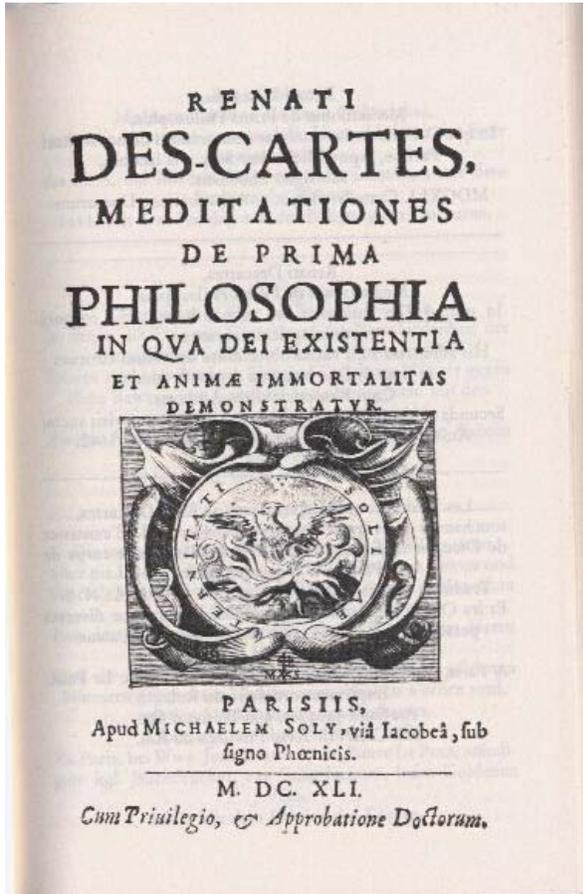


Descartes, *Meditations* I

the demonstrations are so certain that even if our experience seemed to show the opposite, we should still be obliged to have more faith in our reason than in our senses.

– Descartes, *Principles of philosophy*, Part II, Article 52



The main task of Descartes's *Meditations on first philosophy* is to uncover absolutely indubitable first or starting principles that can be used as the foundation or the initial premises for deriving all the rest of our knowledge.

This quest for foundational principles is one of the characteristic features of Descartes's philosophy. Other philosophers have been willing to settle for less — for probability or for provisional suppositions that, while not certainly true, can be confirmed by sensory experience. However, Descartes conception of the proper method for gaining knowledge left him with no choice but to make stronger demands. The first rule of his method dictates that we start with axioms, and the third rule stipulates that all knowledge is to be obtained by deduction from these axioms. Because he was confident of the truth of the mechanist natural philosophy, which postulates that the real world looks very different from the coloured, scented, warm and cool bodies we experience through our senses, Descartes expected that when he proceeded in accord with his method, his deductions from axioms would establish the existence of things

that are very different from what we see around us. So, for Descartes, the fact that deductions from axioms might come into conflict with everyday experience or with common sense would not by itself be a reason to think that the axioms are wrong. Since he could not hope to verify his principles after the fact, by reference to their consequences, he had to be absolutely certain, at the outset, that he could rely on them. He accordingly adopted the most rigorous criterion possible for identifying and admitting first principles: if he could even imagine a claim being false (even by the wildest possible speculation), he would not admit it as a first principle of his philosophy.

This is what we can call Descartes's first criterion of truth (his first criterion for determining whether a previously held belief should be accepted):

Accept only what is beyond any shadow of a doubt.

Using this criterion as his test, Descartes set about looking for first truths.



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QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. What did Descartes take to be required if one is to establish anything “firm and lasting in the sciences,” and why did he think that such drastic measures are required?
2. What would justify rejecting an opinion?
3. What was the foundation on which, up to the time of his meditations, Descartes claimed he had based most of his beliefs?
4. When have the senses been thought reliable and when unreliable?
5. Are there any definite signs to distinguish being awake from being asleep according to Descartes?
6. If there were no definite signs to distinguish waking from dreaming, what would that prove?
7. Even if there were no definite signs to distinguish waking from dreaming, would there still be certain things our senses tell us about that are not cast into doubt? If not why not, if so what would these things be?
8. What did Descartes include in the class of “simple and universal things” from which everything we imagine is constructed?
9. In what respect do the sciences of physics, astronomy and medicine all differ from those of arithmetic and geometry?
10. Why did Descartes think that even the truths of arithmetic and geometry are open to suspicion of possibly being false?
11. Why did Descartes think that it would be even more likely that I would always be deceived when performing calculations if God does not exist than if God does exist?
12. What would be wrong with admitting that the existence of my own body, of the world around me, and of the truths of arithmetic and geometry is highly probable?

NOTES ON THE READING

At the outset of *Meditations* I, Descartes complained that so many false opinions had been spread about that it had become necessary to rebuild the edifice of knowledge on new and more secure foundations. To find such new foundations he proposed to question the principles on which established beliefs are based, and not to accept anything unless the principles that justify it are beyond doubt. Since most of what we know is based on sense experience or reason, he first considered the reliability of these two “principles.” The results that he came up with were devastating. *Meditations* I offers two powerful arguments for doubting anything we have learned from sensory experience and anything we have discovered by reasoning. These arguments are commonly referred to as the dreaming argument and the deceiver argument.

a. The dreaming argument. Prior to Descartes, philosophers wishing to question the reliability of sensory experience had commonly appealed to a set of arguments known as the sceptical “modes.” Sceptics would employ the “modes” to show that one and the same object can appear differently to different animals, to different human beings, to different sense organs, to the same sense organ under different circumstances, and so on. This would hopefully convince the listener that we have no direct knowledge of the nature of objects, but only of appearances, and that the appearances of one and the same object are so numerous and different that there is no way of telling what it is really like.

But Descartes had little use for the sceptical modes. He remarked that while our senses may sometimes tell us different things about the same object, this generally only happens when the object is small or distant. There is another, more compelling reason to doubt what our senses tell



us about the medium-sized objects in our immediate surroundings: the possibility that we might be dreaming.

Descartes supposed that I have no way of definitively ruling out the possibility that I might now be asleep and dreaming. The fact that my current experiences are rich, detailed, and vivid does not prove that they are not dreamed up since I have in the past had dreams that are rich, detailed and vivid. Or, at the very least, I can well conceive it possible that I might have such a dream. Similarly, the fact that I now seem to remember a continuous, coherent past, reaching back for many years and consisting of events that are uniformly ordinary and law-governed does not prove that I am not now dreaming. For, even though many dreams are incoherent, this is not the case with all dreams. Dreams can be as coherent as waking experiences and sometimes they can include dreamed up memories of a long, coherent history. At least, it is possible that some dreams could be like this. And as long as it is possible we cannot claim to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that dreams cannot be internally coherent and plausible. Even the memory of having awakened is no sure indication I am not now dreaming, since I have had (or can well think it possible that I could have) dreams in which I dream that I wake up from a dream within the dream. In general, it seems that any criterion anyone might care to use to try to distinguish dreams from waking experience could be undermined by the objection that we might just dream that the criterion has been met.

We might think that, despite these possibilities, we are pretty good at telling the difference between reality and dreams. But for Descartes, being pretty good at determining the difference is not good enough. We need to be absolutely certain. As long as it is possible that we might be dreaming, we cannot claim to know for sure that we are not dreaming, even now.

But if I grant that there is no way of definitively ruling out the possibility that I am now dreaming, then scepticism about the reliability of all sensory experience follows as a consequence. Since things experienced in a dream are generally false, having no good way to determine that I am now awake means having no good way to determine that there is any truth in my current experience. I cannot say that simply because I am seeing this page with these words printed on it, that therefore there must actually be a page with these words printed on it. More radically, I cannot say that simply because I see myself surrounded by the walls of this room, in this building, in this city, in this country, that any such room, building, city, or country exists. There may not even be a planet Earth or a universe like the one I now think I remember seeing when I last looked up at the stars at night. Perhaps I am a being on a planet in another world who is merely dreaming all of these things and none of them actually exists, and in a moment I will wake up and discover my error. Indeed, perhaps there is not a corporeal, extended world of any kind. After all, setting aside the minority opinions of Hobbes and Epicurus, people have for centuries believed in the possibility of the existence of immaterial spirits like ghosts and angels. These are things that exist without having physical bodies. What is to say, therefore, that I might not be a sleeping angel, merely dreaming that it has a body? This may seem a rather extravagant supposition. But at this stage, Descartes had to worry about extravagant suppositions. The bare possibility that it might be true, however remote, is enough to warrant a doubt, however remote, about whether I have a body. And according to Descartes's initial criterion, nothing can be accepted as a first principle if it is open to any doubt, however extravagant.

Just as the dreaming argument should lead me to doubt whether I really have a body, and whether the surrounding world is at all like what I perceive it to be, so it should lead me to doubt whether there are any such things as the atoms and corpuscles imagined by the mechanical



philosophers, or the forms and qualities imagined by the Aristotelians, or even the other people that we all imagine to inhabit our world. Similarly, it should lead me to doubt whether any of the sciences that describe these things, such as physics, cosmology, and metaphysics are true. After all, just as I may be an angel dreaming that it has a body, so I may be an angel in an aspatial spirit-world dreaming it is located somewhere in a world of bodies. Indeed, I may be a single, solitary spirit, the sole thing in creation, dreaming that there is a world of extended bodies and other minds around it.

But while all of these things — the existence of my own body, the existence of other bodies and an external world, and even the existence of other minds — are called into question by the dreaming argument, Descartes suggested that there are some things that the argument might not be able to call into question. We tend to think that when we dream, our dreams are like images of things we have seen before in waking life, only differently arranged and perhaps distorted. If this is correct, then even if I am now dreaming, something must exist that is in some way like what I am dreaming of. At the very least the simple component parts that my dream images are made up of — the figures, the motions, the sizes, and perhaps the colours and the general types of objects and events — ought to be specific instances of general types of things that we have encountered in reality and that must therefore exist. Otherwise, it would be as extraordinary that we could dream of these things as that someone blind since birth should be able to dream in colour. If we accept that this is impossible, then perhaps we can say that certain “simple and universal things,” those that figure in our dreams and constitute the compound things that we dream about, must be real.

As examples of such things, Descartes listed “corporeal nature in general” which he further analyzed as consisting of extension, shape, size, number, place, and time. This list is remarkable for what it fails to mention. Colour, scent, taste, and other sensible qualities do not appear on the list, even though they, too, would seem to be simple and universal things. Descartes earlier described the “simple and universal things” using the metaphor of “true colours” that make things up the way the colours in oils make up the pictures made by painters. But when he came to list the simple and universal things, colour was not included. It is only in *Meditations* III that we get any explanation of the reasons for this quiet omission.

A little more reflection led Descartes to note that there are certain things that we know about the “simple and universal things.” Shape and number are among the “simple and universal things.” And our reason appears to reveal a number of truths to us that are specific to the nature of shapes and numbers. These truths constitute the sciences of geometry and arithmetic. Interestingly, they do not tell us about anything that really exists. That is, they do not make any claims about what shapes and numbers might be used to describe the things that actually exist. They just tell us about the nature of shape and number themselves. Consequently, the truths of geometry and arithmetic are not affected by the dreaming argument, which only casts doubt on our knowledge of what exists around us. If I dream of five objects, then it might be that those five objects do not exist and that my experience is in that sense false. But my dream itself, insofar as it consists of five objects, will have to consist of a group of three objects and a group of two other objects (at least, of objects that could be grouped in this way). So the simple truth of arithmetic that two plus three is equal to five will have to be reflected in my dream.

This is not to say that when I dream of five objects I will always think that those objects can be divided into a group of two objects and a group of three objects. After all, we sometimes make mistakes in simple arithmetic even in waking life, as anyone who has tried to balance a



check book knows only too well, so it should certainly be possible to make the same mistakes in our dreams. But generally, such mistakes are a product of haste and inattention. Descartes's point is just that the propositions of geometry and arithmetic must in fact be true of the objects we experience in our dreams, and that a slow and careful analysis of numbers and shapes, assisted by frequent review of our work, should uncover the truths of arithmetic and geometry, whether we perform that analysis while awake or while asleep. Thus, these truths of pure reasoning at least appear to be immune to the doubt caused by the dreaming argument.

b. The deceiver argument. However, Descartes proceeded to entertain even more radical sceptical doubts. It is possible that in his younger days he may have attended the Loudun witchcraft trials and been impressed by the efforts of the defence attorneys to argue that if the Devil was as powerful as the Prosecution claimed he was, then he ought to be able to deceive the Court and the Judges into thinking that innocent people are witches. Whether that is the case or not, the thought occurred to him that, if a being powerful enough to have created the world exists, then that being ought to easily be able to inject content into our dreams that in no way corresponds to anything that we have actually experienced or that exists in reality. Even dreams of "simple and universal things" ought to be within the power of such a being to produce and inject into us. So perhaps we cannot be sure that "simple and universal things" have any existence outside of our dreams after all.

With this possibility in mind, Descartes returned to the troublesome fact noted at the close of the last section: that we sometimes make errors in calculation. We think that we can correct these errors by simply checking and rechecking our calculations. But what, Descartes asked, if there is a demon deceiver out there who ensures that every time I add two to three I come up with the same, wrong result? A really powerful deceiver should be able to convince me that two plus three is six. After all, I do occasionally make this mistake all on my own, so a deceiver should be able to make me make it systematically, and so foul up my entire knowledge of arithmetic.

This may be an extravagant possibility, but for Descartes, as long as there is the least reason for doubting a claim, however wild or extravagant, we cannot accept that claim. And so, our reasoning in geometry and mathematics must be rejected as well as our sense experience of ourselves and the world around us.

There is an important sub-text to what Descartes said about the dreaming and deceiver arguments. He suggested that, dubitable though they may be, our intuitions about the simple natures, and the demonstrative sciences of mathematics and geometry that we are able to build on these intuitions, are relatively more immune to doubt than our beliefs about an external world. It takes a more powerful argument, the deceiver argument, to call the former claims into doubt.

Over the remainder of the *Meditations* Descartes repaired the destructive work done in *Meditations* I, first by identifying a solid foundation for knowledge and then by successively readmitting into the edifice of knowledge the things cast into doubt by the dreaming and deceiver arguments. It should be no surprise that he managed to rehabilitate our clear and distinct perceptions of simple and universal things, and the demonstrative sciences of arithmetic and geometry that are based on those perceptions, before he managed to rehabilitate the belief in an external world or in the existence of our own bodies. *Meditations* I teaches us that the latter beliefs are open to doubts that do not affect the former. But we will also see that when Descartes rehabilitated old knowledge claims, he did so only in an attenuated form: the objects of our



knowledge turn out to be stripped of their sensible qualities and a degree of uncertainty ends up attaching even to our knowledge of their “primary and real” qualities.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. Was Descartes entitled to claim that there is no way to distinguish waking from dreaming?
2. Was Descartes entitled to claim that the truths of arithmetic and geometry are not called into doubt by the dreaming argument?
3. Could a deceiver who systematically deceives me, and ensures that I never come across any evidence of my mistake, really be a deceiver?
4. Is there anything that escapes the doubts cast on sense experience and reasoning by the dreaming and the deceiver arguments?

