

RENÉ DESCARTES MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY [1641]

Meditation I

The General Demolition of My Opinions (23)

Here, Descartes's concerns are epistemological in nature as he plunges into the depth of skepticism, coming to the view that almost everything can be called into doubt. He begins by recounting that, many years before, he came to the realisation that there was a large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood (22) and that the nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently erected on them (22) was highly doubtful (23). He subsequently came to the conclusion that if he wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last (22), he had to find an indisputable basis for certitude, some foundation that was beyond all possible dispute. With this in mind, Descartes decided that he would put every one of his assumptions to the test until he stumbled upon the one unassailable truth. However, he argued, it was unnecessary to prove that each individual opinion is wrong: it was sufficient to show that the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested (23) may be disproved in some way for the individual opinions themselves to be seen as baseless. Acknowledging the force of custom (25) which encourages him to assent to these long and deeply-held beliefs, he resolves to put them to the test by imagining ways, no matter how ridiculous-sounding, in which they may be doubted.

Proceeding dialectically in the manner recommended by Plato, Descartes first posits that whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired from the senses (23). Although he acknowledges that the senses can deceive him, he stresses that 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 (23). It is at this point that his first possible doubt arises: what if he is suffering from the illusions of the insane who often 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 (23)?

He then imagines a second possibility: that he may be asleep. Surely, he asks, it is possible to distinguish the sleeping state from that of waking consciousness, as a result of which what he thinks he experiences would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep (23)? His response: Indeed! As if I do not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! . . . I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep (23). He then points out that even if the things he is dreaming of (e.g. hands, paper, pen, tables, etc.) may be illusions, surely they must have been fashioned in the likeness of things that are real, and hence that at least these general kinds of things . . . are things which are not imaginary but are real and exist (24).

Descartes then imagines that sleep may very well be similar to the imagined world of art. What one experiences in sleep is much like the case where artists paint pictures of fictitious creatures such as sirens and satyrs but who, to do so, cannot give them natures which are new in all respects (24) and accordingly must jumble up the limbs of existing animals (24). Even where they arguably come up with entirely novel creatures so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before (24), they utilise other, even simpler and more universal things (24) which are fundamentally real, such as the real colours from which we form all the images of things, whether true or false, that occur in our thought (24). Descartes has in mind not just colours per se, but all the forms of corporeal nature in general, and its extension: the shape of extended things, the quantity, or size and number of these things; the place in which they may exist, the time through which they may endure (24), etc. Shape, size, number, place, time are fundamental qualities of reality that human imagination can remould in various ways but the existence of which can surely not be doubted.

With all this in mind, Descartes wonders whether the mathematical disciplines which deal with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not (24) are superior to the sciences such as physics which study composite things (24). The former, he argues,

may 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. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false (24). Descartes then imagines that God, in whom he has long believed, may have made it so 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 (24). Moreover, since others often go astray 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 (24)? He then deals with the objection that a supremely good (24) God would not allow such a large-scale deception to occur such that I am deceived all the time (24). However, would not even the occasional deception, the existence of which would seem to be indisputable, seem equally foreign to his goodness (24)? Last but not least, Descartes imagines that everything said about God may be a fiction (24) and that it is fate or chance or a continuous chain of events (24) has brought him to this point in his life. He even considers the possibility that instead of God being responsible for his deception, some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me (25) as a result of which the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all eternal things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement (25).

Descartes concludes 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 (25). In an obvious allusion to Plato's famous allegory of the cave, Descartes writes:

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. (25)

Meditation II

Having cast doubt on all his most cherished beliefs by undermining the principles upon which they are founded, Descartes recounts that he found himself in an unshakeable funk: so serious are the doubts into which I have been thrown . . . that I can neither put them out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them. It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles around me so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top (25-26). Nevertheless, whatever the consequences, he resolves that anything

which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I found it to be fully false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognise something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at last recognise for certain that there is no certainty. Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth, so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.

I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement, and place are chimeras. (26)

He asks: So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain (26).

Descartes longs to know, however, if there is something else which does not allow even the slightest occasion for doubt (26). Does God, who puts into me the thoughts I am now having (26), fit the bill? Is it Descartes himself who is the author of these thoughts (26)? If the latter, am not I, at least, something (26) as long as he thinks? But what if his doubts concerning the reliability of his senses and the existence of his body are correct. Am I not so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world: no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist (26). And if so, how does this cast doubt on the fact that he is doubting and, thus, in the process of thinking and, by extension, he exists? Descartes concludes that the answer to this is no: if I convinced myself of

something then I certainly existed (26). Even if he is being deceived by some maleficent power, the fact remains that I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me (26). Indeed, let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing (26). In the final analysis, whatever the nature of his doubts, what is indisputable is that I am, I exist (26). This is because, if he did not exist, there would be no one doubting. Because the doubting is not in doubt, so too is the existence of the doubter. This is the crucial indisputable foundation which Descartes had long sought.

It is at this point that Descartes admits that he does not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this I is (146) whose existence he has concluded is indisputable. He resolves to be careful not to make a mistake in the very item of knowledge that I maintain is the most certain and evident of all (146). (In considering the precise nature of human identity, Descartes is entering the province of philosophy of mind). He begins by observing that it is insufficient to merely conclude that humans are rational animals. Such a definition will lead him, he argues, down a complex path, whereby he will have to offer definitions for each term advanced, that he wants to avoid. Rather, he wants to return to where he started initially, that is, with what is seemingly self-evident (i.e. things about the nature of which he has no doubts and which he believes he perceives distinctly):

the fact, firstly, that he has a body which he understood as whatever has a determinable shape and a definable location and can occupy a space in such a way as to exclude any other body; it can be perceived by touch, sight, hearing, taste or smell, and can be moved . . . by whatever else comes into contact with it (147); and, secondly, that I was nourished, that I moved about, and that I engaged in sense-perception and thinking, and these actions I attributed to a soul (146), the nature of which he thought of as something tenuous, like a wind or fire or ether, which permeated my more solid parts (146).

The problem is, however, that, given the possible doubts expressed earlier, he does not know for sure that he possesses even the most insignificant attributes which I have just said belong to the nature of the body (147). Moreover, what about the attributes I assigned to the soul (147)? Are these also to be doubted? His answer: faculties such as sense-perception seem inseparable from the body (which may not exist) but thinking alone is inseparable from me. I am. I exist. That is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking (147). Because it is possible that were he to cease thinking, he might very well cease to exist, he concludes that he is in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason. . . . I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of thing? As I have just said--a thinking thing (147).

Descartes wonders if he can use his imagination (147) to decide what else am I (147), that is, to delve more deeply into the nature of the soul and its relation to the body. He knows that he is not that structure of limbs which is called a human body (147) and not some vapour which permeates the limbs--a wind, fire, air, breath, or whatever I depict in my imagination; for these are things which I have supposed to be nothing. Let this supposition stand; for all that I am still something (147). In other words, Descartes stresses that there are two things of which he can be sure: I know for certain both that I exist and at the same time that all such images and, in general, everything relating to the nature of the body, could be mere dreams (147). To put this another way, I know that I exist; the question is, what is this I that I know? (147) or, more precisely, how can I know it. His conclusion: none of the things that the imagination enables me to grasp is at all relevant to this knowledge of myself which I possess and that the mind must therefore be most carefully diverted from such things if it is to perceive its own nature as distinctly as possible (148). All he can be sure of is that the I performs certain indisputable functions which define it: what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sense perceptions (148) that may or may not conform to real objects outside of the self.

Meditation VI

Here, Descartes begins by recounting all the things which I previously took to be perceived by the senses, and reckoned to be true (148), his reasons for subsequently calling these things into doubt (148), and what I should now believe about them (148). Initially, he thought that it was a fact that he could perceive that he had a body with sensible qualities, that there are other bodies with sensible

qualities which allowed them to be distinguished from each other, from his own body and mind, that these other bodies affected and thus elicited particular responses in his own body and mind (e.g. pleasure, pain). Because he was able to distinguish the thoughts linked to these physical sensations and received quite without my consent (148) from those which I deliberately formed through meditating (148), Descartes thought it was these external objects which were responsible at least in part for the thoughts in his mind. He thought it reasonable to conclude that the items which I was perceiving through the senses were things quite distinct from my thought (148) and, as such, responsible for producing the ideas which he had about those items. He believed, too, he could not be separated from his body, as I could from other bodies (148), because I felt all my appetites and emotions in, and on account of, this body (148) but not in other bodies. Later, Descartes stresses, he had many doubts: about the trustworthiness of the senses not only concerning things external but internal to the body (e.g. as much as a straight stick appears crooked under water, a missing limb can be felt as if it were really there). Moreover, he envisaged that it was difficult to differentiate the waking- from the dream-state and imagined that it was possible that God (or, alternatively, some all-powerful demon) had created a state of universal deception in which nothing could be taken for granted.

Notwithstanding these doubts, there are certain conclusions that remain, in his opinion, indisputable: the dualism of mind and body:

simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am thinking thing. It is true that I may have . . . a body that is very closely joined to me. . . . I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am a thinking, non-extended thing, and . . . I have a distinct idea of a body in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it. (150)

The difference between mind and body is derived from an essential difference in their unique substances. The mind is defined by the intellectual substance unique to it and which is responsible for its thinking nature just as the body is defined by corporeal substance which is why its nature is one of extension (i.e. the fact that it occupies a certain space).

Descartes is particularly interested in the nature of the mind:

I find in myself faculties for certain special modes of thinking, namely imagination and sensory perception. Now I can clearly and distinctly understand myself as a whole without these faculties, but I cannot, conversely, understand these faculties without me, that is, without an intellectual substance to inhere in. This is because there is an intellectual act included in their essential definition; and hence I perceive that the distinction between them and myself corresponds to the distinction between the modes of a thing and the thing itself. (150)

Descartes acknowledges that his senses reveal that other bodies exist which have different effects on his own self, some pleasant and some unpleasant. He also stresses that sense-perception is not confined to external objects and that certain sensations originating in his body are indisputable. For this reason, he concludes that

I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body. (151)

Last but not least, Descartes concludes that there is one profound difference between the mind and the body: the latter is by its very nature divisible, while the mind is utterly indivisible (151):

For when I consider the mind or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself. I understand myself to be something quite single and complete. . . . I recognise that if a foot or arm or any other part of the body is cut off, nothing has thereby been taken away from the mind. As for the faculties of

willing, of understanding, of sensory perception and so on, these cannot be termed parts of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, and understands and has sensory perceptions. By contrast, there is no corporeal or extended thing that I can think of which in my thought I cannot easily divide into parts. . . . This one argument would be enough to show me that the mind is completely different from the body. . . . (151)