

## **RENÉ DESCARTES MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY (1641)**

Descartes, René. "Meditations on First Philosophy." Selected Philosophical Writings. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: CUP, 1988. 73-122.

### **Meditation I: What can be called into Doubt** (“The General Demolition of My Opinions” [76])

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” (76) and that the “nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently erected on them” (76) was “highly doubtful” (76). 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” (76), 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 one unassailable truth which would then serve as the foundation upon which to erect other truths. To this end, 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” (76) may be disproved in some way for the individual opinions themselves to be seen as baseless: 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” (76). Acknowledging the force of “custom” (79) 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.

Descartes first considers that whatever “I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired from the senses” (76). 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 pieces of paper in my hands, and so on” (76-77). 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” (77)? He then imagines a second possibility: that he may be asleep. Surely, he wonders, 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” (77). 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” (77).

Descartes then proposes 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” (77). He imagines that sleep may very well be similar in this respect to the imagined worlds created by artists: 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" (77) and accordingly must "jumble up the limbs of existing animals" (77). Even where they arguably come up with entirely novel creatures "so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before" (77), they utilise "other, even simpler and more universal things" (77) 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" (78). Descartes also 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" (78), etc. Shape, size, number, place, time are fundamental qualities of reality that human imagination can remould in various ways to create novelties that are not found in the real world. However, the existence of the component elements can surely not be doubted.

With all this in mind, Descartes wonders whether the mathematical disciplines (he was a mathematician by training) which "deal with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or nor" (78) are superior to the sciences such as physics which study "composite things" (78). Whether or not it corresponds to the real world, the mathematical realm forms a coherent whole in which all the parts make sense. Maths, 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" (78). 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" (78). 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" (78)? He then deals with the objection that a "supremely good" (78) God would not allow such a large-scale deception to occur "such that I am deceived all the time" (78). However, would not even the occasional deception, the existence of which would seem to be indisputable, "seem equally foreign to his goodness" (78)? Last but not least, Descartes imagines that "everything said about God may be a fiction" (78) and that it is "fate or chance or a continuous chain of events" (78) which 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" (78) 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" (78).

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" (79). He resolves to "withhold my assent from these false beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods" (79). Because his "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" (79). He resolves 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" (79) until the "weight of preconceived opinion is counter-balanced and the distorting influence of habit no longer prevents my judgement from perceiving things correctly" (79). Descartes proposes to believe 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. I shall think that they 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 judgment" (79). 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. (79)

In the absence of any certain way out of the maze, in other words, it might be better to hold on to certain cherished assumptions rather than interrogate them and turn them inside out.

### **Meditation II: The Nature of the Human Mind, and How it is Better Known than the Body**

Having cast doubt on all his most cherished beliefs by undermining the principles upon which they are founded, Descartes recounts that the next day he found himself in an unshakeable funk: "[s]o 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" (80). 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. (80)

"So what remains true?" he asks. "Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain" (80).

Descartes longs to know, however, if "there is not something else which does not allow even the slightest occasion for doubt" (80), i.e. doubt concerning the 'fact' that nothing is certain. Is there, for example, a God, who "puts into me the thoughts I am now having" (80), fit the bill? Or is it Descartes himself who is the "author of these thoughts" (80)? If the latter, "am not I, at least, something" (80) as long as I think? But what about his intention to pretend that he has "no senses and no body" (80)? "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?" (80). Even if nothing else in the world exists and even if he is being deceived in some way about the existence of such things (perhaps by a maleficent demon), this in no way casts doubt on the fact that he must exist if he is to be deceived or mistaken in some way. He concludes that "if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed" (80) for the simple reason that even if he is being deceived by some maleficent power, the fact remains that "I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me" (80). Indeed, "let him deceive me as much as he

can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something" (80). In the final analysis, whatever the nature of his doubts, what is indisputable is that "I am, I exist" (80). 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" (81) 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" (81) and to "go back and meditate on what I originally believed myself to be" (81). "What then did I formerly think I was?" (81). He begins by observing that it is insufficient to conclude that man is merely a "rational animal" (81). Such a definition will lead him, he argues, down a complex path, whereby he will have to offer definitions for each term advanced (e.g. 'rationality,' 'animal') that he wants to avoid. This is something for which he does not have time, he says. Rather, he proposes to "concentrate on what came into my thoughts spontaneously whenever I used to consider what I was" (81), that is, on 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 first thought which comes to his mind is that "I had a face, hands, arms, and the whole mechanical structure of limbs which can be seen in a corpse, and which I called a body" (81). The next thought Descartes had was 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" (81), the nature of which he either did not think about or else thought of as "something tenuous, like a wind or fire or ether, which permeated my more solid parts" (81). "As to the body" (81), Descartes writes, "I had no doubts about it, but thought I knew its nature distinctly" (81). This is his "mental conception" (81) of it: "by a body I understand 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" (81). On his view, the "power of self-movement, like the power of sensation or of thought, was quite foreign to the nature of a body" (81).

The problem is, however, that, given the possible doubts expressed earlier, he cannot say for sure that he possesses "even the most insignificant of all the attributes which I have just said belong to the nature of a body" (81). Moreover, "what about the attributes I assigned to the soul? Nutrition or movement. Since now I do not have a body, these are mere fabrications. Sense perception? This surely does not occur without a body, and besides, when asleep I have appeared to perceive through the senses many things which I afterwards realised I did not perceive through the senses at all" (81-82)? Only thinking "alone is inseparable from me" (82), he concludes. "I am. I exist. That is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking" (82). It is possible, he asserts, that were he to cease thinking, he might very well cease to exist. Given that he is only admitting "what is necessarily true" (82), 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" (82).

"What else am I?" Descartes asks. "I will use my imagination" (82), he replies. He knows that he is "not that structure of limbs which is called a human body" (82) because it is possible that this does not exist. He knows he is 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" (82). "Let this supposition stand; for all that I am still something" (82). Though it is possible that "these very things which I am

supposing to be nothing, because they are unknown to me, are in reality identical with the 'I' of which I am aware" (82), Descartes says he does not know and prefers to "make judgements only about things which are known to me" (82). Hence, "I know that I exist; the question is, what is this 'I' that I know?" (82). It is quite "certain that knowledge of it does not depend on things of whose existence I am as yet unaware; so it cannot depend on any of the things which I invent in my imagination" (82). Indeed, he is wary of the "word 'invent'" (82) for it would be merely "fictitious invention if I used my imagination to establish that I was something or the other; for imagining is simply contemplating the shape or image of a corporeal thing" (82). Yet "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" (82). 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" (83).

All Descartes can be sure of is that the I performs certain indisputable cognitive 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" (83) that may or may not conform to real objects outside of the self. Is the 'I' in question responsible for these actions a single, unified self? He asks:

Is it not one and the same 'I' who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which come from the senses. . . . Which of all these activities is distinct from my thinking? Which of these can be said to be separate from myself? The fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer. But it is also the case that the 'I' who imagines is the same 'I.' For even if, as I have supposed, none of the objects of imagination are real, the power of imagination is something which really exists and is part of my thinking. Lastly, it is also the same 'I' who has sensory perceptions, or is aware of bodily things as it were through the senses. (83)

Even if such sense perceptions are false (perhaps because he may be dreaming), what cannot be disputed is that "I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed" (83). Even if these are illusions, there must still be an 'I' for it to be subjected to illusion.

Descartes asserts that from thinking about all these things, "I am beginning to have a rather better understanding of what I am" (83). However, he still thinks that the "corporeal things of which images are formed in my thought, and which the senses investigate, are known with much more distinctness than this puzzling 'I' which cannot be pictured in the imagination" (83). He is surprised that he should have a "more distinct grasp of things which I realise are doubtful, unknown and foreign to me, than I have of that which is true and known – my own self" (83). He is thinking here of "particular" (84) "bodies we touch and see" (84):

Let us take, for example, this piece of wax. It has just been taken from the honeycomb; it has not yet quite lost the taste of the honey; it retains some of the scent of the flowers from which it was gathered; its colour, shape and size are plain to see; it is hard, cold and can be handled without difficulty; if you rap it with your knuckle it makes a sound. In short, it has everything which appears necessary to enable a body to be known as distinctly as possible. But even as I speak, I put the wax by the fire, and look: the

residual taste is eliminated, the smell goes away, the colour changes, the shape is lost, the size increases; it becomes liquid and hot; you can hardly touch it, and if you strike it, it no longer makes a sound. But does the same wax remain? It must be admitted that it does; no one denies it, no one thinks otherwise. So what was it in the wax that I understood with such distinctness? Evidently none of the features which I arrived at by means of the senses; for whatever comes under taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing has now been altered – yet the wax remains. (84)

Descartes wonders if the answer may lie not in the “sweetness of the honey, or the fragrance of the flowers, or the whiteness, or the shape, or the sound” (84) but, rather, the “body which presented itself to me in these various forms a little while ago” (84). Take “away everything which does not belong to the wax, and see what is left: merely something extended, flexible and changeable” (84). But what do terms such as ‘flexible’ and ‘changeable’ mean exactly? Are they explained by “what I picture in my imagination” (84), that is, his ability to imagine that the wax is “capable of changing from a round shape to a square shape, etc.? No, he replies, it is not his imagination which is responsible for such knowledge for “I am unable to run through this immeasurable number of changes in my imagination” (84). The same thing applies to the term ‘extended’: the “extension of the wax . . . increases if the wax melts, increases again if it boils, and is greater still if the heat is increased” (84). It is “capable of being extended in many more different ways than I will ever encompass in my imagination” (84), he concludes, leading him to think that the “nature of this piece of wax is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone” (84-85), a point which is further strengthened when he thinks not only of this particular piece of wax but wax in general. He comes to the following conclusion:

But what is this wax which is perceived by the mind alone? It is of course the same wax which I see, which I touch, which I picture in my imagination, in short the same wax which I thought to be from the start. And yet, here is the point, the perception I have of it is a case not of vision or touch or imagination – nor has it ever been, despite previous appearances – but of purely mental scrutiny; and this can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct as it is now, depending on how carefully I concentrate on what the wax consists in. (85)

Descartes realises that he has fallen into the trap of using “ordinary ways of talking” (85): we “say that we see the wax itself, or that it is there before us, not that we judge it to be there from its colour or shape” (85). He concludes that “something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind” (85).

Descartes wonders “on which occasion my perception of the nature of the wax was more perfect and evident. Was it when I first looked at it, and believed I knew it by my external senses, or at least by what they call the ‘common sense’ – that is, the power of imagination?” (85), he asks. “Or is my knowledge more perfect now, after a more careful investigation of the nature of the wax and of the means by which it is known?” (85). He opts for the latter “for what distinctness was there in my earlier perception? Was there anything in it which an animal could not possess? But when I distinguish the wax from its outward forms – take the clothes off, as it were, and consider it naked – then although my judgment may still contain errors, at least my perception now requires a human mind” (85).

What, Descartes asks, “am I to say about this mind, or about myself?” (85) (bearing in mind that he is continuing to refuse to admit that there is “anything else in my except a mind” [86]). “What, I ask, is this ‘I’ which seems to perceive the wax so

distinctly?

Surely my awareness of my own self is not merely much truer and more certain than my awareness of the wax, but also much more distinct and evident. For if I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I see it, clearly this same fact entails much more evidently that I myself also exist. It is possible that what I see is not really the wax; it is possible that I do not even have eyes with which to see anything. But when I see, or think I see, (I am not here distinguishing the two), it is simply not possible that I who am thinking am not something. By the same token, if I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I touch it, the same result follows, namely that I exist. . . . Moreover, if my perception of the wax seemed more distinct after it was established not just by sight or touch but by many other considerations, it must be admitted that I now know myself even more distinctly. This is because every consideration whatsoever which contributes to my perception of the wax, or of any other body, cannot but establish even more effectively the nature of my own mind. (86)

Descartes concludes: "I now know that even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood; and in view of this I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else" (86).