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## *Descartes' Meditations 1-3*

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*Editor's Note: This essay is the first in a two-part series on Descartes' Meditations. The second essay is [here](#).*

In an era of great debate over the fundamental facts of nature—e.g., about the Earth's place in the cosmos, the amount of energy in the universe, the circulation of blood in the human body—René Descartes' (1596-1650) central goal was to establish a body of scientific knowledge that held the same degree of certainty as mathematical truths.<sup>[1]</sup>

*The Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) is a classic work that lays the philosophical foundations of this enterprise.<sup>[2]</sup> It raises timeless and fundamental philosophical questions about knowledge, the self, the mind and its relation to the body, substance, causality, perception, ideas, the existence of God, and more.

This two-part essay reviews Descartes' process of reasoning and some of his arguments on these issues.

### **1. Meditation 1: Skepticism and the Method of Doubt**

Descartes begins by reflecting on the unfortunate fact that he has had many false beliefs.<sup>[3]</sup> He sets out to devise a strategy to not just prevent having false beliefs but, more dramatically, to ensure that *scientific research* reveals truth, not error.

To avoid any false beliefs, his strategy is to doubt any belief he has that could be false or that he could be mistaken about.

His senses have deceived him before, so they could be deceiving him now, so he rejects all sensory-based beliefs. He reasons that if an alleged source of

knowledge is *sometimes* deceptive, then it could *always* be deceptive, and so it should be rejected to find beliefs that cannot be false.

He realizes that if he were asleep and dreaming, many of his beliefs would be false: e.g., if he were dreaming about walking somewhere, his belief that "he is walking," would be false. Since he cannot ever tell if he is dreaming or not, this is further reason to doubt any beliefs from his senses: dreams appear the same as genuine experiences: they cannot be distinguished.<sup>[4]</sup>

He also realizes that he could be mistaken even about beliefs that seem clearly true to him, whether awake or dreaming, e.g., that "bachelors are unmarried."<sup>[5]</sup> He could be mistaken, even about such beliefs, because he could be being deceived by some evil genius<sup>[6]</sup> or even God: this is possible and he cannot show that it is not his actual situation. Since Descartes wishes to reject any belief that could be false, that he could be mistaken about, he rejects even these beliefs.

The sciences, however, rely on beliefs not only about the physical world but also about mathematics, and by the end of Meditation 1, Descartes is tempted to rid himself of the desire to acquire knowledge altogether.<sup>[7]</sup>

### **2. Meditation 2: The Essence of the Human Mind**

In an epistemological epiphany, Descartes notices that one of his beliefs cannot be doubted and is therefore certain:

"I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it."

Descartes simply recognizes that he exists as long as he is thinking. This is true even when he's dreaming and even if he were deceived by an evil demon or even God. Whenever there are thoughts, those thoughts (and their thinker) exist, even if those thoughts are within a deception. This is the *Cogito* as it is given in the *Meditations*.<sup>[8]</sup>

So, Descartes knows that he exists, but what *kind* of a thing is he? He can conceive of himself existing without a body, but cannot conceive of himself existing without thought. So, he must be a *thinking thing*: something doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, imagining and feeling. Descartes takes this to mean that he is *essentially* a mind and not a body.<sup>[9]</sup>

How does the *Cogito* escape the net of doubt cast in Meditation 1? Descartes says that judgments about his own thoughts are entirely unproblematic; the contents of his mental states are clear to him, meaning that he can clearly tell what his own beliefs are. However, even granted this “transparency” of mental states, how does he know that there is a *single entity* that is the subject of all of his thoughts? Descartes asks rhetorically, “Am I not the same who now doubts nearly everything, who still understands something; who affirms that this one thing is true?” His unstated answer is that he is a single entity that endures over time.<sup>[10]</sup>

### 3. Meditation 3: The Existence of God

Being a thinking thing, Descartes knows that he has ideas. He notices that one of these ideas is the idea of God, i.e., something eternal, infinite, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good, and the creator of all things. But where did he get this idea of God, a *perfect* being? Did he invent it? Did it come from other people? No. His idea of God could *only* have come from God. According to Descartes, a cause must be at least as real or perfect as its effect. The *idea* of God however represents much more reality and perfection than the idea of himself, or of anything else.<sup>[11]</sup> There’s only then one possible cause: God. So, God exists. This is Descartes’ *causal* argument for God’s existence.

However, God *might* be a deceiver: God *could* have made Descartes have many false beliefs. That’s possible. How then can Descartes be sure that he can trust any of his other beliefs besides the belief of his own existence? In the case of the *Cogito*, Descartes saw very “clearly and distinctly” that to think, one must exist. But how does he know that clear and distinct perception is always reliable?<sup>[12]</sup> E.g., how does he know that “triangles have three sides” if there’s an evil demon deceiving him?

He now realizes that there is no way that an all-good being<sup>[13]</sup> would make it so that when he “clearly and distinctly” thinks something to be true that it wouldn’t be true: an all-good being would not deceive him or allow an evil demon such license. Plus, he’s just proven that God exists. So now he can trust that whenever he “clearly and distinctly” thinks something to be true, it is.<sup>[14]</sup>

### Notes

[1] For Descartes, knowledge of the sort that can serve as a foundation for science requires certainty, which in turn requires indubitability, namely, that it can’t be

rationally doubted. This is a very high standard for knowledge, and important to understand because it’s directly relevant to responses to Cartesian skepticism that deny the indubitability requirement.

[2] Many of Descartes’ other works, such as *The World, Treatise on Man, Description of the Human Body*, and *Optics*, focused on providing the scientific content itself. See *Descartes: The World and Other Writings*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Cambridge, 1998).

[3] “Several years have now passed since I first realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them. And thus I realized that once in my life I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences” (Med. 1). Descartes was in his mid-30s by this point.

[4] “I see so plainly that there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep” (Med. 1).

[5] “Whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides” (Med. 1). Such beliefs are typically called *analytic a priori*, since they are not based in sense-experience, and can be known purely by definition or reason.

[6] Sometimes translated as “malicious demon.” The Latin is *genium malignum*. I prefer “genius” to “demon,” since the latter has a religious connotation, but at this point in the *Meditations* religious belief of any kind is still in doubt.

[7] “I am not unlike a prisoner who enjoyed an imaginary freedom during his sleep, but, when he later begins to suspect that he is dreaming, fears being awakened and nonchalantly conspires with these pleasant illusions” (Med. 1).

[8] Interestingly, the famous inference *cogito ergo sum* (“I think therefore I am”) occurs in Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method* (Part IV) and the *Principles of Philosophy* (I.7), but not so in the *Meditations*. It’s not clear why Descartes doesn’t do so in the *Meditations*. Some commentators argue that given his method of doubt in the *Meditations*, even simple inferences are put in question. That is, at this stage of the work, Descartes is not even sure that logic is reliable, and so cannot legitimately *argue* from *premises* to a *conclusion* that he exists. Another way to explain the absence of

the *ergo* is to point out that Descartes is seeking a *foundational* belief upon which to justify all of his other beliefs and therefore ground knowledge, and that for a belief to be properly foundational it must not stand in need of justification itself.

[9] To say that he is *essentially* a mind and not a body is to say that his mind is part of his essence: if his mind ceased to exist, he would cease to exist, but he could exist without his body, so it is not part of his essence. Descartes also argues in Med. 2 that his knowledge of his mind through non-sensory means is also the best way to know his body. To show this, he uses the example of a piece of wax. Even when its sensory properties change (through melting, hardening, changing color, etc.) it remains the same piece of wax. So, the wax itself cannot be known through the senses. Also, the true essence of the wax is known through the senses, for the wax can take on a great, perhaps infinite, variety of shapes.

[10] As for his reasoning, Descartes is probably appealing to the fact that he *experiences* himself as a single entity through time. Immanuel Kant will famously challenge this line of reasoning in the Paralogisms of Pure Reason in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

[11] According to Descartes, each thing is “assigned” a degree of reality (which corresponds to its perfection, that is, its capacity to exist independently). In other words, everything has a place on the hierarchy of reality. God, of course, is at the “top,” since he is the most perfect, most independent being possible, and so has the greatest degree of reality.

[12] He asks: “What is required for knowledge is my simply having a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting. Surely it’s not possible that I could have a clear and distinct perception of the truth of some judgment (proposition) which turned out to be false?” (Med. 3). For this reason, Descartes is often called a “rationalist,” since clear and distinct perception, upon which all knowledge ultimately rests on, is *not* a form of sense-experience.

[13] Descartes defines God as all-good. But in Meditation 1, he mentions that being “all-good” doesn’t automatically rule out some deception on God’s part. Even the Bible seems to depict God as a father who lets his children (us) be deceived sometimes. If God allows us to be deceived sometimes, why couldn’t he allow us to be deceived all of the time? But at this point in Meditation 3, he

realizes that such a worry was overblown, for he now clearly and distinctly perceives that God would not allow us to be deceived in such a sweeping manner.

[14] We can now see the so-called “Cartesian Circle.” Descartes wants to remove the possibility that there can be a deceiving God or an evil demon deceiving him. To do this, he first argues that God exists and second claims that God couldn’t be a deceiver. Now to show that God exists he says that he clearly and distinctly perceives a causal principle (that there is as much actual reality in a cause as there is representative reality in its effect). And to show that God is not a deceiver he says that he clearly and distinctly perceives that deception is incompatible with perfection. But remember *why* Descartes is trying to prove that God couldn’t be a deceiver: in order to validate his provisional general rule that he can trust clear and distinct perception! See the circle?

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### **4. Meditation 4: The Source of Human Error**

Descartes argued in Meditation 3 that since God exists, most of his beliefs are true, even those that aren't *clearly and distinctly* (hereafter C&D) perceived, since God wouldn't allow him to be routinely deceived. But of course he sometimes is in error.<sup>[1]</sup> The problem is to account for his errors of judgment without assuming that his ability to judge is hopelessly defective.

Descartes solves this problem by arguing that whenever he makes an error in judgment it's not God's fault, but his own: he has the ability to believe something even where there isn't sufficient evidence. Judging involves both the intellect (the ability to know) and the will (the ability to choose). However, the will can easily be abused. For while his intellect *is* limited (it lacks C&D perceptions of many things),<sup>[2]</sup> his will *is not* limited (it can affirm and deny even on the basis of insufficient evidence). The best course of action in such cases is to simply abstain from judging. God is hardly to blame for such error; rather, it's the misuse of our wills.

### **5. Meditation 5: The Essence of Physical Things**

Descartes then defends a theory of "essences" that is intended to provide a foundation for scientific research. He has many ideas of things (that may or may not exist outside his mind); however, they are not his invention but have their own *true and unchangeable essences*. E.g., he imagines a triangle

(which may or may not exist) but does not the triangle of his "mind's eye" have an essence that is true and unchangeable? Importantly, it is *not* invented by him. Every triangle he imagines will necessarily share certain properties; e.g., its 3 angles will equal 2 right angles.<sup>[3]</sup>

This provides Descartes with a second proof for God's existence. For his discovery about essences applies not only to the objects of mathematics and geometry, but also to *anything*—even God. As long as he C&D perceives a property of God, that property must actually belong to God. One of those properties is existence; therefore, God exists.<sup>[4]</sup> This is Descartes' ontological argument for God's existence.

### **6. Meditation 6: The Existence of Physical Things and Substance Dualism**

All that remains, for Descartes, is to demonstrate that the external world of physical things exists and that the mind<sup>[5]</sup> and body are independent substances, capable of existing without the other.

Descartes argues that it is *possible* that physical things exist. Since he C&D perceives the true and unchangeable essence of physical things (extension, divisibility, etc.), he infers that there is *some* reason to believe that there are things that actually possess this essence.

The existence of physical things is also suggested by his imagination, for its contents depend on something distinct from himself, most likely physical things. That is, the best explanation of how imagination is possible includes the existence of physical things.

But what is Descartes' *proof* of the existence of physical things? He speaks of the ideas that seem to come from his senses. For instance, he has a head, hand, and all the things that make up his body, and perceives pain and pleasure in his body. He perceives heat, texture, light, sound. All of these things help him to distinguish the sky, the earth, and all bodies from one another.

Now, it makes sense that his sensory ideas were caused by things distinct from his own thought, since his experience is that these ideas were not controlled by him and were very "lively and vivid." That is, his ideas were produced by bodies existing outside of him.

How can Descartes *really know* that his sensory ideas were produced by physical things? He says that there

are three possible answers: himself, God or some other higher being, or physical things themselves. Descartes rejects the first, since the ideas in question are produced without his cooperation and often against his will.<sup>[6]</sup> Also, he has such a strong conviction that his ideas of physical things are produced by physical things themselves, that if God were in fact the cause of these ideas, then God would have to be a deceiver. If not the first two, the answer must be third: physical things themselves.

Descartes next argues that mind and body are *really distinct* things:

1. He has a C&D understanding of his mind as a thinking, non-extended substance.
2. He has a C&D understanding of his body as an extended, non-thinking substance.
3. C&D perception can be trusted.
4. So, the fact that he can C&D understand one substance apart from another is enough to make it certain that the two substances are really distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God.
5. *Therefore*, it is certain that his mind is really distinct from his body (*any* body) and can exist without it.

This provides the foundation for his unique brand of substance dualism, sometimes called “Cartesian Dualism.”

Descartes claims that his mind is not in control of his body the way that a sailor is in control of a ship. The mind/body union is deeper. But how can the mind and body causally interact or be unified in a “deep” way if minds are really distinct from bodies?<sup>[7]</sup>

Descartes replies to this objection in a couple of ways.<sup>[8]</sup> First, the brain is the interface between mind and body, and perhaps within the brain it is the pineal gland.<sup>[9]</sup> Second is an argument by analogy. We know that magnetism actually occurs: oppositely charged particles attract. But what is it exactly about oppositely charged particles that causes this attraction? We know *that* magnetism occurs, but we really can’t explain *how* it does—just as we know that the mind and body interact, but cannot fully explain how.<sup>[10]</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Descartes’ time was punctuated not only by debate over the most fundamental facts of nature, but also

about the correct methodology for answering such questions. While the *Meditations on First Philosophy* does not offer answers to such scientific questions,<sup>[11]</sup> it does defend the correct methodology for answering them.

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> Descartes says that his errors—making false judgments—are the only evidence of imperfection in himself. What about hate, rage, and the like? It turns out, however, that for Descartes, much like the Stoics, such emotions stem from errors in reasoning.

<sup>[2]</sup> Descartes tells us not to blame God for our finiteness: there is no reason why God should “place in a single one of his creatures all the perfections which he can place in others”—spread out the perfections, so to speak.

<sup>[3]</sup> This is true not just of triangles, he continues, but any other shape, for example, a chiliagon (a 1000-sided figure). He has probably never encountered a chiliagon through his senses, but he can demonstrate certain properties of a rhombus. And he knows that these properties are certainly true, since he clearly and distinctly perceives them. Pictured is an enneadecagon (19-sided figure).

<sup>[4]</sup> Echoing St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), Descartes insists that he has a clear and distinct perception that existence is part of God’s true and unchangeable essence. Spelled out, his argument looks like this:

1. God is (by definition) the supremely perfect being.
2. If something lacks existence, it lacks a perfection.

*Therefore*

3. God doesn’t lack existence.

On the basis of this argument, Descartes says he is just as certain of God’s existence as he is that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle is 180 degrees or that a mountain must have a valley. See “[The Ontological Argument for the Existence of God](#)” by Andrew Chapman.

<sup>[5]</sup> Descartes makes no distinction between the mind (*l’esprit* or *mens*) and the soul (*l’âme* or *anima*) in his discussion of the mind-body relation.

<sup>[6]</sup> Descartes thinks unconscious perception and willing are absurd notions. Leibniz will challenge

Descartes with regard to unconscious perception at least.

[7] This is the principal objection to Cartesian Dualism then and now. In an extended correspondence with Descartes, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–1680) challenged him on the relation between mind and body, particularly the kind of union they're supposed to have and the possibility of their causal interaction.

[8] Neither reply occurs in the *Meditations* themselves. The pineal gland is discussed in the *Treatise on Man* (before 1637), *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), and in various correspondence. The magnetism analogy occurs in the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) and in correspondence. See *Descartes: The World and Other Writings*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Cambridge, 1998).

[9] Only in the 1960s did scientists discover what purpose the pineal gland serves. Or at least *one* of its purposes: to produce melatonin. Interestingly, in the latest Gray's Anatomy it says that it's still unclear as to the extent of the pineal gland's function. See Lokhorst, Gert-Jan, "Descartes and the Pineal Gland", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/pineal-gland> >.

[10] Neither reply has proven to have much traction. The pineal gland, although located in the right place and not fully understood, is still a body. The problem with the magnetism analogy is that though we have a legitimate alternative explanation of mental activity without reference to an immaterial substance, we don't have competing explanations when it comes to magnetism.

[11] Such scientific questions are addressed in his *Treatise on Man*, *The World*, *Description of the Human Body*, *Optics*, *Principles of Philosophy*, and *The Passions of the Soul*. See *Descartes: The World and Other Writings*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Cambridge, 1998).

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