

# Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*

## Meditation 1: Concerning Those Things That Can Be Called Into Doubt (27-30.1)

Descartes wants to establish a firm foundation for his beliefs, having noted that many of the beliefs he has held in the past have turned out to be false.

METHOD OF DOUBT: "reason now persuades me that I should withhold my assent no less carefully from opinions that are not completely certain and indubitable than I would from those that are patently false."

Sceptical arguments:

1. "the senses do sometimes deceive us when it is a question of very small and distant things"  
*Response*: "there are many other matters concerning which one simply cannot doubt, even though they are derived from the very same senses".
2. Madmen see things that we don't.  
*Response*: they're mad (i.e., bereft of reason) and we'd be unreasonable to accept their statements as providing a *reason* to doubt our senses.
3. Dreaming argument: means that we can never be sure that the world really is as it appears.  
*Response*: doesn't affect the most simple and universal components: "arithmetic, geometry, and other such disciplines, which treat of nothing but the simplest and most general things and which are indifferent as to whether these things do or do not in fact exist, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two plus three make five, and a square does not have more than four sides." [29.1]  
*Also*: Meditation 6, 55.1
4. Demon Deceiver:  
*Response*: see Meditation 3 (40.2)

Conclusion: with 3 and 4 we have *reasoned* skepticism. What is left to believe?

## Meditation 2: Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind: That It Is Better Known Than the Body (30.1-34.1)

this pronouncement "I am, I exist" is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind. [30.2]

What am I (*essentially*)?

"Thought exists, it alone cannot be separated from me" [31.1] - everything else, body, motion, nourishment, might be deceptions.

BUT can't shake notion that I *know* the body better than the mind.

BUT: piece of wax example [32.2] -

- wax not known by the senses, because everything sensory about the wax changes without me thinking it has been replaced
- wax not known by the imagination (which, remember, is not essential to me) because I can't imagine *every possible* shape the wax could take, even though I "grasp that the wax is capable of innumerable changes of this sort" [33.2]

wax is perceived "through the mind alone" [33.1]: "the perception of the wax is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining... rather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone." [33.1]

When we say we "see" people or wax or whatever, we mispeak. If we think carefully, we only *know* body (and not *particular* bodies) by the mind alone.

BUT that means that:

if I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I see it, certainly from this same fact that I see the wax it follows much more evidently that I myself exist. [33.2]

nothing can be perceived more easily and more evidently than my own mind. [34.1]

### Meditation 3: Concerning God, That He Exists (34.1-41.1)

I am certain that I am a thinking thing. But do I not therefore also know what is required for me to be certain of anything? [34.1]

And thus I now seem able to posit as a general rule that everything that I clearly and distinctly perceive is true. [34.2]

Having established this “general rule”, Descartes goes on to catalog his mental contents into three groups:

1. **IDEAS:** these are “like images of things” [35.1] They come in three varieties:
  - a. **adventitious** (that is, those I “believe to be derived from things existing outside me” because “these ideas do not depend upon my will” [35.2])
  - b. **innate** (i.e., I’m born with them, I do not acquire them)
  - c. **produced by me** (like images I make up or imagine)
2. **VOLITIONS or AFFECTS:** when I choose or make a decision, that is an example of a volition, or the exercise of my free will. Descartes believes we have perfectly free will, which makes him what is nowadays called a **libertarian** (but not in the political sense). As we shall see, Hume, in particular, rejects this version of freedom. Descartes’ definition of “willing” is in Med. IV [43.1].
3. **JUDGMENTS:** what we might now call “beliefs with propositional content”. For example, my belief that “I just called to say I love you” is the worst song ever recorded by a talented individual is a “judgment”

Of these three, only judgments are capable of being false (or at least **formally** false, which is the usual sense of falsity – ideas can be “**materially**” false, see below). If we are careful, we cannot be wrong about our ideas or volitions: that is, even if there is a demon deceiver, I cannot be mistaken that *I am having a sensation* of something (say, a pink elephant). Where I can err is in my *judgment* that my sensation is *caused* by an *actually existing* pink elephant.

Distinction:

“taught by nature” means “driven by a spontaneous impulse to believe this”

“light of nature” means what I clearly and distinctly perceive (like the cogito) [35.2]

I am taught by nature that, when I have a sensation of a pink elephant, there really is one there. This is not sufficient (or so Descartes says now, but see Med. VI) because nature has caused me to believe many false things. It can only be certain if it is evident by the *light* of nature.

**Causal Maxim 1:** there must be at least as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of that same cause. [36.2] (CM1 is “evident by the light of nature” and thus cannot be doubted!)

**Causal Maxim 2:** the cause of an idea must contain at least as much *formal* reality as the idea contains *objective* reality. [36.2]

Does CM2 mean that the cause of all my ideas must be exactly what I take them to be?

No: ideas may be *materially false* even while falling under CM2. **Material falsity** “is found in ideas whenever they represent a non-thing as if it were a thing.” [37.2] (Strictly speaking, ideas alone do not represent anything beyond themselves – we **judge** them to represent something.)

Even what is “clear and distinct” in ideas of corporeal things could be “borrowed” from my idea of myself - e.g., *substance, duration, number* [37.2-38.1]

BUT: the idea of God contains *infinite* objective reality, and thus couldn't have been caused by me. Thus God exists.

Objections considered:

1. Infinity is materially false, i.e., just a negation of finitude

*Response*: "I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than there is in a finite one. Thus the perception of the infinite is somehow prior in me to the perception of the finite" [38.1]

*Also*: idea is "utterly clear and distinct" [38.2]

2. I do not comprehend the infinite

*Response*: this doesn't matter (and is unsurprising, since I'm finite). The idea is still in me, clearly and distinctly conceived.

3. Perhaps I am greater than I know, and the idea is caused by my infinite *potential*

*Response*: there is nothing in the idea of God that is potential rather than actual; my knowledge will *never* be infinite; "the objective being of an idea cannot be produced by a merely potential being" [39.1]

Could I (and the idea) exist without God? Potential causes:

1. Myself? No, then I'd be self-caused and not lacking anything (no doubts or desires)

2. None (i.e., always existing)? Even if so, "conservation differs from creation solely by virtue of a distinction of reason" [39.2] - i.e., you'd still need God to keep you existing

3. Any finite cause? Cause must be a thinking thing and have an idea of all the perfections that I attribute to God. This must *also* have a cause the same, and so on, with no infinite regress possible. Thus, ultimately, God. [40.1]

4. Godly qualities scattered but not in a single God? No, "the unity, the simplicity, that is, the inseparability of all those features that are in God is one of the chief perfections that I understand to be in him" [40.1]

5. My parents? They do place certain dispositions, but can't create my *substance* (or maintain it - see 2).

Where did the idea of God come from? It's *innate* - the mark of the craftsman.

God "cannot be a deceiver, for it is manifest by the light of nature that all fraud and deception depend on some defect" and God is "subject to no defects" [40.2]

#### Meditation 4: Concerning the True and the False [41.1-45.1]

If God is no deceiver, and God gave me my faculty of judgment, then it appears to follow that I cannot be mistaken. But I am, so how can we explain this?

*First suggestion*: my faculty is not infinite.

*BUT*: God could have given me a perfect judgment, so if he didn't, isn't he either less than perfect or a deceiver?

*Response*: HOLISM: for all we (poor, finite beings) know, a perfect universe requires that I not have a perfect judgment.

This still doesn't explain *how* I err.

Answer: I have an infinite (because indivisible) will, but finite knowledge. Errors come when I *freely choose* to believe things that, were I to listen to my reason, I would realize I cannot surely know.

Thus, God gives us infinite will as well as the means to avoid error. Any errors are therefore our fault.

Rule for attaining truth [45.1]:

pay attention to all the things that I perfectly understand [CLEAR] and separate them off from the rest which I apprehend more confusedly [DISTINCT]

Meditation 5: Concerning the Essence of Material Things, and Again Concerning God, That He Exists (45.1-48.1)

Certain ideas have “true and immutable natures” even if they do not correspond to anything outside me. [45.2]

e.g.: a triangle: I *discover* facts about it, I do not *fabricate* them. [And note that we can now believe these mathematical facts again, because the demon deceiver has been slain in Med. 3] My senses are irrelevant, because, even if I’ve seen a triangle, I’ve never seen a chiliagon, but I can still discover facts about it in the same way.

46.1: The ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT:

1. “the idea of God, that is, the idea of a **supremely perfect being**, is one I discover to be no less within me than the idea of any figure or number.” (In fact, it’s an *innate* idea, according to Med. III [40.2].)
2. “it belongs to God’s nature that he always exists” – that is, built into the *idea* of God is that God *necessarily exists*. This premise is understood *clearly and distinctly*.
3. THEREFORE God exists.

Now, Descartes realizes this seems a bit fishy at first, so he responds to objections:

*Objection 1:* Premise 2 is wrong, because God’s existence and essence can be separated. That is, it is not *essential* to the notion of God that he must exist. Because, after all, existence and essence are separable for everything else.

*Response:* God’s existence is as inseparable from the concept of God as “angles adding up to 180 degrees” is from the concept of a **triangle**, or the idea of a mountain from that of a valley (that is: you can’t have a mountain if you don’t have something it’s taller than).

*Objection 2:* But from the fact that you can’t have a mountain without a valley, it doesn’t follow that *mountains exist*, so how can you prove God’s existence from a fact about the idea of God?

*Response:* True about mountains. But in the case of God, God’s existence is what’s inseparable from his idea. Thus God, by definition, must exist (because my idea of him is clearly and distinctly conceived, and thus must be true).

*Objection 3:* Okay, suppose I agree that *if* you conceive of a supreme being then it follows that he/she/it exists. But I don’t have to do that!

*Response:* [46.2] You don’t have to *call* “the supreme being” to mind. But if you do, you must concede that he exists. Just as you do not need to imagine a triangle, but if you do, you must concede that its angles *must* add up to 180 degrees. And in both cases, the facts remain true *whether or not you think them*.

Now, of course not everyone knows all facts about triangles. We have to be taught Pythagoras’s Theorem. But once we are taught it *it cannot be doubted*. Same with God’s existence: not necessarily obvious to everyone, but once it’s taught and you think about it, you can’t doubt it. [47.1]

Review of skeptical arguments [47.2-48.1]:

1. “I have been made such that I am often mistaken”  
*Response:* “I cannot be mistaken in matters I plainly understand”
2. “I have taken many things to be true and certain which subsequently I recognized to be false”

*Response* “none of these things I clearly and distinctly perceived,” and, ignorant of the rule for determining truth, believed them on the basis of inadequate evidence.

3. I could be dreaming

*Response* even if I'm dreaming, everything I clearly and distinctly perceive is true. (This leaves Meditation VI to deal with the dreaming argument.)

SUM: “the certainty and truth of every science depends exclusively upon the knowledge of the true God.”

Meditation 6: Concerning the Existence of Material Things, and the Real Distinction between Mind and Body [48.1-55]

We know, from clear and distinct perception of mathematics, that bodies *can* exist.

(Inconclusive) Proof of existence of matter from the *imagination*.

1. difference between imagination and *pure intellectio*n. can both understand and imagine a triangle but only the former for a chiliagon or myriagon. Furthermore, imagination requires *effort*
2. Imagination not essential to my identity
3. “Thus it seems to follow that the power of imagining depends upon something distinct from me. And I readily understand that, were a body to exist to which a mind is so joined that it may apply itself in order, as it were to look at any time it wishes, it could happen that it is by means of this very body that I imagine corporeal things.” [48.2]
4. Thus: intellection is the mind understanding *itself*; imagination is when the mind turns on the *body* and “intuits in the body something that conforms to an idea either understood by the mind or perceived by sense” [48.9]
5. Since I can't think of any other way to explain imagination, CONJECTURE: body must exist.

Not conclusive.

49-50: review of what I first believed and then the reasons for doubting it, including the fact that “nature” has “taught” me that sadness of spirit is connected with pain, and that eating cures hunger, BUT that nature appears to have taught me those sensory things that are mistaken.

Proof of existence of matter [50.2-51.1]:

1. I can clearly and distinctly conceive of mind and body separately, and I know I am mind and can exist without body.
2. I can exist without the faculties of imagination and sensing but they cannot exist without me - thus they are *modes* (like ability to move)
3. “it is clear that these faculties, if in fact they exist, must be in a corporeal or extended substance, not in any substance endowed with understanding. For some extension is contained in a clear and distinct concept of them, though certainly not any understanding.” [51.1]
4. I have a passive faculty of sensing to which there must correspond an active faculty for causing the ideas of sensible things
5. This faculty cannot be in me, because “it clearly presupposes no act of understanding, and these ideas are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will”
6. Thus, the active faculty must either be in God (eminent cause of ideas of sense) or in an actually existing body.
7. Can't be God, because that would make God a deceiver (contrast Berkeley).
8. “consequently corporeal things exist”

Proof of substantial union [51.2]:

1. "God is no deceiver (and thus no falsity can be found in my opinions, unless there is also in me a faculty given by God for the purpose of rectifying this falsity)"
2. Everything I am "taught by nature" has some truth to it ("nature" = God or "the ordered network of created things which was instituted by God")
3. Nothing is taught to me by nature more than that I have a body that responds to pain, hunger, etc. (i.e. is connected to mental things).
4. Thus "I am present to my body not merely in the way a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am most tightly joined and, so to speak, commingled" - otherwise I would not *feel* pain, I would see a wound and infer it. And I would understand the need to eat rather than "having confused sensations of hunger and thirst. For clearly these sensations of thirst, hunger, pain, and so on are nothing but certain confused modes of thinking arising from the union and, as it were, the commingling of the mind with the body."
5. From the fact that I feel some pleasant sensations and some unpleasant from bodies whose existence I infer from sensations "it is plainly certain that my body, or rather my whole self, insofar as I am composed of a body and a mind, can be affected by various beneficial and harmful bodies in the vicinity." [52.1]

Problem [52.1]: can I trust what I am "taught by nature" given that this nature seems to mislead me, e.g., idea of heat resembling something outside (see Galileo's *Assayer*) etc.

Define nature: "what God has bestowed on me insofar as I am composed of mind and body." (i.e., features of substantial union)

Problem [52.2]: sometimes this nature misleads us, as when we cannot help but desire poisonous things or when people with dropsy desire drink that will harm them. Why doesn't the goodness of God [53.2] prevent this?

Observations about mind and body [53.2]:

1. mind indivisible (willing sensing, understanding not *parts* of mind), body not
2. mind not affected by all parts of the body, but only (one part of) the brain
3. part of body that is moved by something pulling on it could be moved in exactly the same way by someone/thing pulling on a different point on the "string"
4. Given 3 it is the case that the brain won't be able to tell the difference between a stubbed toe and phantom limb syndrome. HOWEVER it has to tell the mind *something* so it makes sense that of all the sensations it is able to produce it produces the one that "is most especially and most often conducive to the maintenance of a healthy man.
5. THUS: "notwithstanding the immense goodness of God, the nature of man, insofar as it is composed of mind and body, cannot help being sometimes mistaken." [54.2]

Why we can trust our natures [54.2]:

1. Senses more often right about health matters
2. We can use the other senses to check this one
3. Memory can also be used as a check.

Does Meditation VI deal with the dreaming argument, as required? Yes, reason 3 above:

I notice now that there is a considerable difference between these two [dreaming and being awaked]; dreams are never joined by the memory with all the other actions of life. [55.1]