

## *Cogito Ergo Sum*

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### **RENE DESCARTES (1596-1650)**

Rene Descartes is recognized as the first great philosopher of the modern age. He was born in a small town in Touraine, France, and educated by the Jesuits. Descartes' primary interest throughout his life was with methodology, justification and certainty. His first work was entitled *Discourse on Method* (1637). In it he sought to establish the proper procedures by which a question could be investigated while avoiding the dangers of error and confusion.

In additions to his philosophical writings, he also wrote on mathematics. Linking geometry to algebra, he invented the Cartesian coordinate system and analytic geometry. In discovering that geometrical representations could be represented algebraically, Descartes opened the door to the possibility of representing the whole of nature mathematically.

His most famous work was entitled *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) which our present reading is from. This work was immediately recognized as a formidable challenge to the established philosophy and science of his time. Descartes challenged the foundation of knowledge. He argued that it should not be based upon accepted authority, but rather upon one's own rational intuitions. This signaled the beginning of the "modern" age of philosophy. Descartes was in pursuit of certain knowledge, that which could not be doubted. He employed the method of doubt to find that which he could not possible doubt. His conclusion is summed up in his famous phrase, "cogito ergo sum," which means "I think, therefore, I am." Descartes argued that when he thinks about the fact that he is thinking, he cannot be deceived.

***Vocabulary:***

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| Subsequently:  | coming after  |
| Prudence:      | good judgment   |
| Demented:      | mentally impaired   |
| Sirens:        | any of several sea nymphs, represented as part bird and part woman, who lure sailors to their death on rocky coasts by seductive singing  |
| Satyrs:        | any of a class of minor woodland deities, usually represented as having pointed ears, short horns, the head and body of a man, and the legs of a goat and as being fond of riotous merriment. |
| Corporeal:     | physical  |
| Indubitable:   | cannot be doubted, unquestionable   |
| Fictitious:    | not real, made up   |
| Perpetually:   | continually   |
| Frivolity:     | silliness   |
| Patently:      | clearly   |
| Credulity:     | gullibility   |
| Intimacy:      | closeness   |
| Prejudice:     | forming an opinion before the facts are fully known   |
| Arduous:       | difficult   |
| Inextricable:  | very complicated  |
| Imprudently:   | unwisely  |
| Subtleties:    | fine distinctions   |
| Insubstantial: | not substantial, unimportant  |
| Malicious:     | intentionally harmful, mean   |
| Feign:         | to imagine, to make up  |

**Concepts:**

The Method of Doubt:

“Cogito Ergo Sum”

Innate Ideas:

**Questions:**

1. *What is Descartes in search of?*
2. *What method does he employ to achieve his goal?*
3. *Why does he doubt his beliefs?*
4. *Why does he doubt his senses?*
5. *Why does he posit the idea of an evil genius?*
6. *What is it that Descartes believes he can know with absolute certainty?*

**MEDITATION ONE: CONCERNING THOSE THINGS THAT CAN BE CALLED INTO DOUBT**

SEVERAL YEARS HAVE NOW PASSED since I first realized how many were the false opinions that in my youth I took to be true, and thus how doubtful were all the things that I subsequently built upon these opinions. From the time I became aware of this, I realized that for once I had to raze everything in my life, down to the very bottom, so as to begin again from the first foundations, if I want-

ed to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences. But the task seemed so enormous that I waited for a point in my life that was so ripe that no more suitable a time for laying hold of these disciplines would come to pass. For this reason, I have delayed so long that I would be at fault were I to waste on deliberation the time that is left for action. Therefore, now that I have liberated my mind from all cares, and I have secured for myself some leisurely and carefree time, I withdraw in solitude. I will, in short, apply myself

earnestly and openly to the general destruction of my former opinions.

Yet, to this end it, will not be necessary that I show that all my opinions are false, which perhaps I could never accomplish anyway. But because reason now persuades me that I should withhold my assent no less carefully from things which are not plainly certain and indubitable than I would to what is patently false, it will be sufficient justification for rejecting them all, if I find a reason for doubting even the least of them. Nor, therefore, need one survey each opinion one after the other, a task of endless proportion. Rather — because undermining the foundations will cause whatever has been built upon them to fall down of its own accord — I will at once attack those principles which supported everything that I once believed.

Whatever I had admitted until now as most true I took in either from the senses or through the senses; however, I noticed that they sometimes deceived me. And it is a mark of prudence never to trust wholly in those things which have once deceived us.

But perhaps, although the senses sometimes deceive us when it is a question of very small and distant things, still there are many other matters which one certainly cannot doubt, although they are

derived from the very same senses: that I am sitting here before the fireplace wearing my dressing gown: that I feel this sheet of paper in my hands, and so on. But how could one deny that these hands and that my whole body exist? Unless perhaps I should compare myself to insane people whose brains are so impaired by a stubborn vapor from a black bile that they continually insist that they are kings when they are in utter poverty, or that they are wearing purple robes when they are naked, or that they have a head made of clay, or that they are gourds, or that they are made of glass. But they are all demented, and I would appear no less demented if I were to take their conduct as a model for myself.

All of this would be well and good, were I not a man who is accustomed to sleeping at night, and to undergo in my sleep the very same things — or now and then even less likely ones — as do these insane people when they are awake. How often has my evening slumber persuaded me of such customary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated at the fireplace, when in fact I am lying undressed between the blankets! But right now I certainly am gazing upon this piece of paper with eyes wide awake. This head which I am moving is not heavy with sleep. I

extend this hand consciously and deliberately and I feel it. These things would not be so distinct for one who is asleep. But this all seems as if I do not recall having been deceived by similar thoughts on other occasions in my dreams. As I consider these cases more intently, I see so plainly that there are no definite signs to distinguish being awake from being asleep that I am quite astonished, and this astonishment almost convinces me that I am sleeping.

Let us say, then, for the sake of argument, that we are sleeping and that such particulars as these are not true: that we open our eyes; move our heads; extend our hands. Perhaps we do not even have these hands, or any such body at all. Nevertheless, it really must be admitted that things seen in sleep are, as it were, like painted images, which could have been produced only in the likeness of true things. Therefore, at least these general things (eyes, head, hands, the whole body) are not imaginary things, but are true and exist. For, indeed, when painters wish to represent sirens and satyrs by means of bizarre and unusual forms, they surely cannot ascribe utterly new natures to these creatures. Rather, they simply intermingle the members of various animals. And even if they concoct something so utterly novel that its likes have never

been seen before (being utterly fictitious and false), certainly at the very minimum the colors from which the painters compose the things ought to be true. And for the same reason, although even these general things (eyes, head, hands, and the like) can be imaginary, still one must necessarily admit that at least other things that are even more simple and universal are true, from which, as from true colors, all these things — be they true or false — which in our thoughts are images of things, are constructed.

To this class seems to belong corporeal nature in general, together with its extension; likewise the shape of extended things, their quantity or size, their number; as well as the place where they exist, the time of their duration, and other such things.

Hence, perhaps we do not conclude improperly that physics, astronomy, medicine, and all the other disciplines that are dependent upon the consideration of composite things are all doubtful. But arithmetic, geometry, and other such disciplines — which deal of nothing but the simplest and most general things and which are indifferent as to whether these composite things do or do not exist — contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I be awake or asleep, two plus three makes five, and a square

does not have more than four sides; nor does it seem possible that such obvious truths can fall under the suspicion of falsity.

All the same, a certain opinion of long standing has been fixed in my mind, namely that there exists a God who is able to do anything and by whom I, such as I am, have been created. How do I know that he did not bring it about that there be no earth at all, no heavens, no extended thing, no figure, no size, no place, and yet all these things should seem to me to exist precisely as they appear to do now? Moreover — for I judge that others sometimes make mistakes in matters that they believe they know most perfectly — how do I know that I am not deceived every time I add two and three, or count the sides of a square or perform an even simpler operation, if such can be imagined? But perhaps God has not willed that I be thus deceived, for it is said that he is good in the highest degree. Nonetheless, if it were repugnant to his goodness that he should have created me such that I be deceived all the time, it would seem, from this same consideration, to be foreign to him to permit me to be deceived occasionally. But we cannot make this last assertion.

Perhaps there are some who would rather deny such a powerful God,

then believe that all other matters are uncertain. Let us not put these people off just yet; rather, let us grant that everything said here about God is fictitious. Now they suppose that I came to be what I am either by fate or by chance or by a continuous series of events or by some other way. But because being deceived and being mistaken seem to be imperfections, the less powerful they take the author of my being to be, the more probable it will be that I would be so imperfect as to be deceived perpetually. I have nothing to say in response to these arguments. At length I am forced to admit that there is nothing, among the things I once believed to be true, which it is not permissible to doubt — not for reasons of frivolity or a lack of forethought, but because of valid and considered arguments. Thus, I must carefully withhold assent no less from these things than from the patently false, if I wish to find anything certain.

But it is not enough simply to have made a note of this; I must take care to keep it before my mind. For long-standing opinions keep coming back again and again, almost against my will; they seize upon my credulity, as if it were bound over to them by long use and the claims of intimacy. Nor will I get out of the habit of assenting to them and believing in them, so long as I take them to be

exactly what they are, namely, in some respects doubtful as by now is obvious, but nevertheless highly probable, so that it is much more consonant with reason to believe them than to deny them. Hence, it seems to me, I would do well to turn my will in the opposite direction, to deceive myself and pretend for a considerable period that they are wholly false and imaginary, until finally, as if with equal weight of prejudice on both sides, no bad habit should turn my judgment from the correct perception of things. For indeed I know that no danger or error will follow and that it is impossible for me to indulge in too much distrust, since I now am concentrating only on knowledge, not on action.

Thus, I will suppose not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but rather an evil genius, as clever and deceitful as he is powerful, who has directed his entire effort to misleading me. I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the deceptive games of my dreams, with which he lays snares for my credulity. I will regard myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, no senses, but as nevertheless falsely believing that I possess all these things. I will remain resolutely fixed in this meditation, and, even if it be out of

my power to know anything true, certainly it is within my power to take care resolutely to withhold my assent to what is false, lest this deceiver, powerful and clever as he is, has an effect on me. But this undertaking is arduous, and laziness brings me back to my customary way of living. I am not unlike a prisoner who might enjoy an imaginary freedom in his sleep. When he later begins to suspect that he is sleeping, he fears being awakened and conspires slowly with these pleasant illusions. In just this way, I spontaneously fall back into my old beliefs, and dread being awakened, lest the toilsome wakefulness which follows upon a peaceful rest, have to be spent thence forward not in the light but among the inextricable shadows of the difficulties now brought forward.

**MEDITATION TWO: CONCERNING THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN MIND: THAT THE MIND IS MORE KNOWN THAN THE BODY**

Yesterday's meditation filled my mind with so many doubts that I can no longer forget about them—nor yet do I see how they are to be resolved. But, as if I had suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool, I am so disturbed that I can neither touch my foot to the bottom, nor

swim up to the top. Nevertheless, I will work my way up, and I will follow the same path I took yesterday, putting aside everything which admits of the least doubt, as if I had discovered it to be absolutely false. I will go forward until I know something certain — or, if nothing else, until I at least know for certain that nothing is certain. Archimedes sought only a firm and immovable point in order to move the entire earth from one place to another. Surely great things are to be hoped for if I am lucky enough to find at least one thing that is certain and indubitable.

Therefore, I will suppose that all I see is false. I will believe that none of those things that my deceitful memory brings before my eyes ever existed. I, thus, have no senses: body; shape; extension; movement; and place are all figments of my imagination. What then will count as true? Perhaps only this one thing: that nothing is certain.

But on what grounds do I know that there is nothing over and above all those which I have just reviewed, concerning which there is not even the least cause for doubt? Is there not a God (or whatever name I might call him) who instills these thoughts in me? But why should I think that, since perhaps I myself could be the author of these things?

Therefore, am I not at least something? But I have already denied that I have any senses and any body. Still, I hesitate; for what follows from that? Am I so tied to the body and to the senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have persuaded myself that there is nothing at all in the world: no heaven; no earth; no minds; no bodies. Is it not then true that I do not exist? But certainly I should exist, if I were to persuade myself of something. But there is a deceiver (I know not who he is) powerful and sly in the highest degree, who is always purposely deceiving me. Then there is no doubt that I exist, if he deceives me. And deceive me as he will, he can never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something. Thus; it must be granted that, after weighing carefully and sufficiently everything, one must come to the considered judgment that the statement “I am, I exist” is necessarily true every time it is uttered by me or conceived in my mind.

But I do not yet understand well enough who I am — I, who now necessarily exists. And from this point on, I must take care lest I imprudently substitute something else in place of myself; and thus be mistaken even in that knowledge which I claim to be the most certain and evident of all. To this end, I shall meditate once more on what I once

believed myself to be before having embarked upon these deliberations. For this reason, then, I will set aside whatever can be refuted even to a slight degree by the arguments brought forward, so that at length there shall remain precisely nothing but what is certain and unshaken.

What, therefore, did I formerly think I was? A man, of course. But what is a man? Might I not say a rational animal? No, because then one would have to inquire what an “animal” is and what “rational” means. And then from only one question we slide into many more difficult ones. Nor do I now have enough free time that I want to waste it on subtleties of this sort. But rather here I pay attention to what spontaneously and by my own nature came into my thought beforehand whenever I pondered what I was. Namely it occurred to me first that I have a face, hands, arms, and this entire mechanism of bodily members, the very same as are discerned in a corpse — which I referred to by the name “body.” It also occurred to me that I eat, walk, feel and think; these actions I used to assign to the soul as their cause. But what this soul was I either did not think about or I imagined it was something terribly insubstantial — after the fashion of a wind, fire, or either — which has been poured into my coarser parts. I truly was not in doubt regarding the body;

rather I believed that I distinctly knew its nature, which, were I perhaps tempted to describe it such as I mentally conceived it, I would explain it thus: by “body,” I understand all that is suitable for being bound by some shape; for being enclosed in some place, and thus for filling up space, so that it excludes every other body from that space; for being perceived by touch, sight, hearing, taste, or smell; for being moved in several ways, not surely by itself, but by whatever else that touches it. For I judged that the power of self-motion, and likewise of sensing or of thinking, in no way pertains to the nature of the body. Nonetheless, I used to marvel especially that such faculties were found in certain bodies.

But now what am I, when I suppose that some deceiver — omnipotent and, if I may be allowed to say it, malicious — takes all the pains he can in order to deceive me? Can I not affirm that I possess at least a small measure of all those traits which I already have said pertain to the nature of the body? I pay attention, I think, I deliberate — but nothing happens. I am wearied of repeating this in vain. But which of these am I to ascribe to the soul? How about eating or walking? These are surely nothing but illusions, because I do not have a body. How about sensing? Again, this also does not happen

without a body, and I judge that I really did not sense those many things I seemed to have sensed in my dreams. How about thinking? Here I discover that thought is an attribute that really does not belong to me. This alone cannot be detached from me. I am; I exist; this is certain. But for how long? For as long as I think. Because perhaps it could also come to pass that if I should cease from all thinking I would then utterly cease to exist. I now admit nothing that is not necessarily true. I am, therefore, precisely only a thing that thinks; that is, a mind, or soul, or intellect, or reason — words the meaning of which I was ignorant before. Now, I am a true thing, and truly existing; but what kind of thing? I have said it already: a thing that thinks.

What then? I will set my imagination going to see if I am not something more. I am not that connection of members which is called the human body. Neither am I some subtle air infused into these members, not a wind, not a fire, not a vapor, not a breath — nothing that I imagine to myself, for I have supposed all these to be nothing. The assertion stands: the fact still remains that I am something. But perhaps it is the case that nevertheless, these very things which take to be nothing (because I am ignorant of them) in reality do not differ from that self

which I know. This I do not know. I shall not quarrel about it right now; I can make a judgment only regarding things which are known to me. I know that I exist; I ask now who is this “I” whom I know. Most certainly the knowledge of this matter, thus precisely understood, does not depend upon things that I do not yet know to exist. Therefore, it is not dependent upon any of those things that I feign in my imagination. But this word “feign” warns me of my error. For I would be feigning if I should “imagine” that I am something, because imagining is merely the contemplation of the shape or image of a corporeal thing. But I know now with certainty that I am, and at the same time it could happen that all these images — and, generally, everything that pertains to the nature of the body — are nothing but dreams. When these things are taken into account, I would speak no less foolishly were I to say: “I will imagine so that I might recognize more distinctly who I am,” than were I to say: “Now I surely am awake, and I see something true, but because I do not yet see it with sufficient evidence, I will take the trouble of going to sleep so that my dreams might show this to me more truly and more evidently.” Thus I know that none of what I can comprehend by means of the imagination pertains to this understanding that I have of

myself. Moreover, I know that I must be most diligent about withdrawing my mind from these things so that it can perceive its nature as distinctly as possible.

But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and which also imagines and knows.

Reprinted from *Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, 1931.

