

FIRST MEDITATION

What can be called into doubt

Descartes begins the First Meditation by saying that many of the beliefs he had long cherished were false, and that this made him think that the 'whole edifice' of his beliefs was 'highly doubtful'. The realization that he has been mistaken leads him to think that the whole edifice of his beliefs may be threatened. What is his response to the threat of scepticism? 'I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to *demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations* if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable'. Descartes' response to the problem looks paradoxical: it is not to turn his back on scepticism, but to embrace it. It is not to stop doubting, but instead to try to doubt everything: to refuse to accept anything that it is possible to doubt. Why? Because Descartes thinks that is the only way to discover *whether there is something that cannot be doubted*. If one has a house with rotten timber and shaky foundations, the solution is to demolish it, and find the foundations, and then rebuild from scratch. A different metaphor is given elsewhere, in his replies to some objections:¹

Suppose [someone] had a basket full of apples and, being worried that some of the apples were rotten, wanted to take out the rotten ones to prevent the rot spreading. How would he proceed? Would he not begin by tipping the whole lot out of the basket? And would not the next step be to cast his eye over each apple in turn, and pick up and put back in the basket only those he saw to be sound, leaving the others?

If one has a basket full of apples, some of which are known to be rotten, the solution is to empty the whole basket out, and put back only the good ones. This

¹Objections were raised by a number of Descartes' critics at the time of publication of the *Meditations*. The objections, and Descartes' responses to them, are included in standard editions: see e.g. John Cottingham's translation, *Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy, with Selections from the Objections and Replies* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

method, as applied to beliefs, is to doubt everything it is possible to doubt, in the hope of finding something that it is impossible to doubt. The goal is to take the sceptical challenge seriously, not by believing the skeptic outright, but rather by withholding assent to any belief that is vulnerable to the sceptical attack. 'It will not be necessary for me to show that all my opinions are false'; instead 'I should *hold back my assent* from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable'. One does not have to literally inspect each belief, one at a time, as one would inspect each apple! Descartes says 'I will not need to run through them all individually, which would be an endless task....I will go straight for the *basic principles* on which all my former beliefs rested'.

Having shown the need for the method of doubt, the meditator then raises a number of sceptical arguments, as a way of implementing the method. The thinker of the First Meditation follows through a complex train of thought in an internal dialogue, raising arguments against the 'basic principles' that ground his beliefs, replying to the arguments, and raising more arguments. The thinker presents himself as a naive believer in common sense who must force himself to take seriously the sceptical hypotheses that undermine his naive beliefs. So the Meditation has a certain rhythm, as the thinker plays first one role, and then the other: first the skeptic, then the naïf, and then the skeptic again. The Meditation also has a certain crescendo: the sceptical hypotheses considered at the outset are relatively mild, but the hypotheses becomes more extreme, and the doubt more hyperbolic, as the Meditation progresses.

The deceptiveness of the senses

One of the 'basic principles' on which our beliefs about the world in general rest, is the belief that our senses can be trusted. Consider some of the beliefs you have right now. Perhaps you believe there is a cup of coffee on the table, perhaps you believe that there is a tree just outside. Perhaps you believe that birds are singing, or that a bus is going by, or that someone is

mowing their lawn. Perhaps you believe that you are sitting in a chair, perhaps you believe that you are wearing a dressing gown, sitting by a fire, with a piece of paper in your hands! You have these ordinary beliefs because you trust your senses. Descartes' first sceptical argument aims to undermine this confidence we have in our senses. How does the argument work?². Ordinarily, we naively follow a 'basic principle' that looks something like this.

- A. Whatever is sensed is as it appears to the senses.

Pause for a moment, and ask yourself whether the principle is correct or not. Can you think of an example from your own experience that shows it is wrong? Can you think of a *counter-example* to the principle?

Descartes points out that our senses deceive us with respect to objects 'which are very small or in the distance'. This shows that at least sometimes, what is sensed is *not* as it appears to the senses. Principle A is therefore wrong. If you look at a circular tower that is a long distance away, it may look square. If you look at a straight stick half submerged in water, it will look bent, because of the refractive properties of the water. (This example is discussed by Descartes in his responses to some objections.) The conclusion of the thinker is that we have reason for caution. 'From time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once'.

Does this argument provide grounds for doubting all of those ordinary beliefs based on the senses, at the beginning of this section? In the illusions discussed by Descartes there is a kind of *external interference* in our perceptual processes, and one might think this is a kind of external interference that is often absent. If it were not for the great distance, or the water, our senses would not have deceived us. We might want to say that the circumstances in which our senses deceive us are especially unfavorable circumstances. We know that

²The following reconstruction draws on Harry Frankfurt's interpretation, in *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen* (Bobbs Merrill, 1970).

when things are far away, or half-submerged, our senses can be unreliable. We know that there are favorable circumstances too, and that in these circumstances our senses are reliable. This is how the thinker of the Meditation responds to the sceptical argument he had just thought of. He says,

although the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, 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. Again how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine?

The suggestion here is that there are some perceptual circumstances, for example when the things you see are close by, in good light, and so forth, when our senses deliver the truth. When it comes to distant towers, we get it wrong. But when it comes to a nearby fire, we get it right. If we want to defend the senses, we might want to fix up the naive principle A, in a way that captures this suggestion.

B. If the circumstances are favorable, then whatever is sensed is as it appears to the senses.

Perhaps this conditional principle is good enough to capture the thought in the passage quoted above. Ask yourself again whether it will work. Suppose the principle B were true, but you could never *tell* whether circumstances were favorable or unfavorable. Suppose you could not tell whether things were close by, or distant. Would the principle be any use? Surely not. You need to be in a position to know *that* the circumstances are favorable, before you can draw the conclusion that things are as they appear. The next question is: can we know whether circumstances are favorable or not? The answer implied by the thinker in the above passage is, yes. We can know when circumstances are favorable, and they are favorable in the cases of these apparently undeniable beliefs: that I am sitting by the fire,

wearing a winter dressing gown, and so forth. We should then amend our principle to yield a better one.

- C. We can distinguish favorable from unfavorable circumstances; and if the circumstances are favorable, then whatever is sensed is as it appears to the senses.

This principle is better than A, because it allows for the possibility of sensory illusions. It is better than B, because it includes the vital claim that we can in fact distinguish favorable from unfavorable circumstances. Does it adequately support the trustworthiness of the senses? Can you think of any example that would show this principle to be wrong? Try to test the principle, again, by seeing if you can find a counter-example to it.

Descartes raises an example, a new sceptical hypothesis, which undermines this kind of defence of the senses. Consider the situation of 'madmen, whose brains are...damaged by the persistent vapors of melancholia'. The sensory beliefs of such people are often false, *even when the circumstances in their environment are favorable*. Such people believe, so Descartes claims, 'that they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins'. Whatever the details of the story, it seems clear that in some cases of mad hallucination there is no *external* interference in ones perceptual processes, but there are *internal* interferences in ones perceptual processes. In such cases the external circumstances are favorable, and (we can suppose) the mad person knows that the external circumstances are favorable: the light is good, and so forth. And yet it is not true, in such cases, that things are as they appear to the senses. So the case of the mad hallucination seems to be a counter-example to principle C. We have not yet found a principle that will permit us to trust our senses.

Notice that the thinker in the Meditation seems to laugh off the sceptical hypothesis of madness. 'Such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself'. The suggestion is that mad people are incompetent perceivers, who suffer from internal interferences; and

that we can tell competent from incompetent perceivers; and in particular the thinker of the *Meditations* can tell that he is not one of the incompetent ones. Perhaps we can take this suggestion into account, and find a principle that will improve on C.

D. We can distinguish favorable from unfavorable circumstances, and competent from incompetent perceivers; and if circumstances are favorable, and the perceiver is competent then, whatever is sensed is as it appears to the senses.

Look what has happened to our naive principle that things are as they appear! It has become hedged about with all kinds of qualifications, burdened with all kinds of conditions: when the circumstances are right, and the perceiver is competent, then at least, things are as they appear. Will this more complex and qualified principle successfully defend the senses?

Consider its assumption that we can distinguish competent from incompetent perceivers: that we can distinguish, for example, sane perceivers from the mad ones. Ask yourself: who are the 'we'? The pronoun is supposed to apply to everyone. So it is supposed to apply to people, whether they are sane or mad. Suppose I am mad. The principle says that I must be able to tell that I am mad. The principle says that we can distinguish competent from incompetent perceivers, therefore I must be able to tell that I am an incompetent perceiver. The problem though is that if I am mad, I suffer not only from *sensory hallucinations*, but *defects of judgement*. And if I suffer defects of judgement, then I may well not know that I am mad. The assumption of principle D that we can distinguish competent from incompetent perceivers is false. We have not, it seems, been able to find a principle that will adequately defend the senses.

Dreaming

How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events—that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! ... I see plainly that there are never any sure

signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep'.

This is one of the most famous sceptical arguments in philosophy. I have had dreams which were qualitatively indistinguishable from waking experiences. So the qualitative character of my experience does not guarantee that I am not now dreaming. So I cannot know that I am not now dreaming. There seems to be an implicit continuation of the argument: So I cannot know that I am not always dreaming. So I cannot know to be true any belief based on my sensory experience. What do you think is the conclusion of the dreaming argument? Perhaps it is, for all I know, I may be dreaming now. Perhaps it is, for all I know, I may be dreaming *always*. Will either of these do equally well, for Descartes' purposes?

This sceptical argument is still aimed at the kinds of beliefs that are based on sensory experience. The dream argument threatens our beliefs about bodies outside us, but Descartes does not seem to think it threatens our beliefs about mathematics. Even in a dream one may know that 2 plus 3 make 5, and that a square has only four sides. The dreaming argument threatens all knowledge based on experience, but it does not threaten knowledge of *a priori* truths, i.e. truths known independently of experience.

In responding to the dreaming hypothesis, the thinker of the First Meditation concludes that it undermines all empirical beliefs, that is, *all beliefs based on experience*. The sceptical force of the argument is devastating. Nevertheless, there are, he thinks, some beliefs that escape the sceptical net.

[W]hether 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.

He concludes, provisionally, that beliefs in arithmetic and geometry contain 'something certain and indubitable'. Notice Descartes' assumption here, that the probability of our being wrong about our sensory beliefs is greater than the probability of our being wrong about our arithmetical beliefs. This assumption

that the intellect is more reliable than are the senses is a sign of Descartes' rationalism, and we will be seeing more of it throughout the *Meditations*. However, even this confidence in the beliefs about mathematics will be called into question by the next, and final, sceptical hypothesis.

The Malicious Demon

Descartes first considers the possibility that God could be causing him to be deceived, both with respect to empirical beliefs about the earth, the sky, the material world—and also with respect to the truths of mathematics that are believed independently of experience.

How do I know that he has not brought it about 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 just as they do now? What is more...may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter?

This hypothesis does not fit well with the concept of God, 'who is supremely good and the source of truth', so he adjusts the hypothesis, so that the being who controls my beliefs is not God, but some powerful and deceiving demon.

I will suppose...some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely ...delusions.

My experience would be exactly as it is if it were produced in me not by the workings of the physical world but by a malicious demon. Moreover, my beliefs about the truths of mathematics would also be the same if my arithmetical inferences were under the same control.

Notice that the scope of this sceptical argument is the broadest of all, undermining confidence not only in the veridicality of the senses, but in judgments of reason. But does it threaten all judgements of reason? What would be the consequences for Descartes' own

argument if it did? This question was raised in connection with the madness hypothesis, and it is equally relevant here.

Some questions to consider about Meditation I

(1) We saw that Descartes does not take seriously the possibility that he himself is mad. If he is taking the skeptic seriously, why does he not pursue this possibility? Why does he dismiss the madness hypothesis, if he is really refusing to take nothing for granted? Part of the reason is because he considers instead a related hypothesis that describes a kind of 'madness' of the sane, the *dreaming* hypothesis.

As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake—indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events—that I am here in my dressing gown, sitting by the fire—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!

If dreams are a kind of madness for the sane, then there is less reason to consider more seriously the sceptical hypothesis of madness. But while it seems plausible that dreams and madness are indeed similar in so far as they involve defects in sensory beliefs, it is not obvious that they are similar when it comes to defects of judgement. In Descartes' opinion, a dreamer has defective sensory beliefs, but he does not have defective reasoning powers. The mad person can have *both*. What would happen, if he were to take the madness hypothesis seriously? If madness can involve not only the defects of *perception* that Descartes considers, but defects of *judgement*, then think about the implications this sceptical hypothesis would have for the project of the Meditations: the project of *using reason* to show *by argument* that we can have knowledge.

(2) Descartes says that there are 'never any *sure signs* by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep'. Is this true? Can you think of anything that might be a candidate 'sure sign'? J. L. Austin

suggested that there are qualitative signs that help us to distinguish waking from dreaming. The signs are hard to describe, but the fact that we are able to recognize them is shown by the phrase we have in ordinary language to describe it, namely a 'dream-like quality'³). Some peculiar waking experiences have 'a dream-like quality'. We know what a dream-like quality is, and that typically dreams have it and waking experience doesn't. In support of Austin's point there is also the phenomenon of lucid dreams. When someone has a lucid dream, they become aware that they are dreaming, while they are dreaming, and they are able to affect and control the narrative in the dream. If this is so, then they will be aware of the dream's dream-like quality. Moreover, lucid dreamers provide a counter-example to Descartes' apparent suggestion that one never knows that one is dreaming, when one is dreaming. Is this sufficient to answer Descartes' sceptical argument?

Remember that Descartes claimed there are never any *sure* signs to distinguish waking from dreaming. Are there *some* dreams that seem very similar to waking life? Have you sometimes had the experience that Descartes describes, of believing that you are awake and doing all kinds of things, when really you are asleep in bed? If this is ever the case, then it seems that Descartes is right to say that there are no *sure* signs that will tell you that you are asleep, when you are asleep. Perhaps dreams can have a 'dream-like quality'. But that quality would be of no use against Descartes' argument, if (i) dreams do always have the dream-like quality, but the quality is noticed only when you wake up, and remember what the dream was like, or (ii) dreams do not *always* have the dream-like quality. What is needed is a 'dream-like quality' that will be a 'sure sign': that is, it will always be there to tell you *that* you are dreaming *when* you are dreaming.

(3) Suppose we accept that is not the case that I always know that I am asleep when I am asleep. At least sometimes, when I am asleep, I believe that I am awake. Does this imply that I therefore do not know that I am

³ Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 49

awake, when I am awake? One of Descartes' critics, Gassendi, said that it does not. He acknowledged that dreams may give rise to deception, but nevertheless 'for as long as we are awake, we cannot doubt whether we are awake or dreaming'. Perhaps Descartes' thinking is guided by the following general principle (see Williams, *Descartes: the Project of Pure Enquiry* (London: Penguin, 1978), 309-313):

I can only tell that S, when S, if I can tell that not-S when not-S.

Applied to dreaming, this principle would imply that I can only tell that I am awake, when I am awake, if I can tell that I am not awake, when I am not awake. (Ask yourself whether the principle is implicit in Descartes' sceptical hypothesis about the senses.)

How plausible is the principle? Apply the principle to the cases of being alive, conscious, sober. Substitute for S in the above principle 'I am alive'; 'I am conscious'; 'I am sober'. An application of this principle seems to tell me that I cannot know that I am alive, when I am alive, since I would not know that I was dead, if I were dead. I cannot know that I am conscious, when I am conscious, since I would not know that I was unconscious, if I were unconscious. And so forth. Notice that we have not shown what exactly is wrong with the principle. But we have shown that it has some apparently absurd consequences. Of course I can tell that I am alive, when I am alive!

This argumentative strategy is called a *reductio ad absurdum*. It is a useful strategy in philosophical argument, especially when something looks suspicious, but you can't quite see what is wrong with it. Ask yourself: what is the principle here? Would we get ridiculous consequences, if we applied the principle somewhere else? If so, then the principle should be questioned. Of course, one's opponent is always free to bite the bullet and respond: 'I don't see what's so ridiculous about that consequence!', a philosophical manoeuvre colloquially known as 'outsmarting one's opponent'—named after Australian philosopher Jack Smart, who is thought to be fond of it. But it does seem hard to imagine anyone 'outsmarting' this particular *reductio* argument, accepting that I cannot tell I am alive, when

I'm alive, because I couldn't know I was dead if I were dead. But there may be more to the principle: if you want to pursue this, read the Williams passage cited above.

(4) Suppose Descartes has established that any given experience may be a dream. Is he entitled to infer that therefore *all* experiences may be a dream? Consider this analogous inference, about a lottery. It is a fair lottery. Any number has the same chance of winning as any other number. So it is true that *anyone can win the lottery*. Is it therefore true that *everyone can win the lottery*? Is it possible that every ticket holder wins? Of course not. Similarly, 'For all x, possibly x is a dream' does not imply 'Possibly for all x, x is a dream'. This objection is related to an argument made by Gilbert Ryle, who used an analogy of counterfeit money. Suppose you know that there is counterfeit money around, and that it is hard to tell from the genuine article. Then perhaps it is true that, for all you know, any given 50 dollar bill is a counterfeit. Does it follow that, for all you know, every 50 dollar bill is counterfeit? No. And what is more, it doesn't even make sense to suppose that *all* money could be counterfeit, or so Ryle argued. The notion of a counterfeit is in a sense parasitic on the notion of the real thing.

A country which had no coinage would offer no scope to counterfeiters. There would be nothing for them to manufacture or pass counterfeits of. They could, if they wished, manufacture and give away decorated discs of brass or lead, which the public might be pleased to get. But these would not be false coins. There can be false coins only where there are coins made of the proper materials by the proper authorities. In a country where there is a coinage, false coins can be manufactured and passed; and the counterfeiting might be so efficient that an ordinary citizen, unable to tell which were false and which were genuine coins, might become suspicious of the genuineness of any particular coin that he received. But however general his suspicions might be there remains one proposition which he cannot entertain, the proposition, namely, that it is possible that all coins are counterfeits. For there must be an answer to the question: 'Counterfeits of what?' (Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas* (Cambridge University Press, 1960) 94-5).

Ryle argued that the same applies to the sceptical hypotheses of the *Meditations*, if they claim that for all we know, our senses are *always* deceiving us; or, that for all we know, we are *always* dreaming. Just as there can be no counterfeit money, unless there is also the real thing, so there can be no dreaming experiences, unless there is also waking experience. How convincing do you find this response to Descartes?