

# Class Two - Descartes' First Meditation

## Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

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### 1 Some Context

- **Descartes:** French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher who lived from 1596 to 1650. Considered the founder of modern philosophy
  - Considered himself, in the first instance, a mathematician.
    - \* Bridged algebra and geometry with the idea of the “Cartesian coordinates” system that we all learned in grade school.
  - Had a series of dreams in 1619 that made him think he needed to reform all knowledge, starting with philosophy as it could provide the foundation for scientific knowledge.
  - Wrote several works in philosophy and science but his most important philosophical works are the *Discourse on Method* (1637), and, even more so, the *Meditations on First Philosophy*.
- **The Meditations:**
  - Published in 1641 in Latin.
  - It's an unusual sort of philosophical fiction—written as if it's a journal over several days, with one meditation per day—though it was really written over a few years.

### 2 The Task of the *Meditations*

- **The Initial Observation:** Descartes realized he had believed a bunch of falsehoods in childhood and based his other beliefs upon them without recognizing that they were based on a faulty foundation.
  - **Biographical/Historical Note:** Descartes had quite a good education, but realized that much of the scientific information he received was really unfounded.
    - \* Note, this was before there was really an established scientific method.
    - \* Much of what passed as “science” was commentary on ancient books, especially those of Aristotle.
- **The Task:** Call into doubt everything that can possibly be called into doubt, “demolish everything completely” to re-establish only what can be soundly established on a rock-solid foundation.
- **The Method:** “Hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false,” (15). Even for opinions that seem probable but are not completely without doubt, try to imagine oneself in a circumstance in which they are “utterly false and imaginary,” (19).

### 3 The Deception of the Senses

- **The Basic Problem:** The vast majority of my beliefs are acquired on the basis of my senses—my sensory experiences. By the senses can deceive—we're all familiar with illusions, hallucinations, and dreams. Given that the senses can deceive, how can I be sure that they're not deceiving me now?

- **The Dreaming Scenario:** Consider the possibility that I'm 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!"

- Sure, but I can pinch myself and so I know I'm not dreaming.
- But I've had dreams in which I've pinched myself in the dream, convinced myself that I'm not dreaming, but nevertheless been wrong.

**The Conclusion:** "There are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep."

- **Question:** What do we think of Descartes's conclusion here? Is it really true that there are never any sure signs by which we can distinguish being awake from being asleep? If not, can we modify the example to maintain the same point?

- **A Modified Dreaming Scenario:** You think you're a human being, living a normal life. In fact, however, you're an alien who has just taken inhaled a large dose of a psychedelic drug, and, when you die, you'll awake to your actual alien friends realizing that this whole life was a three hour drug trip.

- \* From a fun thread in Reddit's /r/WritingPrompts:

[https://www.reddit.com/r/WritingPrompts/comments/6xngfe/wp\\_when\\_you\\_die\\_you\\_wake\\_up\\_in\\_an\\_alien\\_world/dmhcs18/](https://www.reddit.com/r/WritingPrompts/comments/6xngfe/wp_when_you_die_you_wake_up_in_an_alien_world/dmhcs18/)

Consider Descartes's remark in this context: "Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all."

- **An Example from Hindu Mythology:** From the Matsya Purana, a text of Hindu lore, dated sometime around the 4th century CE:

"The god [Vishnu] went on: "No one can comprehend my Maya (magical power of illusion). No one has ever comprehended it. There will never be anyone capable of penetrating to its secret. Long, long ago, there lived a godlike holy seer, Narada by name, and he was a direct son of the god Brahma himself, full of fervent devotion to me. Like you, he merited my grace, and I appeared before him, just as I am appearing now to you. I granted him a boon, and he uttered the wish that you have uttered. Then, though I warned him not to inquire further into the secret of my Maya, he insisted, just like you.

And I said to him: 'Plunge into yonder water, and you shall experience the secret of my Maya.' Narada dived into the pond. He emerged again—in the shape of a girl. Narada stepped out of the water as Sushila, 'The Virtuous One,' the daughter of the king of Benares. And presently, when she was in the prime of her youth, her father bestowed her in marriage on the son of the neighboring king of Vidarbha. The holy seer and ascetic, in the form of a girl, fully experienced the delights of love. In due time, then, the old king of Vidarbha died, and Sushila's husband succeeded to the throne. The beautiful queen had many sons and grandsons, and was incomparably happy...

"However, in the long course of time, a feud broke out between Sushila's husband and her father, and this developed presently into a furious war. In a single mighty battle many of her sons and grandsons, her father, and her husband all were slain. And when she learned of the holocaust she proceeded in sorrow from the capital to the battlefield, there to lift a solemn lament. And she ordered a gigantic funeral pyre and placed upon it the dead bodies of her relatives, her brothers, sons, nephews, and grandsons, and then, side by side, the bodies of her husband and her father. With her own hand she laid torch to the pyre, and when the flames were mounting cried aloud, 'My son, my son!' and when the flames were roaring, threw herself into the conflagration.

The blaze became immediately cool and clear; the pyre became a pond. And amidst the waters Sushila found herself—but again as the holy Narada. And the god Vishnu, holding the saint by the hand, was leading him out of the crystal pool

""After the god and the saint had come to the shore, Vishnu asked with an equivocal smile: 'Who is this son whose death you are bewailing?' Narada stood confounded and ashamed. The god continued: 'This is the semblance of my Maya, woeful, somber, accursed. Not the lotus-born Brahma, nor any other of the gods, Indra, nor even Shiva, can fathom its depthless depth.

- **An Technological Version of the Same Kind of Example from *Rick and Morty*:**  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szzVIQ653as&ab\\_channel=AdultSwim](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szzVIQ653as&ab_channel=AdultSwim)

- **Question:** Is there an important difference between a "simulation hypothesis" of this sort and the sort of dream scenario that Descartes is considering?

## 4 Clinging to a Bit of Knowledge

- **Dreams Don't Come from Scratch:** Even when painters dream up some fantastical mythical creatures, they still draw on what they know for real in order to construct these fantastical paintings. Consider, for instance, the following painting:



Here, we have two composite things which don't exist, a siren—half woman and half bird—and a centaur—half man half horse—but both are constructed from simpler things that do exist—people, birds, and horses.

- **The Minimal Starting Point:** Now, an extremely creative painter might dream up creatures that bear basically no resemblance at all to anything that actually exists. Even so, at least the basic ingredients used to compose the image—the colors and shapes—must be inherited from their knowledge of reality. Likewise, even if all of this is a dream, the basic experiential ingredients that constitute this dream—things like color, extension, and so on—cannot be wholly delusory.
- **A Bit of Knowledge:** So, it seems like there's *some* things we can know, even if we're dreaming. Things like the following:
  - Nothing can be red all over and green all over.
  - Nothing can be both inside and outside a given container.
  - A square has exactly four sides.
  - Two plus three equals five.
  - The square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle equals the sum of the squares of the other two sides.

## 5 The Evil Demon

- **The Disturbing Power of an Omnipotent God:** God is omnipotent—capable of doing anything at all. So it seems that he could make me believe the things above as if I have absolute certainty, even though I am, in fact deluded. Of course, God is omni-benevolent—all good—so he *wouldn't* do such a thing. But he *could*.
- **The Evil Demon:** "I will suppose therefore 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 the sky, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams

which he has devised to ensnare my judgment. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, 5that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree."