

# OPEN PHILOSOPHY

"IT IS THROUGH THE VERY SAME PRACTICES THAT ONE BOTH LIVES WELL AND DIES WELL."

~EPICURUS

Search ...

BOOK >> DESCARTES' MEDITATIONS

This translation of Descartes' 1641 *Meditations* is from the 1911 edition of *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Cambridge University Press), translated from the Latin by Elizabeth S. Haldane.<sup>1</sup>

I indicate where my commentary ends by using our writer's avatar where the primary text begins:



Download [an imperfect PDF](#) of this page.

## Introduction to Descartes' *Meditations*



**Warning:** The text you are about to read was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1663 by Pope Alexander VII, just over a decade after the death of its author, René Descartes (1595-1650). As if that were not itself a significant enough achievement, here are but a few representative lines from his "résumé":

*Listed under "Mathematician":*

Contributed foundationally to analytic geometry, including the "Cartesian coordinate system" and ground-breaking methods for representing shapes algebraically.

*Under "Scientist":*

Discovered law of refraction in optics, and contributed first rigorous theoretical work on rainbows in Europe.

*Under "Psychologist":*

Theorized about how the mind produces three-dimensional vision, the role of the brain and nervous system in the explanation of bodily movement, and the physiological basis of emotions.

He would *like* to add under "Philosopher":

- Put knowledge on a sure foundation.
- Proved the distinctness of soul and body.
- Established the existence of God.

We will turn to the first of these shortly, in our text.

Life and Death

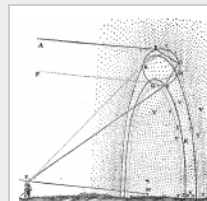
Descartes' mother died when he was a year old, and when he was eight, his father sent him to a nearby Jesuit boarding school in central France. He was a good student; but because he was sickly, he was permitted to linger in bed till mid-morning – a habit that reputedly persisted throughout his life.

Shortly after earning a law degree at university, he moved to Holland, where he carried on his work for two decades. But he finally agreed to join Queen Christina of Sweden as her personal tutor in 1649.

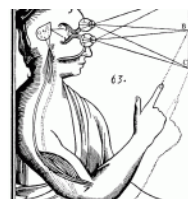
However, after less than a year, he died, in Stockholm. The chief account of the cause is **pneumonia**, due to a regimen of waking to brave the Nordic cold in order deliver 5 a.m. lectures for Christina, combined with his general sickliness – and, perhaps additionally, his exposure to the illness while nursing the French ambassador back to



"René Descartes, " by [Mitch Francis](#)



René Descartes' sketch of how primary and secondary rainbows are formed (probable engraver: Frans van Schooten the younger).



Drawing from Descartes' *Treatise of Man*, explaining the function of

health. But a more recent account has it that [Descartes was poisoned](#) by an arsenic-laced communion wafer, given him by a Catholic missionary priest. Descartes rejected the physics of Aristotle, in terms of whose philosophy Catholic Christianity had come to understand itself (and its “truths”), thanks to the work of Medieval theologians. So it is *possible* that Descartes was assassinated for being a dangerous intellectual, or a heretic, or both. I'd say that would top making the Prohibited Books list!

Descartes, the Philosopher

Descartes' 1641 *Meditations* invited readers to take up the position of a **radical** “meditator” on experience – and to discover the ultimate truths about reality *using their own minds*. His emphasis on the steps of the individual knower, “the Meditator,” undermined

the idea that “knowledge” should be believed because *received* from an authoritative source (such as the Church),

and tended to replace it with

the idea that it is to be believed because *achieved* as the result of a rational process, one that is open to each individual.

No, he was not the first to put pressure on the kind of intellectual authoritarianism that prevailed during the Medieval period. Irish-born Francis Bacon (1561-1626) had recently asserted the primacy of **sense experience** – observation – arguing that science should proceed like Columbus did, considering all things possible until tested by the “empirical faculty.” And on the “spiritual horizon,” it was in 1517 that German-born Martin Luther's “95 Theses” snubbed the authority of the Church.

But the cultural tide had not yet turned. The Counter-Reformation was under way, *re-declaring* Church authority; Galileo had only recently been condemned by the Inquisition. And Descartes was a distinct threat: While acknowledging the senses and **faith**, and despite occasional back-pedaling, Descartes argued for their subservience under **reason** itself. In the first lines of his 1637 *Discourse on Method*, he conceded common sense as a shared inheritance of humanity:

• Good sense is the best shared-out thing in the world; for everyone thinks he has such a good supply of it that he doesn't want more...

Yet he called for a higher standard, one that would allow discrimination among claims that seem plausible, but are nevertheless incompatible:

[O]ur opinions differ... because we take our thoughts along different paths.... For it isn't enough to *have* a good mind; what matters most is *using* it well.

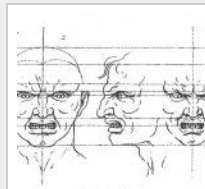
Thus, subverting tradition, and in distinction from new sense-based approaches to knowledge, he declared the correctly operated mind the highest authority. If he took a critical view of “common sense” and the senses, it was because he sought to build knowledge on a sure foundation.

Descartes recognized the radical nature of his project at least to the degree that he sought to

- appease “the Inquisitors of Rome,” who had condemned Galileo, suggesting both that his method confirmed what religious dogma already taught, and that it might be of use in refuting atheists (see the “[Dedication](#)” of the *Meditations*), and
- conceal his conflict between the Scholastics' beloved Aristotelian physics, and his own mechanical approach (which, broadly speaking, would culminate in Newton's work, later that century<sup>†</sup>).

We can glimpse Descartes' strategizing mind at work in a letter to Marin Mersenne, who played a key role in disseminating his work:<sup>‡</sup>

the pineal gland. He believed inputs pass through the sensory organs to the epiphysis in the brain and from there to the immaterial spirit.



Descartes' depiction of the physiognomy of anger, from *Passions of the Soul*.

**Note well:** Some form of “the poison theory” began circulating as a rumor, shortly after Descartes' death, and was asserted in a 2002 French biography of Descartes by Jean-Marc Varaut. The *priest-poison theory* was advanced in a 2010 book by Erlangen University's Theodor Ebert, and remains controversial.

<sup>†</sup> - Isaac Newton (1642-1727) published his *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (*Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*) in 1687.

<sup>‡</sup> - January 28, 1641. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Vol. III, p. 173.

... please do not tell people[;] for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve... I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle.

Well, the secret is out.

While our focus will be Meditations I and II, the entire text is accessible here using the accordion-style boxes in which I've placed the Note, Dedication, Preface, Synopsis, and four of the Meditations themselves. Click to open them. Not accessible here are the *Objections and Replies* to the *Meditations*. With assistance from Mersenne, Descartes solicited objections from top thinkers of the day, including British philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, and the French astronomer and mathematician, Pierre Gassendi. The *Meditations* are remarkable for being published along with fairly uncensored Objections (and Replies, from Descartes). It is a sign of commitment to reason, and value of sharing arguments and evidence publicly.

These Meditations are written in the first person, *as if* one per day, for six days. It is tempting to think of Descartes as the narrator, simply telling us about his thoughts and beliefs. But as you read, think of Descartes as guiding us through a process. At times, the Meditator will treat a position as plausible – but then reject it a few paragraphs later. Rest assured that such reversals are *not* “Descartes contradicting himself.” Instead, strive to piece together how each part contributes to the reasoning process through which we're being guided.

See you in class for discussion.

## Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Prefatory Note To The Meditations

Dedication

Preface to the Reader

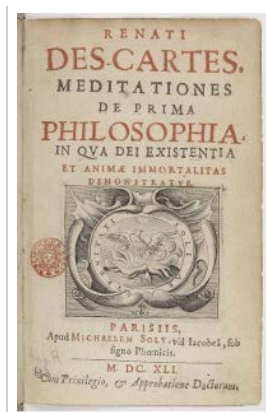
Synopsis of the Six Following Meditations

## Meditations On First Philosophy

in which  
the Existence of God and  
the Distinction Between Mind and Body  
are Demonstrated.<sup>9</sup>

Meditation I *Of the things which may be brought within the sphere of the doubtful*

It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences. But as this enterprise appeared to be a very great one, I waited until I had attained an age so mature that I could not hope that at any later date I should be better fitted to execute my design. This reason caused me to delay so long that I should feel that I was



Title page of the 1641 edition of the *Meditations*.

doing wrong were I to occupy in deliberation the time that yet remains to me for action. To-day, then, since very opportunely for the plan I have in view I have delivered my mind from every care [and am happily agitated by no passions] and since I have procured for myself an assured leisure in a peaceable retirement, I shall at last seriously and freely address myself to the **general upheaval** of all my former opinions.

Now for this object it is not necessary that I should show that all of these are false — I shall perhaps never arrive at this end. But inasmuch as reason already persuades me that I ought no less carefully to withhold my assent from matters which are not entirely certain and indubitable than from those which appear to me manifestly to be false, if I am able to find in each one **some reason to doubt**, this will suffice to justify my **rejecting the whole**. And for that end it will not be requisite that I should examine each in particular, which would be an endless undertaking; for owing to the fact that the destruction of the foundations of necessity brings with it the downfall of the rest of the edifice, I shall only in the first place attack those principles upon which all my former opinions rested.

The Meditator reasons that he can **“reject wholesale”** swaths of belief whenever he discerns a reason for doubt that applies equally to a group of beliefs. For instance, he can reject all beliefs based on *sight* — if he is able to find **“some reason to doubt”** that applies to all seeing. And similarly for beliefs based on feeling, on hearing testimony, and so on. It's not necessary to consider every single belief. This approach makes the **“general upheaval”** of former opinions feasible.

All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived.

But it may be that although the senses sometimes deceive us concerning things which are hardly perceptible, or very far away, there are yet many others to be met with as to which we cannot reasonably have any doubt, although we recognise them by their means. For example, there is the fact that I am here, seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown, having this paper in my hands and other similar matters. And how could I deny that these hands and this body are mine, were it not perhaps that I compare myself to **certain persons, devoid of sense, whose cerebella are so troubled and clouded by the violent vapours of black bile**, that they constantly assure us that they think they are kings when they are really quite poor, or that they are clothed in purple when they are really without covering, or who imagine that they have an earthenware head or are nothing but pumpkins or are made of glass. But they are mad, and I should not be any the less insane were I to follow examples so extravagant.

It's as if the Meditator is saying, “I admit that the senses can mislead sometimes; but wouldn't I have to be **crazy** to deny that *this here* is my hand?” (Today, in place of **“... persons ... whose cerebella are”** **scrambled**, we might translate, “brain-damaged, crazy people.”)



Yair Mor's [“Descartes, in his morning gown.”](#)

At the same time I must remember that I am a man, and that consequently I am in the habit of sleeping, and in my dreams representing to myself the same things or sometimes even less probable things, than do those who are insane in their waking moments. How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality I was lying undressed in bed! At this moment it does indeed seem to me that it is with eyes awake that I am looking at this paper; that this head which I move is not asleep, that it is deliberately and of set purpose that I extend

### The Dream Argument

To piece together this argument, consider some questions:

- Do you agree that you have experiences while dreaming that are “just like” your waking experiences?
- Are there any “definite signs” that distinguish dream experience from waking experience?
- If you answered Yes followed by No, then might you be dreaming *right now*?

This begins the process of using *doubt* methodically, as a tool, for testing beliefs.

my hand and perceive it; what happens in sleep does not appear so clear nor so distinct as does all this. But in thinking over this I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions, and in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream.

Now let us assume that we are asleep and that all these particulars, e.g. that we open our eyes, shake our head, extend our hands, and so on, are but false delusions; and let us reflect that possibly neither our hands nor our whole body

are such as they appear to us to be. At the same time we must at least confess that the things which are represented to us in sleep are like painted representations which can only have been formed as the counterparts of something real and true, and that in this way those general things at least, i.e. eyes, a head, hands, and a whole body, are not imaginary things, but things really existent. For, as a matter of fact, painters, even when they study with the greatest skill to represent sirens and satyrs by forms the most strange and extraordinary, cannot give them natures which are entirely new, but merely make a certain medley of the members of different animals; or if their imagination is extravagant enough to invent something so novel that nothing similar has ever before been seen, and that then their work represents a thing purely fictitious and absolutely false, it is certain all the same that the colours of which this is composed are necessarily real. And for the same reason, although these general things, to wit, [a body], eyes, a head, hands, and such like, may be imaginary, we are bound at the same time to confess that there are at least some other objects yet more simple and more universal, which are real and true; and of these just in the same way as with certain real colours, all these images of things which dwell in our thoughts, whether true and real or false and fantastic, are formed.

To such a class of things pertains **corporeal nature** in general, and its extension, the figure of extended things, their quantity or magnitude and number, as also the place in which they are, the time which measures their duration, and so on.

That is possibly why our reasoning is not unjust when we conclude from this that Physics, Astronomy, Medicine and all other sciences which have as their end the consideration of composite things, are very dubious and uncertain; but that Arithmetic, Geometry and other sciences of that kind which only treat of things that are very simple and very general, without taking great trouble to ascertain whether they are actually existent or not, contain some measure of certainty and an element of the indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, **two and three together** always form five, and **the square** can never have more than four sides, and it does not seem possible that truths so clear and apparent can be suspected of any falsity [or uncertainty].

Nevertheless I have long had fixed in my mind the belief that an all-powerful God existed by whom I have been created such as I am. But how do I know that He has not brought it to pass that there is no earth, no heaven, no extended body, no magnitude, no place, and that nevertheless [I possess the perceptions of all these things and that] they seem to me to exist just exactly as I now see them? And, besides, as I sometimes imagine that others deceive themselves in the things which they think they know best, how do I know that I am not deceived every time that I **add two and three**, or **count the sides of a square**, or judge of things yet simpler, if anything simpler can be imagined? But possibly God has not desired that I should be thus deceived, for He is said to be supremely good. If, however, it is contrary to His goodness to have made me such that I constantly deceive myself, it would also appear to be contrary to His goodness to permit me to be sometimes deceived, and nevertheless I cannot doubt that He does permit this.

Then I feel constrained to confess that there is nothing in all that I formerly believed to be true, of which I cannot in some measure doubt, and that not merely through want of thought or through levity, but for reasons which are very powerful and maturely considered; so that henceforth I ought not the less carefully to refrain from giving credence to these opinions than to that which is manifestly false, if I desire to arrive at any certainty [in the sciences].

But it is not sufficient to have made these remarks, we must also be careful to keep them in mind. For these ancient and

The Meditator concedes that it seems reasonable to think at least some dream elements aren't thoroughly illusory.

"Corporeal nature" refers to the nature of physical things.

At first pass, some knowledge seems to be in reach – if not in reference to the physical world itself, then at least in more abstract domains of study, such as mathematics.

On second thought, can we rule out the possibility that a powerful god is deceiving me?

Doubt, for Descartes, is a tool for shaking free of

commonly held opinions still revert frequently to my mind, long and familiar custom having given them the right to occupy my mind against my inclination and rendered them almost masters of my belief; nor will I ever lose the habit of deferring to them or of placing my confidence in them, so long as I consider them as they really are, i.e. opinions in some measure doubtful, as I have just shown, and at the same time highly probable, so that there is much more reason to believe in than to deny them. That is why I consider that I shall not be acting amiss, if, taking of set purpose a contrary belief, I allow myself to be deceived, and for a certain time pretend that all these opinions are entirely false and imaginary, until at last, having thus balanced my former prejudices with my latter [so that they cannot divert my opinions more to one side than to the other], my judgment will no longer be dominated by bad usage or turned away from the right knowledge of the truth. For I am assured that there can be neither peril nor error in this course, and that I cannot at present yield too much to distrust, since **I am not considering the question of action, but only of knowledge.**

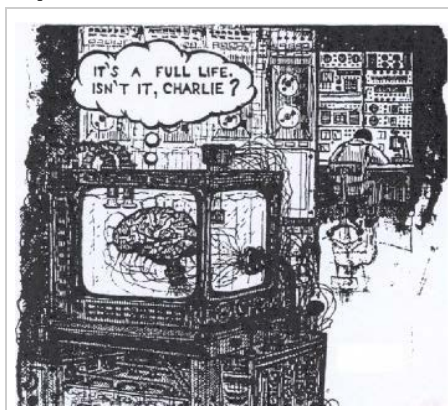
biases. The Meditator “cranks up the doubt” in order to loosen preconceptions. While intense doubt is out of place in “normal life,” it is welcome here, because, as the Meditator says: this project is **theoretical (“of knowledge”), rather than practical (“of action”).**

I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things; I shall remain obstinately attached to this idea, and if by this means it is not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of any truth, I may at least do what is in my power [i.e. suspend my judgment], and with firm purpose avoid giving credence to any false thing, or being imposed upon by this arch deceiver, however powerful and deceptive he may be. But this task is a laborious one, and insensibly a certain lassitude leads me into the course of my ordinary life. And just as a captive who in sleep enjoys an imaginary liberty, when he begins to suspect that his liberty is but a dream, fears to awaken, and conspires with these agreeable illusions that the deception may be prolonged, so insensibly of my own accord I fall back into my former opinions, and I dread awakening from this slumber, lest the laborious wakefulness which would follow the tranquillity of this repose should have to be spent not in daylight, but in the excessive darkness of the difficulties which have just been discussed.

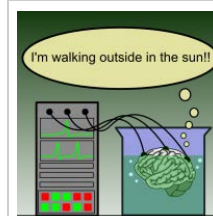
**The Demon Argument**

The Meditator uses the imagined demon to fix this question for each occasion: “Given that hypothesis – that there might be such a powerful demon – is it possible that what seems real is in fact deception?”

- How does sense experience fare on “the Demon test”?
- How does mathematical knowledge?
- How about knowledge of the body?
- Can *you* defend some kind of knowledge in the face of such scrutiny?



“Brain in a Vat,” author unknown



The famous “Brain in a Vat” thought experiment (author: Was a bee).



“Descartes’ Demon,” by Ele Willoughby of the [minouette Etsy shop](#).

Meditation II *Of the Nature of the Human Mind; and that it is more easily known than the Body*

The Meditation of yesterday filled my mind with so many doubts that it is no longer in my power to forget them. And yet I do not see in what manner I can resolve them; and, just as if I had all of a sudden fallen into very deep water, I am so disconcerted that I can neither make certain of setting my feet on the bottom, nor can I swim and so support myself on the surface. I shall nevertheless make an effort and follow anew the same path as that on which I yesterday entered, i.e. I shall proceed by setting aside all that in which the least doubt could be supposed to exist, just as if I had discovered that it was absolutely false; and I shall ever follow in this road until I have met with something which is certain, or at least, if I can do nothing else, until I have learned for certain that there is nothing in the world that is certain. Archimedes, in order that he might draw the terrestrial globe out of its place, and transport it elsewhere, demanded only that one point should be fixed and immovable; in the same way I shall have the right to conceive high hopes if I

am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain and indubitable.

I suppose, then, that all the things that I see are false; I persuade myself that nothing has ever existed of all that my fallacious memory represents to me. I consider that I possess no senses; I imagine that body, figure, extension, movement and place are but the fictions of my mind. What, then, can be esteemed as true? Perhaps nothing at all, unless that there is nothing in the world that is certain.

But how can I know there is not something different from those things that I have just considered, of which one cannot have the slightest doubt? Is there not some God, or some other being by whatever name we call it, who puts these reflections into my mind? That is not necessary, for is it not possible that I am capable of producing them myself? I myself, am I not at least something? But I have already denied that I had senses and body. Yet I hesitate, for what follows from that? Am I so dependent on body and senses that I cannot exist without these? But I was persuaded that there was nothing in all the world, that there was no heaven, no earth, that there were no minds, nor any bodies: was I not then likewise persuaded that I did not exist? Not at all; of a surety I myself did exist since I persuaded myself of something [or merely because I thought of something]. But there is some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, who ever employs his ingenuity in deceiving me. Then without doubt I exist also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think that I am something. So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it.

But I do not yet know clearly enough what I am, I who am certain that I am; and hence I must be careful to see that I do not imprudently take some other object in place of myself, and thus that I do not go astray in respect of this knowledge that I hold to be the most certain and most evident of all that I have formerly learned. That is why I shall now consider anew what I believed myself to be before I embarked upon these last reflections; and of my former opinions I shall withdraw all that might even in a small degree be invalidated by the reasons which I have just brought forward, in order that there may be nothing at all left beyond what is absolutely certain and indubitable.

What then did I formerly believe myself to be? Undoubtedly I believed myself to be a man. But what is a man? Shall I say a reasonable animal? Certainly not; for then I should have to inquire what an animal is, and what is reasonable; and thus from a single question I should insensibly fall into an infinitude of others more difficult; and I should not wish to waste the little time and leisure remaining to me in trying to unravel subtleties like these. But I shall rather stop here to consider the thoughts which of themselves spring up in my mind, and which were not inspired by anything beyond my own nature alone when I applied myself to the consideration of my being. In the first place, the, I considered myself as having a face, hands, arms, and all that system of members composed on bones and flesh as seen in a corpse which I designated by the name of body. In addition to this I considered that I was nourished, that I walked, that I felt, and that I thought, and I referred all these actions to the soul: but I did not stop to consider what the soul was, or if I did stop, I imagined that it was something extremely rare and subtle like a wind, a flame, or an ether, which was spread throughout my grosser parts. As to body I had no manner of doubt about its nature, but thought I had a very clear knowledge of it; and if I had desired to explain it according to the notions that I had then formed of it, I should have described it thus: By the body I understand all that which can be defined by a certain figure: something which can be confined in a certain place, and which can fill a given space in such a way that every other body will be excluded from it; which can be perceived either by touch, or by sight, or by hearing, or by taste, or by smell: which can be moved in many ways not, in truth, by itself, but by something which is foreign to it, by which it is touched [and from which it receives impressions]: for to have the power of self-movement, as also of feeling or of thinking, I did not consider to appertain to the nature of body: on the contrary, I was rather astonished to find that faculties similar to them existed in some bodies.

But what am I, now that I suppose that there is a certain genius which is extremely powerful, and, if I may say so, malicious, who employs all his powers in deceiving me? Can I affirm that I possess the least of all those things which I have just said pertain to the nature of body? I pause to consider, I revolve all these things in my mind, and I find none of which I can say that it pertains to me. It would be tedious to stop to enumerate them. Let us pass to the attributes of soul and see if there is any one which is in me? What of nutrition or walking [the first mentioned]? But if it is so that I have no body it is also true that I can neither walk nor take nourishment. Another attribute is sensation. But one cannot feel without body, and besides I have thought I perceived many things during sleep that I recognised in my waking moments as not having been experienced at all. What

of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I ceased entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist. I do not now admit anything which is not necessarily true: to speak accurately I am not more than a thing which thinks, that is to say a mind or a soul, or an understanding, or a reason, which are terms whose significance was formerly unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing and really exist; but what thing? I have answered: a thing which thinks.

And what more? I shall exercise my imagination [in order to see if I am not something more]. I am not a collection of members which we call the human body: I am not a subtle air distributed through these members, I am not a wind, a fire, a vapour, a breath, nor anything at all which I can imagine or conceive; because I have assumed that all these were nothing. Without changing that supposition I find that I only leave myself certain of the fact that I am somewhat. But perhaps it is true that these same things which I supposed were non-existent because they are unknown to me, are really not different from the self which I know. I am not sure about this, I shall not dispute about it now; I can only give judgment on things that are known to me. I know that I exist, and I inquire what I am, I whom I know to exist. But it is very certain that the knowledge of my existence taken in its precise significance does not depend on things whose existence is not yet known to me; consequently it does not depend on those which I can feign in imagination. And indeed the very term feign in imagination<sup>10</sup> proves to me my error, for I really do this if I image myself a something, since to imagine is nothing else than to contemplate the figure or image of a corporeal thing. But I already know for certain that I am, and that it may be that all these images, and, speaking generally, all things that relate to the nature of body are nothing but dreams [and chimeras]. For this reason I see clearly that I have as little reason to say, *I shall stimulate my imagination in order to know more distinctly what I am*, than if I were to say, *I am now awake, and I perceive somewhat that is real and true: but because I do not yet perceive it distinctly enough, I shall go to sleep of express purpose, so that my dreams may represent the perception with greatest truth and evidence*. And, thus, I know for certain that nothing of all that I can understand by means of my imagination belongs to this knowledge which I have of myself, and that it is necessary to recall the mind from this mode of thought with the utmost diligence in order that it may be able to know its own nature with perfect distinctness.

But what then am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing which thinks? It is a thing which doubts, understands, [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels.

Certainly it is no small matter if all these things pertain to my nature. But why should they not so pertain? Am I not that being who now doubts nearly everything, who nevertheless understands certain things, who affirms that one only is true, who denies all the others, who desires to know more, is averse from being deceived, who imagines many things, sometimes indeed despite his will, and who perceives many likewise, as by the intervention of the bodily organs? Is there nothing in all this which is as true as it is certain that I exist, even though I should always sleep and though he who has given me being employed all his ingenuity in deceiving me? Is there likewise any one of these attributes which can be distinguished from my thought, or which might be said to be separated from myself? For it is so evident of itself that it is I who doubts, who understands, and who desires, that there is no reason here to add anything to explain it. And I have certainly the power of imagining likewise; for although it may happen (as I formerly supposed) that none of the things which I imagine are true, nevertheless this power of imagining does not cease to be really in use, and it forms part of my thought. Finally, I am the same who feels, that is to say, who perceives certain things, as by the organs of sense, since it truth I see light, I hear noise, I feel heat. But it will be said that these phenomena are false and that I am dreaming. Let it be so; still it is at least quite certain that it seems to me that I see light, that I hear noise and that I feel heat. That cannot be false; properly speaking it is what is in me called feeling;<sup>11</sup> and used in this precise sense that is no other thing than thinking.

From this time I begin to know what I am with a little more clearness and distinction than before; but nevertheless it still seems to me, and I cannot prevent myself from thinking, that corporeal things, whose images are framed by thought, which are tested by the senses, are much more distinctly known than that obscure part of me which does not come under the imagination. Although really it is very strange to say that I know and understand more distinctly these things whose existence seems to me dubious, which are unknown to me, and which do not belong to me, than others of the truth of which I am convinced, which are known to me and which pertain to my real nature, in a word, than myself. But I see clearly how the case stands: my mind loves to wander, and cannot yet suffer itself to be retained within the just limits of truth. Very good, let us once more give it the freest rein, so that, when afterwards we seize the proper occasion for pulling up, it may the more easily be regulated and controlled.



Let us begin by considering the commonest matters, those which we believe to be the most distinctly comprehended, to wit, the bodies which we touch and see; not indeed bodies in general, for these general ideas are usually a little more confused, but let us consider one body in particular. Let us take, for example, this piece of wax: it has been taken quite freshly from the hive, and it has not yet lost the sweetness of the honey which it contains; it still retains somewhat of the odour of the flowers from which it has been culled; its colour, its figure, its size are apparent; it is hard, cold, easily handled, and if you strike it with the finger, it will emit a sound. Finally all the things which are requisite to cause us distinctly to recognise a body, are met with in it. But notice that while I speak and approach the fire what remained of the taste is exhaled, the smell evaporates, the colour alters, the figure is destroyed, the size increases, it becomes liquid, it heats, scarcely can one handle it, and when one strikes it, now sound is emitted. Does the same wax remain after this change? We must confess that it remains; none would judge otherwise. What then did I know so distinctly in this piece of wax? It could certainly be nothing of all that the senses brought to my notice, since all these things which fall under taste, smell, sight, touch, and hearing, are found to be changed, and yet the same wax remains.

Perhaps it was what I now think, viz. that this wax was not that sweetness of honey, nor that agreeable scent of flowers, nor that particular whiteness, nor that figure, nor that sound, but simply a body which a little while before appeared to me as perceptible under these forms, and which is now perceptible under others. But what, precisely, is it that I imagine when I form such conceptions? Let us attentively consider this, and, abstracting from all that does not belong to the wax, let us see what remains. Certainly nothing remains excepting a certain extended thing which is flexible and movable. But what is the meaning of flexible and movable? Is it not that I imagine that this piece of wax being round is capable of becoming square and of passing from a square to a triangular figure? No, certainly it is not that, since I imagine it admits of an infinitude of similar changes, and I nevertheless do not know how to compass the infinitude by my imagination, and consequently this conception which I have of the wax is not brought about by the faculty of imagination. What now is this extension? Is it not also unknown? For it becomes greater when the wax is melted, greater when it is boiled, and greater still when the heat increases; and I should not conceive [clearly] according to truth what wax is, if I did not think that even this piece that we are considering is capable of receiving more variations in extension than I have ever imagined. We must then grant that I could not even understand through the imagination what this piece of wax is, and that it is my mind<sup>12</sup> alone which perceives it. I say this piece of wax in particular, for as to wax in general it is yet clearer. But what is this piece of wax which cannot be understood excepting by the [understanding or] mind? It is certainly the same that I see, touch, imagine, and finally it is the same which I have always believed it to be from the beginning. But what must particularly be observed is that its perception is neither an act of vision, nor of touch, nor of imagination, and has never been such although it may have appeared formerly to be so, but only an intuition<sup>13</sup> of the mind, which may be imperfect and confused as it was formerly, or clear and distinct as it is at present, according as my attention is more or less directed to the elements which are found in it, and of which it is composed.

Yet in the meantime I am greatly astonished when I consider [the great feebleness of mind] and its proneness to fall [insensibly] into error; for although without giving expression to my thought I consider all this in my own mind, words often impede me and I am almost deceived by the terms of ordinary language. For we say that we see the same wax, if it is present, and not that we simply judge that it is the same from its having the same colour and figure. From this I should conclude that I knew the wax by means of vision and not simply by the intuition of the mind; unless by chance I remember that, when looking from a window and saying I see men who pass in the street, I really do not see them, but infer that what I see is men, just as I say that I see wax. And yet what do I see from the window but hats and coats which may cover automatic machines? Yet I judge these to be men. And similarly solely by the faculty of judgment which rests in my mind, I comprehend that which I believed I saw with my eyes.

A man who makes it his aim to raise his knowledge above the common should be ashamed to derive the occasion for doubting from the forms of speech invented by the vulgar; I prefer to pass on and consider whether I had a more evident and perfect conception of what the wax was when I first perceived it, and when I believed I knew it by means of the external senses or at least by the common sense<sup>14</sup> as it is called, that is to say by the imaginative faculty, or whether my present conception is clearer now that I have most carefully examined what it is, and in what way it can be known. It would certainly be absurd to doubt as to this. For what was there in this first perception which was distinct? What was there which might not as well have been perceived by any of the animals? But when I distinguish the wax from its external forms, and when, just as if I had taken from it its vestments, I consider it quite naked, it is certain that although some error may still be

found in my judgment, I can nevertheless not perceive it thus without a human mind.

But finally what shall I say of this mind, that is, of myself, for up to this point I do not admit in myself anything but mind? What then, I who seem to perceive this piece of wax so distinctly, do I not know myself, not only with much more truth and certainty, but also with much more distinctness and clearness? For if I judge that the wax is or exists from the fact that I see it, it certainly follows much more clearly that I am or that I exist myself from the fact that I see it. For it may be that what I see is not really wax, it may also be that I do not possess eyes with which to see anything; but it cannot be that when I see, or (for I no longer take account of the distinction) when I think I see, that I myself who think am nought. So if I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I touch it, the same thing will follow, to wit, that I am; and if I judge that my imagination, or some other cause, whatever it is, persuades me that the wax exists, I shall still conclude the same. And what I have here remarked of wax may be applied to all other things which are external to me [and which are met with outside of me]. And further, if the [notion or] perception of wax has seemed to me clearer and more distinct, not only after the sight or the touch, but also after many other causes have rendered it quite manifest to me, with how much more [evidence] and distinctness must it be said that I now know myself, since all the reasons which contribute to the knowledge of wax, or any other body whatever, are yet better proofs of the nature of my mind! And there are so many other things in the mind itself which may contribute to the elucidation of its nature, that those which depend on body such as these just mentioned, hardly merit being taken into account.

But finally here I am, having insensibly reverted to the point I desired, for, since it is now manifest to me that even bodies are not properly speaking known by the senses or by the faculty of imagination, but by the understanding only, and since they are not known from the fact that they are seen or touched, but only because they are understood, I see clearly that there is nothing which is easier for me to know than my mind. But because it is difficult to rid oneself so promptly of an opinion to which one was accustomed for so long, it will be well that I should halt a little at this point, so that by the length of my meditation I may more deeply imprint on my memory this new knowledge.

Meditation III

*Of God: that He exists*

Meditation IV

*Of the True and the False*

Meditation V

*Of the essence of material things, and, again, of God, that He exists*

Meditation VI

*Of the Existence of Material Things, and of the real distinction between the Soul and Body of Man*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the original text at [archive.org](https://www.archive.org).

<sup>2</sup> For convenience sake the *Objections and Replies* are published in the second volume of this edition.

<sup>3</sup> The French version is followed here.

<sup>4</sup> The French version is followed here.

<sup>5</sup> When it is thought desirable to insert additional readings from the French version this will be indicated by the use of square brackets.

<sup>6</sup> Between the *Praefatio ad Lectorem* and the *Synopsis*, the Paris Edition (1st Edition) interpolates an Index which is not found in the Amsterdam Edition (2nd Edition). Since Descartes did not reproduce it, he was doubtless not its author. Mersenne probably composed it himself, adjusting it to the paging of the first Edition. (Note in Adam and Tannery's Edition.)

<sup>7</sup> *intellectio*.

<sup>8</sup> *imaginatio*.

<sup>9</sup> In place of this long title at the head of the page the first Edition had immediately after the *Synopsis*, and on the same page 7, simply *First Meditation*. (Adam's Edition.)

<sup>10</sup> Or *form an image (effingo)*.

<sup>11</sup> *Sentire*.

<sup>12</sup> *entendement F., mens L.*

<sup>13</sup> *inspectio*.

<sup>14</sup> *sensus communis*.

<sup>15</sup> *Percipio, F. nous concevons*.

<sup>16</sup> The French version is followed here as being more explicit. In it *action de mon esprit* replaces *mea cogitatio*.

<sup>17</sup> In the Latin version *similitudinem*.

<sup>18</sup> Not in the French version.

<sup>19</sup> *percipio*.

<sup>20</sup> *perceptio*.

<sup>21</sup> *In the idea of whom alone necessary or eternal existence is comprised*. French version.

<sup>22</sup> *From the moment that*. French version.

<sup>23</sup> *Conception*, French version. *intellectionem*, Latin version.

<sup>24</sup> *intueor*.

<sup>25</sup> *acie mentis*.

<sup>26</sup> *intellectionem*.

<sup>27</sup> *sensus communis*.

<sup>28</sup> Latin version only.

<sup>29</sup> *spini dorsae medullam*.

See also

OPEN PHILOSOPHY

Browse categories.

[Blurb](#) [Course Resources](#) [Descartes](#) [Ecofeminism](#) [embodiment](#) [existential phenomenology](#) [Merleau-Ponty](#) [Metaphysics](#) [Metaphysics](#) [Open Philosophy](#) [Pascal](#) [philosophy of mind](#) [Publications](#) [silence](#) [Site](#) [The Blog](#) [The Prof](#) [Turing](#) [Uncategorized](#) [Warren](#)



INTERNATIONAL LICENSE.