

### Descartes 'Meditations'

Rene Descartes was a 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher who still remains as one of the most influential and profound writers of modern philosophy. He was a mathematician and scientist who used his knowledge of these fields to search for the truth of existence. Descartes locates himself firmly in the rationalist camp, as opposed to the empiricism of Aristotle or his contemporary, John Locke. He constantly asserts in a poetic manner that the clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect are the only sure means of securing knowledge, and ultimately concludes in his 'Meditations', that the senses are not designed to provide us with true knowledge as they 'deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once'.

The First Meditation can be seen as presenting sceptical doubts as a subject of study in their own right. Descartes was the first to raise the mystifying question of how we can claim to know with certainty anything about the world around us. The idea is not that these doubts are probable, but that their possibility can never be entirely ruled out. And if we can never be certain, how can we claim to know anything? Scepticism cuts straight to the heart of the Western philosophical enterprise and its attempt to provide a certain foundation for our knowledge and understanding of the world.

In Descartes first Meditation, subtitled, 'What can be called into doubt', he expresses his determination to erase all previously accepted beliefs which we have acquired through the senses. By this he means any fact of what we think we are doing at any moment in time. For example, I am typing on the computer right now. Descartes would hold that this statement cannot be proved as valid as we cannot know whether this is what we are actually doing, for all we know we may be dreaming. He writes, 'I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing', he then argues that while dreaming there have been similar instances in which he believes himself to be awake, only to still be asleep and eventually wake up to realise he has been misconceived and tricked, 'I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep'.

Descartes ideas about dreaming are at the forefront to his first Meditation. Furthermore, one reason why this particular argument is so plausible is the fact that we all have experienced similar dreams, just as I myself did last night. I dreamt that I and a friend had found two tickets to see Oasis at the bottom of a swimming pool. It is a sold out gig which I tried to get tickets for so as you can imagine, I was very pleased with my find! Whilst sitting at a bar, I thought it was too good to be true and something that only dreams could comprise, so I said to my friend, 'I bet I am just dreaming', only to wake up that second...without the tickets.

Although Descartes believes that the senses deceive us 'from time to time', he holds that studies of mathematics and other a priori subjects 'contain something certain and indubitable' because whether he is 'awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides'. He then goes onto question Gods goodness in relation to the 'transparent truths' of mathematics. The French philosopher writes that even simple things can be doubted. An omnipotent God could make even our conception of mathematics false. One might argue that God is

supremely good and would not lead him to believe falsely all these things. But by this reasoning we should think that God would not deceive her with regard to anything, and yet this is clearly not true. If we suppose there is no God, then there is even greater likelihood of being deceived, since our imperfect senses would not have been created by a perfect being.

Descartes likens himself to being 'like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep', and 'as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes on with the pleasant illusion as long as he can'. This has similar connotations to Greek Philosopher Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' in which prisoner's are shackled inside a cave, away from reality and truth. However, when one prisoner escapes, he sees the world and is enlightened, but fears it, and so goes back into the cave.

Plato is saying in this allegory that humans are all prisoners and that the tangible world is our cave, just as Descartes states that reality may not be what we think it to be. The things which we perceive as real are actually just shadows on a wall, which represents us being deceived in what we think is real and true. And just as the escaped prisoner ascends into the light of the sun, we amass knowledge and ascend into the light of true reality, which is similar to Descartes' beliefs about dreaming; that they might be our reality.

Furthermore, this 'imaginary freedom while asleep' conveys our content with accepting and sticking with 'old opinions' for fear that we may have to accept a newer, harsher reality. Whereas Descartes on the other hand wished to start from the foundations of what we think we know, and build up new solid beliefs about true knowledge. He wanted to 'recognize something certain', and if that was not possible, than 'recognize for certain that there is no certainty'.

In Conclusion, Descartes saw his Meditations as providing the metaphysical underpinning of his new physics. Like Galileo, he sought to overturn two-thousand-year-old prejudices injected into the Western tradition by Aristotle and form a more modern and highly sceptic question of knowledge and existence. However he fully maintained that we do exist as 'I am thinking therefore I exist', so for Descartes, since he is the author of all his thoughts and queries into the world, he must be 'at least, something?'