

the sun, and not mere reflections of
in his own proper place, and not in
as he is.

that this is he who gives the season and
that is in the visible world, and in
which he and his fellows have been

the sun and then reason about him.
habitation, and the wisdom of the
not suppose that he would felicitate
n?

referring honours among themselves
the passing shadows and to remark
which followed after, and which were
not able to draw conclusions as to the
are for such honours and glories, or
did he not say with Homer, "Better to
die," and to endure anything, rather
their manner?

rather suffer anything than entertain
in a miserable manner.

as one coming suddenly out of the
lion; would he not be certain to have

he had to compete in measuring the
and never moved out of the den, while
his eyes had become steady (and the
quire this new habit of sight might be
ridiculous? Men would say of him that
out his eyes; and that it was better not
any one tried to loose another and lead
catch the offender, and they would put

RENÉ DESCARTES (1596–1650), "MEDITATION ONE" (*MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY*), PUBLISHED IN LATIN IN 1641, TRANSLATED BY RONALD RUBIN

In what has become the most widely anthologized piece of philosophy in the modern era, Descartes sets up the skeptical challenge in this, the first of his six "Meditations" (essays). He realizes that all of his beliefs involving the world outside of his mind are possibly false. Even his more abstract beliefs, such as those dealing with mathematical objects, cannot be known with absolute certainty. While it isn't likely, it is at least possible that, instead of an all-powerful and all-good God, an evil demon exists who constantly causes him to fall into error. Descartes decides to adopt the hypothesis that such an evil demon exists in order to carry through to completion his process of systematic doubt. Can he know anything with certainty?

For several years now, I have been aware that I accepted many falsehoods as true in my youth, that what I built on the foundation of those falsehoods was dubious, and therefore that, once in my life, I would need to tear down everything and begin anew from the foundations if I wanted to establish any firm and lasting knowledge. But the task seemed enormous, and I waited until I was so old that no better time for undertaking it would be likely to follow. I have thus delayed so long that it would be wrong for me to waste in indecision the time left for action. Today, then, having rid myself of worries and having arranged for some peace and quiet, I withdraw alone, free at last earnestly and wholeheartedly to overthrow all my beliefs.

To do this, I do not need to show each of my beliefs to be false; I may never be able to do that. But, since reason now convinces me that I ought to withhold my assent just as carefully from what is not obviously certain and indubitable as from what is obviously false, I can justify the rejection of all my beliefs if I can find some ground for doubt in each. And, to do this, I need not take on the endless task of running through my beliefs one by one: since a building collapses when its foundation is cut out from under it, I will go straight to the principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

Of course, whatever I have so far accepted as supremely true I have learned either from the senses or through the senses. But I have occasionally caught the senses deceiving me, and it would be prudent for me never completely to trust those who have cheated me even once.

But, while my senses may deceive me about what is small or far away, there may still be other things taken in by the senses which I cannot

possibly doubt—such as that I am here, sitting before the fire, wearing a dressing gown, touching this paper. Indeed, these hands and the rest of my body—on what grounds might I deny that they exist?—unless perhaps I liken myself to madmen whose brains are so rattled by the persistent vapors of melancholy that they are sure they are kings when in fact they are paupers, or that they wear purple robes when in fact they are naked, or that their heads are clay, or that they are gourds, or that they are made of glass. But these people are insane, and I would seem just as crazy if I were to apply what I say about them to myself.

This would be perfectly obvious—if I weren't a man accustomed to sleeping at night whose experiences while asleep are at least as far-fetched as those that madmen have while awake. How often a dream has convinced me that I was here, sitting before the fire, wearing my dressing gown, when, in fact, I was undressed and between the covers of my bed! But now I am looking at this piece of paper with my eyes wide open; the head that I am shaking has not been lulled to sleep; I put my hand out consciously and deliberately; I feel the paper and see it. None of this would be as distinct if I were asleep. As if I can't remember having been deluded by similar thoughts while asleep! When I think very carefully about this, I see so plainly that there are no reliable signs by which I can distinguish sleeping from waking that I am stupefied—and my stupor itself suggests that I am asleep!

Suppose then that I am dreaming. Suppose, in particular, that my eyes are not open, that my head is not moving, and that I have not put out my hand. Suppose that I do not have hands, or even a body. I must still admit that the things I see in sleep are like painted images, which must have been patterned after real things. Hence, things like eyes, heads, hands and bodies are not imaginary, but real. For, even when painters try to give bizarre shapes to sirens and satyrs, they are unable to give them completely new natures, but can only jumble together the parts of various animals. Even if they were to come up with something so novel that no one had ever seen anything like it before, something entirely fictitious and unreal, there would at least need to be real colors from which they can compose it. By the same reasoning, while things like eyes, heads, and hands may be imaginary, it must be granted that some simpler and more universal things are real—the "real colors" from which the true and the false images in our thoughts are formed. Among things of this sort seem to be general bodily nature and its extension, the shape of extended things, their quantity (that is, their magnitude and number), the place in which they exist, and the time through which they endure.

Perhaps we can correctly infer that, while physics, astronomy, medicine, and other disciplines requiring the study of composites are dubious, disciplines like arithmetic and geometry, which deal only with completely simple and universal things without regard to whether they exist in the

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world, are somehow certain and indubitable. Whether we are awake or asleep, two plus three is always five, and the square never has more than four sides. It seems impossible even to suspect such obvious truths of falsity.

Nevertheless, the old belief is imprinted on my mind that there is a God who can do anything and by whom I have been made to be as I am. How do I know that He hasn't brought it about that, while there is in fact no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no magnitude, and no place, all of these things seem to me to exist, just as they now do? Besides, I think that other people sometimes err in what they believe themselves to know perfectly well; mightn't I be deceived when I add two and three, or count the sides of a square, or do even simpler things (if we can even suppose that there is anything simpler)? Maybe God does not want to deceive me; after all, He is said to be supremely good. But, if God's being good is incompatible with His having created me so that I am always deceived, it seems just as out of line with His being good that He sometimes permits me to be deceived—as He undeniably does.

Or maybe some would rather deny that there is an omnipotent God than to believe that everything else is uncertain. Rather than arguing with these people, I will grant that everything I have said about God is fiction. But, however these people think I came to be as I now am (whether they say that it is by fate, or by accident, or by a continuous series of events, or in some other way) since it seems that he who errs and is deceived is somehow imperfect, the likelihood that I am constantly deceived increases as the power that they attribute to my original creator decreases. To these arguments, I have no reply; I am forced to admit that nothing that I used to believe is beyond legitimate doubt—not because I have been careless or playful, but because I have valid and well-considered grounds for doubt. I must therefore withhold my assent from my former beliefs as carefully as from obvious falsehoods, if I want to arrive at something certain.

But it is not enough to have noticed this: I must also take care to bear it in mind. For my habitual beliefs constantly return to my mind as if our longstanding, intimate relationship has given them the right to do so, even against my will. I will never break the habit of trusting them and of giving in to them while I see them for what they are—things somewhat dubious (as I have just shown) but nonetheless probable, things that we have much more reason to believe than to deny. That is why I think it will be good deliberately to turn my beliefs around, to allow myself to be deceived, and to suppose that all my previous beliefs are false and imaginary. Eventually, when I have counterbalanced the weight of my prejudices, my bad habits will no longer distort my grasp of things. And I know that there is no danger of error in this and that I won't overindulge in skepticism, since I am now concerned, not with acting, but only with knowing.

I will suppose, then, not that there is a supremely good God who is the source of all truth, but that there is an evil demon, supremely powerful and cunning, who works as hard as he can to deceive me. I will say that sky, air, earth, color, shape, sound, and other external things are just dreamed illusions which the demon uses to ensnare my judgment. I will regard myself as not having hands, eyes, flesh, blood, and senses—but as giving the false belief that I have all these things. I will obstinately concentrate on this meditation and will thus ensure by mental resolution that, if I do not really have the ability to know the truth, I will at least withhold assent from what is false and from what a deceiver may try to put over on me, however powerful and cunning he may be. But this plan requires effort, and laziness brings me back to my ordinary life. I am like a prisoner who happens to enjoy the illusion of freedom in his dreams, begins to suspect that he is asleep, fears being awakened, and deliberately lets the enticing illusions slip by unchallenged. Thus, I slide back into my old beliefs; I am afraid that, if I awaken, I will need to spend the waking life which follows my peaceful rest, not in the light, but in the confusing darkness of the problems I have just raised.