

Commentary and Questions

Note the personal, meditative character of the writing. Descartes is inviting us to join him in thinking certain things through, asking us to mull them over and see whether we agree. He is not making authoritative pronouncements. Just as he reserves the right to be the judge of what *he* should believe, so he puts you on the spot. You will have to be continually asking yourself: Do I agree with this or not? If not, why not? This familiar first-person style is quite different from most of medieval philosophy; it harks back to Augustine's *Confessions* in the late fourth century. Descartes is, as it were, having a conversation with himself, so the structure of *Meditation I* is dialectical: proposal, objection, reply, objection, reply. . . . Try to distinguish the various "voices" in this internal dialogue.

Note that there are three stages in the "tearing down" of opinions, and one principle running throughout. The principle is that we ought to withhold assent from anything uncertain, just as much as from what we see clearly to be false. This is simply a restatement of the first rule of his method but is of the greatest importance.* The three stages concern (1) the senses, (2) dreams, and (3) the evil demon hypothesis.

- Q1. Aren't you strongly inclined to think, just like Descartes by the fire, that you can't deny that you are now reading this book, which is "right there" in your hands? Should you doubt it anyway?
- Q2. What do you think of Descartes' rule that we shouldn't completely trust those who have cheated us even once? Does this rule apply to the senses?
- Q3. Could you be dreaming right now? Explain.

*A brief look back at the four rules of the method will be of use at this point. See p. 317. Compare the principle Aquinas notes about big mistakes from small beginnings on p. 269. Once, when a friend of mine stumbled on an unusually high first step of a staircase, I formulated what came jokingly to be known as Norman's First Law: Watch that first step, it's a big one—good advice for appraising philosophical systems. For an alternative to Descartes' view, see the critique by C. S. Peirce on pp. 566–567.

- Q4. What is the argument that even in dreams some things—for example, the truths of mathematics—are not illusory?
- Q5. How does the thought of God, at *this* stage, seem to reinforce skeptical conclusions—even about arithmetic?*

"All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream."

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)

Here Descartes avails himself of the techniques of the Pyrrhonists, who set argument against plausible argument until they find themselves no more inclined to judge one way than another. But he acknowledges that this equilibrium or suspension of judgment is difficult to achieve. "Habit" strongly inclines him to believe some of these things as "probable." Like Descartes, you almost certainly take it as *very* probable that you are now looking at a piece of paper, which is located a certain determinate distance before your eyes, that you indeed have eyes, and that 2 plus 3 really does equal 5. And you almost certainly find it very hard *not* to believe these things. You probably find yourself so committed to them that you almost *can't* doubt them. (Ask yourself whether this is the case.) How can we overcome these habits of believing? We now know, if Descartes is right so far, that we *should* doubt them. As a remedy against these habitual believings, Descartes determines *deliberately* (as an act of will) to suppose that all his prior beliefs are false.

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- Q6. How does the hypothesis of the evil demon help?
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Descartes now thinks that he has canvassed every possible reason for doubting. We cannot rely on our senses; we cannot even rely on our rational

*Review the consequences William of Ockham draws from the doctrine of God's omnipotence (pp. 288–290).