

Descartes' Meditations

Introduction

1. Descartes was a philosopher born in France over 400 years ago.
2. He spent twenty years, often by himself, meditating, thinking about thinking.
3. In his meditations he found that many things he'd always thought to be true were actually false.
4. Descartes decided to get rid of all his false opinions and start building up a set of beliefs that were definitely true.
5. He reasoned that if he could find just one thing that was absolutely certainly true, he could build other true beliefs on top.
6. He began a thinking experiment. He tried to doubt everything that he could possibly doubt so that he might find the one true thing.
7. He wrote the conversations he had with himself in six Meditations. Here is a summary of the first two.

First Meditation

8. Everything that I have ever learned has come to me through my senses – through seeing and hearing and tasting and smelling and feeling.
9. But I have learned too that sometimes my senses deceive me, so the things I know from sense experience can be doubted.
10. At least though I know I'm me, here, sitting in this room, holding a piece of paper in my hands.
11. You'd have to be mad to think you were someone else, like the mad people who think they're a king or that they're made out of glass.
12. Mind you, come to think of it, sometimes I do dream I'm here, sitting in this room, holding a piece of paper in my hands.
13. And when I really think about it, it becomes clear that there is no certain way to tell whether I'm dreaming or awake.
14. That said, when I dream, I do dream about things that really exist.
15. So the things must exist, otherwise I couldn't dream about them. That's something true.
16. And some things are the same whether I'm dreaming or not, like two plus three is five and a square has four sides. These things seem to be clearly true.
17. But then I have another doubt. What if there really is a god. A god could deceive me even about two plus three being five and a square having four sides.
18. Perhaps a good god wouldn't deceive me, but what if there is a god who is really bad?
19. Really, what if there is a god that is a demon and it is cunning and deceiving and powerful.
20. A demon god could deceive me about everything. The whole of reality might be a grand illusion!

Second Meditation

21. The more I think about it, the more it seems I can doubt everything.
22. The possibility of a demon who can put thoughts straight into my head means I can doubt my senses, my body, my dreams, the sky, the earth, everything.
23. Perhaps the only certain thing is that there is no certainty in the world!
24. But I can't even be certain about that. There could be some certainty, but there might not be. I mean, I really can't know for certain either way.
25. But hold on, what about this? There is one certain thing, me! Perhaps I can't be sure about what I am, but I must be something.
26. Even if there is a demon tricking my mind, it can't cause me to be nothing, or there'd be nothing to be thinking this. So I must be something.
27. That's it. As long as I am thinking, I am something. I think, I exist. This must be true every time I think it.
28. So I can say one really true thing about myself. I really am a thinking thing.
29. Can I say any more? Can I get to something else that's certainly true just from the fact that I exist as a thinking thing?
30. When I look out of a window at people in the street, what do I see other than hats and coats? Can I be sure that any of what's out there is real? Could the clothes just cover dummies that move by means of springs?
31. Can I be sure that other people think? Can I be sure that they exist? I'm not certain that I really have any eyes!