

Meditation 1 and the lying senses in rene descartes' book

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Descartes and Dreams

In Meditation I, René Descartes attempted to break down the information he had learned throughout the entirety of his life in an effort to rebuild his knowledge starting from a clean slate, free of falsehoods that he realizes much of his past learning had been built on. Descartes reasoned that any opinion containing within it any sort of doubt, whether it is “not completely certain and indubitable” or it is “patently false”, every faulty opinion would be rejected equally (Descartes, p. 59). This would leave no room for error in his method of removal, accepting nothing but perfection in each and every opinion that would remain. Following this criteria, his plan was to remove “the foundations” rather than seek to find fault in every opinion individually, which would cause “whatever has been built upon [these foundations] to crumble of its own accord”. Descartes realized that anything he had come to believe up until this point had been “from the senses or through the sense,” and he knows that the senses themselves are sometimes deceptive (Descartes, p. 60). He noted that although the senses can be deceiving, they are only deceptive in menial things. Initially, he considered it madness to deny all he had learned through his senses just because this information contained a small amount of deceit, but his trust of the senses soon fell through when he opened his mind to even more possibilities of deception behind his senses.

This thought of doubting the senses is what lead Descartes to consider the possibility that the entirety of life is a dream. He equated dreams to the delusions of the insane. The connection he placed between the two is based

on the fact that dreams can convince one that something that isn't true actually is true by just tricking the senses alone, similar to what happens to the minds of the insane. The argument he then made for why reality is not but a dream is based on the idea that even imaginary things must be made of true and real components. The example he used is a painter working on an art piece. The painter can create whatever he pleases in his work, but his creations, even if imaginary, would only be "produced in the likeness of true things". Even if an artist can create an image unlike any other, "something utterly fictitious and false," they still must be made of other things that are simple and universally true, such as colors. The colors from which the imaginary thing is made up of must still be true. A painter cannot change the components from which life is made up of, and the same goes for a dreamer, in that a dream must be constituted from real components such as color. Descartes then applied this established idea to the sciences. He believed sciences based on composite things- such as physics, astronomy, and medicine- could in fact be doubted due to their reliance on the senses, while sciences based on the simplest and most general truths- such as arithmetic and geometry- would still exist. The obvious truths such as the facts that "two plus three [makes] five" and that "a square has does not have more than four sides" are true whether one is "awake or asleep" (Descartes, p. 61). Descartes then took into account that basic truths such as these can even be called into doubt with the consideration that an omnipotent God could be giving us a false view on mathematics. He believed that if one then went on to doubt that the existence of God, this would even further lead us

into the greater possibility of deceitful thoughts because we were no longer created as perfect beings by a perfect God.

This led Descartes to the point that he had to assume that God may not actually be a "supremely good God," and that he must consider the possibility that God is "an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving [him]". The conclusion he reached was that he must consider the above possibility, viewing "all external things as nothing but the bedeviling hoaxes of my dreams" sent at him by the deceiving God to truly reach his original goal of beginning his knowledge anew (Descartes, p. 62). Descartes knew that he must do all he could to maintain his doubts of the falsehoods despite not having the power to innately know what is true.

To a certain extent, I agree with the methods Descartes had chosen to use during his attempt at establishing a wholly truthful set of knowledge. I believe that if one is to truly pursue a goal of reaching knowledge based only on most fundamental of truths, the consideration that one is dreaming throughout life is definitely one to focus on. He established a key point in that there are certain truths in the sciences and in regards to components that cannot be denied whether dreaming or not, but later denied them, claiming that there could still be doubt behind such ideas based around the possible deception of our minds through God. This is where my view and his branch apart into separate directions. I believe there must be a truth behind everything imagined or dreamed in life due to the realness of the components which these things are composed of. I don't agree with his final

conclusion due to the fact that I disagree with his doubting of these mathematical truths. I instead would have proceeded with the pursuit of true knowledge with the principles of mathematics still intact in my mind. I think it is wrong to doubt the entirety of our world due to the fact we could be being deceived at the most fundamental level of our knowledge. I believe if whether there is a possibility of falsities at this level or not, those types of falsities cannot be considered when looking at the truths of the reality we are in due to these falsities being outside of this reality. I believe he took his deceit to the point where I feel he could make no progress because of his overpowering denial at the very core of knowledge and reality itself.