Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy I & II”

René Descartes was, without exaggeration, among the very finest philosophers who ever lived. He was born in France in 1596, but did the majority of his work in The Hague, Netherlands to avoid the Catholic heresy trials that had convicted Galileo in 1633. His “Meditations on First Philosophy” (which really means “meditations on metaphysics”) was originally intended as a guide for university professors in western Europe, but quickly became essential reading for philosophy students the world over. In addition to being a preeminent philosopher, Descartes made important contributions to mathematics (the Cartesian coordinate system is named after him), physics, and medicine.

There are six meditations in all, but we'll read only the first two in this unit. This is because Descartes pins all his hopes for escaping doubt on proving the existence of God, and many feel he was unsuccessful in his proofs. As a result, the first two meditations have become the most influential, although the sixth has important arguments about the relationship between the mind and the body, and we’ll have a look at those in the last unit.

The translation you're reading is by Jonathan Bennett, who taught at Cambridge University and Syracuse for many years before his retirement. His translation is so good that it nearly eliminates the need for additional notes in this guide. Large dots before words are there to indicate emphasis in the sentence, and small dots around words indicate Bennett's additions to the original text, to improve readability.

One important thing to remember is that even though Descartes unintentionally inspired an extreme kind of skepticism, he had no designs on being a skeptic himself. In the first meditation, Descartes lays out his plan for ensuring that all the things he comes to believe from now on will be 100% certain. Part of that plan involves him making some outlandish but inessential assumptions (you’ll see what I mean). And in the second, he argues that in spite of the restrictions he's placed on himself, he can begin to rebuild his stock of beliefs with absolute certainty.

Notes:

- **First Meditation**
  - p. 2: When Descartes uses the term “extension” he means the property of having volume.
  - p. 3: When Descartes talks about his “old familiar opinions”, he is referring to his old tendency—the one he’s now trying to avoid—of believing things that later turned out to be false because he didn’t scrutinize them carefully enough.
• p. 3: Think of the claim about the demon as a methodological assumption—Descartes will use this as a test to make sure that he couldn’t possibly be wrong about anything he believes in the future. The details of the assumption are, of course, not essential to the test. If you find the demon too outlandish, substitute a more plausible scenario that raises as much doubt as possible.

• Meditation II

• p. 6: Remember, Descartes doesn’t actually believe he is dreaming—he’s just assuming he is to make sure all his beliefs are certain.

• p. 6: In the second column, Descartes begins a famously obscure argument about a piece of wax. Part of its difficulty comes from the fact that Descartes seems to drop his assumption that he’s being systematically deceived. Many experts on Descartes believe he was trying either to argue again for the conclusion that he exists, or argue for the conclusion that the mind is more easily known than other things. Of course, it could be an argument for both, or for neither.

Questions to think about:

1. You’re pretty sure that you’re not dreaming right now and that 5+7=12. What makes you so sure?

2. Why does Descartes suspect that we can’t be sure of these things?

3. Do you think “I exist” beats the demon test? Why/why not?

4. Do you think “I exist as a thinking thing” beats it? Why/why not?

Extras:

Descartes Dinosaur Comics