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## ***Descartes***

### **DISCOURSE ON METHOD AND THE MEDITATIONS**

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*Translated with an Introduction*

*by F. E. Sutcliffe*



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44

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## 4

I DO not know if I ought to tell you about the first meditations I pursued there, for they are so abstract and unusual that they will probably not be to the taste of everyone; and yet, so that one may judge if the foundations I have laid are firm enough, I find myself to some extent forced to speak of them. I had long ago noticed that, in matters relating to conduct, one needs sometimes to follow, just as if they were absolutely indubitable, opinions one knows to be very unsure, as has been said above; but as I wanted to concentrate solely on the search for truth, I thought I ought to do just the opposite, and reject as being absolutely false everything in which I could suppose the slightest reason for doubt, in order to see if there did not remain after that anything in my belief which was entirely indubitable. So, because our senses sometimes play us false, I decided to suppose that there was noth-

ing at all which was such as they cause us to imagine it; and because there are men who make mistakes in reasoning, even with the simplest geometrical matters, and make paralogisms, judging that I was as liable to error as anyone else, I rejected as being false all the reasonings I had hitherto accepted as proofs. And finally, considering that all the same thoughts that we have when we are awake can also come to us when we are asleep, without any one of them then being true, I resolved to pretend that nothing which had ever entered my mind was any more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterwards I became aware that, while I decided thus to think that everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who thought thus must be something; and observing that this truth: *I think, therefore I am*, was so certain and so evident that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were not capable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.

Then, examining attentively what I was, and seeing that I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world or place that I was in, but that I could not, for all that, pretend that I did not exist, and that, on the contrary, from the very fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed very evidently and very certainly that I existed; while, on the other hand, if I had only ceased to think, although all the rest of what I had ever imagined had been true, I would have had no reason to believe that I existed; I thereby concluded that I was a substance, of which the whole essence or nature consists in thinking, and which, in order to exist, needs no place and depends on no material thing; so that this 'I', that is to say, the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, and even that it is easier to know than the body, and moreover, that even if the body were not, it would not cease to be all that it is.

After this, I considered in general what is needed for a proposition to be true and certain; for, since I

had just found one which I knew to be so, I thought that I ought also to know what this certainty consisted of. And having noticed that there is nothing at all in this, *think, therefore I am*, which assures me that I am speaking the truth, except that I see very clearly that in order to think one must exist, I judged that I could take it to be a general rule that the things we conceive very clearly and very distinctly are all true, but that there is nevertheless some difficulty in being able to recognize for certain which are the things we see distinctly.

Following this, reflecting on the fact that I had doubts, and that consequently my being was not completely perfect, for I saw clearly that it was a greater perfection to know than to doubt, I decided to inquire whence I had learned to think of something more perfect than myself; and I clearly recognized that this must have been from some nature which was in fact more perfect. As for the notions I had of several other things outside myself, such as the sky, the earth, light, heat and a thousand oth-

ers, I had not the same concern to know their source, because, seeing nothing in them which seemed to make them superior to myself, I could believe that, if they were true, they were dependencies of my nature, in as much as it had some perfection; and, if they were not, that I held them from nothing, that is to say that they were in me because of an imperfection in my nature. But I could not make the same judgement concerning the idea of a being more perfect than myself; for to hold it from nothing was something manifestly impossible; and because it is no less contradictory that the more perfect should proceed from and depend on the less perfect, than it is that something should emerge out of nothing, I could not hold it from myself; with the result that it remained that it must have been put into me by a being whose nature was truly more perfect than mine and which even had in itself all the perfections of which I could have any idea, that is to say, in a single word, which was God. To which I added that, since I knew some per-

fections that I did not have, I was not the only being which existed (I shall freely use here, with your permission, the terms of the School) but that there must of necessity be another more perfect, upon whom I depended, and from whom I had acquired all I had; for, if I had been alone and independent of all other, so as to have had from myself this small portion of perfection that I had by participation in the perfection of God, I could have given myself, by the same reason, all the remainder of perfection that I knew myself to lack, and thus to be myself infinite, eternal, immutable, omniscient, all-powerful, and finally to have all the perfections that I could observe to be in God. For, consequentially upon the reasonings by which I had proved the existence of God, in order to understand the nature of God as far as my own nature was capable of doing, I had only to consider, concerning all the things of which I found in myself some idea, whether it was a perfection or not to have them: and I was assured that none of those which indicated some imperfection

was in him, but that all the others were. So I saw that doubt, inconstancy, sadness and similar things could not be in him, seeing that I myself would have been very pleased to be free from them. Then, further, I had ideas of many sensible and bodily things; for even supposing that I was dreaming, and that everything I saw or imagined was false, I could not, nevertheless, deny that the ideas were really in my thoughts. But, because I had already recognized in myself very clearly that intelligent nature is distinct from the corporeal, considering that all composition is evidence of dependency, and that dependency is manifestly a defect, I thence judged that it could not be a perfection in God to be composed of these two natures, and that, consequently, he was not so composed; but that, if there were any bodies in the world or any intelligences or other natures which were not wholly perfect, their existence must depend on his power, in such a way that they could not subsist without him for a single instant.

I set out after that to seek other truths; and turning to the object of the geometers, which I conceived as a continuous body, or a space extended indefinitely in length, width and height or depth, divisible into various parts, which could have various figures and sizes and be moved or transposed in all sorts of ways – for the geometers take all that to be in the object of their study – I went through some of their simplest proofs. And having observed that the great certainty that everyone attributes to them is based only on the fact that they are clearly conceived according to the rule I spoke of earlier, I noticed also that they had nothing at all in them which might assure me of the existence of their object. Thus, for example, I very well perceived that, supposing a triangle to be given, its three angles must be equal to two right angles, but I saw nothing, for all that, which assured me that any such triangle existed in the world; whereas, reverting to the examination of the idea I had of a perfect Being, I found that existence was comprised in the idea in

the same way that the equality of the three angles of a triangle to two right angles is comprised in the idea of a triangle or, as in the idea of a sphere, the fact that all its parts are equidistant from its centre, or even more obviously so; and that consequently it is at least as certain that God, who is this perfect Being, is, or exists, as any geometric demonstration can be.

But what persuades many people that it is difficult to know this, and even also to know what their soul is, is that they never lift their minds above tangible things, and that they are so accustomed not to think of anything except by imagining it, which is a mode of thinking peculiar to material objects, that everything which is not within the realm of imagination seems to them unintelligible. This is evident enough from the fact that even the philosophers hold as a maxim in the Schools, that there is nothing in the understanding which has not first been in the senses, in which, however, it is certain that ideas about God and the soul have never been; and

it seems to me that those who wish to use their imagination to understand them are doing just the same as if, to hear sounds or smell odours, they attempted to use their eyes; except that there is still this difference, that the sense of sight assures us no less of the truth of its objects than do the senses of smell and hearing, whereas neither our imagination nor our senses could ever assure us of anything, if our understanding did not intervene. Finally, if there are still men who are not sufficiently persuaded of the existence of God and of their soul by the reasons I have given, I would like them to know that all the other things of which they think themselves perhaps more assured, such as having a body, and that there are stars and an earth, and such like, are less certain; for, although we may have a moral assurance of these things, which is such that it seems that, short of being foolish, no one can doubt their existence, at the same time also, short of being unreasonable, when it is a question of a metaphysical certainty, one cannot deny that there are

not sufficient grounds for being absolutely assured, when one observes that one can in the same way imagine, being asleep, that one has another body, and that one sees other stars and another earth, without there being anything of the sort. For how does one know that the thoughts which come while one dreams are false rather than the others, seeing that they are often no less strong and clear? And may the most intelligent men study this question as much as they please, I do not believe that they can give any reason which would be sufficient to remove this doubt, unless they presuppose the existence of God. For, firstly, even the rule which I stated above that I held, namely, that the things we grasp very clearly and very distinctly are all true, is assured only because God is or exists, and because he is a perfect Being, and because everything that is in us comes from him; whence it follows that our ideas and notions, being real things and coming from God, in so far as they are clear and distinct, cannot to this extent be other than true. Accord-

ingly, if we often enough have ideas which contain errors, they can only be those which contain something confused and obscure, because in this they participate in nothingness, that is to say that they are in us in this confused way only because we are not completely perfect. And it is evident that it is no less contradictory that error or imperfection, as such, should proceed from God, than that truth or perfection should come from nothingness. But, if we did not know that all that is in us which is real and true comes from a perfect and infinite Being, we would have no reason which would assure us that, however clear and distinct our ideas might be, they had the perfection of being true.

But, after knowledge of God and of the soul has thus made us certain of this rule, it is a simple matter to understand that the dreams we imagine when we are asleep should not in any way make us doubt the truth of the thoughts we have when we are awake. For, even if it should happen that, while sleeping, one should have some quite distinct idea,



as, for example, if a geometer were to discover some new demonstration, his being asleep would not prevent it from being true; and as for the most ordinary error of our dreams, which consists in representing to us various objects in the same way as our waking senses do, it does not matter that they give us occasion to doubt the truth of such ideas, because they can also lead us into error often enough without our being asleep, as when those who have jaundice see everything yellow, or when the stars or other very distant bodies seem to us much smaller than they are. For, finally, whether we are awake or asleep, we should never let ourselves be persuaded except on the evidence of our reason. And it is to be observed that I say: of our reason, and not: of our imagination or our senses. For, although we see the sun very clearly, we should not on that account judge that it is only as large as we see it; and we can well imagine distinctly a lion's head grafted on to the body of a goat, without concluding on that account that there is any such chi-

mera in the world; for reason does not dictate that what we see or imagine thus is true, but it does tell us that all our ideas and notions must have some basis in truth, for it would not be possible that God, who is all perfect and true, should have put them in us unless it were so. And because our reasonings are never so clear or complete while we sleep as when we are awake, even though sometimes our imaginations are as vivid and distinct or even more so, reason tells us that, it not being possible that our thoughts should all be true, because we are not absolutely perfect, what truth there is in them will undoubtedly be found in those we have when we are awake rather than in those we have in our dreams.