

A History of Philosophy

32 Descartes' Meditations 1

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Okay, well, today we come back to our friend René Descartes. And what we're doing is tracing the line of thought in his meditations, where he has six meditations. The theme of the first is simply, I doubt, where he is recognizing the kinds of problems that have given rise to the skepticism of that day, as well as of earlier centuries.

The lack of indubitable certainty. And that leads him, in meditation two, to draw the inference, I doubt, therefore I exist. And I exist as a thinking, doubting thing.

That will lead, in meditation three, to the further assertion that God exists. In meditation four, we talk about the reliability of reason and the problem of error. Human reason becomes reliable because it's the exercise of God-made faculties.

God doesn't deceive. But that leaves us with the problem of how you account for error. It's like the problem of evil in relation to good.

Okay. Then, in meditation five, he speaks more about the existence of God, but his overall concern is with the necessary truth regarding material things, material bodies. And then, in meditation six, certain contingent truths about material existence.

So that's the lay of the land. And there's a continuity of thought, as you would expect, in the light of what we were saying last time, that his method is that of a deductive system. So what he's trying to do is to establish initial axioms, and then, by means of a series of proofs, to draw one conclusion after another.

So you have an extended chain of reasoning that runs in a linear fashion all the way through the meditations. This is not a series of independent topics. It's a logically deduced system of thought.

Okay. Now, last time, of course, we were talking around what he did in first meditation. And our concern today, initially, is with meditation two, then with three, perhaps four.

And it's in Meditation Two that he pulls, as you can see, that famous thing which is so often quoted, I think, therefore, I exist. And people have tried to parody that ever since by substituting something for thinking. I feel, therefore, I exist.

I heard somebody parody it in the attitude of Jean-Paul Sartre, whose autobiographical piece was entitled Nausea. I vomit; therefore, I exist. And after all,

you know, as I commented last time, if any of you have been seasick, you don't doubt your existence.

You'd like to, but you don't. But, in any case, for Descartes, it's, I think, or I doubt, therefore, I exist. That is to say, the initial axiom is right there in the first meditation.

So, the very exercise of clearing away the underbrush of things that can be doubted had established the intuitively obvious fact that I doubt. And if you doubt that, then, obviously, you doubt. It's sort of almost a necessary truth.

To question it is asserting it. To deny it is impossible. So, a necessary truth there.

But, as he reflects on that premise, he notes that doubting is just one form of thinking. And so, what he's doing is saying, I think, therefore, I exist. So, instead of dubito, it's now cogito, ergo sum.

I think, therefore, I exist. But the significant thing for the moment is the scope of what he includes within the cogito. Within the simple statement, I think, it includes doubting, perceiving, imagining, affirming, and denying, in fact, any kind of conscious state and conscious activity.

Activity of the consciousness. If you have the impression, as I run across people who do all the time, that when he says, I think, therefore, I exist, he's talking of cold intellectual activity. Well, you just haven't read closely enough.

Because he's including conscious feelings, acts of the will, like affirming and denying. So, he's not thinking of intellect as separate from emotion, intellect as separate from will. To say, I think, therefore, I exist, is like saying, I'm conscious, therefore, I exist.

One other observation, that among the things which he includes within thinking are both contents of consciousness and acts of consciousness. Get the distinction, it becomes important. The content of consciousness is what he normally calls an idea or an image.

Perhaps a concept or a notion. It's what you're thinking. Sometimes he calls it the object of thought.

Where the objects of thought are in the consciousness. Ideas and so forth. But, it includes as well acts of consciousness.

The act of thinking. And, of course, you're conscious of thinking when you pause to reflect. The act of affirming.

The act of denying. The act of doubting. The act of wishing.

The act of hoping. So that, when he says, I think, therefore, I exist, he's not saying, I have ideas, and there must be something having ideas. Or, there must be some repository for ideas.

Namely, in a mind. No, he's not just saying that. He's saying that there must be an agent that acts in various conscious ways.

An agent of thought. An agent that wills. An agent that hopes.

An agent that doubts. Because what we're aware of in self-consciousness is of activities. Not just the contents.

The objects of consciousness. The ideas. And, as we'll see, that distinction becomes pretty crucial in response to some of his later critics.

But this, I doubt, I think, described in this extended way, all of it is intuitive. That is to say, it's not something that is inferred, known indirectly via some proof or some other step. Uh, it's known directly by introspective awareness in self-consciousness.

Quite independently of any sense perceptions or awareness of external things. Introspectively, looking within, I become aware of this. Whether or not I'm in touch with anything in the external world.

It's not mediated through sense perception. It's not mediated through our own bodily awarenesses. These are simply mental awarenesses.

You see? Mental awarenesses. He doesn't prove, he thinks he cannot prove, that he even has a body. Until meditation sex.

Because he has no way of proving the existence of any material things, logically, until that point. Having begun where he began, with complete skepticism. Complete doubt.

You see? So, he's talking of consciousness, not of material qualities, physical properties, but of mental qualities, mental properties. Okay. Unrelated to the physical senses.

That's the point, I think, of his illustration about the wax. And if you don't sparkle in your eyes in recognition, it's only because you haven't read it. But he talks about a cake of wax.

The physical properties of which change when it's heated. Yeah, it melts. It becomes soft.

Perhaps liquid. It changes color. Changes shape.

So on and so forth. So that the physical properties are transient and relative. Yet, for all of the changeableness of the physical properties of a piece of wax, the idea of wax as wax is a mental concept.

You see? Not tied necessarily to unchanging, not tied necessarily to changing qualities. You think about the unchanging nature of wax that has changing qualities. You see? His point is that what is immediately before the consciousness is not the physical qualities, but the, in that case, the idea of wax.

Which is not reducible just to a collection of physical qualities. So, in talking this way about consciousness, what he's doing is acknowledging that he's going to be working with a representational theory of knowledge. So that, as it turns out, the mind is aware of its ideas and its mental acts.

Okay? Mental ideas and acts which represent to it external bodies and other external realities. So that our ideas, our mental states, are representations of something. You see? Immediate representations.

We have a direct awareness of these, intuition, direct awareness. We have an indirect awareness of these, that is to say, their existence has to be inferred. You're not directly aware of physical bodies.

For that matter, you're not directly aware of anything external to your consciousness, whether it be physical bodies, other minds, or God. You see? What we're directly aware of is our own consciousness. Yeah.

So, if we want to know about the existence of God, we have to prove it from our own consciousness. That is to say, it has to be an a priori proof. A proof based not on empirical evidence, but on the content of one's own consciousness.

That's what he does in meditation three. And if you want to prove the existence of other minds, if you want to know about the existence of other minds, you have to prove it. If you want to know about the existence of bodies, you have to prove it.

Now, William Temple, who was an Oxford philosopher back in the first part of this century, became Archbishop of Canterbury. In a book of his called *Nature, Man, and God*, which suggests a pretty inclusive sort of coverage, not much else to talk about. But in a book of his called *Nature, Man, and God*, he has a chapter called *Descartes' Faux Pas*.

Descartes' Faux Pas. You see, a faux pas is a false step, a mistaken step. Descartes' Faux Pas was precisely this.

The claim that all we are directly aware of is the content of our own consciousness. Because this established the entire problem that modern philosophy had to overcome. And we've been trying to overcome Descartes' problem ever since.

Yeah, the history of modern epistemology begins here. Begins here in the sense that Descartes is saying to us, you've got to prove that you've got a body, that there's an external world. You've got to prove that other minds exist.

You've got to prove the existence of God. We have no other way of knowing it apart from an inference. Yes.

And that becomes difficult. Oh, we're familiar enough with attempts to argue the existence of God, I mean. In our Christian tradition, we're aware of that, but not necessarily aware of the distinctive kind of job it is granted Descartes' starting point.

But what about proving the existence of other minds? Did you ever worry whether I really had one? You see? But hey, how would you do it? How would you do it? You don't have some kind of telepathy that gives immediate insight into my consciousness. You see? So it turns out for Descartes that you can't prove the existence of another mind until you've proved the existence of another body. And then, because of the analogies between your bodily behavior and my bodily behavior, and knowing the interrelationship that there is between your bodily behavior and your mind, you're able to infer by an analogical argument, arguing by way of analogy, that there must be an analogous relationship between my body and my mind, that there is between your body and your mind.

And since you know it in your case, you can infer it in my case. You see? But apart from that analogical inference, you have no way of knowing that I have a mind. According to Descartes.

Well, that sounds sort of odd. You see? But what it meant is that, uh, you have to have an alternative epistemology to this representational theory of knowledge. If you're going to, say, we have other ways of knowing other minds.

Is there some direct awareness of other minds, of other consciousnesses? Something more direct. And when we get to Hegel, we'll find he says there is. You see? And, in the existential tradition, yes, there is.

But the problem begins back here. Okay, now, what I've been talking about thus far is simply this. The cogito.

Now, what follows from it is that I exist. Therefore, I exist. But, the question is, what am I that exists? And initially, Descartes doesn't disclose how problematic that is.

Because if the argument is, I think, therefore, I exist, what follows during those times when I don't think, when I'm unconscious, fast asleep, dreamless sleep? You see? Now, it doesn't prove I don't exist. The point is, I can't prove that I did exist. You see? In other words, uh, what we seem to be committed to as a starting point could be taken as, uh, what has been called a solipsism of the present moment of consciousness.

Now, solipsism is a view that nobody takes seriously in the sense of holding it. It's sort of a dead-end street. Pulled a sack.

Literally, a solipsist is one who says, I and only I exist. Solus ipsa, only the self. Solipsism of the present moment would be the view that I and only I exist at this present moment.

Now, you can see the solipsism that is the hypothetical starting point. I think, therefore, I exist. Don't know about anybody else, any other minds, let alone bodies.

You see? But why the present moment? Because of the problem with the discontinuity of my consciousness. I have gappy consciousness. And frankly, the longer the gap is at night, the happier I am the next day.

You see? Gappy consciousness. Yeah. But, how do I know whether or not my consciousness is gappy? How do I know whether the past consciousnesses are mine? But only by memory.

What is memory? It's a present consciousness, not a past consciousness. In my present consciousness, I have a representation of what I take to be a past consciousness. But I never have a direct awareness of a past consciousness.

Because I'm not in the past, I'm in the present. So all I know is my present consciousness. The present moment of consciousness, I don't even know that I said that.

Solipsism of the present moment. Two problems leading to the solipsism of the present moment. Three problems.

One, all I know is that I exist. Number one. Number two, the discontinuity of my own consciousness.

Number three, the problem of memory. Problem of memory. Because what is memory but a present representation of a past consciousness? So you find people

like John Locke and David Hume trying to argue about what they call personal identity.

The continued identity of the same self from the past on into the present and the future. You see? Personal identity. Trying to argue about the trustworthiness of memory.

And in effect, David Hume throws his hands up and says, I don't know, on that one. Because you can hardly wait until the past comes along the way, you can with the future in order to see if it happened. You can't go forward to the back, to the past.

So, the problem that he poses is really pretty intense. Solipsism of the present moment of consciousness. Well, that suggests the kind of objection he's going to run into.

But the, the, uh, the point is that the intuition with which he's behaving in the beginning, the *dubito*, the *cogito*, involves all that problem. But he also finds the *ergo sum* as, sort of an intuitively obvious corollary. You see, in English it's two words, I think.

In the Latin in which he wrote or the French in which he wrote, it's, well, in the Latin it's one word. *Cogito*. French, it would be two.

You see, but one word. So what, what is this I that's involved in the thinking, the *cogito*, the one word? Well, he takes it to be a pretty obvious, uh, thing that this, that I am, is a thinking thing. That is to say, a thinking agent.

A thing that thinks. His phrase, *res cogitans*. *Cogitans*, present participle, indicating what's going on.

Res, thing, substance, entity. *Res cogitans*. But there he's jumped to a conclusion that may not be warranted.

Because granted an immediate awareness of myself in the act of thinking, reflectively, we're aware of ourselves as thinking. Where does the *res* come in? That thing. Am I aware of the mind that does the thinking? The mind is a mental substance, an immaterial entity, a soul.

You see? Yet that's what he's affirming here. I'm a thinking thing. And he takes it that he's proved the existence of the soul.

In fact, at the very beginning of the work, he says he's going to prove the existence, the existence of God and of the soul. Which was precisely what the scholastics tried to do. To provide a basis for theology.

Well, he has shown that we have a direct awareness of thinking and of thoughts. Bit of a thinker. You see? That's the question.

And that's what gets challenged because when he equates this thinking thing with soul, with interior, with immaterial mind, Thomas Hobbes, to whom he sent the meditations for comments before it was published. Thomas Hobbes raised his obvious objection. Why shouldn't the thinking thing be a body? Which, of course, is precisely what Thomas Hobbes thought it was.

You remember Thomas Hobbes' materialism. Why shouldn't the thinking thing be a body? He's assuming, of course, that it's the brain that does the thinking rather than some kind of immaterial soul. Why not a corporeal thinker? To which Descartes has his response.

First, I have no intuitive awareness of the body as I do of the mind. That is to say, I have an intuitive awareness of the agent, but I don't have intuitive awareness of the body. And secondly, he claims, I do have some notion of a soul substance.

Now, that term notion is the tricky word. He's not saying I have a clear and distinct idea. Now, I have a clear and distinct idea of thinking, of doubting, and of a number of the ideas that I think, but I don't have a clear and distinct idea of mind substance, of soul substance.

I have a rather vague notion of what that will be. He doesn't say vague, but it's a notion; it's not a clear and distinct idea. Notion implies something perhaps more imaginative than explicit.

But in any case, he thinks there are more grounds for affirming a soul substance as the thinker because of this notion than there are grounds for asserting that matter is the soul substance, that body is the thinker. So, I think, therefore I exist. What am I? A thinking thing, a soul.

So forth. Well, later on, there's going to be a further objection that we'll run into, raised by David Hume around 1800, who said regarding the mind and our introspective awareness of mind, no, all we're aware of are our ideas. And in being aware of my mind, I'm only aware of a bundle of ideas that I call mine.

But what bundles them? I am, you see. Now, Hume is not talking about, however, an awareness of mental acts, only of ideas. And so, Descartes' point hinges, it seems to me, on the fact that we have a direct awareness of our mental acts, therefore, of an agent.

And sometimes it takes a mental effort to affirm, to deny, to decide, you see, let alone to think, to reason, to infer. You see, we're aware of the agency acting in those cases. So, it seems to me that Descartes' argument hinges not just on representational ideas, but on an introspective consciousness of our own mental activity, which I think you don't find in David Hume.

There is just the ideas. So, without the mental activity, why have an agent? You see? And so, when it comes to the existence of mind without any awareness of agency, Hume is simply a skeptic. We have no way of knowing.

Well, it'll turn out that Hume is also a skeptic about the existence of material bodies. He's also a skeptic about proving the existence of God. So, Descartes, who started with skepticism, really, according to David Hume, should end up where he started, skepticism.

You see? So, the story of epistemology from Descartes to Hume is the story of a concerted attempt to argue one's way out of skepticism by what we called last time a foundationalist approach. Okay. An approach which, according to David Hume, fails utterly.

So, Hume has to find another way out of skepticism. And for him, it's a matter of beliefs that are the product of mental habits. Sort of a pragmatism.

Okay. Ruth? That Descartes locks himself into that makes how he defines intuition of a mental act different than how I would say, from a more realist perspective, I have an intuition in my body. You know, the realist would come along and say, no, indeed, I do intuit in my body.

It's just the way I know it. The crux of the thing is representational business. And I see I erased that word somewhere along the way.

Yeah, you see, the intuitive is something that's direct. Representation means that we mean our knowledge is indirect. And the kind of realism that I assume you're talking about, the kind that Dallas Willard was talking about last week, week before last, is a direct realism.

He alluded to Scottish realism. Thomas Reid. He alluded to G.E. Moore.

It's a direct realism. How can Hegel talk of a direct awareness of other minds, but by virtue of a direct realism about that? Likewise, the existentialist. That's the way such a thing could hypothetically say, I vomit, therefore I exist.

You see, because there's a direct awareness of one's bodily existence in a state of nausea. You see? So you're right. The issue is direct or indirect.

Direct or representational knowledge. No, not semantics. Yeah, I think it comes down to the adequacy of two different descriptions.

Of knowing, being aware of, perceiving. And those of you who were in Dallas Willard's second lecture will remember that he talked of several keys to that realism. One was the notion of intentionality.

That is to say, the mind reaches out and directly apprehends what is out there. Points to mental intention. Another was the importance of a substantive self.

That is to say, an agent that can have such an intention and mental outreach. So, right on that target, yeah. Yeah, and we'll be getting into that sort of thing as we go along.

But it's Descartes who really made the crucial issue of the 17th and 18th centuries epistemology. Very crucial. Anything else? David? Yeah, there may be logical fallacies that are involved in this.

As, for instance, a gap in the chain of argument. A suppressed premise that doesn't happen to be true. You see, something of that sort.

But that is the kind of mistake that is involved in this representational view. When he says that the object that we're aware of is our own mental states. You see, now, I take that to be a misdescription of the nature of consciousness.

A misdescription. Yeah, because if, as Ruth says, I'm aware of my own body, or as Sartre says, I'm aware of my own bodily vomiting. You see, an immediate way.

If that's the case, then I'm only aware of my own ideas as a misdescription. You see, there's a great deal of difference between having an idea of vomiting and vomiting. Right? You have an idea right now.

I don't see anybody doing it. You see. And within his argument, you said before that the mistake is not a mistake, but what Hume really points out is the way people interact.

Yes, yes. You see, it may be legitimate to say, I think, therefore I exist. Hobbes says it's a mistake to infer that you're a thinking thing, an immaterial soul.

It doesn't follow. Hume says it's a mistake to infer that there is any thing at all. That things.

So they think there are gaps in the argument, yeah. Janelle. How do you explain how you go from, I exist, I'm a thing? Okay, that's the next order of business.

Jim? You've been thinking a bit less graphically. Would you say that I just simply have the idea? Yeah, this comes up again when we get to George Berkeley, who has a similar kind of representational view as the basis for his subjective idealism, you see. But George Berkeley will make a distinction between the idea of hunger and feeling hungry.

His example is of pain. I think it was one of those other 18th-century English figures. Oh, his name slips me for the moment.

Who said he's going to refute the learned Bishop Berkeley, and he kicked a rock. Oh, that hurts. That's real pain, not just the idea of pain.

To which Berkeley responded, sure, the idea of pain is voluntary. The real pain is involuntary. That's the real difference.

But they're both ideas. There are some involuntary ideas, you see. So, Descartes, I suspect, would say the same thing.

That your present idea of vomiting is—or your present idea of a meal is a voluntary one, whereas your feeling hungry is an involuntary one. But they're both ideas. But that doesn't make me aware of— No direct awareness.

No. Not according to Descartes and Berkeley. According to Reed, yes.

Tim? Well, is there any reason why an immaterial agent giving concentration to careful argumentation with Descartes doesn't get tired? I mean, there's a physical tiring, yeah, but there's also a mental, couldn't there be? Purely mental, tiring. Now, that's not the way Descartes would answer it. That's the way Berkeley would answer it.

The way Descartes would answer it is probably by saying, yes, as we'll see when we've proven the existence of the body, there is a causal relationship between the body and the mind. So that if your body gets fatigued, your mind is affected. Mm-hmm.

Yeah, it's interesting that my mind gets fuzzy about nine or ten o'clock at night. Usually, it's not fuzzy in the morning, but it's fuzzy at night. Why? Well, Descartes would say it's obvious.

Your body's getting tired, and your mind is affected. Yes. Yeah.

Be careful that you don't take substance to mean something physical. So, it's our translation of the word *res*, which means a thing, and we use the term substance in ordinary English in a variety of ways. Now, the substance of this argument is, you see, or we say, what is the matter? Meaning, what's the problem? Well, the matter under discussion is, you see, so terms like matter and substance do not necessarily refer to things physical.

Literally, substance is what stands beneath. Sub-sta-o. How many people had high school Latin? Bunch of barbarians.

Sub-sta-o, stands beneath, you see. No, sure, you know, it's Greeks, Romans, or barbarians are the only alternatives. It's the way it was in antiquity, at least.

So, in that sense, you see, the mind is that which underlies all of the conscious states and activities. The underlying reality, that of the mind. David? I was wondering, with Descartes, if he does say that there are involuntary ideas, can he sort of wiggle his way out of the solipsism of the present moment by saying that we have these involuntary ideas going on? No, I think an idea that you're not conscious of, he would regard as a self-contradiction.

It's like a square circle. Because an idea is a conscious state, and you're asking about an unconscious consciousness. No such animals.

Well, there are mental states. There are images that go through your mind while dreaming. So dreaming is a state of consciousness.

It's not waking consciousness, but it's a conscious state. You can tell me sometimes what you dream. Doesn't the subconscious hold ideas that you're not aware of? Do you mean that there are certain unconscious or half-conscious influences on your conscious states? Is it an idea until it becomes conscious? Now, the causes of that consciousness are another thing.

But depth psychology has found all sorts of causes that nobody thought of before. Found? Well, hypothesized. Yeah.

Ascribing causes. All right, meditation three. Janelle wants to get to that.

Meditation three. Having come only this far, that I am a thinking thing, thinking ideas, it's pretty plain that Descartes has only two additional premises now available for anything he wants to prove. One, the existence of the mind, okay, and two, the actual ideas that I have.

So if he's going to argue for the existence of God, he has to argue from either or both of these. And he does. The main body of meditation three is arguing from our actual ideas.

Specifically, my idea of God, which is one of my ideas, you see. But the other would be the existence of the mind. Yeah.

And in both cases, what he's going to do is to try to construct a causal argument. A causal argument. Now, the argument from the existence of the mind is relatively simple, and it only plays a secondary role.

It's a secondary role woven into the argument from the idea of God. But the existence of the mind is fairly simple. Here I am, very obviously, a finite, fallible, contingent thing.

Limited, subject to error, and dependent on my being as a mind on other things, and for my functioning as a mind dependent on other things. In other words, what he is dealing with in the existence of the mind is the agent that acts in conscious actions, the agent, and the ideas. You see, those things he gets out of his initial description of thinking.

There are ideas, there's an agent, a thinking thing. So his question is going to be, what causes these? It's the ultimate cause. So it's cause-effect argument.

Now, if you're on your toes, you know, I know you're not physically, but mentally, on your toes. You may be on your toes physically; it's almost that time. But if you're on your toes mentally, you'll recognize that in coming at a causal argument, he has a suppressed premise in addition.

Namely, that there are, in reality, causal relations. That any contingent thing must have a cause. Ideas aren't self-existent; they must have a cause.

Contingent minds aren't self-existent; they must have a cause. Ouch! Where'd that come from? Well, I think it's a happy illustration of the fact that when you try to suspend everything, you're bound to find something down the track you fail to suspend. He's suspending judgment on everything in meditation one.

But apparently, he didn't suspend judgment on the causal principle. Oh, he might, you know, he might develop an argument for that, saying nature teaches us that. And indeed, you notice that he distinguishes between three kinds of ideas.

Ideas that are innate, ideas that are adventitious, and ideas that are factitious. A factitious idea is one I make up; it's a fiction. Like my idea of a furry giraffe with butterfly wings and pink polka dots on its tail.

You see, that's a fictitious idea. There are some ideas that are adventitious. That is to say, they come to us from outside agents, from outside causes.

Like my idea that there's a tree out there on campus is adventitious. Because of what is impacting the sense organs and so forth. But then this possibility of innate ideas.

You see, now our very experience of adventitious ideas, over which we have no control, is involuntary, not voluntary. You see, adventitious ideas are involuntary, factitious ones are voluntary. The very existence of these adventitious, voluntary ideas is such that, as he puts it, nature teaches us that.

Nature makes it evident that there is a cause out there. I have no control over that idea. You see, I look Carl here in the face, and I just can't get away.

There it is. Like it or leave it, I mean, there it is. Involuntary.

So he might say that the causal idea is given in the very experience of having ideas. The causal principle is given in that. But in any case, that is obviously involved.

Now, this business of Descartes seeming to take for granted things like a causal principle is curious, because he purports to have suspended judgment on all previous philosophical conclusions. You've read a piece of Gilson, didn't you, when we were dealing with Augustine? Well, Gilson has a book on Descartes called *The Influence of Medieval Philosophy on René Descartes*. It's a book, yay, thick.

Descartes, who pretended to suspend all medieval philosophical conclusions, and Gilson wrote a book, yay, thick, on the influence of medieval philosophy on René Descartes. Yeah, you try and do any presupposition-less thinking, and you'll end up in the same place, you see. Any presupposition-less science is a will-o'-the-wisp.

It was for Descartes. We're not always aware of our presuppositions. That's the problem.

These are your unconscious ideas. The thing is, if they're unconscious, they're not yours. You don't have them.

They have you. Well, time has trickled out.