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Harry G. Frankfurt: Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen

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Introduction

In the *Theaetetus*, Plato describes thinking as a conversation conducted by the soul with itself.¹ This has sometimes been taken as a reason for admiring his use of the dialogue form. Koyré goes so far, in fact, as to maintain that “the dialogue is the form *par excellence* for philosophic investigation, because thought itself, at least for Plato, is a ‘dialogue the soul holds with itself.’”² But a dialogue is not a conversation with oneself. It is a conversation with other people. If thinking is indeed internal discourse, then dialogue can hardly be the ideally appropriate literary form in which to convey it. A much more appropriate vehicle is the meditation, in which an author represents the autonomous give and take of his own systematic reflections.

Moral and religious meditations were published before the seventeenth century, but Descartes was the first to use the form in an exclusively metaphysical work.³ During his lifetime he published three major philosophical books. One of these, *Principles of Philosophy*, was meant as a text for use in the schools, and its form was dictated by this intention. But in the *Discourse on Method* and in the *Meditations*, Descartes was free to write philosophy as he liked. Both

¹ 189e and 263e.

² Alexander Koyré, *Discovering Plato* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), p. 3n.

³ Etienne Gilson, *Études sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1951), pp. 186–187.

books are autobiographical. Like Plato's dialogues, they do not emasculate the philosophical enterprise by severing its connection with the lives of men. Descartes differs from Plato, however, in the way he solves one of the touchiest problems of philosophical writing—to protect the vital individuality of philosophical inquiry without betraying the anonymity of reason.

Plato never enters the dramatic scenes he creates. He may intend to signify by this self-effacement his refusal to use the stage of inquiry for personal display.⁴ There is a certain tension, however, between his conception of inquiry and the literary genre he chose. Plato insists that philosophy and rhetoric are antithetical, but his dialogues would have been lifeless if he had rigorously excluded rhetoric from them. If the characters in a dialogue are to appear as persons, and not merely as devices for punctuating the text, rhetorical elements must naturally intrude into their discourse just as they do into the conversations of real people.

Descartes avoids this difficulty by declining to place his inquiry within a social context. He does his thinking in private, and no one appears in his *Meditations* but himself. To be sure, his style is personal and sometimes even intimate. But while he writes autobiography, the story he tells is of his efforts to escape the limits of the merely personal and to find his generic identity as a rational creature. Whatever actually may have been his motives in publishing the *Discourse* anonymously, philosophically it was appropriate for him to do so. His attitude toward philosophy is nicely implicit in the paradox of an anonymous autobiography,

⁴ See Ludwig Edelstein, "Platonic Anonymity," *American Journal of Philology*, LXXXIII (1962), 1–22.

which serves to reveal a man but which treats the man's identity as irrelevant.

Religious meditations are characteristically accounts of a person seeking salvation, who begins in the darkness of sin and who is led through a conversion to spiritual illumination. While the purpose of such writing is to instruct and initiate others, the method is not essentially didactic. The author strives to teach more by example than by precept. In a broad way the *Meditations* is a work of this sort: Descartes's aim is to guide the reader to intellectual salvation by recounting his own discovery of reason and his escape thereby from the benighted reliance on his senses, which had formerly entrapped him in uncertainty and error.

In reading the First Meditation it is essential to understand that while Descartes speaks in the first person, the identity he adopts as he addresses the reader is not quite his own. Students of Descartes often fail to take into account the somewhat fictitious point of view from which he approaches his subject, and this frequently leads to serious misunderstanding. As he begins the *Meditations*, Descartes's stance is not that of an accomplished scholar who has already developed the subtle and profound philosophical position set forth in that work. Instead, he affects a point of view he has long since outgrown—that of someone who is philosophically unsophisticated and who has always been guided more or less unreflectively in his opinions by common sense.

This is not very surprising, of course, in view of the autobiographical nature of his book. Descartes's meditations occurred years before he wrote the *Meditations*, and the First Meditation represents an early stage of his own philosophical thinking. He makes this quite explicit in the *Con-*

versation with Burman, where he explains that in the First Meditation he is attempting to represent “a man who is first beginning to philosophize,” and where he discusses some of the limitations by which the perspective and understanding of such a person are bound.⁵ The lack of sophistication that Descartes affects consists essentially in a failure to appreciate the radical distinction between the senses and reason. Thus it concerns doctrine, not talent, and it is by no means inconsistent with the resourcefulness and ingenuity that Descartes displays in the First Meditation. The talent available to him as he starts his inquiry is his own. It is only the assumptions that govern his initial steps that are naïve and philosophically crude.

This point is also implicit in the method Descartes employs to present his ideas in the *Meditations*. He describes this method in a well-known passage near the end of his Reply to the Second Objections. There he distinguishes between what he calls the “analytic” and the “synthetic” methods of proof, and he observes that “in my *Meditations* I have followed analysis alone, which is the true and best way of teaching.”⁶ When the synthetic method is used, a system of thought is formally arranged in deductive order: definitions, axioms, and postulates are neatly laid out, as in a geometry textbook, and each theorem is exhibited as conclusively demonstrable from these materials. But there

⁵ Charles Adam, ed., *Entretien avec Burman* (Paris: Boivin, 1937), p. 64; Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: L. Cerf, 1897–1913), Vol. VII, p. 156, ll. 3–5. I will hereafter refer to the Adam and Tannery edition as “AT.” The volume will appear in roman numeral, the page number will follow in arabic, throughout.

⁶ AT VII, 156, ll. 21–23. E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (New York: Dover, 1955), Vol. II, p. 49. I will hereafter refer to the Haldane and Ross edition as “HR.”

is no inkling of how the materials were arrived at or of how the various theorems were found to be derivable from them. The work of discovery and creation is ignored, taken entirely for granted, and attention is directed exclusively to the certification of its results.

Descartes acknowledges the suitability of this method for the exposition of a subject like geometry, where the primary notions involved in the proofs “are readily granted by all.”⁷ He regards it as quite unsuitable in a work devoted to metaphysics, however, even though he is convinced that the primary notions of metaphysical discourse are ultimately more intelligible than those of geometry. For while the concepts he finds basic in metaphysics are inherently very clear, they are discordant with the preconceptions “to which we have since our earliest years been accustomed.”⁸ If they are advanced abruptly, therefore, they are quite likely to be rejected as inappropriate or implausible. It is accordingly most desirable to present them in such a way that the reader can appreciate their significance and recognize their priority.

This happens when the exposition is according to the analytic method, which “shows the true way by which a thing was methodically discovered.”⁹ Analytic accounts are designed not merely to evoke agreement but to facilitate insight; the author invites his readers to reproduce the fruitful processes of his own mind. He guides them to construct or to discover for themselves the concepts and conclusions which, by the synthetic method, would be handed to them ready-made. For this reason an appropriate use of the analytic method requires a relatively unsophisticated starting

⁷ HR II, 49; AT VII, 156, ll. 29–30.

⁸ HR II, 50; AT VII, 157, ll. 11–12.

⁹ HR II, 48; AT VII, 155, ll. 23–24.

point. The reader cannot be supposed to possess already the fundamental concepts of the subject at issue, or to be from the start in a position to grasp the truths that the inquiry is supposed to attain.

Descartes's method of exposition in the *Meditations* obliges him to show scrupulous respect for the philosophical naïvete of his intended reader. As he develops his argument he must not require either the use or the understanding of materials that the text has not already provided and that could be acquired legitimately only through philosophical investigations the reader cannot be assumed to have completed. He must take no step for which he has failed to make suitable preparation; at no stage of the work may he presume any greater philosophical progress than he himself has led his reader to achieve.

Descartes was of course fully aware of this. He insists that he “certainly tried to follow that order most strictly” in the *Meditations*; he “put forward first [those things] that must be known without any help from the things that follow, and all the rest are then arranged in such a way that they are demonstrated solely on the basis of things preceding them.”¹⁰ Now this provides a valuable principle for use in interpreting the *Meditations*. For it justifies presuming that there is an error in any interpretation according to which Descartes is required to rely at a given point upon philosophical material not already developed at some earlier stage in his presentation.

Now one of Descartes's most provocative doctrines does not appear in the *Meditations* at all. In a number of his letters he maintains that what God can do is not limited by the laws of logic, and that these laws are, in fact, subject

¹⁰ HR II, 48; AT VII, 155, ll. 11–14.

to the divine will. “The truths of mathematics,” he writes to Mersenne,

were established by God and entirely depend on Him, as much as do all other creatures. To say that these truths are independent of Him is, in effect, to speak of God as a Jupiter or Saturn and to subject Him to the Styx and to the Fates. . . . You will be told that if God established these truths He would be able to change them, as a king does his laws; to which it is necessary to reply that this is correct. . . .”¹¹

In another letter, to Mesland, Descartes says: “the power of God can have no limits. . . . God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictions cannot be together, and consequently He could have done the contrary.”¹² There can be little doubt that Descartes actually held this remarkable doctrine. But he never sets it forth in the *Meditations*, perhaps because he feared it would disturb the theologians whose support or toleration he was anxious to enjoy. It would therefore be quite improper to interpret the philosophical position he develops in the *Meditations* in such a way that his views concerning the dependence of the “eternal verities” on the will of God play an essential role in it.

In view of Descartes’s emphasis on the importance of order in the *Meditations*, no advice could be worse than that given by Prichard. After observing that Descartes’s book is “extraordinarily unequal” and that “some parts . . . deal with what is important and very much to the point”

¹¹ Letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630; AT I, 145, ll. 7–13; 145, l. 28–146, l. 1.

¹² Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644; AT IV, 110.

while others are “very artificial and unconvincing,” Prichard suggests that

the proper attitude for the reader and the commentator is to concentrate attention on what seem the important parts and to bother very little about the rest. For that reason I shall in fact consider closely certain portions which seem to me central and almost ignore the rest, and I would suggest that you should do the same in reading him.¹³

Descartes would not have been surprised by this attitude; in the Preface to the *Meditations*, in fact, he anticipates being read more or less as Prichard suggests. But he warns there that “those who do not care to comprehend the order and connections of my reasonings and who are out only to prattle about isolated passages, as many are accustomed to do, will not receive much profit from reading this essay.”¹⁴ If his account of his thought is viewed as forming a mere collection of philosophical atoms—a compendium into which one may plausibly dip at any point—the result will often be a failure to grasp what he wishes to convey.

In the First Meditation Descartes defines the philosophical enterprise he proposes to undertake; he also sketches and illustrates the procedure by which he intends to carry it out. Without a thorough comprehension of what goes on in this Meditation, it is not possible to understand his conception of the tasks of metaphysics or to evaluate intelligently his solutions to the problems he considers in his book. This comprehension may seem easy to come by.

¹³ H. A. Prichard, *Knowledge and Perception* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 72.

¹⁴ HR I, 139; AT VII, 9, l. 28–10, l. 2.

After all, the First Meditation has a reputation for lucidity and its arguments are very familiar. In fact, however, the Meditation is far from fully accessible to a casual reading and important aspects of it are very often misunderstood.

Descartes himself remarks of the *Meditations* as a whole that “on many things it often scarcely touches, since they are obvious to anyone who attends sufficiently to them.”¹⁵ But it is more prudent to take this statement as a warning than as a reassurance, particularly in view of Descartes’s admonition that “if even the very least thing put forward is not noted, the necessity of the conclusions fails to appear.”¹⁶ Because of its basic importance, and because of the rather deceptive clarity inclining many readers to overlook its complexities, the First Meditation needs to be examined with special care.

My aim in Part One of this book is to give an account of the views Descartes develops in the First Meditation and of the arguments by which he supports them. When he says or does something that seems questionable, I shall sometimes attempt to show that his statement or his procedure is more plausible than it looks. Descartes’s brilliance is at times too hasty and impatient; there are gaps in his exposition that he neglected or disdained to fill. Especially when his failures seem most blatant and damaging, I shall endeavor—whenever, at least, I can see how—to offer saving explanations which he himself might reasonably have provided. Whether these explanations actually succeed in saving him from criticism is, of course, another matter.

In general I shall be less concerned with exploring and evaluating the details of Descartes’s views for their own

¹⁵ HR II, 49; AT VII, 156, ll. 3–5.

¹⁶ HR II, 48–49; AT VII, 156, ll. 1–3.

sakes than with clarifying the structure of the inquiry he conducts in the First Meditation. I have an ulterior purpose in this. Part Two of this book is largely devoted to elaborating an interpretation of Descartes's discovery and validation of reason. In seeking to understand the nature of the question that he found it necessary to ask about reason, and the answer to it that he thought it possible to give, I have found it useful to recognize that in the First Meditation he raises a question of the same sort about the senses and tries (unsuccessfully, of course) to provide the same sort of answer to it. This parallelism between his discussions of the senses and of reason is, indeed, part of the evidence for the thesis about the latter that I develop in Part Two. The fact that Descartes sees his problem in the First Meditation in a certain way increases, I believe, the plausibility of my claim that he sees the similar problem that he faces later in the *Meditations* in a similar way. It is therefore important for my argument in Part Two, though perhaps not decisive, that I make clear just what goes on in the First Meditation.

Part One presupposes that the reader is familiar with the First Meditation. Here, then, is a translation of it.

First Meditation

CONCERNING THOSE THINGS THAT
CAN BE CALLED INTO DOUBT

It is now several years since I observed how many false things I accepted as true early in my life, and how dubious all those things are that I afterwards built upon them; and, therefore, that everything must be thoroughly overthrown for once in my life and begun anew from the first foundations, if I want ever to establish anything solid and permanent in the sciences. But the task seemed enormous, and I

awaited a time of life so mature that no time better suited for undertaking such studies would follow. On that account I have delayed so long that from now on I would be at fault if I were to use up in deliberating the time left for acting. Today, then, I have opportunely freed my mind from all cares and arranged a period of assured leisure for myself. I am quite alone. At last I shall have time to devote myself seriously and freely to this general overthrow of my opinions.

For this purpose, however, it will not be necessary for me to show that all my opinions are false—which, very likely, I could never manage to do. But reason already persuades me that assent must be withheld no less scrupulously from things that are not entirely certain and indubitable [*indubitata*] than from things that are plainly false. For the rejection of all my opinions, therefore, it will be enough if I discover in each one of them some reason for doubting. And they need not be gone over one by one for that purpose—that would be an endless task. But when the foundations have been undermined, whatever has been built up upon them will collapse of itself. Hence I shall immediately attack the very principles on which everything I once believed depended.

Unquestionably, whatever I have accepted until now as true in the highest degree I have received either from the senses or through the senses. From time to time, however, I have caught them deceiving, and it is prudent never to trust entirely in those who have cheated us even once.

But it may be that even though the senses do deceive us from time to time regarding things that are very small or too far away, there are nevertheless many other things regarding which one plainly can not doubt even though they are derived from those same senses: for example, that I am now here, sitting by a fire, dressed in a winter cloak, touching

this paper with my hands, and the like. Indeed, by what reasoning could it be denied that these very hands and this whole body of mine exist? Unless perhaps I were to consider myself to be like certain madmen, whose brains are being broken down by a vapor from the black bile, a vapor so perverse that they calmly assert that they are kings (when they are in extreme poverty), or that they are dressed in purple (when they are naked), or that they have earthenware heads or that they are nothing but pumpkins, or blown out of glass. But they are madmen, and I should seem no less mad if I were to take them in any way as a model for myself.

How eminently reasonable! As if I were not a man who is used to sleeping at night and to experiencing in dreams all those very things—or, from time to time, things even less probable than the ones such madmen experience, while they are awake. Indeed, how often am I persuaded during my nightly rest of these familiar things—that I am here, wearing a cloak, sitting by a fire—although I lie undressed between the sheets.

But now, at any rate, I am surely looking at this paper with wakeful eyes, this head that I am shaking is not asleep, I am deliberately and knowingly extending this hand, and I am having feelings. A sleeping man would not have such distinct experiences.

As if I did not recall having been deluded at other times by similar thoughts in dreams! Now that I think over these matters more attentively, I see so plainly that one can never by any certain indications distinguish being awake from dreaming that I am amazed. And this very amazement almost confirms the conjecture that I am dreaming.

Well then, suppose that we are dreaming, and that these things—that we open our eyes, move our head, extend our hands—are not true, and even that we do not actually have

hands or a body. Even so it surely must be acknowledged that things seen during sleep are like painted representations, which could not be formed except in the likeness of truly real things. And so it must be acknowledged that at least things of these kinds—eyes, head, hands, and the whole body—exist as real things, not imaginary, but true. For as a matter of fact even when painters themselves strive to depict sirens and satyrs with the most extraordinary forms, they cannot provide them with natures that are novel in every respect, but can only mix together the parts of different animals. Or even if they should happen to think up something so novel that nothing at all like it had been seen, and thus something that is entirely fictitious and false, at least the colors out of which they compose it would surely have to be true colors. And for the same reason, even if things of these kinds—eyes, head, hands, and the like—could be imaginary, still it must be acknowledged that certain other simpler and more universal things are true and that out of these “true colors” are formed all the true and the false representations of real things in our thought. These seem to be of that sort: corporeal nature in general and its extension, the shape of extended things, the quantity (or the size and number) of those things, the place in which they exist, the time through which they last, and the like.

In the light of these considerations, perhaps we are right to conclude that physics, astronomy, medicine, and all other disciplines that depend on a consideration of composite things are indeed doubtful; and that arithmetic, geometry, and others of that sort, which treat only of the simplest and most general things and scarcely care whether those things are in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable [*indubitati*]. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three joined together are five, and a square does not

have more than four sides. And it seems that it cannot be the case that truths so evident should incur any suspicion of falsity.

Nevertheless there is a certain opinion, long established in my mind, that there is a God who can do everything and by whom I have been created as I am. Now how do I know he has not brought it about that there is no earth at all, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, and that all these things should nevertheless seem to me to exist just as they do now? And what is more, just as I sometimes judge that others are mistaken about the very things that they consider themselves to know most perfectly, how do I know that God has not brought it about that I am mistaken every time I add two and three together or count the sides of a square or [do something even simpler], if anything simpler can be imagined?

And yet, perhaps God willed that I should not be deceived in that fashion, for he is said to be supremely good. But if it should be inconsistent with his goodness to have created me so that I am always mistaken, it would seem no less foreign to his goodness to allow that I should be sometimes mistaken, which, however, cannot be maintained.

Of course, there may be some who prefer to deny so powerful a God rather than to believe that all other things are uncertain. But let us not oppose them, and let us grant that all this regarding God is fictitious. Let them suppose that I have become what I am by fate, or by chance, or by a connected series of things, or in any other way you please. Since it seems to be a kind of imperfection to be mistaken and to err, the less power they ascribe to the author of my origin, the more probable it will be that I am so imperfect that I am always mistaken.

I certainly have no response to these arguments. On the contrary, I am finally forced to acknowledge that of those things I formerly considered to be true there is nothing regarding which it is not legitimate to doubt. And this is not through lack of consideration or frivolity, but for valid and meditated reasons. If I want to find something certain, therefore, assent must be carefully withheld from those things one after another no less than from things obviously false.

But it is not yet enough to have observed these things; I must be careful to bear them in mind. For the familiar opinions come back again and again and dominate my belief, which is tied to them even entirely against my will by long use and the privilege of intimate acquaintance. Nor will I ever get out of the habit of assenting to and trusting in them as long as I take them to be as they really are: doubtful in a way, to be sure (as has just now been shown), but nonetheless highly probable—opinions that it is far more reasonable to believe than to deny.

That is why, in my view, I shall not be acting incorrectly if, with my will plainly set in a contrary direction, I deceive myself and pretend for a while that they are altogether false and imaginary. Then finally, the scales being balanced with prejudices on both sides, no bad habit will any longer twist my judgment away from the right perception of things. For I know that no danger or error will ensue during that time and that my disbelief cannot be overindulged, since I am now committed not to acting but only to knowing.

I will suppose, therefore, not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but some evil spirit who is supremely powerful and cunning and who has expended all his energy in deceiving me. I will suppose that the sky, the air, earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things are nothing

but the delusions of dreams by means of which he has set traps for my credulity. I will consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, no senses of any kind, but as thinking falsely that I have all those things. I will remain firmly fixed in this line of thought [*meditatio*] and thus, even if it is not in my power to know anything true, still—this is in my power—I will at least not assent to anything false. With firm resolution I will be on my guard so that the deceiver, however powerful, however cunning, cannot trick me in any way.

But this is a laborious undertaking, and a kind of laziness reduces me to the ordinary way of life. Just as a prisoner who happened to be enjoying an imaginary liberty in dreams is afraid to wake up when he later begins to suspect that he is asleep, and readily connives with the agreeable illusions, so I willingly slide back into my old opinions. I dread to be awakened lest my peaceful rest should be succeeded by a laborious wakefulness that would have to be spent not in the light, but in the midst of the inextricable darkness of the difficulties that have just been raised.