

## Descartes: Skepticism and the Purpose of the Meditations

### 1. The Agenda of the Meditations, announced and hidden

-Opening sentences of Meditation One:

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.

–CSM2: 17; compare our book, p.13

-from a letter to Mersenne, 28 Jan. 1641:

I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle.

–CSMK3: 173

-So, Descartes's announced purpose is to establish something stable in the sciences: an understandable goal in the wake of scientific upheaval. But what is a being kept at least a bit hidden is something that is supposed to favor a particular type of physics.

### 2. The Structure of the Meditations

See opening sentences again. Tearing Down: Med 1; Building back up: Meds 2-6  
Using (in an explicit, and also in a hidden, way), but also defeating, skepticism

### 3. Skepticism: Some General Points

force and scope of skeptical claims, arguments

### 4. Descartes's Dream Argument

This would all be well and good, were I not a man who is accustomed to sleeping at night, and to experiencing in my dreams the very same things, or now and then even less plausible ones, as these insane people do when they are awake. How often does my evening slumber persuade me of such ordinary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fireplace – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! BUT RIGHT NOW MY EYES ARE CERTAINLY WIDE AWAKE WHEN I GAZE UPON THIS SHEET OF PAPER. THIS HEAD WHICH I AM SHAKING IS NOT HEAVY WITH SLEEP. I EXTEND THIS HAND CONSCIOUSLY AND DELIBERATELY, AND I FEEL IT. SUCH THINGS WOULD NOT BE SO DISTINCT FOR SOMEONE WHO IS ASLEEP.

As if I did not recall having been deceived on other occasions even by similar thoughts in my dreams! As I consider these matters more carefully, I see so plainly that there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep. As a result, I am becoming quite dizzy, and this dizziness nearly convinces me that I am asleep.

– *Meditation I*, 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph (p. 14)

- different font (with allcaps): anti-skeptic digging in
  - hands as an emblem of resistance to skepticism: G.E. Moore and Descartes
- What's the argument? What's the conclusion? force? scope?
  - My complaints about Descartes's lack of explicitness here, together with some discussion of scope and force of the skepticisms of Meditation 1 are in the footnote pointed to at the bottom of this sheet
- the basic structure of the argument – ppt or board
- E.M. Curley's (Descartes Against the Skeptics) rendering of Descartes's conclusion:
  - (5) None of my beliefs about ordinary-sized objects in my immediate vicinity are certain

## **5. Secondary Quality Anti-Realism** (or what Adams calls “Primary Quality Realism”): **A Very Brief Account**

- primary/secondary quality distinction: list at p. xii.3 of Adams; colors are among the secondary
- SQAR says secondary qualities aren't *really* in bodies (physical objects) – as opposed to what Aristotelian/Scholastic science says
  - [-Why?: Mechanism and PCR PQ]
- Hey, Descartes is taking our colors away!
- Shhhh!

## **6. How Descartes Uses Skepticism to Sell SQAR: A Parenting Story**

### **Reading Priorities**

1. Meditation 1 through 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph of Meditation Three: pp. 13-25.7 of our book
  - Watch for what the scope of Descartes's skepticism is at various points in Meditation One, and also for clues as to what its force is.
  - Watch especially for material that bears on the question of *universal* skepticism: Is it Descartes's considered view that all of his beliefs have been cast into doubt?
  - Watch for the back-and-forth between the skeptic and anti-skeptic, with the anti-skeptic “digging in” at various points – as illustrated in dream argument, above.
2. Adams, pp. xii-xvii
3. The rest of the Meditations