

Critical Paper 1: Descartes, *First Meditation*

In his *First Meditation*, “Of Those Things That May Be Called Into Doubt,” Descartes claims that our senses cannot be wholly trusted, as they are always capable of deceiving us. His argument is as follows:

1. If you are dreaming, then you are having visual experiences.
2. The visual experiences you have when you dream are formed on the basis of a resemblance with real and familiar things.
3. So, if you are dreaming, then you are perceiving real and familiar things. (1, 2)
4. You perceive real and familiar things with your senses.
5. So, you use your senses to perceive your experiences in your dreams. (3, 4)
6. If you are awake, then you are perceiving real and familiar things.
7. So, you use your senses to perceive real and familiar things when you are awake. (4, 6)
8. So, waking cannot be distinguished from dreaming. (5, 7)
9. Thus, you cannot trust your senses. (8)

Not **solely**, but **at all**.

Descartes is trying to refute the idea that we should rely solely on our senses to obtain true knowledge. According to his argument, if waking cannot be distinguished from dreaming, then our senses are capable of deceiving us even during our waking state. This is because if we cannot distinguish between the two states, then it may be possible that what we perceive as real and existing during our “waking” state may in fact be a dream. Therefore, we cannot rely on our senses to gain knowledge. Good. This is exactly right as a reconstruction of the argument.

Although Descartes’ argument is valid, I do not believe that it is sound. This is because I believe that we can correctly distinguish between our dreaming and waking states. So, I will explain why premise (5) is false in order to deny Descartes’ conclusion. Suppose I dream that I am riding my motorcycle across the Atlantic Ocean. When I wake up, I will know that I was dreaming because it is impossible to drive a motorcycle across water. Furthermore, I do not own

Excellent!

But what if it's all been a dream always?

or know how to drive a motorcycle. So, I will not be able to find my own motorcycle and ride it on a road in my waking state, let alone find and then ride one across water in my dream state. Thus, I am clearly able to distinguish between my dreaming and waking states. So, I believe that premise (5) is false, and I therefore do not find Descartes' conclusion to be sound.