

# DESCARTES' *MEDITATIONS* - STUDY GUIDE

[Page numbers are from the Penguin Edition]

## MEDITATION ONE

1. **Foundations (p.95)**  
He realises most of his knowledge (esp. for science) is unreliable, and the only way is to rebuild it from the foundations.
2. **Systematic Doubt (95)**  
He proposes to destroy *all* his opinions, and only accept as knowledge those which are *totally* certain, rejecting the rest. Opinions should be rejected if there is *any* way in which they could be false.
3. **Mistrusting the Senses (96)**  
The senses are instantly rejected, because they are obviously occasionally deceptive, and they certainly can't be proved.
4. **Madness and Dreams (96-7)**  
The idea that daily experience is all wrong seems mad, but then he realises that dreams are a sort of daily madness, and he believe them. There is no clear proof that he is not currently dreaming.
5. **Reality remixed (97)**  
Although he may be dreaming, perhaps he can deduce what reality is like - it is the components out of which dreams are made. The major components (hands and eyes) may be imagined, but the basics must actually exist.
6. **Mathematics (98)**  
The most basic components ( $3+2=5$ , squares have four sides) are reliable, because they don't require any particular things to exist to make them true.
7. **Deception by God (98)**  
But it is possible that an omnipotent God exists, and such a being could deceive him about maths, so it isn't certain.
8. **Deception by Nature (99)**  
If there isn't a God then he is just the product of chance, which makes his maths even less reliable.
9. **Deception by a Demon (100)**  
To force himself to face up to his doubts, he imagines an evil demon who systematically deceives him about everything.

## MEDITATION TWO

10. **Despair and Solipsism (102-3)**  
He finds he is reaching total uncertainty. He must doubt his memory, and whether he has a body. He may be inventing reality himself, in which case he is the only thing which exists.
11. **The Cogito (103)**  
There *is* one certainty - in order to be deceived, he himself must exist, and that must be true whenever he is thinking.
12. **The Cartesian Ego (104-5)**  
So what is he? 'Rational animal' begs too many questions. The demon makes his body doubtful. So he is just "a thing which thinks", but that is only while he is actually thinking.
13. **Imagination (106)**  
He wants to extend his knowledge, but realises that imagination is no help, because it just pictures physical objects, which he already knows are open to doubt.
14. **Phenomenalism (107)**  
Reality may be uncertain, but he is definitely having a range of experiences, and his self ("I", the being who is having the experiences) must also be certain.
15. **Understanding Wax (108)**  
His knowledge of physical objects (e.g. wax) may seem to come through his senses, but when sensations change it his *judgement* which arrives at the knowledge. His *understanding* is the essential part of him, not his senses.
16. **"Seeing" dummies (110)**  
We *say* that we "see" things, but actually we are making a judgement, as when we see clothed people, and judge that they are human rather than mechanical dummies.

## MEDITATION THREE

17. **Truth (113)**  
He is certain of his own existence, but what makes him so certain? Because he is "clear and distinct" about it, and this test has never let him down. So clear and distinct conceptions are *true*.
18. **Categories of Thought (115-6)**  
The next step is to categorise his thinking - into *ideas* ('concepts'), *ideas with added attitude* ('propositional attitudes'), and *judgements*. Error is entirely found in judgements, mainly about the way concepts match up with so-called 'reality'.
19. **Categories of Ideas (116)**  
Next he categorises the ideas/concepts - into *innate*, *adventitious* and *invented*. Innate ideas come from his own nature, adventitious ideas from outside himself, and invented ideas are his own creation - but are these three separate?

**20. Adventitious Ideas (117)**

Adventitious ideas seem to indicate an external world, because it seems natural, and the ideas don't depend on his will - but 'natural' is unreliable (unlike the true 'natural light'), and he may have an unconscious power to create them himself.

**21. Appearance and reality (118)**

There is also a gap between these adventitious ideas and the things they seem to represent, as when a thing (e.g. the sun) looks small, but he judges it in reality to be very large.

**22. Degrees of Reality (119)**

Among his ideas, those of *substance* (the essence of things) seem to be more real than their *modes* (qualities attached to the essences), and the idea of God has a greater sense of reality than any other idea.

**23. Cause and Reality (119-21)**

Causes must have at least much reality as effects, so nothing cannot produce something, and less perfect causes cannot create more perfect effects. The sources of his ideas must therefore have more perfection and reality than the ideas themselves.

**24. Weak Ideas (121-3)**

Most of his ideas are either very vague ideas about objects (such as heat and cold), which are presumably produced by his own weak nature, or they are based on thinking about himself (e.g. substances, time, space and numbers).

**25. Idea of God (123-4)**

The idea of God, however, contains the concept of infinite substance and a whole range of perfections, which are clearly beyond his own power to produce, which indicates that God must exist.

**26. Am I God? (125-7)**

Perhaps his own mind is vastly more powerful than it seems, and thus can produce great ideas itself? No, because he is clearly improving, and so cannot have reached perfection yet, and probably never will. And he cannot have created himself, because he would then have given himself all the divine attributes, which he clearly has not done.

**27. Self needs God (127-8)**

His self is just a fragment of separate parts, each supporting an idea, unless there is an underlying force holding the parts together, and preserving his identity. Conservation requires the power of creation to continue through time.

**28. Necessity of God (128-9)**

He may imagine that the cause of his ideas is less than God, but clearly the cause must be a thinking thing, and there has to be some ultimate cause which generates itself (rather than an infinite regress), and which conserves him.

**29. Unity of God (129)**

He may imagine that several different causes implanted ideas like perfection and infinity in him, but he realises that the concept of God which he has involves unity as one of its chief perfections, and that idea was also implanted in him.

**30. The Trademark (130)**

I have not acquired this idea of a perfect God through my senses, and I am not able to change it in any way, so clearly it is an innate idea, and was put there by God, like a trademark imprinted on an artefact by a workman.

**31. No Deceiver (131)**

Since God clearly exists, as the source of my greatest ideas, and is also clearly a perfect being, it is self-evident (by the 'natural light') that God is not a deceiver, as that would be an obvious defect.

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**MEDITATION FIVE**

**32. Ideas of Things (142)**

To investigate material things, analyse ideas about them, which involves extension, numbers, and duration, and also particular details about each individual object.

**33. The Triangle (143)**

Among the ideas he finds many which are pure ideas, such as the triangle. They are not invented by him, and have properties which can be discovered, such as the triangle having internal angles adding up to two right angles.

**34. Triangles Innate (143-4)**

Triangles didn't enter his mind from outside, because he can think of infinitely many triangles, but can only have experienced a few of them; they must, though, have real existence in his mind, because they are clear and distinct, and hence true.

**35. Perfect Being (144)**

Just as his mind contains the idea of triangles, so it also contains the idea of a supremely perfect being, and he can discover many unexpected features of this being, just as he did with the triangle.

**36. Existence Essential (144-5)**

Because the being he is thinking of is 'supremely perfect', it must have the characteristic of real existence, just as triangles contain two right angles, and the idea of a mountain is inseparable from the idea of a valley.

**37. No Invention (145)**

The idea that God must have existence is not an invention, like a horse having wings, because it is simply impossible to clearly conceive of a supremely perfect being without conceiving of him as also existing.

**38. Perfection Required (146)**

It is not possible to avoid the argument by denying perfection to the idea of God, because this characteristic is unavoidable and part of an innate idea; clearly existence is a perfection, and so God has to exist.

### 39. Uniqueness of God (147)

He cannot conceive of anything else which has existence as a necessary feature (and would thus also have to exist), and this perfect being must also clearly be unique, and also eternal.

### 40. Clarity of Understanding (147)

At first the necessity of God's existence may not be obvious, but then Pythagoras' Theorem is not obvious at first, but is clear and distinct once it is grasped, and God's necessity is as clear as that, once it has been realised.

### 41. Truth Needs God (148-9)

Although he accepts as true anything which he clearly and distinctly conceives, he could not trust himself and would slip back into doubt if God, who is no deceiver, did not guarantee these proofs, and his memories of past proofs - even in dreams.

## MEDITATION SIX

### 42. Imagination Separate (150-1)

If he now tries to know of material objects, he may try using his imagination, but he sees that imagination (which needs effort) is quite separate from understanding - as when he clearly understands a chiliagon, but is quite unable to imagine one. It also seems to him that imagination is not an essential part of his mind, and he would be the same without it.

### 43. Imagination as Bridge (151-2)

The best explanation of imagination is that the understanding turns outwards (as opposed to intellection, which contemplates pure ideas), using the body and senses as subjects, which suggests (but doesn't prove) that material bodies really exist.

### 44. The Senses (152-4)

His experience has always involved the body, pleasure and pain, appetites, passions, and the five senses. There seemed to be external objects, uncontrolled by him, which were very vivid, and which created his ideas. He also seemed to own his body, and liked and disliked the various sensations he received.

### 45. Scepticism (154-5)

But senses are unreliable, because of external illusions (a square tower can appear round), and internal illusions (a pain in an amputated leg). In addition he realises that he may be dreaming, and that he could easily be utterly deceived.

### 46. Dualism (156)

His mind must be separate from his body, because i) his mind necessarily exists when he is thinking, but his body does not, ii) the mind thinks, but the physical body does not think, and iii) his body is extended in space, but his mind is not.

### 47. Faculties (157)

His self is purely thinking thing, but this has the faculties of imagining and perceiving. Perception has passive and active parts, which receive impressions and form them into ideas. This faculty of active perception, and also the faculty of apparent physical movement, imply some substance different from his mind.

### 48. Objects (158-9)

The objects implied by his faculties must exist, because God is no deceiver. Their geometry is very clear to him, but he must use his God-given mental powers to understand the detailed particulars of the objects. All experience contains some truth.

### 49. Intermingling with the Body (159)

He experiences having a body, which must contain some truth, and his mind is not just lodged in the body (like a pilot in a ship), but united with it into a single whole (the 'intermingling thesis'), as shown by thirst and pain.

### 50. External Error (160-2)

Among his ideas some are known by the 'natural light' (e.g. events cannot be undone; pain is to be avoided). External things are deceptive (is space empty? how big are stars?), but such errors are his own fault, because he treats senses as infallible, when actually they only give him knowledge which is immediately useful and suitable for him.

### 51. Internal Error (162-3)

Internal misjudgement, such as thinking poisoned food is good, are a reasonable limitation in a finite creature like us, but the occasional *desire* of sick people for things that harm them (e.g. dropsy causing excessive thirst) is more baffling. But (as with a faulty clock) such illness follows the laws of nature, even when the 'nature' of the person seems to have gone wrong.

### 52. Unity of Mind (164)

He examines the 'nature' of a person, and sees again that mind and body are separate, as the former is a unity, the latter not.

### 53. Reliable Senses (165-6)

All our senses work like the nerves to the foot, which give surprisingly accurate and useful information, both about the location and the type of stimulus they are receiving - which demonstrates God's goodness in designing us to avoid errors.

### 54. Error Explained (167)

Because mind is separate from body, it cannot infallibly tell whether senses are giving their normal information or something deceptive, but it is best that the mind is tuned to healthy senses; the alternative would be constant error.

### 55. Avoiding Error (167-8)

It is now much clearer how to avoid error. He must compare *all* of his senses, check sensations against his *memories*, and carefully use his *understanding* to evaluate them.

### 56. Not Dreaming (168)

By applying these three tests, he sees that the idea that he is now dreaming is ridiculous, because dreams do not fit in with our other memories, and they are not consistent with all of our senses and our understanding.

### 57. Human Imperfection (168-9)

Although we are equipped to avoid error, life is just too busy for certainty, and so we must remain humble.