

Two Model Précis on Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Model Précis #1

Through a tormented sweep within the recesses of his mind, Descartes agonizes over the doubtful nature of his opinions. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes arrives at the conclusion that nothing is certain, but for the existence of self, due to the deception of the senses and the questioned existence of an omnipotent God.

The simplest test of certainty appears to be the discernment of an object's existence through use of the senses: touch, sight, smell, taste, sound. But Descartes refutes this notion by demonstrating the inability to decipher the difference between waking hours and dreaming hours. No matter how realistic the tabletop feels beneath his fingertips, he remarks he has "been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep!" It is therefore impossible to discern sleep from time spent awake, and ultimately impossible to likewise discern tangible objects from objects seen in dreams. Thus, Descartes stresses the trickery of the senses, rendering them as useless tools to the discovery of certainty.

Descartes struggles though with his belief in an omnipotent God, one who is "supremely good" and therefore would never deceive. But rather than justify the certainty of all things with the existence of a wholly honest Almighty power, Descartes asserts the existence of a "malicious demon" responsible for the deceptions of the world. This notion leads Descartes to reject all past beliefs; by disbelieving all things, he can in no way leave himself vulnerable to the cunning of such an evil spirit. The existence of such a creature counteracts the trusted nature of a loving God, and reopens the door to uniform uncertainty. Through the simultaneous existence of God and this demon, potentially the Devil, Descartes supports his claim that nothing may be certain, even when certainty should be assured by the existence of an entirely good entity.

Descartes concludes his discussion on the refutation of all things held as certain with the assertion, "I am, I exist." Despite rendering all things as falsities of human existence, the self must truly be due to its ability to contemplate its own presence. The simple act of thinking that oneself is "something," as Descartes puts it, gives one the sufficient evidence of his or her own existence.

*Meditations on First Philosophy* encompasses the broad philosophical discussion of existence: to take all things as reality or disregard them as doubtful. Descartes boldly asserts the notion that nothing can be certain if factually obtained by the senses or faithfully regarded as true through the existence of a loving God. Both are susceptible to deceit, whether through dreams or through the powers of a malicious and demonic presence. Ultimately, though, Descartes may indeed validate his own existence; he cannot necessarily validate his thoughts, his dreams, his senses, or his beliefs, but instead the thought of simply being is enough.