

# Dreams, Madness and Philosophy: Reflections on Descartes' First Meditation

JAMES CONLON  
MOUNT MARY COLLEGE  
U.S.A.



It was the morning of July 3rd and I was teaching Descartes' first *Meditation* to my *Introduction to Philosophy* class. In an attempt to get them to arrive at the logical progression of his argument themselves, I started by asking them if they could give me an example of a truth that they were sure of. Someone volunteered something like "I'm 24 years old." I then asked whether they could be absolutely sure of that, that is, whether there was some possible scenario which could make that false. Someone else said: "Well, your parents could have lied to you." And everyone agreed that, even if a parental lie isn't likely, it is possible; so, one's age isn't absolutely certain. We followed this deconstruction process with similar suggestions until someone said something like, "Well, we can at least be sure that we're in this room together." Now they were ripe for Descartes' famous dream argument and someone made this exact point: that we could be dreaming we are in this room together. Then I tried to work them into seeing that, since any statement relying on data from the senses can be falsified by a dream scenario, we couldn't be sure of the truth of any sensual experience. Eventually, most reluctantly agreed that it was definitely a possibility, however unlikely, that we might actually be at home in bed rather than discussing Descartes in this classroom.

This particular morning the lesson was going exceptionally well. One student said: "But if that's true, wouldn't we all have to be having the same dream?" Someone else replied: "No, it just means that you'd all be part of the dream I was having." Someone else said: "But I usually sense during a dream that I'm dreaming and I don't sense that now, so I'm not dreaming now." "But," another asked, "do you *always* know when you're dreaming? Aren't there some nightmares where your fright clearly means that you don't know you're dreaming?" "Yes, that's true," she

replied. "Well, then how do you know this isn't one of those nightmares?" I was feeling accomplished; it seemed like everyone was seeing both the logical and the psychological force of Descartes' point.

Suddenly, a delicate student who had said little throughout the semester became vocal and fiercely irate. "This is ridiculous" she almost shouted, "every one of us knows we're not home in bed! Who are we trying to kid with this? Deep down, we all know we're here and it's absolutely crazy to pretend otherwise." This was said with such conviction, even with a measure of scorn for anyone who might claim otherwise, that we were all a bit taken back. I remember, in an effort to diffuse the situation, saying something like "Well, you at least see what Descartes is trying to argue, even if you disagree with him." Mercifully, the period was about over and I asked them to see if, for next class, they could come up with some form of truth that wouldn't be undone by the dream scenario.

That night, I had a particularly vivid dream. My brother and I were walking through a strange city, trying, with increasing urgency, to locate a certain refined ethnic restaurant. My brother and I had been quite close and when he died six years ago, it affected me in unexpected ways. I did not just find that I missed him, I found that the way I existed in the world, my psychological — and even my physiological — stance toward it, was changed. Perhaps because, as adolescents, we had grown to self-consciousness together, it seemed that the very structure of my consciousness included him, as if he was on the periphery of anything I experienced. So, when he died, it took me quite a few years before I got used to experiencing a world with a hole in its periphery.

Anyway, the dream I was having about my brother had not progressed very far when I was rather suddenly awakened from it by noises upstairs. This quick transition from a sleeping to a waking state was unusually disturbing. I was forced to move rapidly from a dream world with my brother, into a waking world without him. There was a peculiarly physical pain in this, almost as if a sudden change in atmospheric pressure had racked my body. As I lay in a pool of sweat, I could not help but think of Descartes and the morning's class. This dream had not just engaged my mind on some surface, conceptual level; it engaged my whole self and on the deepest of existential levels. In dreaming about my brother I had experienced the felt fabric of the world the way it was when he was in it. It had felt so good, and then so quickly bad, that tears

began mixing with my sweat and running down my face. The more I dream, and the more I pay attention to that strange but common form of consciousness, the more convinced I am that Descartes is right: the truth of dreams leaves unsure many of our seeming certainties.

It was now becoming clear, however, what those noises were that woke me. The couple who lived in the flat upstairs was making love. I could hear the rhythmic creaking of the bed and the unmistakably human sounds of sexual pleasure. Freud notes in several places that children, overhearing these sounds, often become confused and fearful because they take them to be sounds of violent struggle. As I listened for awhile, I could not help but confirm that these sounds are indeed intriguingly ambiguous.

My mind drifted back to Descartes. An especially bright student in the morning's class had argued that, in the long run, you could always tell dreams from life because "dreams were kind of crazy and life kind of consistent." With the "crazy" sounds of love as background, I became convinced that my student was mistaken, not so much about dreams, but about life.

Two centuries after Descartes, H. D. Thoreau took on the intellectual task of confirming for himself the truth of the *Meditations*. Using his sojourn at Walden Pond as a methodology, he re-enacted Descartes' skeptical experiment on the concrete and practical plane of everyday life.<sup>1</sup> In *Walden*, Thoreau argues again and again that anyone who really believes life is consistent must be sleepwalking through it.

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men could steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments.<sup>2</sup>

Philosophy, from its earliest beginnings, has conceived its task as opening human eyes to this truth. Sometimes, students, on the verge of an interpretation of text or life, will hesitate because their idea seems to them "off the wall." I encourage and hold my breath, hoping that their

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<sup>1</sup>I owe this insight to Stanley Cavell.

<sup>2</sup>Thoreau, *Walden*, ch. 2, paragraph 21.

idea will contain even the slightest measure of originality. Being "off the wall" is the very least of the dangers facing any thinker trying to come to honest grips with the weirdness of the world.

In fact, I think history demonstrates that a thinker's worth is inversely proportionate to the common sense of her ideas. Thales was the first Greek to step into theory with the mad claim that everything was water. When Meno came to Socrates with a hot topic like whether virtue can be taught, he was taken aback because Socrates turned the perfectly obvious issue of the nature of virtue into a site of turmoil. The subsequent history of philosophy can be helpfully viewed as a series of efforts to come up with ideas that are as far from common sense as possible, and then make them seem as obvious as air. What could be stranger than Plato's claim that it is actually the stuff of everyday life, its beds, horses and apples, that have the consistency of dreams? And his claim sets the stage for even stranger things to come. Philosophy's task, as I conceive it, is to keep the things of the world unsure, the "weirdification" of reality. The key to Socrates' wisdom is precisely in knowing nothing; no thing in a philosopher's world should be so solid that it cannot melt before her eyes or turn into a rose and fly away. That insight is what underlies the truth of Descartes' skepticism. As novelists like Rushdie and Garcia Marquez have taught us, the only real realism is a magical one.

I find that, at least in practice, belief in God often tends to obscure this truth. God becomes synonymous with common sense and is used to blunt the strange edge of things. The concept of God is taken as proof that there is a unified, functional intelligence directing the happenings of the universe. This closes off possibilities not only for strange interpretations of things, but even for the actual experiencing of things as strange.

But to equate God and common sense is to forget that godhead itself is something of an "off the wall" interpretation. Polytheistic religions capture this spirit by seeing some gods as players, jokers and tricksters. And Christianity is not unique among major religions in stressing that "foolish" is a pretty fair description of God's heart. In short, I believe that any rich or interesting understanding of God would support the metaphysical conclusion that the world is a hauntingly weird place.

As I was arriving at this conclusion, the activity upstairs began rapidly moving toward its own. Something about the escalating intensity of that drew me once again to this morning's student so disturbed by Descartes' craziness. For the first time, I think, I began to understand the necessity of his reference to madness at the beginning of the *Meditations*. He goes to great rhetorical lengths to insist that anyone who would radically doubt the power of the senses to deliver reality would have to be mad.

How could I deny that these hands and this body are mine, unless I am to compare myself with certain lunatics whose brain is so troubled and befogged by black vapors from the bile that they continually affirm that they are kings when they are paupers, that they are clothed in gold and purple when they are naked; or imagine that their head is made of clay, or that they are gourds, or that their body is glass. But this is ridiculous; such men are fools, and I would be no less insane than they if I followed their example.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, he would certainly have to be insane, except . . . except that something exactly like this insanity is woven into our daily — nightly — lives. The truth of dreams puts into doubt every waking sensation we have. The solidity of our most disabling fears and our most agonizing pleasures can dissolve as quickly as we awaken from a dream.

Granted, Descartes goes on to claim that such profound skepticism is short-lived, that the logical acuity of his next five meditations rescues one quickly from the bleak conclusions of the first. But, as the history of modernity has shown, the insecurity we have in the world, our tenuous hold of the objects in it, is far deeper than even Descartes realizes. A level of hesitancy now seems fundamental to any reflective stance toward the world. Whatever our relationship to the world happens to be, it seems to have precious little to do with knowledge.

Shakespeare, writing some twenty-five years before Descartes, realized the ineradicable role that skepticism played in the human psyche and was able to convey this with a poetic force equal to that of Descartes' logic. The "proof" that Lear wants of Cordelia's love, that Othello wants of Desdemona's fidelity, that Hamlet wants of his uncle's treachery and

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<sup>3</sup>Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. Laurence Lafleur (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), p. 76.

that Leontes wants of his own paternity, is forever beyond the mind's ability to deliver — and a bout with madness is the cost that each of these tragic heroes pays for facing this humbling truth.

Such a wrestling with madness seems also to be the cost of doing philosophy. My angry student this morning was absolutely right to warn of craziness; Descartes warns us himself. Ever since Plato's "parable of the cave," it has been accepted that others will be seeing the philosopher as mad; but it is not just others, the situation is far more disturbing than that.

What really motivates the philosopher to return to the cave? Is it simply the generosity of an altruistic educator which keeps Socrates arguing even as the hemlock nears? It does not take a Freud to see that the person Socrates is in most need of convincing is himself. The idea of a soul is so weird that he can maintain his belief in it only by coaxing others into the weirdness with him. The philosopher does not return to the cave in a spirit of self-sacrifice, confident about the reality of the sun. "Crazy" isn't just a taunt hurled at the philosopher by ignorant outsiders; it is also a gnawing fear from within her own self.

I know too well that it is not altruism which sends me into the classroom; it is desperation. I teach to stay sane. I sense some of this same desperation in Descartes that fire-warmed night he sat in his dressing gown and wrote arguments to others as a means of assuring himself that he wasn't dreaming.

There is an undeniable genius in the six day plan of the *Meditations*, in how he manages to reverse *Genesis* and pull god and the world out of his logical hat. But it is the first meditation that most amazes me. The radical simplicity of the skeptical question he asks there, the courage it took to really ask it, the subtle and pervasive shadow it casts on everything else once it gets asked — these are the real things that earn Descartes his place in the philosophical canon.

The night was starting to return to calm again. The frenzied activity upstairs had crashed into quiet whispers. One last moment from this morning's class brought a smile to my heart. It was a frustrated exclamation from one of my most diligent students. She was the kind of student who implicitly trusts the value of a classroom, trusts that Descartes would not be being taught to her unless he had something meaningful to give her. But her trust was wearing pretty thin about this whole dream thing. In final desperation, she offered what she took to be an utterly

convincing point, a point that no one would be fool enough to doubt: "Well surely," she said, "our whole lives can't be a dream."

But on this night, the metaphysical accuracy of her claim seemed highly suspect. Even in the logos-obsessed West, philosophy has sometimes used the dreaming/waking analogy to identify the kind of enlightenment it hopes to provide. In Plato's cave, for example, the dim light and fuzzy images are undeniably dreamlike, and the ascent to the light of the sun like awakening from a dark, and lifelong sleep.

Eastern texts, however, make far more explicit and frequent use of this analogy. The *Upanisads*, for example, argue in several places "that what we call waking life is truly a kind of dream from which we will awaken only at death."<sup>4</sup> They even seem comfortable with the ontological notion that the world could actually be a dream of god.<sup>5</sup> So the possibility that our entire lives could be a dream is not at all an absurd one. The story of the Chinese philosopher, Chuang Tsu, is wonderful in this regard.

Once upon a time Chuang Tsu dreamed that he was a butterfly, a butterfly fluttering about enjoying himself. It did not know that it was Chuang Tsu. Suddenly he awoke with a start, and he was Chuang Tsu again. But he did not know whether he was Chuang Tsu who had dreamed that he was a butterfly, or whether he was a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Tsu.<sup>6</sup>

And it seems to me not mere fancy when Shakespeare, reflecting at the end of his own career on the weirdness of life and the weird magic of dramatizing it, makes his own famous stab at ontology; "we are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep."<sup>7</sup>

But now I sensed my own eyes starting to slide sag ... or were they actually only beginning to open? Right then, it did not seem at all crucial to decide. My last image was of the clock. It was 3:16 on July 4th, the day Thoreau began his Walden experiment, exactly halfway between the memorials of Spring and the labors of Fall. As the numbers blurred


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<sup>4</sup>Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 206-214.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.* p. 250.

<sup>7</sup>Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV, i.

before me, I realized that this whole whirling together of things: Descartes, Thoreau and the angry student, my brother dying and my neighbors loving, the *Upanisads*, Chuang Tsu and all the arguments offered, was something I had secretly hoped I would have some day: a midsummer night's dream. "And, as I am an honest Puck,"<sup>8</sup> I resolved to write it down the next morning lest I forget that it was real. 

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<sup>8</sup>Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, i.