

Scepticism in the Global History of Philosophy

Dreaming, Meditating, Introspecting: Introduction to Sceptical Themes

I. René Descartes (1596–1650)

1. In the First Meditation reasons are provided which give us possible grounds for doubt about all things, especially material things, so long as we have no foundations for the sciences other than those which we have had up till now. Although the usefulness of such extensive doubt is not apparent at first sight, its greatest benefit lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses. **The eventual result of this doubt is to make it impossible for us to have any further doubts about what we subsequently discover to be true.** (Synopsis of the First Meditation; CSM II, 9)
2. [...] it will not be necessary for me to show that all my opinions are false, which is something I could perhaps never manage. **Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false.** So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. And to do this **I will not need to run through them all individually, which would be an endless task.** Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested. (First Meditation; CSM II, 12)
3. **Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses.** But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once. (First Meditation; CSM II, 12)
4. [...] in our sleep we regularly seem to have sensory perception of, or to imagine, countless things which do not exist anywhere; and if our doubts are on the scale just outlined, there seem to be no marks by means of which we can with certainty distinguish between being asleep from being awake. (*Principles of Philosophy*, §4; CSM I, 193)
5. since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable? (First Meditation; CSM II, 14)
6. Secondly, and most importantly, we have been told that there is an omnipotent God who created us. Now we do not know whether he may have wished to make us beings of the sort who are always deceived even in those matters which seem to us supremely evident; for such constant deception seems no less a possibility than the occasional deception which, as we have noticed on previous occasions, does occur. (*Principles of Philosophy*, §5; CSM I, 194)
7. But perhaps God would not have allowed me to be deceived in this way, since he is said to be supremely good. But if it were inconsistent with his goodness to have created me such that I am deceived all the time, it would seem equally foreign to his goodness to allow me to be deceived even occasionally; yet this last assertion cannot be made. (First Meditation; CSM II, 14)
8. I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me (First Meditation; CSM II, 15)

II. Vasubandhu (c. 4th/5th century CE)

1. **One who is not awake does not understand the nonexistence of a sense-object seen in a dream.** Just so everyone, asleep with the sleep of repeated perfuming of erroneous conceptual fantasy, sees unreal external objects, as in a dream; being unawakened, they do not properly understand the nonexistence of the [external object]. But when they are awakened through the acquisition of supramundane non-discriminative insight which is the antidote to that [erroneous imagination], then they properly understand the non-existence of the sense-object because the subsequently obtained pure worldly insight becomes present. This [situation] is the same. (verse XVII)
2. Causal efficacy [is proved] as in ejaculation in a dream. “Is proved” is to be understood. [Causal efficacy is established] as with ejaculation in a dream [that is, a wet dream], which is characterized by the emission of semen in a dream in the absence of [actual] sexual union. (verse IV)

III. Abū Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058–1111)

1. You have asked me, my brother in religion, to convey to you the aim and secrets of the sciences, as well as the confusing intricacies of creeds, and to relate what I have endured in **extricating truth from the mayhem of factions, with their differing approaches and methods, and how I have ventured to raise myself from the depths of conformity to the heights of insight.** (*The Rescuer from Error*, §77)
2. [...] you should know that the differences among people in sects and religions, and the divergences among the masters¹ of various creeds, factions, and methods, is a deep ocean in which many have drowned and from which only a few have been saved. **Each faction claims that they are [79] saved, and “each is content with what they have”** [cf. Qur’ān 23:53, 30:32]. (*The Rescuer from Error*, §§78-9)
3. The thirst for apprehending things as they really are has been my preoccupation and principle from a very early age. It is part of my God-given instinct and nature, a matter of temperament not of choice or invention. Hence, **I was freed from the bonds of conformity [taqlīd] and my inherited beliefs were shattered while I was just a boy**, since I observed that Christian boys grew up only to be Christians, Jewish boys only to be Jewish, and Muslim boys only to be Muslim. (*The Rescuer from Error*, §81)
4. I was therefore inwardly moved to seek out the reality of this original nature, as well as the reality of the beliefs acquired out of conformity [82] to parents and teachers. I also sought to distinguish among these conformist beliefs about which there are disagreements in differentiating true from false, beginning with the instilled beliefs. I said to myself: “Since I seek to know things as they really are, I must first seek out the reality of knowledge itself.” **It became apparent to me that certain knowledge is that in which what is known is laid bare in such a way as to leave no room for doubt, and is unaccompanied by the possibility of error or illusion**, to the point that the mind² cannot even conceive it. (*The Rescuer from Error*, §§81-2)
5. After a lengthy process of doubt, my mind did not allow me to maintain my trust in sensory beliefs either, and began gradually to cast doubt on them, saying: “Where does this confidence in sensory beliefs come from? **The strongest sense is vision, which looks at a shadow and sees that it is stationary, and judges that there is no motion. But then as a result of experience and observation, after an hour, it is cognizant that the shadow is indeed moving. Moreover, it finds that it did not move suddenly, all at once, but rather incrementally atom by atom, in such a way that it was never actually stationary.** Likewise, vision looks at a celestial body and sees that it is small, around the size of a dinar, but then

¹ Translator’s note: The Arabic term *imām* is being used in a loose sense here, not in the narrow sense of prayer leader.

² Translator’s note: Literally, the heart (*al-qalb*); but see Ghazālī’s remarks on the “heart” at §151. (“By “heart” I mean the reality of a human’s spirit where his cognizance of God is located, not the flesh and blood that he shares with corpses and animals.”)

geometrical proofs indicate that it is in fact larger than the earth in size. **In this and other such sensory matters, the judge of sensation makes its judgments, but the judge of reason³ then judges it to be false and disproves it irrefutably.**” So I said: “My confidence in sensory beliefs has also been annulled. [...] (*The Rescuer from Error*, §84)

6. My confidence in sensory beliefs has also been annulled. Perhaps one can only trust the **rational beliefs**,⁴ which are among the first principles, such as the statements, ‘Ten is greater than three,’ ‘Negation and affirmation cannot coexist in the same thing,’⁵ and ‘The same thing cannot be both originated and eternal, or existent and nonexistent, or necessary and impossible’” [85]. The sensory beliefs replied: **“How can you be sure that your confidence in rational beliefs is not like that in sensory beliefs? You trusted in me, but the judge of reason disproved me.** Were it not for the judge of reason, you would have continued to believe me. **Perhaps behind rational apprehension there is another judge who, if he were to manifest himself, would disprove the judgment of reason, just as the judge of reason manifested himself to disprove the judgments of sense perception.** The fact that such an apprehension has not manifested itself does not indicate that it is impossible. (*The Rescuer from Error*, §§84-5)
7. Meanwhile, **sense perception underscored the problem by referring to dreams**, saying: “Do you not believe things in dreams and imagine situations that you believe to be permanent and stable, never doubting them while you are in that state? **And do you not then wake up and come to know that all your imaginings and beliefs were baseless and futile?** Why are you so sure that **everything that you believe in your waking state on the basis of the senses or reason** is true in relation to your current state? **A state may arise that bears the same relation to your waking state as your waking state does to your dream state. By comparison to that state your waking state would be like sleep. If such a state were to occur, you would become certain that all the things conjured up by your reason were inconsequential imaginings.** Perhaps that state is what the mystics hold to be their state, for they claim to have a vision in their states when they are immersed in themselves and lose awareness of their senses, which does not agree with these rational beliefs. (*The Rescuer from Error*, §86)
8. When these notions occurred to me and made an impression on my mind, I sought a cure but found none. **For they could only be rebutted with a proof, and a proof can only be constructed by combining the first [principles of] knowledge.** If these are not given, then it is impossible to arrange a proof. This disease defied all cure and lasted for almost two months, during which I embraced the **sophistical⁶ creed** in actual fact, though not in speech nor expression. **Eventually, God cured me of this disease and my mind was restored to health and balance. The rational necessary beliefs were once again accepted and trusted, both securely and certainly.** This did not come about by composing a proof or by an arrangement of words, but rather by **a light that God Almighty cast into my breast, which is the key to the greater part of cognizance.** (*The Rescuer from Error*, §86)

IV. Democritus (born c. 460 BCE)

1. Wretched mind, do you take your assurances from us and then overthrow us [sc. the senses]? Our overthrow is your downfall. (DK B125)
Compare al-Ghazālī, *The Rescuer from Error*, §85

³ Translator’s note: In this text, the Arabic term *‘aql* (often used to translate the Greek *nous*) is sometimes translated as reason and sometimes as intellect.

⁴ Translator’s note: It is clear from what follows that the rational beliefs are the same as the necessary beliefs.

⁵ Translator’s note: Alternatively, something cannot be affirmed and denied at once.

⁶ Translator’s note: Though Ghazālī writes “sophistical creed”, his arguments are more reminiscent of the ancient skeptics than the sophists.

VI. Galen (c. 129–c. 200 CE)

1. who does not know that the greatest confusion of any reasoning lies in its conflict with what is evident? If someone cannot even make a start except from something evident, how can he be relied on when he attacks his very starting point? Democritus was aware of this; when he was attacking the appearances with the words ‘By convention colour, by convention sweet, by convention bitter, but in reality atoms and void’ [=B9/125] he made the senses reply to thought as follows: ‘**Wretched mind, you get your evidence from us, and yet you overthrow us? The overthrow is a fall for you [=B125].**’ You should, then, charge reason with being untrustworthy, since it is so devious that when it is most convincing it is in conflict with the phenomena which served as its basis. Instead you do the opposite: things for which you have no account of how they come to be you judge not to be, as reason demands. But to me this very fact seems to be the most important objection to reason. For who in his mind can still trust reason when it comes to matters which are not evident, if it is devious as to postulate the contrary of what is obvious? (*On Medical Experience* 15.7, p. 114 Walzer = B125/T179c, trans. Walzer/Taylor)

Primary texts

- Al-Ghazali, *The Rescuer from Error*. In Muhammad Ali Khalidi (ed. and trans.). *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, 59–98. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. [esp. pp. 59–64, down to the end of §88]
- Democritus in G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield (eds. and trans.). *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. [see pp. 411–2 for DK B125]
- Descartes, René, John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (eds.). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vols I & II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. [Abbreviated as ‘CSM’]
- Galen in Hunayn Ibn Ishāq Al-‘Ibādī, Hubaish Ibn Al-Hasan Al-Asam, Richard Walzer, and H. A. R. Gibb. *Galen on Medical Experience: First Edition of the Arabic Version*. London; New York: Published for the Trustees of the Late Sir Henry Wellcome by the Oxford University Press, 1944.
- Vasubandhu and Jonathan A. Silk (ed.). *Materials Toward the Study of Vasubandhu’s Vimśikā: Sanskrit and Tibetan Critical Editions of the Verses and Autocommentary*. An English Translation and Annotations. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018 [2016].

Further reading

Descartes

- Blumenfeld, David and Jean Blumenfeld. "Can I Know that I am not Dreaming?" In Michael Hooker (ed.), *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*. Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. [On Descartes’ dreaming argument]
- Hatfield, Gary C. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*. London: Routledge, 2003 [especially chapter 2 on the method of doubt]
- Menn, Stephen. "The *Discourse on the Method* and the Tradition of Intellectual Autobiography." In J. Miller and B. Inwood (eds), *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy*, 141–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. [Provides context for Descartes’ use of the autobiographical genre – which Menn traces to Galen, Ibn al-Haytham, and al-Ghazālī prior to the European Renaissance]

Vasubandhu

- Adamson, Peter and Jonardon Ganeri. *Classical Indian Philosophy: A History of Philosophy without any Gaps*, vol. 5. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022 [2020]. [see pp. 273–9 for a brief introduction to Vasubandhu and Yogācāra Buddhism]
- Gold, Jonathan C. "No Outside, No Inside: Duality, Reality and Vasubandhu’s Illusory Elephant." *Asian Philosophy* 16 (2006): 1–38. [On Vasubandhu’s dream example]

al-Ghazālī

- Adamson, Peter. *Don't Think for Yourself: Authority and Belief in Medieval Philosophy*. Notre Dame, 2022. [See chapters 1–3]
- Frank, Richard M. "Knowledge and *Taqīd*: The Foundations of Religious Belief in Classical Ash‘arism." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109 (1989): 37–62. [background on Ash‘arism]
- Frank, Richard M. "Al-Ghazālī on *Taqīd*: Scholars, Theologians, and Philosophers." *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften* 7 (1991–2): 207–52. [background on al-Ghazālī]
- Kukkonen, Taneli. "Al-Ghazālī’s Skepticism Revisited." In H. Lagerlund (ed.), *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background*, 29–59. Leiden: Brill, 2010. [on al-Ghazālī’s sceptical arguments]

Democritus and Galen

- Lee, Mi-Kyoung. "Democritus on knowledge and the senses: the late sources." In *Epistemology after Protagoras: Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus*, 217–50. Oxford: Oxford University press, 2005. [on Democritus’ reception in Galen concerning the senses]
- Menn, Stephen. "The *Discourse on the Method* and the Tradition of Intellectual Autobiography." In J. Miller and B. Inwood (eds), *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy*, 141–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. [on the possible reception of Democritus by al-Ghazālī via Galen]