

## **DESCARTES VE RÜYA ARGÜMANI** **DESCARTES AND THE DREAM ARGUMENT**

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### **ÖZET**

Bu çalışmada, rüya argümanı olarak bilinen argümanın önemli noktalarını göz önüne serebilmek amacıyla René Descartes'ın *Meditations on the First Philosophy* adlı eserinde sunduğu Birinci Düşüncenin ilgili kısmı ele alınacaktır. Birinci Düşüncenin konuyla ilgili kısmını inceledikten sonra, geçerli olup olmadığı konusunda hakkında her zaman tartışılan *rüya argümanını* değerlendirmek niyetindeyim. Kanımca, kötü cin varsayımıyla birlikte rüya argümanının Descartes'ın felsefe sisteminde bazı işlevleri var. Örneğin, rüya argümanı, bir yandan Descartes felsefesinde bilgi kuramının yıkıcı kısmını gözler önüne sererken, çünkü Descartes bu argümanı kullanarak herşeyi şüphe konusu yapar; öte yandan, Descartes'a göre hataya düşmemeniz için size yardımcı olur. Ancak, duyularımızdan şüphe etmek için rüya argümanının kullanılamayacağını sanıyorum, çünkü kanımca, rüyalar birşeylere tanıklık etmek için güvenilir kanıtlar değildir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Argüman, düşünce, geçerli, şüphe, kanıt, hata.

### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, I am going to study only on half of the First Meditation, which is set forth by René Descartes in his book called *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, in order to focus on the so-called *dream argument* so that I can show its crucial points. After I look into half of the first meditation, I would like to focus especially on dream argument in the first meditation about which there have been always discussions to evaluate whether it is a valid argument or not. In my point of view, dream argument as well as malicious demon hypothesis has some functions in Descartes' philosophy. For example, on the one hand it shows us the destructive part of theory of knowledge in Descartes's philosophy because Descartes doubts about everything by employing it. On the other hand it helps you to keep yourself away from making mistakes in terms of Descartes. However I do not think that we can use it to doubt about our senses because I do believe that dreams are not reliable evidences for testifying something.

**Key words:** Argument, meditation, valid, doubt, evidence, mistake.

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• For more detailed information, see Bernard Williams' book called *Descartes*, especially pp. 309-313, Penguin Books, New York, 1978.

## INTRODUCTION

The well-known French thinker was bothered by the fact that men of letters disagreed on every subject. Were there no statements or propositions above dispute? Descartes wandered and asked. If there were any such, we should find them out and construct our knowledge on them. Descartes thought that he had a firm method for discovering propositions which were certain. He would take into consideration all the statements it was possible to conceive of and see if it was possible to doubt them all. Descartes then went on employing his methodic doubt to all propositions that included those derived from ordinary experience and from the learned disciplines. He figured out that it was possible to doubt them all. He could even put into trial the objective existence of the world of his experience since this world would be a dream or a phantasm induced in him by a malignant demon. However at the end Descartes arrived at a proposition about which he could not doubt any more. This was the statement that *cogito ergo sum*. In other words, Descartes attempted to establish the ideas or beliefs of his era on a firm basis so as to make possible to differ what was certain from what was uncertain or probable. He committed to substitute the science of his age for a sound science in which any claim would carry its proof by employing his philosophic method containing *intuition* and *deduction*. For Descartes, intuition is that which if only someone had a total perception of a proposition then someone knew if it was true or false. Thus this method of coming to know if a proposition was true or false is called intuition. Descartes held that the propositions one could come to understand perfectly would be self-evident in that one's knowledge regarding with them would not be dependent on knowledge of any propositions; hence they were good enough to stand as basic assumptions for being the starting points from which other propositions can be deduced. On the other hand, deduction is that which someone could understand an inferential step from one proposition to another without understanding each of these propositions, for he believed that one may come to know a proposition that one did not know directly by intuition, by reasoning to it from other propositions, which are themselves intuitively known, by means of inferences intuitively known to be valid. This method of coming to know if a proposition was true, a method that is dependent totally on intuition, though not on intuition of the proposition itself, Descartes called deduction.\*\* However, Descartes adopts and employs a different method for selecting the propositions which are to serve as the basis for his reasoning. This method of selecting his basic assumptions is called as the method of universal doubt in which Descartes uses the dream argument which I do not think as a good base to deny especially the senses.

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\*\* For more information see J.L. Watling., *Descartes, A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, edited by D.J.O'Connor, London: The Free Press of Glencoe, s. 171-175, 1964.

Therefore, in order to set forth my arguments about the subject at hand, I am going to summarize and examine very closely the half of the first meditation in which Descartes illustrates his purposes and reasons for doubting about everything, especially material things. Since my job here is to examine the half of the first meditation, I will not deal with the second and third ones unless I see some connection between them and the first meditation.

Now it is time to investigate Descartes's First Meditation. In his book called *Meditations*, Descartes starts by explaining the method of doubt. In order to have a firm basis for his philosophy, he decides to make himself doubt about everything. According to Descartes, a man who seeks truth once in his life time should call in doubt whatever can be doubted. Many of our beliefs were acquired in childhood and we have been taught so many things by either our parents or our teachers without knowing if they are true. In his words: it was necessary once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.<sup>1</sup>

This is the starting point of method of doubt because it provides the basis for critique of all knowledge. Descartes claims this argument because according to him, our beliefs come from uncritical sense perception. For being successful in this investigation, first of all a person who engages in doing this research must learn how to control his assents so that he can look at basic things under our beliefs. It is because he must first find a ground for his sense perception. Secondly, he must doubt everything about which there can be the slightest uncertainty likewise other opinions that are totally false. To get certainty is extremely important for Descartes because certainty will protect you from errors. Third, it is obviously clear that he cannot test each belief to see whether it admits of doubt or not; however he can examine the foundations on which his beliefs in general depend. This is what Descartes dedicated himself to do at the beginning of his First Meditation. According to Descartes, in the first sight, when we look at our beliefs, most of them look like coming from the senses. But senses sometimes deceive us therefore we cannot count on them for certainty where they have once deceived us. It is because they can deceive us any time. It is very interesting for me that Descartes did not give any particular examples about sense deception other than mentioning small or remote objects. In my opinion, we may use the example of wax which Descartes illustrated in the second meditation for showing us what belongs to a typical material things. What example of wax tells us is that one cannot identify a particular object by the forms it presents to the senses.

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<sup>1</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations, The Rationalists, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz* (trans: John Weitch), Anchor Books, Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc, New York 1974, p. 112-113.

Here is the example of wax: the piece of honey freshly taken from the honeycomb has a distinctive taste, scent, and so on. But if it is put to fire, it loses all these forms. If its identity depended on the forms, then it would have been one thing before the fire and another thing afterwards. But it is the same thing all along. What kind of thing is it that persists through change in its sensible forms? Perhaps just a body, something extended, flexible and changeable. If so, then what identifies it is not what the senses bring to one's notice but what can be grasped by the intellect as belonging to the body. So sensible forms are not the key to the nature of the wax. I know that this example is mainly related to what belongs to a material thing; in addition to this in my opinion it shows us what we acquire by our sense perceptions is doubtful. It strikes me that Descartes supports his doubts about sense perceptions and material things by giving the example of wax in the second meditation. In short what we are having by our senses is only the appearances not reality.<sup>2</sup>

Let us go back our discussion about the first meditation. Descartes goes on to say that although the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to some small or remote objects, yet there are many other facts about which doubt is impossible, in spite of the fact that these are collected from the senses. For instance, that I am here sitting by the fire, having on a winter dressing-gown, holding this paper in my hands and so on. Again these hands and my body, how can their existence be denied?<sup>3</sup>

At this point, Descartes illustrates a madman example by saying that madman have the delusion that their bodies are made of glass or think themselves to be pumpkins and they believe that they are kings. I think by giving this madman example Descartes is trying to question that are my senses more reliable than theirs? Moreover there is a possibility that he may be a madman. As a matter of fact there is no need for Descartes to suppose himself insane, it is enough to recall that he sometimes has dreams which are similar to state of the madman. He has often dreamed that he was sitting in his dressing-gown by the fire when he was really undressed in bed. It is not good to tell himself that now at least he is awake because he recalls having been deceived earlier by just such reflections when asleep. Who can give a guarantee to Descartes that he is not dreaming right now. So there is no criterion by which one can certainly distinguish sleep from the waking state. As a result, we cannot be certain that our whole life is not a dream and that everything the senses teach us is true.<sup>4</sup> I do not understand very well why Descartes did not use the madman example instead of employing dream argument to support his doubt about everything but it strikes me that for

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<sup>2</sup> Descartes, *ibid.*, p.123-125

<sup>3</sup> Descartes, *ibid.*, p.113-114

<sup>4</sup> Descartes, *ibid.*, p. 115

Descartes, dream argument seems to be stronger than madman example. I think he thought that dreams can only be seen by people who have no pathological handicaps.\*

I think I can say that Descartes eliminates the doctrine of realism by using the dream argument. Because if we cannot distinguish sleep from waking state, we do not know which is which and in this case we cannot talk about certain reality. As a result not only external world but also every empirical proposition is suspect.

So far I have tried to summarize and showed Descartes' method of doubt concerning senses and the external world. Before I go further, I would like to look at *Objections and Replies* regarding dream argument and senses.

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As we have seen, the first possibility Descartes considered was that what seemed to be waking life might all be a dream. He observed that dreams can be as vivid as waking experience upon waking up we can feel astonished not to be in the circumstances where we were dreaming. In dreams we believe things that we usually find to be false upon waking. In short, dreams can delude us. Moreover there can be nothing in the experience of dreaming or being awake to tell us which is which. So how can we tell we are not dreaming now? If we cannot tell, then maybe the beliefs which are being formed in the course of our present experience are all false. I think all Descartes needs is the possibility that all conscious experience is dream experience. For if we cannot eliminate the possibility we cannot take conscious experience as a trustworthy guide to how things really are independently of experience. As has already been mentioned, Descartes employed the dream argument to weaken his confidence to sense perceptions. However the dream argument did not throw doubt on everything because beliefs about simpler and more universal things such as mathematical sciences were left untouched by the dream argument.

Now we can look at *Objections and Replies* related to senses and dream argument. In the fifth objections, Descartes' critic argues that we cannot find any falsity in our senses because senses are quite passive and

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\* It may be noteworthy to state that the well-known islamic philosopher Al-Ghazali also dealt with dream metaphor in some of his writings by saying that how can we know that the things we know as dreams are real and the things we know as real are dreams? Since I just want to look into the ideas of the founder of the Modern Philosophy akin to the dream argument to criticize, I will not copy with Al-Ghazali's views on dream metaphor. However for further information, see: Syed Muzaffar Uddin Nadvi, *Muslim Thought and Its Source*, printed at jayyed press, Delhi, 1983. See also, Mohammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Kitab Bhavan, New Delhi, 1994. See also, Saeed Sheikh, *Studies in Muslim Philosophy*, SH. Muhammad Ashraf Publishers, Lahore, 1974.

report only appearances. Therefore the falsity is in the judgements not in the senses. He says let us look at a tower. When we go and take a look to this tower very closely, if the shape of which is square we will certainly find out that it is a square; on the other hand if we go away and look at it from far away it can be seen a round or some other shape.

This is obviously clear and nobody deny it. But this is not the indicator that it happens all the time. Moreover in our life, we have a habit of sleeping and we sometimes have our dreams during the sleep. Upon waking up, we understand that we are not the situation where we were dreaming. For that reason dreams can cause to deceive us. On the other hand we do not have dreams all the time; when we wake up, we do not doubt if we awake.<sup>5</sup>

Descartes replies to his critic by saying that my critic is still thinking by using his old knowledge which is full of preconceptions. First he had better get rid of them if he wants to understand what I mean. Second unlike you said, we cannot realize and estimate the situations where error can take place without finding a strong ground. In addition to this Descartes says that I can demonstrate to my critic that he sometimes makes mistakes in some subjects that he believes as true.<sup>6</sup>

In fact I agree with Descartes' critic because if you are awake right now, there is no need to doubt if you dream, unless of course you are a skeptic. Descartes seems to be doubtful about his past experiences, but since you made mistakes in the past either in your dream or in your waking state that does not mean you will make mistakes now or future. Descartes' answers to these objections are not enough to persuade us.

In the third objections, Descartes' critic says that I agree with Descartes what he said in his dream argument. It is clear enough for me that we cannot separate a dream situation from a state waking. But these kinds of argument were made by Plato and other ancient philosophers earlier. They said that there is an ambiguity in the objects of the senses and it is very difficult to distinguish the waking state from dreams. So Descartes is using the same ancient material.<sup>7</sup>

Descartes replies by saying that I had three aims for giving this argument. My first purpose was to help to readers so that they could distinguish the objects of the mind from the real things which are in external world. My second aim for giving the argument was to answer them in the

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<sup>5</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations on the First Philosophy with selections from the Objections and Replies* (trans: John Cottingham), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, p. 63-64.

<sup>6</sup> Descartes, *ibid.*, p.64

<sup>7</sup> Descartes, *ibid.*, p. 65

coming meditations. My third goal was that I wanted to get rid of some doubts about truths which I illustrate in coming meditations.<sup>8</sup>

In the seventh objections, Descartes' critic argues that Descartes talks about some matters of the utmost certainty which I do not understand. Moreover without explaining what it means, he says these things are true even in dream situation. If we dream something which is nonsense as true why can we not dream these matters of the utmost certainty things as false? It is because everything is possible in dream. So I do not figure out what Descartes is saying.<sup>9</sup>

Descartes answers to the questions and objections by saying that my critic did not distinguish between reality and appearances, so he did not understand what I said. What I mean matters of the utmost certainty is clear and distinct ideas. They are always true even in dream situation; besides you cannot comprehend something truly if it is not clear and distinct. For that reason, first you should be aware of what reality is and what appearances are.<sup>10</sup>

It seems to me that everything is based on clear and distinct ideas in Descartes philosophy but I must confess what he means by saying them is not understandable for me. So his critic seems to be right what he asked Descartes. Again Descartes does not give any satisfactory answer other than accusing his critic of not understanding him very well. I think that before proving the existence of God, even clear and distinct ideas are not reliable for Descartes. So Descartes cannot use clear and distinct ideas for defending himself against his critic.

In the sixth objections Descartes' critic states that Descartes wants us to trust our mind rather than sense perceptions. It is because our intellect is more trustworthy than senses in terms of Descartes. But there is something which I do not get very well; our minds are supposed to get something from senses so that mind can discover some certainty among them. Moreover suppose one of our sense made a mistake, how can you eliminate this error without using your senses? For instance, when we put a stick in a glass of water, it will be seen as bent because of deflection. However we can get rid of the error by using the sense of touch not by using the mind.<sup>11</sup>

Descartes answers to his critic by saying that you gave this example to me because of your earlier opinions which you have gotten from your childhood. That is what I am trying to eliminate. These kinds of thoughts which are harmful to catch the truth have come from childhood. We have been taught that sense perceptions are reliable and whatever we learn via

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<sup>8</sup> Descartes, *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Descartes, *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Descartes, *ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Descartes, *ibid.*, p. 64-65.

them. In addition to this even in your example, we ought to apply our mind whether we use our sense organs to correct the error. Therefore intellect corrects the mistakes which come from senses not sense organs.<sup>12</sup>

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As we have seen Descartes stated that we have the same thoughts and impressions in our sleep similar to waking state. So we cannot tell whether we are awake or asleep. By the time he came to this conclusion, he had denied sense perceptions. It is obviously clear that he used the dream argument to weaken his beliefs about senses. Unlike Descartes, I believe that dreams are not experiences and we cannot make judgments during our sleep. For that reason, in my opinion, dream argument is invalid. My arguments against Descartes' are as follows:

First of all, in my point of view, it is not possible to be deceived when we are asleep. But we may be deceived when we are awake such as hallucination because having deceived is related to an external object. On the other hand, dreams seem to be akin to our inner process.

Again we can decide to do something when we are awake by using our will; I mean we have a right to choose for doing or not doing something. For instance, I can decide that I will have my red coat on when I go to work tomorrow. But in our sleeps, we cannot choose which dream we are going to see tonight or tomorrow night. So if I do not employ my will during my sleep, being asleep is different from being awake.

How about asking are dreams knowledge instead of asking are dreams experiences or impressions? Suppose, you saw a very famous person committing a crime in your dream. Can you go and tell the judge what you saw in your dream? Sure you can. But your dream cannot be used as evidence to testify something. That is to say, they are not reliable evidence and we cannot depend on them for doing something. For that reason instead of denying our sense perceptions, we are supposed to refute our dreams by saying that they are doubtful.

I am not denying that we have sometimes our dreams when we are asleep. But in my opinion we cannot use them to deny our real life and senses. It is possible for us to test an empirical knowledge via senses; but how can we observe someone's dream whether he is telling the truth or not. We can go and test an external object any time but it seems to be impossible to me that we cannot go and see the same dream which we had whenever we want to see it.

If the dreams are the same our waking state like Descartes said, why can we not remember them exactly after waking up. I sometimes dream and after I wake up, I do not remember very well what I dreamt. On the other

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<sup>12</sup> Descartes, *ibid.*, p. 65.

hand, when I go out or study something alone or with my friends, I recall very well what I did. Therefore I am aware of what I am doing when I am awake.

As a matter of fact, Descartes says that I am sitting by fire and I am wearing my winter dressing-gown now; then he remembers having some dreams about these things. But what he tells us is related to his past experiences. Since you dreamt some events and made some wrong judgments in your past sleeps, that does not mean you will make some mistakes in future or now. Of course if you can make judgments in your dreams!

Again if there is no criterion between being awake and being asleep, how can we learn such as a foreign language in our dream? For example, suppose we ask a person how he learned how to speak a foreign language. Do you think he can say to us that I learned it in one of my dreams? I think it is almost impossible to learn something when we are asleep; because we must be awake and intend to learn something. When we learn something, we have an object which is clear for everybody to focus on and to study. Where is the object of a dream? The object of a dream seems to pertain to only person who has that dream and he has to have that dream even if he or she does not like it; because dreams are independent of our wills as I mentioned earlier.

In a nut shell, what I am saying is this: Dreams occur in our internal world not in external world. For that reason, we have no outward criterion for both their occurrence and their evaluation. On the other hand, for instance right now I am writing this paper and there are some pencils and papers on my table. If one of my friends come and see me, they will see what I see right now unless of course he has some kind of disability such as blindness or a pathological disorder.

In the final analysis, after all these illustrations, I can claim that dreams can be distinguished from waking states by their lack of connection with waking experiences. That's why we cannot use them to doubt about our sense perceptions and perceptual propositions.

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