

Why It Doesn't Matter I'm Not Insane: Descartes's Madness Doubt in Focus

Abstract: Harry Frankfurt has argued that Descartes's madness doubt in the *First Meditation* is importantly different from his dreaming doubt. The madness doubt does not provide a reason for doubting the senses, since were the meditator to suppose he is mad, his ability to successfully complete the philosophical investigation he sets for himself in the first few pages of the *Meditations* would be undermined. I argue that Frankfurt's (1970) interpretation of Descartes's madness doubt is mistaken and that it should be understood as playing the same role as his more famous dreaming doubt. I focus my discussion around four questions: (Q1) What does the meditator have in mind when speaking of madness?; (Q2) Why does the meditator so quickly dismiss the madness doubt but take seriously the dreaming doubt?; (Q3) Does the madness doubt have the same scope as the dreaming doubt?; and (Q4) Why does the meditator bring up the madness doubt at all?

Introduction

The *Meditations* as a whole is best understood as an attempt to establish a radically new approach to the way our minds cognize reality. One of the main goals of the *Meditations* is to undermine the scholastic doctrine that whatever is in the intellect has previously been in the senses and to replace this doctrine with an alternative. Famously, it is Descartes's method of doubt invoking *inter alia* dreams and madness that begin this project. Frankfurt (1970) has argued that Descartes dismisses the madness doubt in virtue of the fact that if taken seriously it would undermine his ability to conduct a rational philosophical investigationⁱ. I argue that this epistemologically focused interpretation fails to accommodate the textual evidence found elsewhere in Descartes's writings. My reading of Descartes's madness doubt in the *First Meditation* understands its role in his overall method of doubt as no different than the role of the dreaming doubtⁱⁱ.

Section One: The Madness and Dreaming Doubt

The scholastic doctrine mentioned above is targeted by the meditator in both the *First* and *Sixth Meditations*, "Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses" (AT vii 18; CSM II 12) and, "I easily convinced myself that I had nothing at all in the intellect which I had not previously had in sensation" (AT vii 75; CSM II 52). These highlight two aspects of the scholastic doctrine: that the senses mediate the mind's access to reality and the senses serve as the only source of the contents of the mind. I understand the method of doubt in the *First Meditation* as an attempt to dislodge this first aspect and the subsequent meditations as an attempt to *inter alia* dislodge the second. Ultimately, this clears the way for Descartes's alternative doctrine that the mind has *unmediated* access to reality

and, furthermore, that the mind brings with it its own *innate* stockpile of contents with which to cognize this reality.

The general structure of the method of doubt in the *First Meditation* is to set forth a reason for doubt followed by a limitation on this reason. Then a further, more encompassing reason is offered followed by another limitation until finally the meditator admits “that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised” (AT vii 21; CSM II 14-5).

The meditator’s first reason for doubt is that the senses have deceived him in the past. Despite this feature of his senses, they deliver to him numerous other “obvious beliefs” that are impossible to doubt, e.g., that he is holding a piece of paper in his hands right now. The meditator then presents another reason for doubt intended to encompass even these “obvious beliefs” by comparing himself to a madman “whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked” (AT vii 19; CSM II 13). Just as madmen are convinced of the truth of various falsehoods, it is possible that he too is convinced of the truth of these “obvious beliefs” when they are false. But this possibility appears to be dismissed out of hand by the meditator, “I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them [the insane] as a model for myself” (AT vii 19; CSM II 13).

Yet, just as quickly as the madness doubt is dismissed, the meditator sarcastically remarks, “A brilliant piece of reasoning!” (AT vii 19; CSM II 13) and reconsiders that he is not so unlike the madman, since he is “a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake – indeed sometimes even more improbable ones” (AT vii 19; CSM II 13). The state of dreaming would convince him equally as madness

would of the truth of the “obvious beliefs” when they are false. Resisting these considerations, the meditator insists there is no way, at this very moment, he could be asleep and therefore be convinced of the truth of the “obvious beliefs” when they are false, since all of his present experiences have a distinctness dream experiences lack. Yet, once again the meditator reconsiders, since he remembers past states of dreaming, in virtue of their distinctness, that have convinced him of the truth of the “obvious beliefs” when they were false. He concludes that there is no sure sign which can be used to distinguish the state of dreaming from the state of being awake.

I would like to focus my discussion of the meditator’s introduction of the madness and dreaming doubt around four questionsⁱⁱⁱ:

- (Q1) What does the meditator have in mind when speaking of madness?
- (Q2) Why does the meditator so quickly dismiss the madness doubt but take seriously the dreaming doubt?
- (Q3) Does the madness doubt have the same scope as the dreaming doubt?
- (Q4) Why does the meditator bring up the madness doubt at all?

In the next section, I examine Frankfurt’s answers to these questions.

Section Two: Madness as Undermining Reason

John Carriero characterizes the traditional epistemologically emphasized reading of the *Meditations* as one that focuses on Descartes’s handling of skepticism along with “certainty, justification of belief, and knowledge” (Carriero 2009, 2). Frankfurt’s reading has exactly this kind of emphasis, since he understands the *First Meditation* as examining particular “rules of evidence” that “define policies to be followed in determining whether or not to accept a belief” and questioning each defined policy as to whether it is a “reasonable way to attain certainty” (Frankfurt 1970, p. 47).

Frankfurt thinks the meditator has a particular conception of madness in mind, namely that “an essential aspect of madness [is] to be unable to distinguish properly between reasonable and unreasonable judgments” (Frankfurt 1970, p. 52). Support for this comes from the original French translation of ‘madmen’ as ‘*insensées*’ or “those who have lost their reason” (Frankfurt 1970, 52). In regards to (Q1), the meditators conception of madness is a state in which discernment of the reasonable is severely handicapped if not altogether missing. Reason, then, is in some sense undermined by madness.

This provides an answer to (Q2) why the meditator so quickly dismisses the madness doubt and why the dreaming doubt can be taken seriously,

The whole point of his critical examination of his former opinions is to determine whether or not there are reasonable grounds for doubting them. If he were to begin by suspending the judgment that he is reasonable, he would be unable ever to reestablish his confidence in his own ability to carry out his task (Frankfurt 1970, p. 53).

If the madness doubt were a reason for doubt, then the “obvious beliefs” provided by the senses *plus* the meditator’s general capacity to “conduct the investigation to which he wishes to devote himself” (Frankfurt 1970, p. 53) would be uncertain. This latter uncertainty, Frankfurt suggests, would not be engendered if the meditator were to dismiss the madness doubt in favor of the dreaming doubt,

Like the abnormal man, the dreamer generates sensory data of his own ... The fact that he perceives non-veridical data is not due, however, to idiosyncrasy or to a defect in his individual constitution. It cannot therefore be dismissed as a fact of merely personal relevance (Frankfurt 1970, p. 56).

Frankfurt’s answer to (Q3) is that there is a difference of scope between the madness and dreaming doubt. Dreaming is a “nonpathological equivalent of madness” (Frankfurt 1970, p. 56) that does not threaten one’s general capacity to conduct an investigation, but does cast doubt on just those deliverances of the senses one would consider to be “obvious beliefs”.

Why does the meditator bring up madness at all? Frankfurt's answer to (Q4) might be discerned from the following passage,

Even if Descartes makes the most generous assumptions and supposes that he is a *normal perceiver* who obtains sensory data under conditions favorable in every respect discoverable by the senses, he cannot be certain that the sensory data he obtains will be veridical (my emphasis) (Frankfurt 1970, p. 58).

Bringing up the madness doubt only to dismiss it serves to illustrate that the senses fail to deliver certainty even if we suppose they are in ideal conditions. Doubting the epistemic states that are the upshot of the senses does not require one to go to such great lengths as supposing one is mad^{iv}. Madness is, of course, amongst those conditions considered to be non-ideal. We need only to examine experiences taken to be an ordinary "element in the common-sense picture of experience" (Frankfurt 1970, p. 57).

Section Three: The Similarity of Madness and Dreaming

Frankfurt claims that the meditator's conception of madness is the inability to discern the reasonable from the unreasonable. These claims are supported by no strong textual evidence within Descartes's writings besides the French translator's use of "*insensées*". I believe that Frankfurt's focus on the epistemology of the *Meditations* obscures the obvious answer to (Q1). What the meditator has in mind when thinking of madness is answered immediately after the madness doubt is introduced,

How could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to a madman, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass (AT vii 19; CSM II 13).

That is, madness is a physiological disturbance in the brain that causes one to be convinced of the truth of things that are false, mainly by bringing about particular inaccurate mental states.

Madness, then, is understood as quite similar to dreaming. Nowhere else in Descartes's writings does he give any indication that madness undermines reason in the way suggested by Frankfurt^y.

I think my answer to (Q1) gains further support when it is understood that Frankfurt's conception of madness requires the answer to (Q3) that it does, namely that there is a difference in scope between the madness doubt and the dreaming doubt. I say this brings further support for my answer to (Q1) because the text clearly shows that neither Descartes nor his meditator thought there was such a difference. The immediate evidence is the meditator's recognition in the *First Meditation* that he is not so unlike a madman, since he is a man who dreams. But I suspect this begs some questions against Frankfurt's reading so I shall mention a few other places that suggest no scope difference is at work.

I believe that Descartes thought that madness and dreaming are very similar if not exactly similar states. It is a fair assumption that if madness and dreaming are similar states, then madness threatens one's ability to conduct an inquiry only insofar as dreaming does. But, as even Frankfurt will admit, the meditator does not think that dreaming does so threaten. If dreaming does not threaten one's ability to conduct an inquiry, neither does madness. There would be, then, no scope difference between the madness doubt and the dreaming doubt. Therefore, given the similarity between the state of madness and dreaming, Frankfurt's answer to (Q3) would be incorrect thereby bolstering support for my answer to (Q1). But are there any passages suggesting the similarity between madness and dreaming?

In the *Optics*, Descartes says:

First, it is the soul which sees, and not the eye; and it does not see directly, but only by means of the brain. That is why madmen and those who are asleep often see, or think they see, various objects which are nevertheless not before their eyes: namely, certain vapours disturb their brain and arrange those of its parts normally engaged in vision exactly as they would be if these objects were present (AT vi 141; CSM I 172).

In this passage madmen and dreamers are directly compared to one another. In fact, they are characterized in the same way as seeing and thinking falsely. Descartes offers the same causal explanation for why this is the case citing a “disturbance” in their brains due to “vapours”. This strongly suggests that not only did Descartes think madness and dreaming to be phenomenologically similar but, more importantly, that the same causal process explains this similarity. This causal explanation is very similar to the one given by the meditator in the *First Meditation* for madness. If he uses this explanation in the *Optics* to explain both madness and dreaming and uses it in the *First Meditation* to explain madness right before his discussion of dreaming, then I think it is fair to say Descartes thought of these states as very similar.

In the *Fifth Set of Replies*, Descartes says the following about the state of dreaming,

Admittedly, when imagination or sensation is strongly active (as occurs when the brain is in a disturbed state), it is not easy for the mind to have leisure for understanding other things. But when imagination is less intense, we often have the experience of understanding something quite apart from the imagination. When, for example, we are asleep and are aware that we are dreaming, we need imagination in order to dream, but to be aware that we are dreaming we need only the intellect (AT vii 358-9; CSM II 248).

Here we see that imagination or sensation is correlated with a “disturbed” state of the brain and that dreaming requires the imagination and so requires the brain to be so disturbed. Again, in the *First Meditation* and the *Optics*, we saw the state of madness characterized as a “disturbance” in the brain of some kind or other. This again suggests a strong similarity between dreaming and madness. I conclude, then, that we have good reasons to suppose that Descartes and his meditator thought of madness and dreaming as quite similar states. Given this, we have no reason to think there is a scope difference between the madness doubt and the dreaming doubt.

Recall that Frankfurt’s answer to (Q2) was that the meditator dismissed the madness doubt in virtue of its threat to conducting his inquiry while the dreaming doubt did no such thing.

But if, as I argued above, the madness doubt does not threaten his ability to conduct an inquiry anymore than the dreaming doubt does, what is the explanation for the meditator's remarks at AT vii 19; CSM II 13? I believe these remarks are *not* in fact dismissive, but serve the same function as the earlier remarks that it is "impossible" to doubt some beliefs, e.g., that he is holding a piece of paper in his hands, and his later remarks that now his current experiences have a distinctness that dreaming experiences lack. In other words, all of these remarks are part of the meditator's ultimately failed attempts to resist the encroaching skepticism. The remark 'I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them [the insane] as a model for myself' at AT vii 19; CSM II 13 serves as just another ineffectual limitation on the presented doubts, since it is quickly undermined by the similarity of madness and dreaming. Therefore, the madness doubt is taken no less seriously than the dreaming doubt.

This, I believe, offers a satisfying explanation of the sarcasm found in the meditator's comment 'A brilliant piece of reasoning!'. What the meditator is doing is dismissing the suggested limitation that he is nothing like a madman. He is saying that it would not be crazy to suppose he is like a madman, since, when he dreams, he is in a very similar phenomenological state correlated with (and caused by) the same "melancholic vapour" disturbance in his brain.

There remains the final question (Q4) of why the meditator brings up the madness doubt at all? This question is especially pressing for my reading of the *First Meditation*, since madness and dreaming are similar states bringing the same things into doubt. I believe the answer to this question lies not in the writings of Descartes, but in the writings of the skeptics prior to Descartes. Janet Broughton (2002) has pointed out that the skeptics before Descartes^{vi} frequently brought up madness and dreaming together in considerations of skepticism. For instance, in *Against the Logicians* Sextus Empiricus, the famous Academic skeptic, says:

For as in waking life the thirsty man feels pleasure in indulging in drink, and the man who flees from a wild beast or any other object of terror shouts and cries aloud, so also in dreams delight is felt by the thirsty when they think they are drinking from a spring, and similarly fear is felt by those in terror ... And just as in a normal state we believe and assent to very lucid appearances ... so also in a state of madness some are similarly affected (7.403-5).

And Socrates in Plato's *Theaetetus* says, "Then let us not leave it incomplete. There remains the question of dreams and disorders, especially madness and all the mistakes madness is said to make in seeing or hearing or otherwise misperceiving" (157e). So I understand Descartes to simply be following the *status quo* in discussions of skepticism. The madness doubt is brought up for the reason that traditionally when one writes about skepticism one writes both about madness and dreaming.

Conclusion

I have argued that Frankfurt's reading of Descartes's madness doubt in the *First Meditation* is mistaken on several accounts. In particular, neither Descartes nor his meditator conceives of madness as undermining reason. Instead, the state of madness is phenomenologically very similar to the state of dreaming and both, for Descartes, have the same causal explanation. In general, I believe that Frankfurt's mistake lies in his overemphasis on epistemology when understanding the *First Meditation*. With a better grasp of how Descartes understands the states of madness and dreaming it is seen why it just does not matter that I am not insane^{vii}.

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ⁱ In *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen*, Frankfurt offers the beginning suggestion of this line of interpretation, which has been elaborated by Ablondi (2007).

ⁱⁱ **Much of my understanding of Descartes' *Meditations* has been influenced by John Carriero's book *Between Two Worlds* (2009), which sees the *Meditations* in a more metaphysically oriented fashion than previous interpreters have. In his own words, "A reading that seeks to leverage Descartes's conception of mind out of external-world skepticism leaves as irrelevant or desperate too much of what is going on in the *Meditations*" (Carriero 2009, p. 3).**

ⁱⁱⁱ These four questions were taken from Ablondi (2007).

^{iv} Although of course in order to doubt what Descartes calls the "simplest and most general things" one must in some sense go beyond mere common-sense experience. Descartes accomplishes this by invoking the defective origins doubt (see AT vii 21; CSM II 14-5).

^v In Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* he says the following in his discussion of two forms of madness, mania and melancholia:

The mind of the melancholic is entirely occupied by reflection, so that his imagination remains at leisure and in repose; the maniac's imagination, on the contrary, is occupied by a perpetual flux of impetuous thoughts. While the melancholic's mind is fixed on a single object, imposing unreasonable proportions upon it, but upon it alone, mania deforms all concepts and ideas; either they lose their congruence, or their representative value is falsified; in any case, the totality of thought is disturbed in its essential relation to truth (Foucault 1965, p. 125).

I find it interesting that the maniac, as described by Foucault, appears to fit more closely with the madman of Frankfurt's reading while the melancholic appears to fit closer to the madman as I have understood it. More interestingly, Descartes describes his madman as affected by "melancholic vapours". Now I hesitate to draw any

strong conclusions from the brief discussion I quoted from Foucault, but it does seem surprising that Descartes used “melancholia” rather than “mania” to characterize the madman of the *First Meditation*.

^{vi} This is certainly not meant to imply that Descartes was a skeptic (but see Popkin (1982) *Descartes Against the Skeptics*).

^{vii} I am grateful to Monte Cook and my fellow graduate students at the University of Oklahoma for comments on earlier drafts of this paper and Don Sievert for his critical comments on the final version of this paper.