

Madness at the centre: on Descartes' first meditation turned into a dialogue

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. Charles Larmore presents the central part of Descartes' first meditation as a brief dialogue between a skeptic and a sensible empiricist. I point out a source of discontent about this innovative transformation.

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Introduction. *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes' Meditations* contains a paper by Charles Larmore entitled "The First Meditation: skeptical doubt and certainty." There he attempts the feat of presenting the main steps in the central part of Descartes' first meditation as a dialogue. The dialogue is between a skeptic and a sensible empiricist. Taking the Cambridge translation of Descartes' meditations as our "original" text, there is at least one source of discontent about Larmore's effort to turn the meditation into a dialogue, which I aim to present.

The dialogue opens with the empiricist declaring that we can have knowledge based on sense experience. The skeptic replies that our sensory experiences of small distant objects are sometimes misleading (we sometimes experience them as having qualities that they do not have). The empiricist replies by retreating from this territory: at least our sensory experiences of medium-sized objects are reliable. At this point, it is necessary for me to quote the dialogue, instead of paraphrasing.

Skeptic: What of the possibility that you are mad?

Empiricist: I would be mad even to consider that possibility.

Skeptic: Still, you must acknowledge that in the past you have

mistaken dreams for veridical perceptions. In fact, there are no sure signs by means of which dream perceptions can be distinguished from waking ones. How can you rule out the possibility that any perception of some close, medium-sized object is actually a dream? (2014: 56)

It is this part which I shall focus on, in fact the first two sentences.

Opinions of others. Let us call the skeptic's attempt to generate doubt by likening a person to the mad as madness doubt. Here is the passage in which Descartes introduces madness doubt and presents a reason for rejecting it:

Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, 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. But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself. (1996 [1642]: 13)

The last sentence of this quotation presents a reason for rejecting madness doubt: "I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself."

Compare this with what Larmore's empiricist says: "I would be mad even to consider that possibility." A striking difference here is that Larmore's empiricist rejects madness doubt because he would be mad to pursue it, whereas Descartes' narrator is concerned about the opinions of others. He does not want to be thought mad. (I assume that he means thought mad by others!)

Let us call the reason in the Cambridge translation, when taken literally, “the literal reason”:

(The literal reason) Descartes would be thought equally mad if he took anything from the mad as a model for himself, including likening himself to the mad as a way of doubting his own beliefs.

Why has Larmore departed from the literal reason? Perhaps he thought he could improve on Descartes slightly. Here we can imagine a dialogue of our own.

Cambridge-Descartes: I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from the mad as a model for myself, including likening myself to the mad as a way of doubting my own beliefs.

Larmore: That is not a good enough reason.

Cambridge-Descartes: Why not?

Larmore: Either the beliefs of others about whether you are mad are reliable or they are unreliable. If they are unreliable, then you should not care whether they think you mad or not. But if they are reliable, then your worry is that you would be thought mad by others if you took anything from the mad as a model for yourself and this thought of theirs would be reliable. But why not simply say that it would be mad for you to take anything from the mad as a model for yourself? There is no gain from introducing reliable others who would regard you as mad and it makes everything so complicated.

This is an interesting argument from the Larmore side for dropping any reference to the opinions of others when Descartes presents his reason against pursuing madness doubt. However, there is a response which someone in favour of the literal reason might offer.

“The sentence in the text expressing the literal reason has two functions,” says this respondent. “One function is to express this reason. But there is also a hidden function: to provide evidence that Descartes is not as mad as the people he refers to. One of the qualities of the mad is that they are insensitive to the opinions of others.” For example – here I am extending Descartes’ example – you say to a person who believes he is wearing a purple robe, “Are you mad? You are naked”; but he ignores you. He is insensitive to your concern that he is mad (he does not care if you think that) and your belief that he is naked (he does not engage with it, by asking about your evidence say, rather he assumes his contrary belief is right). Descartes, in contrast, is sensitive to the opinions of others. That is evidence for his sanity

A source of discontent with the Larmore dialogue then is that he drops reference to the opinions of others and it is unclear that this is a good idea. Reference to how he would be thought of is plausibly performing some other function than expressing a reason for rejecting madness doubt. Is there good enough reason to depart this much from the Cambridge translation, taken literally?

References

Descartes, R. (translated and edited by J. Cottingham, with an introductory essay by Bernard Williams) 1996. *Meditations on First Philosophy, with Selections from the Objections and Replies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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