

## **The first meditation again: a hidden source of doubt?**

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*Abstract.* I raise the question of whether there is a hidden source of doubt in Descartes' first meditation, if one adopts the perspective of some people he describes as insane.

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Consider this passage from early on in Descartes' first meditation:

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.

Here Descartes distinguishes himself from the insane.

But won't some insane readers feel excluded, for example someone who believes their head is made of earthenware? "In the preface, you asked me to meditate along with you, for I too am a serious reader, and now you are saying that my beliefs are insane and implying that the rest of the meditations are not for me. Why have you done this, you deceptive character?" Descartes is famous for raising doubts about whether one is dreaming or being deceived by a demon. My question is whether there

is a hidden source of doubt at this point. If one takes up a certain perspective when reading the text, the experience of being invited into the entrance hall of this philosophical house and then dismissively treated creates doubt about the trustworthiness of the narrator. (To avoid this, he should have been more specific in his preface to readers: “you must not only be willing to meditate seriously with me, but also...” Descartes does say something more but not enough to prevent readers who understandably feel deceived at this point.)

### **Reference**

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