

The problem of the poor king, from Descartes and Rousseau

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Abstract. In this paper, I present the problem of the poor king, from combining Descartes and Rousseau.

One evening I was thinking about something Descartes wrote, which involves kings and madness, and then about something Rousseau wrote, which also involves kings and madness, and a problem occurred to me, which I wish to present. I am not sure that it is a very important problem, but it is a problem. I call it “The problem of the poor king.” But before coming to the problem, I find it necessary to disambiguate.

Early on in the first meditation of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes briefly considers likening himself to the mad as a way of doubting his belief that the two hands he observes are his:

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.

I was going to confidently object to Descartes, but then I noticed an ambiguity in this translation: “they firmly maintain they are kings *when* they are paupers.” That could

be intended to convey that they believe they are kings but they are paupers and this fact undermines their belief to the point where it is delusional, to which I object, “Kings can be paupers too.” Or, alternatively, being or becoming paupers causes them to believe that they are kings and this is insane, to which I say, “Yes, the mere fact of being a pauper should not cause that belief.”

I suspect the first interpretation is right. Let us assume it is. Perhaps Descartes would have responded to my objection by saying, “Yes, it is logically possible for you to be a king and be a pauper, but it is highly probable, so improbable that these people must be insane to believe that this possibility is realized.”

It is time to introduce the problem. Let us imagine that you believe you are a king despite being a pauper. You want to convince Descartes, or at least some Cartesians, that you are sane. You don’t belong on his list of madmen, with such people as someone who believes they are a pumpkin, do you? So you try to make some money.

You are living in a country where Descartes’ meditations are very influential. So also are the writings of Rousseau. Now Rousseau also writes about kings and madness, when responding to a largely forgotten philosopher, and ambiguity too. He does so early on in chapter 4 of book 1 of *The Social Contract*. Rousseau writes:

If an individual, says Grotius, can alienate his liberty and make himself the slave of a master, why could not a whole people do the same and make itself subject to a king? There are in this passage plenty of ambiguous words which would need explaining...

Leaving aside the issue of ambiguity, Rousseau’s reply is that an individual cannot do what this philosopher says, because that would be mad and the contract would be

invalid owing to madness:

...such an act is null and illegitimate, from the mere fact that he who does it is out of his mind. To say the same of a whole people is to suppose a people of madmen; and madness creates no right.

That is all the material we need from Rousseau – we will be setting aside the theme of voluntary slavery, at least explicitly.

The problem you face is this:

- (a) You aim to convince people in the country you live in that you are not mad.
- (b) You cannot deny that you are a king – lying is beneath your station – or withhold this information, which would also mislead others.
- (c) Owing to the influence of Descartes, as soon as you declare you are a king, you are regarded as mad because you are a pauper
- (d) Owing to the influence of Rousseau, you cannot then make a valid contract, so you cannot make any money.

I suppose a solution is: respond to (d) by recommending that a person should be able to make a certain contract even if they are mad as long as to sign this particular contract would not itself be evidence of madness.

References

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