**Descartes and the Crazy Argument**

The first of Descartes’ six *Meditations* is devoted the task of building the best case for skepticism about the senses through the use of methodological doubt. In the course of his presentation, Descartes discusses, or at least references, four classic arguments for skepticism. Three of these arguments (the argument from perceptual error, the dream argument, and the deceiver hypothesis) Descartes treats with respect and subjects to sustained analysis. The fourth (which is actually the second in order of discussion in the text of *Meditation* I) he dismisses out of hand so summarily that it barely surfaces as an argument at all. Here is what he says:

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 vapors of melancholia that they firmly maintain that 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.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Ancient skeptics took a different view of the matter, regarding the madness hypothesis as a serious challenge to any claim to possess certain knowledge.[[2]](#footnote-2) Perhaps Descartes has judged too quickly in dismissing the madness hypothesis. On the other hand, perhaps Descartes is quite correct in his dismissive response to the possibility that he might be mad. At any rate, that is what I will argue in this paper. After sketching the argument more fully than Descartes does and treating it as a potential challenge to our knowledge-claims, I will argue that, pursuant to his aims in the *Meditations*, Descartes is within his rights to reject that challenge without further ado. However, I will then go on to develop Descartes’ ideas, suggesting that he has overlooked some of the profound implications of the madness hypothesis, implications that we can recover to our profit. I will conclude by suggesting some further applications of the Cartesian response to the madness hypothesis to analogous contexts.

**The Madness Hypothesis Stated** An old saying has it that those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad. One characteristic of certain sorts of lunatics, apparently the ones Descartes is most concerned about, is their absolute conviction about views that are obviously false, and easily seen to be so, on the basis of evidence obvious to everyone but himself or herself. Thus, the lunatics in Descartes’ examples imagine themselves to be kings, or clothed in purple, or made of glass – suppositions that, if they were *not* mad, could be shown to be false from obvious facts, such as they are in fact paupers, or naked, or quite able to sustain substantial blows without breaking. Yet their delusions seem quite unshakeable; as John Nash, Jr. once put it in an interview, his schizophrenic delusions seemed as certain to him in his madness as mathematical truths seemed to him in his lucid state.

Such a fate, it seems, could befall any one of us. Even if, as seems contrary to fact, there were no genuinely mad people in the world, it still seems *possible* (if only through divine intervention) that such people could exist. Indeed, if such people could exist, I could be one of them. If I were, and if my particular form of madness affected my powers of reasoning, the cognitive faculties I use to form my beliefs, how would I know? The obvious answer seems to be that I would neither know nor be able to find out whether this was the case or not the case. After all, I can only know that I am sane if I am able to use my cognitive, belief forming faculties to arrive at a rationally justified judgment about this contingent matter of fact, and this seems precisely what would be excluded by the sort of madness that I am supposing might be my lot. My being mad – even severely insane – is perfectly consistent with my believing that I am not, and even with my believing, on the basis of apparent reason and evidence, that I am sane. If am mad in the way I have been envisaging, then my cognitive faculties are deficient in such a way that I am no longer qualified to make rational judgments or even to judge the value of evidence as proof for the truth of any proposition.

More than this, even on the mere supposition that I might be mad, my epistemic condition will be exactly the same as if I were actually mad, and the use of my cognitive faculties to arrive a rational judgment about the matter equally futile. In order for me to arrive at any sort of rational judgment concerning my cognitive state, I have to assume that I am capable of so doing. However, if I make that assumption, then I am in effect begging the question against the very supposition that I am entertaining, since I cannot assume that I am capable of arriving at a rational judgment in this context without presupposing that I am sane, which is precisely the point at issue. On the other hand, if I cannot make that assumption, then I cannot have any reason to hope that I will be able to arrive at a rational judgment about the matter. Once again, the supposition that I might be mad in the manner envisaged calls my cognitive faculties into question in such a way that renders them useless for this sort of task. It seems, then, that I am caught in a dilemma. Either I seriously consider the question, in which case I have begged the question against my original supposition and the question is moot, or I recognize that, given my supposition, my cognitive faculties are disqualified from arriving at any rational judgment about the matter. In that case, the indicated conclusion would seem to be suspension of judgment on the matter, which is precisely the traditional skeptical conclusion.

**Why the Foregoing is not a Problem for Descartes** So it might seem at first glance. However, a closer look at the argument reveals that the apparent skeptical conclusion can be blocked, or rather, proves to be unreachable given the supposition that I might be mad. We have already agreed that, if I am mad, then I am disbarred from reaching any conclusion about whether or not this is the case. On this basis, then, I am expected to arrive at the skeptical conclusion that I cannot know whether I am mad or sane, and thus ought to suspend judgment about the matter. But wait a minute – in order for me to arrive at this skeptical conclusion, I have to suppose that it is possible for me to make a rational judgment about the matter, and as we have seen, this is to suppose that I am capable of using my cognitive faculties to do so. However, as we also have already seen, to suppose this is to beg the question against my original supposition that I might be mad. For, if that supposition is true I am disqualified from using my cognitive faculties to arrive at any rational judgment about whether or not I am mad. However, to embrace skepticism about the question in this case by suspending judgment about the matter is precisely to arrive at a rational judgment about the matter based on and though to be justified by those considerations. As such, it is precisely to do what, given my original supposition I am disbarred from doing given my current epistemic situation. Again, if I am mad in such a way that I cannot trust my cognitive faculties to arrive at any rational judgment about whether or not this is the case, then I cannot trust whatever reasoning it was that led me to suspension of judgment. In that case, suspension of judgment on this question will *not* be justified for me on based on any epistemic considerations.

This result holds regardless of whether or not I am actually sane or not, and despite the fact (if it is a fact) that these considerations would actually justify suspension of judgment. I can only reach this result as a result of the rational exercise of my cognitive faculties if I am sane, and this is something that, given my supposition that I might be mad, is not available to me without begging the question against that possibility. Since my belief that certain rational considerations imply a skeptical response to the question is itself the product of rational judgment, I am in no position to affirm that judgment given the possibility that I might be mad. Therefore, despite appearances, the supposition that I am mad does not imply skeptical suspension of judgment after all. What it implies instead is that there is no rational basis for me even to so much as discuss the question whether or not I am sane within the epistemic context created by the supposition that I might not be. For I cannot assume that I am rationally capable of doing so without already assuming that the supposition from which I began is false, and thus in that way begging the question against that supposition and foreclosing the conclusion before I even begin to discuss that question.

It should be clear, then, why Descartes is fully justified in dismissing the possibility that he might be mad in this context. Descartes is looking for grounds for skepticism, and in particular, skepticism about the senses as a (basic) source of knowledge about the external world.[[3]](#footnote-3) The madness supposition, as we might call it, cannot contribute to this project, since the epistemic situation/predicament that it envisages is self-stultifying in a way that will not permit even so much as rational thought about or discussion of the question it raises, let alone rational judgment or resolution concerning it. This is the result of the fact that this supposition calls into question the very cognitive faculties that would have to be relied upon in order to think about, discuss, or resolve the question it raises, thus placing us in an epistemic context in which there is no way to even undertake to think about, discuss, or resolve that question.[[4]](#footnote-4) Since no skeptical argument can emerge from such a context, it is simply irrelevant to Descartes’ project in the first *Meditation* and can simply be put aside. In assuming that he is not insane, Descartes may be begging the question against a certain sort of epistemic nihilist, although even this is debatable (see below), he is not begging the question against the skeptic. In the end, the madness supposition is no friendlier to the skeptic than to the dogmatist and thus cannot be used to resolve the question between them, because it can never generate a successful argument for skepticism and thus rationally justify skeptical suspension of judgment concerning the senses.

Still, one might ask, might not the madness supposition have important epistemological implications independent of and outside the ambit of Descartes’ project in the *Meditations*? After all, it *seems* perfectly possible, in spite of all that has been said thus far, that I might actually be insane in the manner envisaged above. Apparently, in the epistemic context constituted by the madness supposition, I am disbarred from using my cognitive faculties to even so much as discuss the question of whether I am insane, let alone to resolve it. At the same time, if I am insane, then the cognitive effects of my epistemic condition cannot be limited just to the question at issue, but must be seen to be applicable to every possible employment of my cognitive faculties. If that is so, how do I know that I can ever trust my cognitive faculties to arrive at rational belief, let alone the truth, about any matter whatsoever? Not, it appears, without begging the question against that supposition and assuming that I am not mad, in which case it appears that we are in grave epistemic difficulty indeed.

**How the Madness Supposition Refutes Itself** It is time to stop the bleeding. What we have so far taken for granted is that the madness supposition is coherent in such a way that it lies within our power, as cognitive beings, to entertain that supposition and explore its implications for epistemological questions. However, it is far from clear that we are able to do this. If we are to make this supposition, then it must be possible for us to envisage that supposition being metaphysically possible, i.e. true in the actual world; otherwise, it remains merely an idle speculation with an unspecified content. Now suppose that someone attempts to evoke this possible by means of some argument A (call it *the crazy argument*.) It really doesn’t matter what the content of A is, but just for ease of exposition suppose it is something like the following:

1. There is no logical contradiction in the supposition that I am mad at the present time.

2. Whatever is free from logical contradiction is logically possible, i.e. true in some possible world.

3. If a proposition is true in any possible world, then it is possibly true in every world.

4. The actual world is a possible world.

5. So the proposition that I am mad at the present time is possibly true in the actual world.

6. Therefore, it could actually be that case that I am mad at the present time.

Undoubtedly, there are many potential criticisms of this argument and, for all I know, it may even be invalid. It doesn’t really matter at all for my purposes. For, on the supposition that I might be mad at the present time, I am in no position to evaluate this argument and thereby accept the conclusion on its basis. Given that I accept the conclusion, I have placed myself in an epistemic context in which my cognitive faculties cannot be trusted to evaluate reasoning, especially putatively sophisticated philosophical reasoning of the sort embodied in the foregoing argument. In that case, whatever probative value argument A above may have seemed to possess prior to my accepting its conclusion, I now must ruefully disregard as beyond my cognitive power to assess.

At this point, it might be thought that I can somehow just intuitively grasp the possibility that I might be mad at the present time – that it is just somehow obvious to me in such a way that I cannot cavil with it. However, on the supposition that I might be mad at the present time, I am in no better position to rationally trust my intuitive grasp of what is possible than I am to evaluate argumentative reasoning. A lunatic might well believe with intuitive certainty that square circles are possible, that it is possible that 1031 to the 17th power is the highest prime, and that it is possible for God both to create a rock too heavy for Him to lift and yet go on to lift it, and so on. If I am mad, my intuitions are no more probative than those of any other lunatic and the fact that mine seem perfectly cogent whereas theirs seem ludicrous is exactly what we would expect, or at least, impossible to rule out.

The same, of course, will hold of claims based on experience, whether based on direct observation or on credible reports of others. I know that there are crazy people in the world; I have met some of them myself and have heard reliable reports to this effect from others. Given that lunatics do exist, there is no reason in the nature of the case why I might not count among their number. No, indeed: however, consider the case of the maniac who claims that he was abducted by aliens and lived for a time in a colony on Jupiter. He remembers all of this, and is willing to offer the testimony of other insane people who were there with him as further corroboration of his story. Somehow, I don’t find these appeals the least convincing. On the supposition that I might be mad as well, my own reports can carry no more weight than those I am all too ready to discount, despite the fact that it is metaphysically possible that they are true.

On the supposition that I might be mad at the present time, I occupy an epistemic condition from which it is, for all I know, impossible for me to even so much as envisage the possibility of that supposition being true, and thus to seriously consider its possible truth. Of course, if I am not mad in the way I have been envisaging, then it will be perfectly possible for me to envisage the possibility that I might be mad and investigate it philosophically as I have been doing here. In that case, it is perfectly possible that my cognitive faculties are reliable when properly used, just as they seem to be. It would thus seem to be the case that it is necessary condition for my even being able to envisage the possibility that I am insane at the present time in a manner serious enough for it to count as the basis for a philosophical hypothesis is that I am *not* actually mad.[[5]](#footnote-5) It thus seems to be the case that I can only seriously envisage the possibility that I might be mad on the supposition that I am not so *in fact*. Of course, in that case, if I actually do envisage the possibility that I am mad, as it appears to me that I can, the question of my sanity is moot.

Neither do I need to worry about the charge of begging the question. Begging the question is something that only a rational being can do. As such, begging the question against the supposition that I might be insane is possible for me only if I am sane. Therefore, if I actually do succeed in begging the question against the supposition, then I am *eo ipso* rational and thus not insane, in which case I clearly am not begging the question after all. On the other hand, if I am insane in the envisaged way, then I am not rational and thus am incapable of deliberately begging the question. In neither case, then, can the charge of begging the question stick.

It does not follow from this, of course, that I am sane or in a position to apprehend the state of my own mental health. Even though it seems to me that I am sane and perfectly rational, this could still be an illusion, as many philosophers might be inclined to suggest. Even so, given that in the nature of the case I could never have a good reason for supposing that I am insane whether I am or not, I really have no reason seriously to consider that possibility or treat it as a live philosophical hypothesis. If I am insane, of course, everything that I have just now said is just as much gibberish as anything else I might have said. So be it. Supposing that I have any choice at all (which, after all, could be an illusion too if I am insane), there is obviously only one choice open to me: to believe that I am sane. I have no reason to think that anyone or anything will ever persuade me otherwise, and supposing that I am sane, every reason to discount that possibility. In either case, it is best for me to follow the advice of the Calvinist preacher: “When you meet a contradiction on the road of faith, look it straight in the eye – and pass on.”

1. Descartes, *Meditations*, in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1985, Vol. II, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Cicero’s *Academica*, edited by H. Rackham, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1933, II, xvii, 52-54 and II, xxviii, 88-90 and Augustine of Hippo, *Contra Academicos*, translated by Peter King, Indianapolis, IN, Hackett Publishing, 1995, 3.11.25. Both discuss this possibility within a wider discussion of the dream argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As I have argued elsewhere, Descartes’ purpose in doing so is to undermine Aristotelianism and to prepare the way for the triumph of mathematical physics over common sense as the basis for what to believe about external reality. To this end, it is absolutely necessary that Descartes promote the problem of the external world as a genuine philosophical problem requiring an extra-scientific solution. See Steven M. Duncan, *The Proof of the External World*, London. James Clarke, 2008, Chapter One. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Frankfurt reaches a similar conclusion: see his *Dreams, Demons, and Madmen*, Indianapolis, IN, Bobbs-Merrill, 1970, 37-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A madman’s avowal that he is insane will be true and sincerely believed to be so by him. However, to the extent that his avowal is the product of his condition, its being true is merely accidental and has no more rational basis for him than anything else that he believes under that condition’s aegis. It counts neither as knowledge nor even rational belief. It is at best true opinion, with no more warrant than the lucky tout’s belief that his ability to pick winners is due to his reliance on fortune-tellers. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)