Why It Matters that I’m Not Insane: The Role of the Madness Argument in Descartes’s First Meditation

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ABSTRACT: Descartes’s First Meditation employs a series of arguments designed to generate the worry that the senses might not provide sufficient evidence to justify one’s taking as certain one’s beliefs about the way the world is. As the meditator considers what principle describes the conditions under which it is possible to attain certain knowledge, one after another doubt-generating device is ushered in, until at last he finds himself like someone caught in a whirlpool, able neither to stand firm nor to swim out. In this paper, I examine one of those devices, namely, what is often referred to as the Madness Argument. In particular, I want to discuss its relation to the Dream Argument and its function in the Meditations as a whole. My position stands in contrast to the interpretations of Anthony Kenny, Margaret Wilson, Michael Williams, and, more recently, Janet Broughton and Catherine Wilson.

DESCARTES’S FIRST MEDITATION employs a series of arguments designed to create doubt about whether the senses provide sufficient evidence to justify one’s taking as certain one’s beliefs about the way the world is. As the meditator considers what he knows for sure, one after another doubt-creating device is ushered in, until at last he finds himself (at the start of the Second Meditation) like a man caught in a whirlpool, unable to stand firm or to swim out. In what follows, I want to look at one part of the dialectical procession of the First Meditation, and specifically at what is often referred to as the Madness Argument. In particular, I want to discuss its relation to the Dream Argument and its function in the Meditations as a whole. Similar versions of the interpretation of the Madness Argument that I will endorse have been previously suggested by others, but I wish to expand upon this reading and defend it in the light of more recently offered alternative readings.

In the Meditations, the meditator is seeking a criterion by which to distinguish his true beliefs from his false ones. Toward this end, he successively offers and then rejects a series of candidates for this test. For years, he confines to the reader at the onset, he had assumed that his senses provided him with reliable information about the external world. He admits that less than optimal external conditions—say, things such as poor lighting or observations of objects at a great distance—might give him reason not to rely completely on data provided by the

1Because the situation in which the narrator describes himself in the first paragraph of the First Meditation differs from Descartes’s own philosophical development as described in the Discourse on Method, I will...
senses. But, he asks, when external conditions are optimal, do not the senses serve as the source for true beliefs about the world? In these cases, when something is right before my eyes, for example, is there any reason not to trust what my senses are telling me?

Ah, but what if I am insane? In other words, while external conditions may be optimal, what if internal conditions, so to speak, are not? Beliefs that I seem to know with certainty (“that I am here, sitting by a fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hand”) would now be put into doubt (AT VII 18; CSM II 13). For in this case, while what I sense may seem to provide me with a wholly accurate account of the world, I would be in fact no different from those 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).

Thus, if it is possible that I am insane—if this is something that cannot be ruled out—then, by the standards the meditator has set for himself, the senses fail to provide the sought-after criterion for distinguishing the true from the false. Let us call this the Madness Argument against empiricism.

The Madness Argument is not considered for long. The meditator immediately rejects the possibility that he is insane as a counter-argument to the proposal that the senses provide reliable information about the world when external conditions are optimal. Referring to the cast of characters mentioned in the passage quoted above, he claims that “they are insane, and I would be thought equally insane if I took anything from them as a model for myself” (ibid.). But once more he considers: “A brilliant piece of reasoning!” he says (sarcastically?) of his hasty rejection of the Madness Argument. Am I not like these people in that I have experiences when I am asleep much like they do when awake? In other words, while I have sense experiences when sleeping, I do not take these to be the source of reliable information about the external world any more than I take the madman’s report that he is wearing a purple robe when I see him to be naked as a reliable piece of information about how things stand in the world. But what reason do I have to trust my waking experience as reliable? Sense experience is sense experience (is it not?), so until I have a reason to count waking sense experience as (unlike sense experience in dreams) a source that can be trusted to support true judgments about the world, I—again by the standards established in the First Meditation—must withhold taking the experiences of the Dream Argument.

The move from the two questions. Why does the meditator not consider the Madness Argument but must conclude that the Dream Argument is a retraction of his proposal and gives it no real weight?

Anthony Kenny’s question is just the same purpose. In defining me as “mindful of his reader, mad?” is one of greater concern for me, it might seem offered, even if I do not know that I am not as performing the sense of proof, pursues the former argument, the “is introduced as an argument” and all do, madness is “

While I do not forget that I am lunacy, I do not forget that he is a purpose or that the fact that he is lunacy serves as Descartes’s earliest Argument. But before he gives up the Madness Argument but is prompted to meditate even me it is not himself: “People make it?” If this were incorrect...

1Follow Margaret Wilson when she is dreaming now, nor the meditator’s task would thus (or vice versa) so that he is awake and he is awake. The problem is to having found P, could he establish of this point, see Margaret Wilson.

2Anthony Kenny, Descartes (my emphasis).

Margaret Wilson, Descartes’s problem, the content of the mind, in Essays on Descartes (1986), p. 128). While I do not think that in both cases we have a resemblance (at least, at this point in the Madness Argument, it is any more of a reliability...
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1. F. Ablon, The Metaphysical Writings of Leibniz, 12 vols., ed. C. Adam and P. Hahn, Philosophical Writings of Leibniz, vol. 3 only (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). I am grateful to C. Adam and P. Hahn for their permission to use their edition of Leibniz’s Philosophical Writings of Leibniz, vol. 3 only.


4. Margaret Wilson, Descartes, pp. 11–12. Michael Williams also stresses the fact that “dreams can reproduce the content of the most commonplace waking experiences” (“Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt” in Essays on Descartes’ Meditations, ed. A. O. Rorty (Berkeley CA: Univ. of California Press, 1986), p. 128). While I do not deny that dreaming is more commonplace than insanity, I will argue that this is not Descartes’s motivation for dropping the Madness Argument in favor of the Dream Argument. Further, I think that Williams in particular misses the point of the Dream Argument. It is not the content of dreams and their similarity (at least sometimes) to waking experiences that does the work for Descartes. It is rather that in both cases we have sense experience (regardless of whether the “story” of the dream is normal or not), and at this point in the Meditations the meditator does not have grounds for trusting that waking experience is any more of a reliable indicator about the state of the external world than is dreaming sense experience.
meditation in the first place? A similar question can be asked of Wilson’s interpretation (and that of Williams; see note 6 supra). If the Dream Argument presents us with a much more acceptable reason for doubting the testimony of our senses, insofar as it is more commonplace than madness, why even mention the Madness Argument? But more importantly, we must ask if the Madness Argument and the Dream Argument really do put the same things into doubt. I believe that there are good reasons to think that they do not.

First, though, I want to mention another interpretation. In her recent work on the *Meditations*, Catherine Wilson suggests that the meditator never intends to take the possibility that he is mad seriously, even for a moment. Instead, she thinks that he compares himself to madmen only insofar as he thinks that anyone who considers doubting that of which the senses give him the strongest assurance (e.g., that I am seated near a fire) would be just as out of touch with reality as are the insane. “Look,” he is saying (to himself), “you want me to doubt that I’m holding a piece of paper in my hands at the very time I’m seeing a piece of paper in my hands? I’d have to be as mad as that guy who thinks he’s a pumpkin to doubt something that’s so very evident.” According to Wilson, he then does an about-face when he realizes that in dreaming he is indeed very much like a madman.

I have a difficult time reconciling this interpretation with what Descartes actually writes in the First Meditation. It seems clear that the Madness Argument is taken seriously, if only for a moment, and the meditator’s castigation of himself comes only after—and in fact because—he had taken the argument (and his rejection of it) seriously. After listing several things that he believes on the basis of what the senses so clearly tell him, he asks: “How could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine?” Well, how could it? “Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen” (AT VII 18–19; CSM II 13). It certainly seems from the text that, as is the strategy in the First Meditation, what is happening here is that a criterion for certain knowledge—in this case, that the senses provide one with reliable information about the world in cases in which the perception takes place under the most optimal of external conditions—is held up for scrutiny and rejected, first on the grounds of the Madness Argument and then as a result of the Dream Argument.

My own reading of the place of the Madness Argument in the First Meditation and in the *Meditations* as a whole is similar to a suggestion made by others, but I want to develop it and to examine it in light of recent criticism, as well as to defend it as a more promising answer to the questions asked above. Whatever else may be involved in madness, hallmark features of the insane are the making of inferences that are not warranted by the evidence and the employment of argument patterns that do not arrive at their conclusions in a valid manner. (Of course, we all do this from time to time. In fact, I believe, madness is merely the replicating of our own way of thinking about things. At the most extreme, At the most extreme, I think like the rest of the world. At the most extreme, I think like the rest of the world.

Following Harry Frankfurt, we can say that if I am insane, I am in favor of the (impossible) claim that I am insane, if taken seriously, in philosophy.

The whole point of *Meditations* is to determine whether one can begin by suspending judgment until one has reestablished his certainty of reason. In other words, we entertain doubts about everything until we have a reason by which we can expect to resolve them.

In other words, if the main point of the game is over before it begins, then the whole point of the meditation is to find a foundation for everything. The task [Descartes] sets for himself is to find a foundation for the reality of the physical. For example, suppose that I claimed the following inference form where the premise might be the case that I have no real body.

While it has for its main point in the first place, the *Principles of Descartes* (1644).
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from time to time. In the case of the madman it is simply more pervasive and more extreme. At the most basic level, isn't the madman the one whom we say doesn't think like the rest of us, i.e., along the patterns deemed "reasonable" or "logical"?

Following Harry Frankfurt, I think that the reason the Madness Argument is dropped in favor of the (importantly different) Dream Argument is that the possibility that I am insane, if taken seriously, undermines my ability to rationally conduct my philosophical investigation. As Frankfurt puts it:

The whole point of [the meditator's] 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. For if he were to entertain doubts about his own rationality, he naturally would be bound to suspect any reasoning by which he might attempt to establish his sanity. He could not reasonably expect to resolve his doubts (or anything else) in the course of his inquiry.  

In other words, if the meditator entertains the suggestion that he might be insane, the game is over before it has even begun. How so? What exactly is it about rationality that makes the meditator's doubt in his sanity defeating to his project of securing firm and enduring knowledge? Against Frankfurt, I think that it is not so much "that the task [Descartes] sets for himself in the Meditations is not to discover how a madman can find a foundation for the sciences." Rather, it seems to me that the real point is that if the meditator is not entitled to suppose his rationality a priori, that is, if he cannot assume without supporting argument that he has certain knowledge of the truth of basic logical laws as well as absolute faith in his understanding of valid logical deduction, nothing at which he arrives in the Meditations can be trusted. For example, suppose that I could not rely on my belief that modus ponens is a valid inference form when it seems to me that it is (and seems that it must be); while it might be the case that if p, then q, and I see (correctly) that p, I could not be justified in concluding q, since if rationality is out the window, nothing can be known to follow from anything else. And it is for this reason that the meditator claims in effect that it would be irrational to consider oneself irrational in an effort to find a criterion that will function as a guide for proper rational inquiry.

While it has for the most part gone unnoticed, Spinoza made a similar observation with regard to the meditator's need to presuppose his own rationality. In The Principles of Descartes's Philosophy, he notes that certain basic truths of logic,

10Ibid.
11It is true that the examples of beliefs held by certain madmen all are instances of propositions derived from inaccurate sense perceptions and not cases of an improper use of logic. Still, the Latin insanī and the French (approved by Descartes) insensē, which are translated as "madmen," do suggest that Descartes has in mind those who have a diminished capacity for rational thought and not merely those who occasionally have sensations that inaccurately represent the world to them. Further, anyone who believed that he was made of glass or that she was a gourd would almost certainly have to hold beliefs, incompatible with those beliefs, which themselves are based on what they take to be warranted grounds (e.g., that my hands do not shatter when I clap hard, or that pumpkins cannot talk while I can.)
such as something cannot come from nothing, are required for the cogito argument to succeed as Descartes needs it to do for his project:

For example, if someone should say that he is in doubt whether something can arise from nothing, he might also doubt his own existence even when he is thinking. For if I can affirm that something can exist without a cause, I can by the same right affirm that thought may exist without a cause and that I think although I am nothing.\(^{12}\)

In other words, without the principle that everything that is has a cause for its existence, there need not be an “I” to cause the thought “I am, I exist.” Likewise, the cogito requires the principle of non-contradiction, since without it, while I would exist when thinking, I could also \textit{not} exist at the same time and in the same manner.

On this interpretation, then, the difference between the two arguments is a difference in the scope of what each calls into doubt. The Madness Argument does not allow me to take as reliable (1) some (though I don’t know which) of my beliefs grounded in what my senses tell me (e.g., I cannot trust that I am sitting near a fire, for I might be like the naked man who believes himself to be dressed in purple); but, most significantly, (2) it leads me to doubt my ability to trace out a deductive argument using the principles of basic logic. The Dream Argument, on the other hand, calls into doubt the reliability of \textit{almost everything} that I believe the external world to be like on the basis of what my senses tell me. If I can offer no reason why the sense experience of my waking life should be preferred as more trustworthy than the sense experience of my dreaming life, most of my beliefs that I derive from sensation are put into doubt and, for the purposes of the \textit{Meditations}, taken as false.

But what, then, to do with the meditator’s exclamation “A brilliant piece of reasoning!”? Let us take things step by step. The meditator makes two claims preceding the remark:

(P1) It [cannot] be denied that these hands or this body is mine unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen.

(P2) I would be equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.

(P3) [That was] a brilliant piece of reasoning!

(P4) As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake. (AT VII 18–19; CSM II 13)

P4 fleshes out what the meditator meant by the ironic P3, for it explains why the preceding was \textit{not} particularly brilliant reasoning. But to what does P3 apply? On the Kenny and Wilson-Williams interpretations, P3 is merely a retraction of P2 (and a return to the consideration raised by P1). If the Madness and Dream Arguments are indeed the same, what has happened is that the meditator has caught himself in an inconsistency. “Look at what a smart guy I am,” he says sarcastically. “Here

I go and reject an argument that calls into doubt the reliability of the deliverances of my senses on the grounds that the argument supposes something quite out of the ordinary, when in fact the same doubt can be generated by a very similar argument, but, in this case one which rests on the most commonplace of experiences!  

But how are we to understand the utterance on my reading?  Actually, not too differently.  Again, on the interpretation that I am offering, the difference between the two arguments is one of scope.  The Madness Argument puts into doubt my rationality and the reliability of at least some of the deliverances of my senses, while the Dream Argument casts suspicion on the reliability of all the information (other than what Descartes calls “the simplest and most general things”)13) that my senses provide me about the external world.  So the “A brilliant piece of reasoning!” signals in an ironic tone the meditator’s realization that, while seriously entertaining the possibility that he is mad would be to stop his meditations just as things are getting started, he can achieve the doubt about the senses that he wants to have with the less far reaching Dream Argument.14 According to my reading, then, P3 is the meditator’s retraction not of P2 but of P1.  It marks his sudden awareness that likening himself to the insane is not the only way that his beliefs about his hands might be put into doubt, for there is another way it can be done, and this way does not require him to suspend his faith in the certainty of the rules of logical inference.

Janet Broughton has recently argued against the interpretation that I defend here on the grounds that for it to work, Descartes must hold that lunatics are globally irrational.15 But this, she notes, is clearly not the case.  The madman who thinks he is made of glass may nevertheless have many other beliefs that are true.  Indeed, he may, she suggests, be a fine mathematician.  Further, she argues, Descartes himself recognized that madmen are not globally irrational.  In the Replies to the Seventh Set of Objections (from Bourdin), Descartes says that the insane are capable of having clear and distinct ideas.16 According to Broughton, there are several functions that the Madness Argument serves, but none of them are the one for which I have argued.  Without addressing her own interpretation,17 let me say that I think she too hastily dismisses the view that the Madness Argument is rejected because the meditator

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3Specifically, it is “arithmetic, geometry, and all other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not [which] contain something certain and indubitable” (AT V, 70; CSM II 14).

4It is less far reaching in that it does not call into question my reasoning abilities. It is more far reaching in that it puts almost all of the information that I derive from my sense experience into doubt. An insane person may have many true beliefs generated by his sense experiences, but if my waking sense experiences are unreliable in terms of giving me an accurate picture of my world as are the sense experiences of my dreaming life, then most cannot be trusted to be justifiers of my beliefs.


6In her Descartes’ Method of Doubt (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002), Broughton claims (p. 65) that what Descartes says in the Seventh Set of Replies is “incompatible” with the interpretation that I am supporting. I argue below that it is not.

7Except to say that she sees P3 as a retraction of the meditator’s previous dismissal of both the possibility of doubting what seems most certain and the Madness Argument’s ability to generate this doubt. While she does think the Madness Argument supplies something that the Dream Argument cannot, she takes both arguments as capable of producing doubt as to the certainty of those “beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible” (AT VII 18; CSM II 12–13).
realizes (and Descartes knows) that to accept it is to destroy any chance of succeeding in the project for which the doubt is generated in the first place. First, such a reading does not require that lunatics be globally irrational. As I tried carefully to show above, what gets put into doubt with the Madness Argument are the truth of some of what I believe on the grounds of my sense experience and my ability to count on the most basic logical rules as holding. It is not that the insane are wrong or confused all the time, but rather, if I accept the Madness Argument, that I can never tell whether this particular instance is one in which I am thinking clearly or perceiving accurately (or not). It may be that I err only ten percent of the time, but if I have no means for telling whether this is one of those times, I can never know with certainty whether my belief is true. While a ninety percent chance of success is a good bet in general, for the standards in place in the First Meditation, it will not do.

What about the reply to Bourdin? In the passage cited by Broughton, Descartes is not saying that the mad have clear and distinct ideas, but rather is suggesting how Bourdin might have come to the conclusion that such was Descartes’s opinion. Speaking of Bourdin’s attribution of this position to him, Descartes writes:

I do not know what kind of analysis has enabled my supremely subtle critic to deduce this from my writings, for I do not remember ever having had any such thought, even in a dream. Admittedly, he may have inferred from what I wrote that everything anyone clearly and distinctly perceives is true, although the person in question may from time to time doubt whether he is dreaming or awake, or may even, if you like, be dreaming or mad. (AT VII 461; CSM II 310)

Careful attention to the text shows that Descartes is offering an explanation of how Bourdin might have come to attribute a particular view to Descartes. Note that Descartes does not say “he may have inferred when I wrote” that anything anyone clearly and distinctly perceives is true,” but “he may have inferred from what I wrote” that I thought “that everything anyone clearly and distinctly perceives is true.” It is true that later in the Meditations Descartes does arrive at the conclusion that what is clearly and distinctly perceived by me as true is true. But his point in the reply to Bourdin is that “it requires some care to make a proper distinction between what is clearly and distinctly perceived and what merely appears or seems to be” (AT VII 462; CSM II 310). This said, if Descartes had meant in this passage to claim that madmen can have clear and distinct ideas, my interpretation of the Madness Argument, inasmuch as it does not require global irrationality for lunatics, is not harmed.

Another reason that I am attracted to the interpretation offered here is that it provides a structural balance to the First Meditation. After noting that there are some beliefs of his that are not thrown into doubt by the Dream Argument, the meditator wonders whether his long-standing belief in God as a benevolent being can be maintained under closer scrutiny. What if, contrary to all I have ever thought, God is in fact a deceiver and has created me such that I err not only in my judgments, but in the natural world, but also in my perceptions? In that case, it appears that my senses are unreliable—there may be no light, no space—but every false notion I entertained as a man “think they have been mistaken.” (AT VII 21; CSM II 14). This is precisely what I have knowledge that I have knowledge of—man, unable to consult another unless two to three or four hours have passed—God Argument.

Not only do I think the Madness Argument are parallel, but there is another reason why they are both dropping the same logical demonstration. Without firm and enduring Timid Argument is dropped, and even the Memnon support. In the Timid Argument, deceiving Creator, if there are no evidences at [his] present state, he may have just as much reason [as me] to suppose him to be deceived as we. But in the Memnon, he observes that despite his former belief that the senses are infallible in the world, he still finds him is in fact reliable means of knowledge is introduced. In other words, if his senses sees as uncertain, then God is true.

Here is the relevant passage:

I will suppose that man was deceived, but rather some more subtle way, so to speak, his energies in order to deceive him, and the shapes, sounds and tastes to be only devised to ensnare him, as by light, or flesh, or blood or by force (AT VII 223; CSM II 15).

Two important things to note: first, the meditator is not deceived by God, but by the deceiving God, but rather by the deceiving God, but rather by his own senses. The evil genius is clearly understood as the cart on sense experience,
only in my judgments with regard to the clearest and most basic features of the natural world, but also when employing the seemingly surest of mental operations? In that case, not only would information derived from sense experience be unreliable—there might be "no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place"—but even my beliefs in the areas of mathematics and geometry, where men "think they have the most perfect knowledge," could not be trusted (AT VII 21; CSM II 14). Thus, if God has made me such that I am deceived when I think that I have knowledge of such simple truths, I am in the same state as the madman, unable to conduct even the simplest of deductions, whether it be adding two to three or counting the sides of a square. Let us call this the Deceiving God Argument.

Not only do I think that the Madness Argument and the Deceiving God Argument are parallel to each other in what they put into doubt, I also believe that they are both dropped for the same reason, namely, that to doubt basic truths of logical demonstration would force the meditator to cease his search for something firm and enduring in the sciences. Of course, my claim that the Deceiving God Argument is dropped—or better, put aside, until the Third Meditation—requires some support. In the First Meditation, after wondering about the possibility of a deceiving Creator, the meditator briefly considers the possibility that there is no God at all and then concludes that, were that the case, were he to "have arrived at [his] present state by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events," he would have just as much if not more reason to think that his imperfections might lead him to be deceived about himself and the nature of the world. The meditator then observes that despite his having generated many reasons that put into doubt the belief that the senses provide him with dependable information about the external world, he still finds himself falling back into his old opinion that such information is in fact reliable material for true judgments. It is at this point that the evil genius is introduced. In order to keep himself from, out of habit, trusting in what he now sees as uncertain, the meditator creates a fictional bogeyman to serve as a safeguard.

Here is the relevant passage:

I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgment. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. (AT VII 22–23; CSM II 15).

Two important things to note: first, the opening sentence strongly suggests that the meditator is no longer entertaining the possibility that he was created by a deceiving God, but has resumed his belief in the (benevolent) God in which he has always believed. Second, and more significantly, when those things in which the evil genius is created in order to put into doubt are listed, only beliefs based on sense experience are mentioned. The ability to put the truths of mathematics,
geometry, and logic are not within the power of the evil genius.¹⁸ That God is a deceiver is a real possibility for the meditator, albeit one that must be rejected for the same reason that the Madness Argument must be rejected.¹⁹ The evil genius, on the other hand, is a fiction created by the meditator himself, and its purpose is to serve as an aid to memory, akin to tying a piece of string around one’s finger. To consider the evil genius to be the Deceiving God under a different name is to seriously misunderstand the argument of the First Meditation.²⁰ It is true that “God” is mentioned at the start of the Second Meditation, but this is not, I hold, the Deceiving God or the evil genius. The meditator begins the Second Meditation by listing the various things put into doubt by the First Meditation, and he asks himself whether there might be “something else which does not allow even the slightest occasion for doubt” (AT VII 24; CSM II 16). In particular, he wonders if there is “a God, or whatever I may call him, who puts into me the thoughts I am now having” (ibid.). This is not the Deceiving God of the First Meditation. In the first place, the Deceiving God did not do his deceiving by putting false thoughts into my head, but by creating me such that I err even in those cases when I believe I have the most certainty. But second, the context makes clear that the meditator is asking here whether with regard to the author of my thoughts, whoever it might be—me, God, an evil scientist, the C.I.A.—might it be possible that there is one thing that this author cannot cause me to doubt. And of course, the meditator believes that he has found just such a thing in his knowledge that he exists whenever he thinks that he does.

Again, I maintain that the Deceiving God Argument is abruptly dropped for the same reason that the Madness Argument is dropped. If the doubt generated by either


²⁰In the Third Meditation Descartes constructs a proof that God exists and is not a deceiver. This leads to the infamous “Cartesian Circle” for the very reason that he cannot use logical inferences to conclude that my Creator exists and would not have created me such that I err when using what seem to me to be valid inferences.

²¹John Carrico provides one of the “best” examples of such confusion. His “The First Meditation” (Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 68 (1987): 222-48) refers to the evil genius who puts mathematics into doubt (p. 222), and even refers to the doubt raised by the passage in which the Deceiving God is considered (AT VII 21) as the “evil genius doubt” (p. 234), despite the fact that the evil genius is not first mentioned until three paragraphs later (AT VII 22-23). This said, I am in agreement with Carrico’s larger claim that the “central aim of the Meditations is to replace scholastic abstractionism with Descartes’ own nativism” (p. 229).
possibility is taken seriously, the meditator realizes that he would suddenly find himself unable to trust the conclusions of *what seem to him* to be sound deductions. That this is in fact why the Madness Argument is dropped seems to me supported by the fact that such a reading can best answer the two questions raised earlier, namely, why Descartes drops the argument, and why he brings it up in the first place if he knows he is only going to drop it. He drops it because, as said, he cannot proceed in a rational inquiry without being certain that the staples of rational thought—the basic rules of logical inference—can be trusted. He brings it up, I hold, because he feels the need to signal this commitment, and implicitly to acknowledge that he cannot, nor can anyone, begin with a truly blank slate. If a reasoning mind is to be the tool employed for an *a priori* investigation into the nature of the world, one must be fully justified in accepting without question the very laws that guide that reasoning. Or so, I hold, Descartes believed.