Descartes, Madness and Method: A Reply to Ablondi

David Scott

ABSTRACT: This paper replies to Fred Ablondi’s discussion of Descartes’s treatment of madness in the Meditations. Against Ablondi’s interpretation that Descartes never seriously takes on board the skeptical hypothesis that he might be mad, because to do so would be for him to undermine the logical thought processes required to realize his agenda in the Meditations, I contend that Descartes does employ madness as a skeptical device, by assimilating its skeptical essentials into the dream argument. I maintain that while Descartes does not use madness to undermine logical processes, he does adduce other considerations that reveal him to be prepared to see those processes undermined. On the question why Descartes abandons madness in the Meditations, I argue that, despite its attractiveness as a skeptical device, the madness hypothesis involves methodological shortcomings that render it unfit for service in the doubt.

UNTIL FRED ABLONDI’S DISCUSSION of it recently in this journal, Descartes’s treatment of madness in the Meditations has not exercised scholars greatly.¹ The reason likely has to do with the extremely short and apparently dismissive shift that Descartes gives madness in Meditation One.² With Ablondi’s account, however, the question of Descartes’s handling of madness as a skeptical tool is now squarely on the table. On his interpretation, Descartes never seriously takes on board the skeptical hypothesis that he might be mad, because to do so would be for him to undermine the logical thought processes required to realize his agenda in the Meditations. In the following I reply to Ablondi’s position. I attempt to show that in fact Descartes does employ madness as a skeptical device, and that he does so by assimilating its skeptical essentials into the dream argument. I argue that Descartes does not intend madness to undermine logical processes but that he is, rightly or wrongly and as a matter of general principle, prepared to see those processes undermined. Finally, this paper has a positive agenda, which is to answer the question why Descartes regards madness as he does in the Meditations. My contention, which derives in part from work by Hide Ishiguro, is that despite its attractiveness as a skeptical device, the madness hypothesis involves methodological shortcomings that render it unfit for service in the doubt.


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"A brilliant piece of reasoning while seriously entertaining us just as things are getting to be too serious, I have with the less far reaching piece of reasoning [!] in my awareness that likening the mental hands might be put into those or not require him to suspend

Ablondi claims that there Wilson et al., according to the hypothesis, and “what he describes, is clearly productivity rather than correctness his contention that “the meditator’s self-castigation extends not to the madness hypothesis, but not also to the madness hypothesis on the observation that Descartes he explicitly accepts P1 as 'a piece of reasoning'”’ Therefore, I (and he) which is a retraction (endnote 2) only at P2. That is, by ‘a piece of retraction. On the reason was the madness passage has Descartes’s repudiation of what he calls his "castigation"—

As noted, the proof that the skeptical thrust of the skeptical mind his rationale brilliant,“ because it fails to presenta experiences—namely, experiences of madmen of the insane and the sleep at night, and regularly lasts

3 Ablondi, p. 82, emphasis added.
4 Ibid., p. 84.
in Meditation One:

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David Scott

DESCARTES, MADNESS AND METHOD: A REPLY TO ABLONDI

“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. According to my reading, then, “[A brilliant piece of reasoning!]” 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. 7

Ablondi claims that there is a discrepancy between the interpretation of Catherine Wilson et al., according to which Descartes ends up taking on board the madness hypothesis, and “what Descartes actually writes in the First Meditation.” His concern, so described, is clearly philosophico-historical, as it addresses the correct meaning rather than correctness of Descartes’s position. 8 However, in my view Ablondi’s contention that “the meditator’s castigation of himself comes only after—and in fact because—he had taken the [madness] argument (and his rejection of it) seriously” rests on a serious misreading of this text. With Wilson et al. I maintain that Descartes’s self-castigation extends only to his reason for rejecting the madness hypothesis, and not also to the madness hypothesis itself. My textual argument against Ablondi relies on the observation that Descartes cannot be retracting P1 in addition to P2, because he explicitly accepts P1 in the sentence immediately following “A brilliant piece of reasoning!” Therefore, I claim that the declaration “A brilliant piece of reasoning!”—which is a retraction (entailing that something is being retracted)—can be directed only at P2. That is, by “A brilliant piece of reasoning!” Descartes is retracting only his retraction. On the reading that I share with Wilson et al., then, the dialectic of the madness passage has three moments: (i) the introduction of the hypothesis; (ii) Descartes’s repudiation of the hypothesis; and (iii) his repudiation—what Ablondi calls his “castigation”—of his repudiation of the hypothesis. 9

As noted, the proof that Ablondi misreads this text is that the meditator retains the skeptical thrust of the madness argument in the dream argument. In Descartes’s own mind his rationale for rejecting the madness hypothesis is poor, i.e., “bril-

lant,” because it fails to account for the fact that he routinely thinks thoughts or has experiences—namely, dreams—that are as insane as the waking thoughts and experiences of madmen. Descartes unambiguously likens the waking experiences of the insane and the sleeping experiences of the sane. He is “a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do

7Ibid., p. 85.
8Arguably, however, his way of putting the matter is question-begging, since presumably both he and Catherine Wilson are, as interpreters of Descartes, attempting to provide accounts of “what Descartes actually writes in the First Meditation.”
9(i) “Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapors 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.” (ii) “But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.” (iii) “A brilliant piece of reasoning! 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—indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night….”
when awake—indeed sometimes even more improbable ones.” The sameness in “all these experiences” is obviously not numerical sameness, but qualitative sameness, i.e., sameness of content. In respect of what else—other than content—could one experience be “more improbable” than another? This qualitative sense of “same experience” forces the conclusion, against Ablondi, that the skeptical content of the short-lived madness hypothesis in effect lives on in the dream hypothesis that now spearheads the meditator’s doubt.10 We can sum up Descartes’s retort (“A brilliant piece of reasoning!”) roughly as follows:

Fat lot of good it will do me to argue that I should dismiss the madness hypothesis because I’d be mad to accept it. How could I be so foolish as to think that such an argument against the possibility that I am mad could arrest the process of doubt? The fact is, the content or substance of the madness hypothesis, i.e., what the madness hypothesis actually entails for the purposes of my philosophical doubt, is present (perhaps even in spades) in a rather mundane feature of my daily (or nightly) existence. Stupidly, in dismissing the madness hypothesis, I have forgotten that I dream!11

II

That the text shows the meditator to take the madness hypothesis seriously is sufficient to undermine Ablondi’s claim that madness—that is to say, the skeptical implication of the madness hypothesis—is never taken seriously in the Meditations. Unquestionably, however, a deeper philosophical principle motivates Ablondi’s interpretation, a principle that, if accepted, significantly colors the wider reading that we give to Cartesian doubt. Ablondi claims, both generally and on Descartes’ behalf, that acceptance of the madness hypothesis precludes further rational inquiry. On this he follows Frankfurth’s view that “if [Descartes] 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 would naturally 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.”12 For the most part,

10Gary Hatfield also thinks that the madness hypothesis is not intended as an instrument of doubt. However, his argument differs from Ablondi’s, cf. Hatfield’s Descartes and the Meditations (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 75–76.

11Many commentators remark on the similarity between the madness and dream arguments. Janet Broughton, for instance, notes that “Descartes would expect his readers to be unsurprised by his structuring a dream argument in the same way he had structured a lunacy argument: for the ancient skeptics, the two phenomena also provided similarly structured skeptical considerations,” Descartes’s Method of Doubt (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 65–66; cf. ibid., p. 22. Also, cf. Margaret Wilson, p. 23; Ishiguro, p. 67; Derrida.


Ablondi concurs: “Following a philosophical method, the meditator claims in effect that the possiblility that I am mad could arrest the process of doubt. Finally, it is this rationalization of the madness hypothesis, to the hypothesis of the mysticism of madness, that the meditator is trying to arrest—namely, that to accept the madness hypothesis would necessitate that I cease his inquiry.

In a moment I shall make an observation about Ablondi’s argument. I am not going to consider the possibility that I am in fact mad. It follows that I conduct my philosophical inquiry. The meditator actually argued in this section that the madness hypothesis is a philosophical reason for not accepting the hypothesis; no consideration of the (admittedly) matter of historical fact that the madness hypothesis (as I deem) Descartes showed to be weak could be taken as evidence for his argument. The distinction between a possible or a probable hypothesis or a hypothesis that is plain and self-evident requires us to employ probabilistic reasoning, but it has its limits. While Descartes is within his rights in fixing the range of probability, we cannot accept the argument, few if any texts accept the argument. More to the point, when we read the passage from Meditations I, we see that it must bear the weight of reason.

Other considerations also militate against the Cartesian madness argument. It serves to divert further inquiry, in the sense that it diverts attention that in itself, i.e., as a matter of historical fact, it does not bear the weight of reason.

13Ablondi, p. 83. Against the charge of irrationality a priori, that is, in the sense of the truth of basic logical principles, Descartes claims that nothing at which he arrives is contrary to the texts, in the same way
the fact that this is precisely what Descartes entertains as a genuine possibility from the outset. Descartes repeatedly presents global skepticism as a live option toward which, for all he knows, he may be headed: "I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose upon me in the slightest degree." Further, as Descartes in fact seems reconciled in advance to the possibility of having his inquiry pre-empted at some stage, the fact that he does not regard it as having been interrupted at the madness stage of the process suggests that he does not hold madness to undermine his logical faculty.

Of course, this is to assume that Ablondi is right that Descartes thinks that undermining one's logical abilities is akin to undermining the possibility of further, non-circular inquiry. While it seems safe to assume that Descartes himself thinks this way—did he not, it is hard to imagine him capable of arguing rationally about anything—the rub is whether as a matter of historical fact he respects this principle. After all, everyone makes mistakes; so the question is whether Descartes makes the mistake of arguing in a circle. This is impossible to settle here; nor does it feature in Ablondi's deliberations. That said, scholars are generally agreed that, if Descartes does go astray in this way, he does so first by doubting his powers of reason—which Ablondi contends he doesn't do—and then by using those powers of reason to defeat the doubt. As for the factual question, there is, as Loeb has described it, "an enormous literature [that] offers a bewildering variety of solutions to this problem," and indeed there are many who maintain that the problem has no solution at all; which is to say that there is widespread acceptance of the existence of some version of the circle arising from the doubt of reason. That Ablondi's position clearly puts him at odds with that literature does not settle the substantive question, of course, but it does establish the enormity of the challenge he faces.

Returning, then, to the question whether Descartes rejects the madness hypothesis because it preempts further inquiry, it is worth noting that nowhere does he ever say anything like this. Yet if Ablondi is right that this is Descartes's view, Descartes's silence is surely very odd. His adherence to the presupposition of rationality would, if true, set an absolute, inviolable limit on doubt; and given the importance that he attaches to doubt, it is hardly credible that, in a self-professedly closely argued text like the Meditations, Descartes would not acknowledge his collapse of the presupposition of rationality.

Ablondi's account is clearly too simple to handle the facts that, remarkably, his position is about whether Descartes is open-minded in despite his madness and directly assumes that the meaning of his previous statement is. Descartes's statements forcefully attest that he himself has never given me any reason to think that it is evident. If Descartes's position were to undermine the logical faculty of his meditator, it would be impossible for him to act in the way he does.

The position that Descartes's position on doubt rests on the presupposition of rationality, as Ablondi, the medieval philosopher, does (though I don't think so), is not tenable. (e.g., I cannot think of any madman who believes his own madness, whether he is a madman or not, who fails to act in the way the meditator does.) One might think that Descartes could keep the madman in as a meditator, of course, in which case the madman would be tenable, but the madman is not a genuine meditator.

[Handwritten note:]

The evidence at this point is that the madman is a madman in a valence role, and that madman it is: the madman the one who believes himself mad in a genuine way. For this reason, I think, the madman is not a meditator.

**[Footnotes]**

17AT VII:22–23, CSM II:15. Descartes explicitly confronts this possibility twice more at the outset of Meditation Two §§1.2 (AT VII:24).

18Ablondi mentions it only once (p. 88 n19) and claims that the circle arises in connection with the deceiving God hypothesis in Meditation Three. It is not clear, however, that Ablondi thinks that there is a circle at all, as he goes on to claim that "the Deceiving God Argument is abruptly dropped." His support for this is that "if [this] 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" (pp. 88–89). This, again, is illicit, moving as it does from normative premise concerning what a meditator would do, logically speaking, to a factual conclusion about what Descartes actually has his meditator do.


20AT VII:4.
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acknowledge his having set a pre-ordained limit on it. Even less credible is what Ablondi’s account requires us to believe, namely, that Descartes expresses his adherence to this fundamental methodological limit in a single ironic utterance, “A brilliant piece of reasoning!” This unlikely view must further contend with the facts that, right from the outset, Descartes professes to keep an open mind about where methodological doubt might take him and that he eventually extends this open-mindedness to his faith in rationality. Just a few paragraphs after the madness and dream arguments, in Meditation Two’s examination of the question whether the meditator can justify defining himself as a “rational animal,” in light of his previous doubt the meditator refuses to consider or define what rationality is. Descartes’s principled willingness to embrace logic-impugning doubt is most forcefully attested by that fact that in Meditation Three he sets out “to remove [the] slight reason for doubt” raised by the possibility of “some God” who “could have given me a nature such that I was deceived in matters which seemed most evident.” If Descartes were as concerned as Ablondi maintains to insulate his logical faculty from the effects of methodological doubt, such pronouncements would be impossible in the Meditations.

III

The position that Descartes rejects madness because he places reason off limits to doubt rests on a certain view of what the madness hypothesis undermines. For Ablondi, 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.” While Ablondi seems to be right about (1), matters are not so simple when it comes to (2). In fact, deciding the precise sense in which Descartes thinks madness compromises pure thought processes may be a complex task. Consider what else Ablondi has to say about Cartesian madness:

[H]allmark 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 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”?)

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\(^{21}\) “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” (p. 85).

\(^{22}\) AT VII:25, CSM II:17.

\(^{23}\) AT VII:36, CSM II:25.

\(^{24}\) Ablondi, p. 84, emphasis added.

\(^{25}\) Ablondi, pp. 82–83.
This raises interesting issues. For while Ablondi might well be right that for Descartes madmen don’t “think like the rest of us,” the question is how Descartes holds their thinking to be different. Does he think it is intrinsically different (because, for example, madmen really lack some internal capacity, or have a different one), or does he think it is merely extrinsically different, i.e., a matter of degree. On the one hand, Ablondi asserts that a madman’s errant thinking—his “making of inferences that are not warranted by the evidence and [his] employment of argument patterns that do not arrive at their conclusions in a valid manner”—is distinguished from the errant thinking of the sane by its being “simply more pervasive and more extreme.” This seems to cast the distinction in terms of degree rather than kind. On the other hand, the claim that the madman is “the one whom we say doesn’t think like the rest of us, i.e., along the patterns deemed ‘reasonable’ or ‘logical,’” makes it sound as if Descartes regards madmen either as lacking some capacity that sane people possess, or as possessing a faculty somehow diseased or compromised in itself. In this case the difference looks to be one of kind, not degree.

To appreciate this difference, consider, on the one hand, the account of madness given in the examples of madness in Meditation One. On these examples, the disordered thought processes of the insane are the result of a disturbed physiology, e.g., vapors. The story is the causal one that disordered physiology gives rise to certain mental passions, which in their turn disorder thinking. Thus, we might imagine that the lunatic who argues, invalidly, “If A is B, and B is C, then A is not,” concludes this if, as the result of a traumatic experience with her logic professor at college (for instance), she was constantly compelled by her emotions to veer away from the conclusion normally forced by such premises.

Now contrast this interpretation—madness as tied to physiological impairment—with the interpretation according to which it is the activity of an inherently defective mental faculty. Inherently defective thinking, thinking defective in itself rather than in relation to or as a result of some externally located stimulus or condition, seems more like the kind of thing contemplated in the hypothesis of a deceiving God who creates me to go wrong. On that account, the lunatic’s deviance is constitutional, and defective logic is part of her very fabric; and because of that, the way in which her thinking is errant must, in the very nature of the case, be concealed both from her and from others (a fact that, among other things, renders treatment out of the question). Unlike the first version of madness, in this case no extrinsic or incidental emotional component can be isolated to explain the move from “If A is B, and B is C” to “A is not.” That move is inexplicable both in itself and in relation to any natural external condition—creation notwithstanding—or psychological mechanism. With no substantive explanation to hand, the best that we can hope for is just what many hold Descartes to offer us later in Meditation One: the purely formal device of an omnipotent creator who does things we simply cannot comprehend, e.g., have two and three make more or less than five. This at least fills the place-holder that we require to avoid that ultimate piece of metaphysical insanity, which is that the lunatic’s behavior has no explanation at all.

23Ablondi acknowledges that Descartes’s madmen are “afflicted by inaccurate and confused reasoning” and “by disturbed and disordered mental processes.” Descartes himself states that the lunatic’s “inverses, which are to be understood as representing the mind’s contrariety for rational conclusions, represent the world to the lunatic by contrary representations.”

24Marion argues that these concepts are ideas of the mindless (amenities: Alberto Manguel, and the mind (mens) to poor wits, which means that they do not exhibit anything more. (Cartesius, Questions (Chicago II: 161), 149). And the merely mindless is to be understood to an absence or deficit in the mind, which of course must be present to be.

25AT VI:141, CSM II:160.

26In effect, Descartes seeks to show that our innate knowledge—perception—(i.e., the body: “Finally the senses do not err” (I should not say: our senses attached to bodily organs, do not err) or bodily organs, as we mistake the application of the senses by those organs. This is a version of the Meditations, VII:228, CSM II:160.)

27In the Meditation that takes the form of creation ex nihilo, which Descartes rejects. Cf. AT VII:40–41.
Let us now turn to the texts to see where Descartes stands. We just noted that his actual examples of madness suggest an extrinsicist account.27 His claim that mad people are those “whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapors of melancholia that they firmly maintain . . . ,” clearly identifies physical causes for errant beliefs (mental states). So, madness is errant thinking distinguished as such by disordered passions; errant thinking as madness can be distinguished from the errant thinking (also caused by passion) of the sane, through the fact that the mental passion of the former is ultimately traceable back to disordered or unusual physiology. On this view of madness, errant belief seems to be the symptom, while the “disease itself,” i.e., the underlying cause, is not something mental, but physical.28

The Meditations' position on madness is confirmed in Descartes’s other writings. In the early Optics we find an account of madness that is straightforwardly physiological in nature: “it is the soul which sees, and not the eye; and it does not see directly, but only by means of the brain. That is why madmen . . . often see, or think they see, various objects which are nevertheless not before their eyes: namely, certain vapors disturb their brain and arrange those of its parts normally engaged in vision exactly as they would be if these objects were present.”29 In the fourth set of replies to objections to the Meditations, Descartes says the lunatic’s power of thought is “disturbed” by states of bodily affairs, and in general he accepts that bodily organs “impede” thought.30 Another relevant discussion is found in the seventh set of replies to objections. In response to Bourdin’s reading of Descartes, according to which “matters of the utmost certainty . . . are such that they cannot appear doubtful even to those who are dreaming or mad,” Descartes responds:

27Ablondi acknowledges that none of Descartes’s examples involve faulty reasoning. His response is to assert that Descartes’s terms (insani, insensée) “suggest” that madmen use improper logic and are not merely afflicted by inaccurate sense perceptions: “Still, the Latin insani and the French (approved by Descartes) insensée, 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” (p. 83 n11). I find no support for this claim.

28An account of madness in the Meditations that clearly doesn’t work is by Jean-Luc Marion. On his view, Descartes regards lunatics as mindless, i.e., without minds. Among the other minds treated in the Meditations, Marion argues, some “emerge, first as madmen (insani: AT VII 18 [1.26]) who are immediately rejected as mindless (amenes: AT VII 19 [1.5]). Unlike the demented (demenes: AT VII 19 [1.6]) who put their damaged mind (mens) to poor use, they have no mind, they have lost it, and with it, almost their humanity: As amenes, they do not exhibit other minds that could be compared to mine, which thereby remains unique,” Cartesian Questions (Chicago IL: Chicago Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 121–22. This distinction between mindless lunatics and the merely mind-damaged demented is unsustainable. Descartes’s term for “madmen,” insani, refers to an absence or deficiency of health, not mind. Insani actually presupposes mind’s presence, as a mind must be present to be unhealthy.

29AT VI:141, CSM I:172–73.

30In effect, Descartes grants interaction, though at the same time he denies thought’s dependence on the body: “Finally the fact that the power of thought is dormant in infants and extinguished in madmen” (I should not say ‘extinguished’ but ‘disturbed’), does not show that we should regard it as so attached to bodily organs that it cannot exist without them. The fact that thought is often impeded by bodily organs, as we know from our own frequent experience, does not at all entail that it is produced by those organs. This latter view is one for which not even the slightest proof can be adduced” (AT VII:228, CSM II:160).
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 might have inferred from what I wrote that everything that anyone clearly and distinctly perceives is true, although the person in question may from time to time doubt whether he is dreaming or awake, and may even, if you like, be dreaming or mad. For no matter who the perceiver is, nothing can be clearly and distinctly perceived without its being just as we perceive it to be, i.e., without being true. But because it requires some care to make a proper distinction between what is clearly and distinctly perceived and what merely seems to be, I am not surprised that my worthy critic should here mistake the one for the other.\footnote{CSM II:309–10, AT VII:461–62.}

Here Descartes says that although someone “may even, if you like, be dreaming or mad,” it remains the case that “everything that anyone clear and distinctly perceives is true.” Clearly, he thinks that dreamers and madmen are capable of having clear and distinct perceptions and thus of possessing truth. While nothing is said about the relation of physiology to lunatic thinking, it tells against the second part of Ablondi’s view of Cartesian madness, because it means that for Descartes lunatics are rational or retain their reason, in the sense that they retain their capacity to have clear and distinct perceptions, i.e., to engage in acts of pure understanding.\footnote{For Descartes, lunatics are rational also in the sense that they retain their capacity for language. Descartes argues this in the so-called “language test” of the Discourse on the Method (AT VI:56–59). While both these capacities (to think clearly and to speak) may well employ reason or pure intellect, for Descartes they are not necessarily the same kind of purely intellectual act. For while he thinks that linguistic acts involve acts of pure understanding, if his replies to Hobbes are anything to go by he does not think that all acts of pure understanding are or result in linguistic acts, cf. AT VII:178.}

What the texts generally reveal, then, is that for Descartes madness is an underlying physical condition ultimately causing mental passions, passions that in their turn cause faulty inferences. Those inferences are mental, but they are not the result of purely intellectual thinking, i.e., of ideas proper. It is the operation of (mental) passion, ultimately the result of a physiological disorder, that precipitates the false steps taken in lunatic logic. Did the inferences result from ideas proper they would be logical inferences, which they are not. Note, however, that strictly speaking there is nothing untoward in the mere fact that passions, construed mentally, can and do disorder thinking. As Brown argues persuasively in her recent work, we have “passionate minds,” a fact basic to the human condition as Descartes understands it.\footnote{Deborah J. Brown, Descartes and the Passionate Mind (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006). Cf. Lilli Alanen, Descartes’s Concept of Mind (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 97–106.}

IV

We have now considered both Ablondi’s account of Descartes’s treatment of madness and the madness hypothesis, and the interpretive principle guiding that account, namely, the more general view that Descartes does not (and cannot) doubt reason. The chief challenge to his more general view comes from commentators who view Descartes as doubting the truths of mathematics, by means of the deceiving God hypothesis. For them, Descartes’s doubt of mathematics just is doubt of reason, and...

\footnote{Ablondi, p. 87. Ablondi, p. 88.}

Ablondi certainly argues that Descartes’s phrase “Not only do I think, but I think that I think” are parallel to each other, and both dropped for the same reasons. In the same demonstration would have been short-lived and enduring in the same way.

In denying that I think therefore I am, there has developed over time a common view. Their mistaken understanding of an omnipotent deity further complicates the other. Both are sketched in the form of an evil demon—actually, quite a few of its appearance as the demon who, if accepted, would, if accepted, would accept evil demon hypothesis, i.e., a demon who is “put aside the demon” (as he has dropped” (again), as God or demon, rendered imaginary in literature debating as to whether I will explore in a single line, and the others restrict my attention to the subject.

Ablondi claims in his final paragraph (§ 5), however, that it raises in that meditatio, and the desire to with the obvious falsehood, but by the obvious falsehood, tract in order to install the evil genio hypothesis, but against the problem where the “malice...
Ablondi certainly accepts that part of their position. Against their view, however, he argues that Descartes does not doubt the truths of mathematics in the Meditations: “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.”

In denying that Descartes doubts mathematics, Ablondi is not alone. Over the years there has developed a small but not insignificant stream of commentators who share this view. Their main strategy has been to distinguish in the Meditations between an omnipotent deceiving God on the one hand, and a “lesser” evil demon on the other. Both are skeptical devices, but, the argument goes, only one of them—the evil demon—actually plays a role in the doubt. On this view, what initially makes its appearance as the hypothesis of an omnipotent, deceiving God (which hypothesis would, if accepted, undermine reason), is actually replaced in Meditation One by the evil demon hypothesis. Thus, the evil demon is substituted for the deceiving God, who is “put aside until the Third Meditation,” where Ablondi claims it is “abruptly dropped” (again). The result of this substitution is that reason, unthreatened by God or demon, remains secure. Ablondi acknowledges the existence of an extensive literature debating this question, a literature that he does not and could not possibly explore in a single paper. Needless to say, I am in the same predicament, so I shall restrict my attention to Ablondi’s specific arguments for this position.

Ablondi claims that the evil genius—not a deceiving God—is introduced in the final paragraph (§12) of Meditation One, as a response to the problem that Descartes raises in that meditation’s penultimate paragraph (§11), viz., that habit works against the desire to withhold consent from “former beliefs just as carefully as . . . from obvious falsehoods.” He rightly identifies the meditator as being concerned to install the evil genius presented in §12 “as an aid to memory,” intended to safeguard against the problematic return of “habitual opinions.” Here is the beginning of §12, where the “malicious demon” is first mentioned:

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, colors, 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.

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34 Ablondi, p. 87.
35 One of the first to argue for this replacement is Henri Gauthier, Essais sur Descartes (Paris: Vrin, 1937), p. 163. Cf. reply by Kenny, p. 35.
36 Ablondi, p. 88. I find no evidence for this claim.
37 Ablondi, p. 88 n.18.
38 That said, the last three paragraphs of this section contain arguments that, as far as I know, have not previously been made in this debate.
39 AT VII:22, CSM II:15.
40 AT VII:22–23, CSM II:15.
Ablondi has two comments:

[F]irst, 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 [sic] the truths of mathematics, geometry, and logic are [sic] not within the power of the evil genius. 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. 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.

Here are my responses to Ablondi’s comments. (1) Neither in the first sentence of §12, nor anywhere else in the evil demon passage, does Descartes refer to the possibility that he was created by a deceiving God. That possibility is mooted earlier, in §9. So in §12 there is simply no basis for Ablondi’s contention that “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.” Nor, for that matter, is there any evidence that Descartes has suspended his doubt and returned to his faith. Here in §12 Descartes do exclude God as the source of the doubt he expresses there, and his reason is given explicitly as deference to those who insist that God is not evil, but “supremely good and the source of truth.” This deference is simply his acknowledgment of a scruple that he raises in §9, the scruple, specifically, that “perhaps God would not have allowed me to be deceived in this way, since he is said to be supremely good.”

(2) The simple absence of reference in §12 to beliefs that are purely logic-based proves nothing about Descartes’s intentions in respect those beliefs. In fact, far from helping to settle the issue (as Ablondi thinks), it simply raises it. In any event, it is easy to demonstrate, alone on the basis of the text in question (but also on the basis of other texts), that although Descartes does not mention these beliefs explicitly, his doubt in §12 still encompass them. As we have seen (and as Ablondi notes), in §§11–12 the meditator sets up the evil genius “as an aid to memory,” employed to safeguard against the problematic return of “habitual opinions.” But the question is: in respect of which memory in particular is the evil genius supposed to provide aid? Against the return of which “habitual opinions” in particular is Descartes out to safeguard? Descartes answers explicitly: It is the memory of or safeguard against the return of those “opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful,

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43AT VII:22, CSM II:14.
44In his “Synopsis” Descartes offers far stronger grounds for doubt about the propositions of geometry and the evidence against the possibility of a deceiving evil genius than of material things over which our senses can have any knowledge. “especially material ones.”
45As set out in Book One, §12 as reflected in the conclusion of the Meditations.
46Descartes announces in Book Two that he will confine himself subsequently to the first philosophy.
48CSM II:15. “Descartes, the Intelligencer,” in its most general heading, speaks of a “faculty of clear and distinct intuitive knowledge.” A painful demon, some of whose effects the meditator was, as a physician, who takes a similar view.
49Kemp, 1973: 639–41. Kemp (1973: 641–43), to whom I am indebted, observes that Slightly Leibnizian is the term, not with all his resources.

40AT VII:21.
41Ablondi, pp. 87–88.
42Presumably “put into doubt” is intended here.
as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny."\(^4^6\)

The opinions to which Descartes is referring here are the opinions that he has "just" doubted. They are the opinions that, he says, "are in a sense doubtful" and that he is continually drawn to reaffirm despite having adduced reasons to doubt them. (Hence the need for the safeguard.) Clearly, among the opinions that "are in a sense doubtful" are the mathematical opinions doubted in §9 by means of the deceiving God hypothesis. In this sense they are expressly included in the present doubt (in §12); so, by the very rationale for the evil demon that Ablondi cites, it is apparent that Descartes does doubt the truths of mathematics.\(^4^7\)

Ablondi's additional claim that "the ability to put [into doubt] the truths of mathematics, geometry, and logic [is] not within the power of the evil genius," is also contradicted by the text he cites. Even granting that Descartes "replaces" the deceiving God with the evil demon, the fact is that the demon is every bit as powerful as the deceiving God. Some have explained Descartes's emphasis on omnipotence and his willingness to undermine reason on the strength of it, in terms of his place within the voluntarist tradition of Scotus, as distinct from the rationalist tradition of Aquinas.\(^4^8\) Whatever the merits of this view, there is no question that omnipotence, in conjunction with malice, is the primary attribute to which Descartes appeals in his characterization of the supernatural deceiver. Time and again he is explicit on this point, both in the evil demon passage from Meditation One, and in almost every other reference to the deceiver (however the deceiver is called).\(^4^9\) In the passage Ablondi cites, instead of talking about "God, who is supremely good and the source of truth," Descartes considers "some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning [who] has employed all his energies to deceive me."\(^5^0\)

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\(^4^6\) AT VII:22, CSM II:15.

\(^4^7\) In his "Synopsis" of the Meditations, Descartes claims to provide reasons "which give us possible grounds for doubt about all things, especially material things" (CSM II:9, AT VII:12). This is further textual evidence against the view that, because in some of his statements of the doubt Descartes mentions doubt of material things only, he must therefore be understood as restricting doubt to material things. The phrase "especially material things" gives us license to take more restrictive statements of the doubt (i.e., Meditation One, §12) as reflections of an intention to emphasize one kind of doubt rather, than to reject another. Once Descartes announces in the "Synopsis" that there are some things he will emphasize, we can hardly expect him subsequently to give equal attention, in every statement of the doubt, to everything he doubts.


\(^4^9\) Cf. infra, nn54-62.

\(^5^0\) CSM II:15, AT VII:22. My argument here echoes Loeb (p. 204), who maintains that "[t]he supposition, in its most general form, that renders beliefs based on clear and distinct perception doubtful is that one's faculty of clear and distinct perception is defective—whether as the result of a deceiving God, a powerful demon, some other chain of events, or chance." I also accept Hatfield (p. 88) and Marion (pp. 22-23), who take a similar approach. My position is opposed to Kennington (pp. 44-45). Hiram Caton replies to Kennington on this point, "Descartes on Descartes' Evil Genius," Journal of the History of Ideas 34 (1973): 639-41. Kennington continues their debate in "Reply to Caton," Journal of the History of Ideas 34 (1973): 641-43, to which Caton appends a rejoinder. John Cottingham, "The Role of the Malignant Demon," Studia Leibnitiana 8 (1976): 257-64, takes up Kennington. Walter H. O'Brian agrees with Cottingham, but not with all his reasons, cf. "Doubting the Truths of Mathematics in Descartes' Meditations," Southern
Finally, moving beyond the confines of Meditation One, Ablondi claims that in Meditation Two §3, when Descartes asks if there is “a God, or whatever I may call him, who puts into me the thoughts I am now having,”31 he is not talking about the deceiving God of Meditation One §9:

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 whether with regard to the author of my thoughts, whoever it might be—me, God, an evil scientist, the C.I.A.—might it [sic] be possible that there is one thing that this author cannot cause me to doubt.32

The objection here that the deceiving God can’t be the evil demon, unlike the evil demon, such that it doesn’t deceive “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” fails on at least two counts. First, there is no reason why for Descartes the deceiving God could not be “putting false thoughts into my head” precisely by “creating me such that I err even in those cases when I believe I have the most certainty.” In other words, there is nothing to prevent us from reading this not as A or B, but as A by means of B. Second, Ablondi’s focus on a difference between the precise kinds of deception practiced respectively by God and the evil demon ignores the fact that, as we have just seen, however else we might characterize the supernatural deceiver, it is omnipotent. It is hard to credit that Descartes is or would be exercised by the precise mechanism behind deception wrought by an omnipotent being. The texts simply don’t show this to be his concern; but it is unlikely they would. For, given that the deceiver is omnipotent, what could Descartes have to say concerning the mechanism of deception? As far as I know, Descartes doesn’t ever put matters this way, but his successor Malebranche certainly does, albeit in a context other than doubt. For him, the whole point of God’s omnipotence is that it obviates the need for (and the sense of) mechanism in the case of the divine. Such talk in respect of God is simple anthropocentrism.33

In the first three meditations there is an unmistakable indefiniteness in Descartes’s characterizations of the supernatural deceiver. This indefiniteness is most apparent in the French translation that Descartes approved and that, unlike the Latin version, allows for easy substitution of “Deum” (Meditation One §9, “un Deum,” “quidquid unum Deum,” “quidquid unum Deo sunt”) for “sceptrum” (“de Deo,” “equidem scias quidquid unum Deum,” “quidquid unum Deo sunt”); and “in suum opus” (Meditation One §12), Descartes does not mean the “utmost power” (“optimum virtutis”) but the “utmost power entailed by being a metaphysical subject” (“utmost power entailed by being a metaphysical subject”).34 When there is no distinction between the deceiver and the “quidquid unum Deo sunt” and the omnipotence of the deceiver, it is clear there is no distinction between the deceiver and the omnipotence of the being who is the deceiver in Meditations Two, Three, and Four. Descartes is simply preponderant in favor of unreflective theism; the Cartesian has attracted Descartes to theism.

This looseness and indefiniteness, by attributing it to God or by any refusal to make a sharp distinction, already shown convinced Descartes that Descartes is or would be exercised by the precise mechanism behind deception wrought by an omnipotent being. The texts simply don’t show this to be his concern; but it is unlikely they would. For, given that the deceiver is omnipotent, what could Descartes have to say concerning the mechanism of deception? As far as I know, Descartes doesn’t ever put matters this way, but his successor Malebranche certainly does, albeit in a context other than doubt. For him, the whole point of God’s omnipotence is that it obviates the need for (and the sense of) mechanism in the case of the divine. Such talk in respect of God is simple anthropocentrism.33

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32 Ablondi, p. 88.
33 Nicholas Malebranche, Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion, ed. & trans. N. Jolley and D. Scott (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 112–14. Ablondi’s further contention that “the context makes clear that the meditator is asking . . . whether with regard to the author of my thoughts, whoever it might be—me, God, an evil scientist, the C.I.A.—might it [sic] be possible that there is one thing that this author cannot cause me to doubt” (emphasis added), is misleading, as it suggests that the identity of the putative author of my thoughts is somehow unknown: it is “me, God, an evil scientist, the C.I.A.” The identity of the author of his thoughts cannot be known for Descartes, for he says he knows exactly who the author of his thoughts is (for the purposes of doubt): it is an omnipotent deceiver, namely “a God, or whatever I may call him, who puts into me the thoughts I am now having.”
allows for easy inference to definite and indefinite articles. Right from the outset (Meditation One §9), Descartes speaks of “an omnipotent God” (“Deum,” “un Dieu”) who “allowed me to be deceived.”\(^{54}\) In the same meditation (§10), the indefinite description is again employed: (a) “the existence of so powerful a God” (“aliaquem Deum,” “un Dieu”);\(^{55}\) (b) “Let us grant . . . that everything said about God is a fiction” (“de Deo,” “un Dieu”).\(^{56}\) In the final references to the deceiver in Meditation One (§12), Descartes speaks of “not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth” (“optimum Deum,” “un vrai Dieu”);\(^{57}\) “but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning” (“genium aliquem malignum,” “un certain mauvais genie”);\(^{58}\) and “the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be” (“nec mihi quidquam iste deceptor,” “ce grand trompeur”).\(^{59}\) This pattern of usage, in which there is no distinction between the indefinite way in which Descartes talks about God qua deceiver and the indefinite way in which he talks about the evil demon, continues in Meditations Two and Three.\(^{60}\) Overall, it dominates the Latin version, but it is so preponderant in the French translation that it is inconceivable that it would not have attracted Descartes’s attention, had it not accurately reflected his meaning.

This looseness of approach to the supernatural deceiver cannot be explained either by attributing to Descartes a distinction between a deceiving God and an evil demon, or by any refusal on Descartes’s part to impugn reason; such explanations, we have already shown on separate grounds, are defeated by the texts. However, assuming that Descartes is deliberately vague or non-committal in these references to the supernatural deceiver, his approach is best explained by his simply being mindful of the theological scruple that he raises in Meditation One (§9) that God “is said to be supremely good.” In other words, it is best explained by reading him as saying, in response to this scruple, “Right then, we’ll call the deceiving God something else; we’ll refer to the deceiver in such a way that it need not be taken to specify that god in respect of which certain people will insist on a strict form of address, even in purely hypothetical discourse.” In reality, I suggest, all that is at issue here is a name, for the texts reveal the skeptical content of the deceiving God and the evil demon hypotheses to be the same. This suggestion is borne out in Meditation Two, where Descartes asks, “Is there not a God, or whatever I may call him, who puts into me these thoughts I am now having?”\(^{61}\)

A final piece of textual evidence against those who, with Ablondi, maintain that Descartes is distinguishing between the deceiving God and the evil demon, is found

\(^{54}\) CSM II:14, AT VII:21 (1.2), AT IX:16;
\(^{55}\) CSM II:14, AT VII:21 (1.17–18), AT IX:16;
\(^{56}\) CSM II:14, AT VII:21 (1.20), AT IX:16;
\(^{57}\) CSM II:15, AT VII:22 (1.23), AT IX:17;
\(^{58}\) CSM II:15, AT VII:22 (1.24), AT IX:17;
\(^{59}\) CSM II:15, AT VII:23 (1.14), AT IX:18;
\(^{60}\) For Meditation Two, cf. CSM II:16, AT VII:24 (1.21), AT IX:19; CSM II:17, AT VII:25 (1.6), AT IX:19;

in Descartes’s reference to the deceiver in Meditation Two §6. There Descartes speaks of “some supremely powerful and, if it is permissible to say so, malicious deceiver, who is deliberately trying to trick me in every way he can,” and what is noteworthy is his insertion of what appears to be the same theological scruple—“if it is permissible to say so”—he raises in Meditation One (§§9, 12). The earlier concern, it will be recalled, is with calling God, who is good, “malicious” (and thus a deceiver). Assuming that the same scruple motivates Descartes’s insertion in Meditation Two of the phrase “if it is permissible to say so,” this suggests that the being Descartes is talking about is God as much as it is the demon. That is, he is equating them, at least for the purposes of philosophical doubt. For the only way Descartes could be raising a theological scruple in respect of the demon that he also raises in connection with God is if he is not (for the purpose of the doubt at least) distinguishing the two. If he is not distinguishing them, it makes perfect sense that he would acknowledge this theological scruple in respect of both God (in Meditation One §9) and “some supremely powerful . . . deceiver” (in Meditation Two §6).

V

Having demonstrated the overall untenability of Ablondi’s interpretation of Descartes’s handling of the madness hypothesis, we must now address the question why Descartes ultimately troubles to replace the madness hypothesis. Given that he finds similarity of content in the madness and dream hypotheses, why does he not simply run with the madness hypothesis, rather than replace it with the dream argument? If this issue has a philosophically satisfactory, non-trivial resolution, it is likely to be found in some feature of the dream hypothesis not comprehended by the madness hypothesis. I shall argue that the dream argument is methodologically superior to the madness argument, i.e., superior as regards the methodological nature of Cartesian doubt. My suggestion is that if there is a good reason why Descartes substitutes the dream argument for the madness hypothesis, it is the methodological one that, as a meditator, he cannot wield madness as a skeptical tool in the way that he can wield dreaming. That is, “This might be false because I might be mad” works differently, in a way that does not further the doubt, from “This might be false because I might be dreaming,” even though in each case it is the same thing that might be false.

Here I rely on a paper by Hide Ishiguro. On the question of madness as a skeptical hypothesis, Ishiguro maintains that there is a difficulty about giving substance to the supposition that one is now mad, and that the only way [one] can do this is, as in the case of dreaming, to think that in principle there could be a future state in which [one] was certain of one’s madness, in the sense of this difficulty as she says. For it turns on the question of whether one’s future state, in which one is certain of madness, is the same one, like, is available to us.

In the process of arguing that one’s affirmation of madness—independently of the content of the hypothesis—happens when we imagine it.

The world impinges on us, and we can either establish or establish facts depending on what we believe. The Committed to Human: the process of imagining the world as it is, and the world be as it is, is the process of the breakdown of the phenomenon and the table that are created to exist, and the phenomenon’s existence of people that is what people relate or fail to outside certain patterns, whether they think as why the thinker truth to him to true beliefs.

On Ishiguro’s reading, the objective imputed pattern of mad beliefs and desires to the world in the way that we find these patterns [of beliefs or desires] in the insane. Ishiguro contends, because of some property of the mad world we find it impossible for the mad person to hold true beliefs and desires. The same would be the case to the pattern of relations in which the thinker takes the pattern of relations to true beliefs, predicting the breakdown of the philosopher who believes that the world would then be the same as-thus, the same as by us, i.e., by sane people.

If for argument’s sake, we will at least the outline of a case.
which [one] was certain that [one] had been mad and rightly so.” Ishiguro’s solution of this difficulty is purely formal or without content, i.e., a point of principle, as she says. For it turns out that no description (in terms of content) of what the future state, in which one was certain and right that one had been mad, is actually like, is available to us now.

In the process of arguing her position, Ishiguro adds some considerations about madness—indeed independent considerations, not derived from the Cartesian texts, though consistent with them—which, I believe, can help solve our present problem. What happens when we interpret someone’s behavior as “mad”? Ishiguro comments:

The world impinges on a person’s beliefs, and even where the way in which we measure or establish facts depends on conventions, these are not arbitrary. That is why in interpreting other people we in general adopt what Richard Grady has called the Principle of Humanity: the principle that the imputed pattern of relations among beliefs, desires, and the world be as similar to our own as possible. . . . To judge a man mad is to avow the breakdown of the Principle of Humanity. It is perhaps when the kind of tension that are created to cope with our irrationalities seems to be absent that we acknowledge the existence of people whose systems of belief we fail to penetrate. We do not see how they relate or fail to relate to the world outside them. Even if we can recognize from the outside certain patterns in such a person’s train of thought, what we cannot understand is why the thinker takes these patterns to correspond to a line of thinking which leads him to true beliefs.66

On Ishiguro’s reading, the Principle of Humanity, which she accepts, covers “the imputed pattern of relations among beliefs, desires, and world.” Mad people, she contends, violate that principle, by undermining our confidence that they relate to the world in the way we do. The reason we cannot understand why the lunatic “takes these patterns [of belief-world relations] to correspond to a line of thinking which leads him to true beliefs” is that we wouldn’t take those patterns to lead us to true beliefs. Therein lies an important difference: we (the sane) think, between the sane and the insane. Ishiguro’s point about the Principle of Humanity is that, presumably because of some property in virtue of which the lunatic differs from the sane person, we find it impossible to impute to an insane person a pattern of relations among beliefs and desires (on the one hand) and the world (on the other) that is similar to the pattern of relations we share among ourselves. If we did see how a person “relates or fails to relate to the world outside [her],” or if we could understand “why the thinker takes these patterns to correspond to a line of thinking which leads him to true beliefs,” presumably we would not deem that person insane or “avow the breakdown of the Principle of Humanity.” Such a person’s ways of relating to the world would then be understandable in terms of the pattern of relations established by us, i.e., by sane people, in our beliefs about and dealings with the world.

If for argument’s sake we accept this account of madness, we can formulate at least the outline of a solution to the question why Descartes drops madness in favor

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65Ishiguro, p. 68.
66Ishiguro, pp. 72–73, emphasis added.
of dreaming. Unlike the madness hypothesis, the dream argument doesn’t require us to avow a breakdown in the so-called Principle of Humanity. It doesn’t require this because the relation of ourselves and our beliefs to the world in sleep is at some level known or familiar to us in a way that the relation of ourselves and our beliefs to the world in madness is not. That is, at least relative to any belief-world relation that we might stipulate in the case of madness, the belief-world relation in sleep is both grasped and shared in the way contemplated in the Principle of Humanity. This fact, I maintain, credits the dream hypothesis with a methodological advantage. This becomes apparent when we consider that in order for doubt to be methodological at all—for beliefs to be undermined in a systematic manner—the patterns of relation to the world on which those beliefs rest must be known or understood. How can one doubt beliefs in a systematic way, unless the patterns of relation those beliefs have to the world are understood? On Ishiguro’s account, those patterns of relation remain hidden in cases of madness, and this means that any systematic effort to undermine the beliefs resting on them must falter. As a methodological strategy, therefore, the madness hypothesis is a dead-end. Descartes’s doubt does not target beliefs willy-nilly. Rather, it is methodological, which means that it targets the rationale behind sets of beliefs. Such rationale is what Ishiguro terms the “pattern(s) of relation” between beliefs and the world, and the point is that unless it is available to scrutiny, it is not available to doubt, and consequently the beliefs resting on it fail to be undermined in any meaningful, principled way.

A natural way of objecting to this would be to claim that the patterns of belief-world relation in dreaming are no clearer than the patterns of belief-world relation in madness. To defend against this, I must be able to show how, in some relevant sense of “know” or “understand,” I actually know or understand what it means to put myself in the position of a dreamer, but do not know or understand what it means to put myself in the lunatic’s position. In their own ways, madness and sleep represent unknown relations to the world, unknown not least because they are relations in which we lack control, in which we do not feel ourselves entirely to be the authors of our own thoughts (to use Descartes’s terms). What needs to be shown is that madness is the greater unknown, or that while the distortions of dreams may be the same (qualitatively speaking) as the distortions of madness, the fact that they are distortions of dreams makes them more accessible to us than they would be were they distortions of madness.

Here perhaps the best I can do is propose a strategy—an appeal to everyday usage—to establish the claim about the methodological significance for Descartes of the difference between madness and dreaming. Our everyday use of “madness” and “dreaming” tolerates, I suggest, a distinction between madness and dreaming such that we would regard an explanation of falsehood in terms of the former as less satisfying than an explanation of falsehood in terms of the latter. So, “he might be wrong because he might be dreaming” might be taken to involve considerations different from “he might be wrong because he might be mad.” The idea is that if, for instance, John claims to have kissed Sue, but in fact he didn’t (because he only

dreamt it), I have an explanation of error. If John had a dream, he didn’t have a memory of the dream that taught him he didn’t kiss Sue. But why don’t I have an explanation of error in the case of madness? I can’t explain why I deluded myself by attributing his delusion to the fact that he didn’t know he was. This paper has basically (V). In the first part (V), I have argued that the madness hypothesis, which Ishiguro has attended to this, is a text-based one that he in the dream argument for madness is false, and that Descartes doesn’t undermine the beliefs. In addition, I challenge the idea that Ishiguro distinguishes between everyday usage and what would undermine the theories of madness that does not reflect a philosophical solution to the question of the dream hypothesis. The dream hypothesis, I think, is not of interest. Relying on Ishiguro’s analysis, I argue that we could take. Perhaps this is an explanation of error, but better understood, and an explanation of error, better understood, and the question of Descartes’s doubt.

67 AT VII:481.
DESCARTES, MADNESS AND METHOD: A REPLY TO ABLONDI

This paper has basically involved two parts, one negative (I to IV), the other positive (V). In the first part I argued against a particular reading of Descartes’s treatment of the madness hypothesis by Fred Ablondi, the commentator who, more than most, has attended to this question. My initial counter-claim against Ablondi was the text-based one that he fails to account for the fact that the madness argument lives on in the dream argument. On that basis I also disputed Ablondi’s understanding of what madness is for Descartes, and I adduced arguments against the interpretive principle guiding his reading of the madness hypothesis—the principle, namely, that Descartes doesn’t (because he wouldn’t) doubt his own powers of reasoning. In addition, I challenged Ablondi’s evidence for his supporting claim that Descartes distinguishes between a deceiving God (who plays no role in the doubt but who would undermine reason if He did), and an evil demon (who does play a role in the doubt that does not threaten reason). On the positive side, I showed that if there is a philosophical solution to the question why Descartes replaces the madness with the dream hypothesis, it is likely rooted in a methodological consideration of some kind. Relying on Ishiguro I showed what form that methodological consideration could take. Perhaps the least secure aspect of my efforts was my contention that, as an explanation of error or falsehood, the hypothesis that we might be dreaming is better understood, and thus more methodologically efficacious, than the hypothesis that we might be mad. Hopefully the foregoing has gone some way toward solving the question of Descartes’s relation to the madness hypothesis.