Cogito and the Problem of Madness. Derrida vs. Foucault

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COGITO AND THE PROBLEM OF MADNESS.
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Abstract

The present article represents an attempt to argue in the favor of the thesis that, in the First Meditation, in the fragment where the problem of madness is spoken of, Descartes’ view aims to exclude the possibility that the knowing subject, the Cogito, could be insane, and not only to avoid the problem of madness because of various reasons or to replace the madness-example with a dreaming-example. In other words, this research aims to expose and to argue for Michel Foucault’s point of view regarding the Cartesian problem of madness, and also to argue against Jacques Derrida’s view on the same issue. More broadly speaking, beyond the highlight of a possible different approach to Descartes’ text or the analysis of the Derrida-Foucault controversy, the main aim of this article is to emphasize a problem maybe less discussed of the act of knowing: beyond the proper usage of a wrong method, the misusage of a correct method or the poor practice of some spiritual exercises, the errors in the act of knowledge could as well follow from a deficiency in the knowing subject itself.

Keywords: Descartes, Foucault, Derrida, Cogito, madness, epistemology, spiritual exercise.

I. Introduction. The Cartesian excerpt

In this article I will argue that, in the fragment from the First Meditation where Descartes approaches the problem of madness (Descartes 2008, 13-14), his aim is to exclude (and not only to avoid) the possibility that the knowing subject (the Cogito) could be insane; in other words, I am going to argue in the favor of a point of view held by Michel

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Foucault, and I will try to reject another possible interpretation of the Cartesian text, which belongs to Jacques Derrida. According to Descartes’ approach, the problem of madness is entirely different – the possibility that the knowing subject could be mad is not avoided by Descartes simply because it is impossible for a knowing subject to be mad indeed, but because the dream represents a better example of doubt, and also because of what Derrida calls *pedagogical reasons*. The stake of this essay is not only to show a fresh (or at least different) way of approaching Descartes’s text, but it could also present and shape the Derrida-Foucault controversy, as pointing out a less noticed or approached problem of the act of knowing – a false opinion could occur not only because of the usage of a wrong method or because of the wrong practice of a correct spiritual exercise\(^2\) (or even the proper usage of a deficient spiritual exercise), but also because of some sort of deficiency in the knowing subject himself (the madman, for instance). Beyond *meletē heautou*, *gnōthi seauton* and their intersection, the madman is also to be found.

I will begin by presenting the extract from Descartes’ text, and a series of arguments in the favor of my thesis will follow. I will also try to counter some possible counterarguments, in order to strengthen my standpoint.

\(^2\) In this research, the term “spiritual exercise” will not strictly refer to a religious act, such as an incantation, a prayer, fasting and so forth, and will have a broader signification (which actually could, in a sense, include a religious dimension, but which will not be limited to it). Even if, let us say, the origin of this term could be traced back to Ignatius of Loyola, where it had a more religious connotation, here it will be used, as we are going to see, in a Foucauldian sense, meaning, to put it briefly, that an spiritual exercise is an auxiliary act of the process of knowing, and that it is not to be confused with the method itself. In Foucault’s opinion, Descartes’ text, as it will be presented here, also speaks of the dimension of this spiritual exercise and, moreover, it is emblematic for an epistemological passage from a *care of the self* to a *knowledge of the self* (and I consider that it is highly disputable whether this is the last text where the two dimensions are mixing together). Thus, an incorrect spiritual exercise is referring to an auxiliary act that rather prevents the process of knowing, and a poor practice of a correct exercise means to apply wrong an exercise which otherwise (in the pure theory, for example) is favorable to the act of knowing.
But perhaps, although they [the senses] sometimes deceive us about things that are little, or rather a long way away, there are plenty of other things of which there is clearly no doubt, although it was from the senses that we learned them: for instance, that I am now here, sitting by the fire, wrapped in a warm winter gown, handling this paper, and suchlike. Indeed, that these hands themselves, and this whole body are mine – what reason could there be for doubting this? Unless perhaps I were to compare myself to one of those madmen, whose little brains have been so befuddled by a pestilential vapor arising from the black bile, that they swear blind that they are kings, though they are beggars, or that they are clad in purple, when they are naked, or that their head is made of clay, or that their whole body is a jug, or made entirely of glass. But they are lunatics, and I should seem no less of a madman myself if I should follow their example in any way. (Descartes 2008, 13-14).

II. Foucault’s reasoning – the madman as an alter

The problem that Descartes invokes in the quoted paragraph is seen by Foucault in a manner that supports my thesis. As he mentions (Foucault 1972, 56-58), the impossibility of being mad it’s essential for the

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3 Being given that this paragraph is situated at the very core of my research, I will also quote John Cottingham’s translation, where it can be explicitly seen that here Descartes is referring to the sensorial perception: “Yet although the senses [my emphasis] occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses – for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapors of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.” (Descartes, 1988).

4 Since Richard Howard only made an abbreviated translation of the Foucauldian text and did not include in his edition the passages from the second chapter referring to Descartes’ Meditations, I will further use the translation made by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa, in Michel Foucault, History of Madness (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), and my own translation of a very short
thinking subject, and not for the object of thought, for the object that is to be known. Moreover, Descartes chooses the dream over madness (and this is a main question this essay addresses) because even if “one admits the possibility that one might be dreaming, and one identifies with that dreaming subject to find « some grounds for doubt »”, we cannot “suppose that one is mad, even in thought, for madness is precisely a condition of impossibility for thought.”5 (2006, 45).

In other words, the possibility of thinking is specific to the thinking subject, the Cogito, while madness is presented here exactly as the opposite of the capacity of thinking. Descartes chooses the dream because he can suppose that he thinks and, at the same time, he dreams, but he can not suppose that he thinks and, at the same time, he’s mad. This view is strengthened by Foucault when he specifies that “in the economy of doubt, there is a fundamental disequilibrium between on the one hand madness, and dreams and errors on the other”6 (45), in the sense that the dream is only a stage, a step, which will be overran in the process of searching for the truth – “Dreams and illusions are overcome by the very structure of truth”7 (45), as Edward McGushin also pointed out – but madness is the impossibility of searching for the truth.8

Finally, Foucault synthesizes the Cartesian excerpt using an illustrative motto: “We are not always sure of not dreaming, but we can

passage, where I found it more appropriate; I will also quote the original French edition in footnotes, in such a way that the reader could see the used excerpts in a broader perspective.

5 “On peut supposer qu’on rêve et s’identifier au sujet rêvant pour trouver «quelque raison de douter»”, “On ne peut, en revanche, supposer, même par la pensée, qu’on est fou, car la folie justement est condition d’impossibilité de la pensée.” (Foucault 1972, 57).

6 “Dans l’économie du doute, il y a un déséquilibre fondamental entre folie d’une part, rêve et erreur de l’autre.” (1972, 57).

7 “Songes ou illusons sont surmontés dans la structure même de la vérité.” (1972, 57).

8 “Madness is simply excluded by the doubting subject, in the same manner that it will soon be excluded that he is not thinking or that he does not exist.” (2006, 45); “La folie est exclue par le sujet qui doute. Comme bientôt sera exclu qu’il ne pense pas, et qu’il n’existe pas.” (1972, 57).
never be sure of not being mad.”⁹ According to Foucault, the attempt of being extravagant itself is an extravagance, and “the perils of madness have been quashed by the exercise of Reason.” (2006, 46)⁰:

This new sovereign [of Reason] rules a domain where the only possible enemies are errors and illusions. [In] the process of Descartes’ doubt [...] madness is banished in the name of the man who doubts, and who is no more capable of opening himself to unreason than he is of not thinking or not being.¹¹ (Foucault 2006, 46)

Summing up the interpretation given by Foucault, we can say that, in his *Metaphysical Meditations*, Descartes excludes the possibility of being mad (“they are lunatics, and I should seem no less of a madman myself if I should follow their example in any way”) because madness is exactly the incapacity of thinking¹², while the dream is just a method we use to doubt the existence of some objects, an obstacle that need to be overcome, and which supposes the action of thinking (thinking is for it a necessary condition, although not a sufficient one).

In order to better understand this argument and this interpretation given by Foucault, we shall try, using a series of terminological distinctions, to place ourselves more carefully in the context of his speech, or otherwise we might be accused of the same mistake Foucault is accused by Derrida – whose view I shall introduce soon – the mistake that Foucault would have had since the very beginning of his exposition “an assured and rigorous precomprehension of the concept of

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⁹ Here I preferred a more textual translation, since Murphy and Khalfa’s translation has a tendency to say that we can never know either if we are mad or if we are dreaming, which, I believe, is not the point of Foucault’s fragment. They say as follows: “Man was never certain that he was not dreaming, and never sure that he was not mad.” (2006, 46); “On n’est pas toujours sûr de ne pas rêver, jamais certain de n’être pas fou.” (1972, 58).

¹⁰ “Le péril de la folie a disparu de l’exercice même de la Raison.” (1972, 58).

¹¹ “Celle-ci est retranchée dans une pleine possession de soi où elle ne peut rencontrer d’autres pièges que l’erreur, d’autres dangers que l’illusion. Le doute de Descartes [...] bannit la folie au nom de celui qui doute, et qui ne peut pas plus déraisonner que ne pas penser et ne pas être.” (1972, 58).

¹² See McGushin (2007, 183), where he points out that “The very essence of madness is the incapacity of doubting.”
madness.” (Derrida 2005, 49). Thus, I will introduce a hermeneutic process which aims to present what Foucault understands by *madness*.

In his Preface to the first edition of the *History of Madness*, Foucault states that madness is the *absence of an œuvre*:

> What then is madness, in its most general but most concrete form, for anyone who immediately challenges any hold that knowledge might have upon it? In all probability, nothing other than the absence of an œuvre. (Foucault 2006, XXXI)

Derrida, commenting Foucault’s text, will say that, according to Foucault, or even to the entire historical thought that he is studying, “the concept of madness overlaps everything that can be put under the rubric of negativity” (Derrida 2005, 49). Derrida continues his exegesis, mentioning that Foucault wanted madness to be the subject of his book, the subject of the *History of Madness*, but a subject “in every sense of the word: its theme and its first-person narrator, its author, madness speaking about itself” (39). Such a madness, Foucault will be writing, can be spoken of only by means of a specific speech, where “madness [is] speaking on the basis of its own experience and under its own authority, and not [...] within the language of reason” (39). In this context, the history of madness is “a history not of psychiatry, [...] but of madness itself, in its most vibrant state” (39-40).

Let us try to clarify these affirmations. The madness that Foucault speaks of, and at the same time the madness that can be found in Descartes’ text, represents a “madness [...] before being captured by knowledge” (2005, 40), a form of madness “itself”. Foucault refuses the

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13 Everything happens “as if Foucault knew what «madness» means” (Derrida 2005, 49).

14 Cf. Derrida (2005, 391, n. 6); in this translation of Derrida’s text, as the translator, Alan Bass, points out in this footnote, the absence of an œuvre has been translated by absence of work, in order “to avoid confusions that could be caused by caused by translating it as « Work of Art »”. According to Bass, “to translate Foucault’s definition of madness [...] as « the absence of the work of art » (l’absence d’œuvre) does not convey Foucault’s sense of the absence of a work governed by institutionalized rationalism”.
language of reason, of Order\textsuperscript{15}, choosing something that he will call *the archaeology of a silence*. However, I strongly consider that speaking about this silence is a difficult task, being given that we are not allowed to use a language of order, structured in accordance with the exigencies of reason. The language that is to be used, Foucault will claim, is a *language without support*, situated in a *relativity without recourse* (Foucault 2006, XXXV)\textsuperscript{16}; in other words, as Derrida remarks, “a language declining, in principle if not in fact, to articulate itself along the lines of the syntax of reason” (Derrida 2005, 44). Such a language, as it can be easily pointed out, is a language that is unusable, being given that it does not accept the requirements of reason\textsuperscript{17}, or that it is more than an ordinary language, being given that it only refuses *in principle* and not *in fact* the the exigencies of reason (but then it is not a *proper language for a silence* anymore), or, in the end, that rather represents a *silence*. Anyway, from these ideas we can see that being insane could (also) mean not being able to use proper, intelligible and meaningful language, or even to be totally silent.\textsuperscript{18}

I shall now introduce a new concept, a new idea, which will help us better understand Foucault’s discourse. This silence, that represents the object of Foucault’s *archaeology*, is not to be understood as “an original muteness or nondiscourse, but [as] a subsequent silence, a discourse arrested by *command*” (2005, 45). In this context, Foucault introduces the Decision, “the point at which the dialogue [between

\textsuperscript{15} “The system of objectivity, of the universal rationality of which psychiatry wishes to be the expression”, but also “the language of the body politic” (2005, 40).

\textsuperscript{16} Also see Derrida (2005, 43).

\textsuperscript{17} I think that this aspect could be seen as a rejection of a logical principle – and more precisely, as the rejection of the Law of the Excluded Middle. If we accept this, then Foucault’s argument – this time, somehow beyond the pure analysis of Descartes’ text – becomes even more powerful: generally speaking, I believe it can be easily accepted that, if being mad supposes not respecting the Law of the Excluded Middle when one thinks, then thinking means having already dismissed the possibility of being mad.

\textsuperscript{18} A praise of madness, as Derrida emphasizes, supposes “intentions [that] cannot be admitted because the praise (éloge) of silence always takes place within logos, the language of objectification” (2005, 44).
reason and unreason] was broken off” (44-45). This moment appears in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, when the right to language had been annexed by the “psychiatric reason”. Foucault considers that Descartes’ excerpt is illustrative also for the “moment at which the great confrontation between reason and unreason ceased to be waged in the dimension of freedom, and in which reason ceased to be for man an ethic and became a nature.”

This dimension regarding human nature in Descartes’ text context is of interest in this article; in other words, here it will not be asserted that man could choose whether to be mad or reasonable (and hence an issue concerning ethics could occur), but it will be considered, as Foucault also does, that man, in the context of the actual discussion, is either reasonable or insane.

Once having presented these specifications that could be useful in order to better understand Foucault’s considerations on the passage from the First Meditation, I will introduce another opinion regarding Descartes’ text, an opinion that belongs to Jacques Derrida and that is formulated as an answer to and a critique of the Foucauldian interpretation, and then I will try to argue against this hermeneutic process, this possible counterargument (and this possible counterexample) showing that my thesis – Michel Foucault’s interpretation of the problem of madness from the Cartesian Metaphysical meditations is the correct or, at least, the preferable one – still stands.

III. Derrida’s argument – the madman is myself

In the light of the rereading of the Cartesian cogito, after having tried to read it following Foucault’s line of interpretation, Derrida notices two aspects: firstly, Descartes does not “circumvent the eventuality of sensory error or of dreams”, but rather he uses the dream as an extreme case, a “radicalization”, as a “hyperbolical exaggeration of

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19 “The Decision, through a single act, links and separates reason and madness, and it must be understood at once both as the original act of an order, a fiat, a decree, and as a schism, a caesura, a separation, a dissection” (2005, 44-45).

the hypothesis according to which the senses could *sometimes* deceive me” (Derrida 2005, 57-58); in other words, what could, for Foucault, appear as a “extravagance”, now can be seen as “admissible within dreams” (2005, 58). Derrida brings into discussion the example of colors and of the body (and not only of them, because extension, quantity, magnitude and number are just as illustrative), meaning the example of simple objects, which compose the other objects, can not be divided anymore and are not reducible to other objects21. In this sense, we might say (or at least Descartes considered so) that, on the one hand, physics, astronomy, medicine and the other similar sciences (nowadays we might call them empirical sciences) are uncertain, because they “have as their end the consideration of composite things.” (Descartes *apud* Derrida 2005, 59)22. On the other hand, arithmetic, geometry and the other similar sciences (today we can call them formal sciences) are certain, because they “only treat of things that are very simple and very general.” (2005, 59)23. The latter category of sciences, Derrida considers, will also be put into doubt, just as madness will, but not using a “natural doubt”. What Descartes will use then is a methodical doubt, “metaphysical, artificial and hyperbolical doubt through the fiction of the evil genius” (2005, 60) – *le Malin Génie*. I consider that the point of this part of Derrida’s itinerary is to show that the insanity24 can be seen *only as an instance* of the sensory error25 and that, furthermore, there are

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22 In Michael Moriarty’s translation: “which involve the study of composite things”.
23 In Michael Moriarty’s translation: “which deal only with the very simplest and most general things”.
24 As the editor of the volume *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, where the text “My body, this paper, this fire” is to be found, points out in one of his footnotes – see Foucault (1998, 417) – on the one hand, the term “insanity” can be excessive, especially when we are referring to the example of the painters. One the other hand, the same editor admits that in French the term “extravagance” has an “overtone of madness absent from most uses of English cognate forms”. However, for clarity, in this article the terms “madness”, “insanity”, and “extravagance” are used as equivalents.
25 “Madness is only a particular case, and, moreover, not the most serious one, of the sensory illusion which interests Descartes at this point.” (Derrida 2005, 60).
other instances – such as the dreams, which are more serious and, in a sense, more global.\(^{26}\)

The second aspect remarked by Derrida „in the light of the rereading of the Cartesian Cogito” is that the hypothesis of extravagance does not seem “to receive any privileged treatment” or “to be submitted to any particular exclusion”, “at this moment of the Cartesian order”, madness being only a “hyperbolical exasperation” (2005, 60-61); according to Derrida, what Descartes does is to prevent the astonishment of a novice, who would be afraid to doubt his own body (or the fire, the paper etc.), and this moment is underlined by Descartes using an *sed forte* – “« but yet perhaps... »” (2005, 54). This is the first of a series of arguments that can be called *pedagogical reasons*. Another important statement, but to which Foucault will answer without difficulty, is made by Derrida in a footnote. According to this note, Descartes’ text speaks about madness only “as the index of a question of principle, that is, of epistemological value”. Descartes “never speaks of madness itself in this text. Madness is not his theme” (2005, 392, n. 15). Even if, Derrida notices, “it will be said, perhaps, that this is the sign of a profound exclusion”, “this silence on madness itself simultaneously signifies the opposite of an exclusion, since it is not a question of madness in this text, if only to exclude it” (2005, 392, n. 15). At the end of his note, Derrida strengthens his standpoint: “It is not in the *Meditations* that Descartes speaks of madness itself” (2005, 392, n. 15). Reformulating and trying to offer a clarification, we can say that Derrida’s point is not that, in the text of the *Meditations*, Descartes does not speak of the problem of madness, but that the madness Descartes is conceiving is not the one Foucault is speaking of.

For Derrida, the madness invoked by Descartes “affected only certain areas of sensory perception, and in a contingent and partial way” (2005, 61). Derrida insists on this point of view – Descartes chooses the dream over madness not because the *Cogito* can not be mad, but because madness does not inspire that much doubt as dreams do. Descartes would operate, as Foucault points out mentioning Derrida’s idea, the

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\(^{26}\) That is to say that dreams could lead to a worse sensory error.
passage from a bad example to a proper one\textsuperscript{27} (Foucault 1998, 399). Thus, “the sleeper, or the dreamer, is madder than the madman. Or, at least, the dreamer [...] is further from true perception than the madman” (Derrida 2005, 61-62). Derrida will insist again, arguing that “it is in the case of sleep, and not in that of insanity, that the absolute totality of ideas of sensory origin becomes suspect” (2005, 62). If it were to put it differently, I believe that we can say that the main argument from this part of Derrida’s reasoning is to show that madness does not delude the knowing subject as much as dreams do\textsuperscript{28}. Moreover, from Derrida’s perspective, as Edward McGushin points out, Descartes, far from excluding madness, places it at the very center of the doubt, as the “defining moment of the cogito” (McGushin 2007, 184), which, I think, is to consider that, as in the case of dreams, madness is an epistemological barrier to be overcome by the Cogito’s meditation.

Derrida will give yet another reason to consider that Descartes would have chosen the dream over madness, but without excluding the latter – madness “is not a useful or happy example pedagogically, because it meets the resistance of the nonphilosopher who does not have the audacity to follow the philosopher when the latter agrees that he might indeed be mad” (Derrida 2005, 62). At this point we encounter a second pedagogical reason: this time, the neophyte, or the nonphilosopher, not only does not have the courage needed to doubt his own immediate perception, his “whole system of actuality”\textsuperscript{29} (and doubting his immediate perception, as Foucault argues, will not be easy even for the philosopher), but he also does not have the audacity to follow and accept the initiative of someone who accepts that he could be mad himself. This is not the case, according to Derrida, of dreams – very probably, a nonphilosopher will accept the hypothesis that he is actually dreaming and thus he will continue the exercise proposed by the Cogito.

\textsuperscript{27} “To pass from madness to dreams is to pass from a « bad » to a « good » instrument of doubt.” (Foucault 1998, 399).

\textsuperscript{28} See Derrida (2005, 62), where it is stated that “it [the insanity] does not cover the totality of the field of sensory perception. The madman is not always wrong about everything; he is not wrong often enough, is never mad enough”.

\textsuperscript{29} See McGushin 2007, 188.
In this sense, Descartes would choose only an “apparent dismissal of the possibility that he might be mad” (McGushin 2007, 184), and all of these for the pedagogical reason presented.

However, Derrida admits that Foucault would be right regarding the problem of madness in Descartes’ text if the latter did not go beyond the level of natural doubt; the situation changes “as soon as we come to the properly philosophical, metaphysical, and critical phase of doubt” (Derrida 2005, 63), stage marked by the hypothesis of the Evil Genius, by the possibility to doubt the mathematical truths, which were escaping natural doubt. Therefore, the meditating subject will not avoid madness, but, on the contrary, “the Cogito escapes madness only because at its own moment […] it is valid even if I am mad, even if my thoughts are completely mad” (2005, 67). I believe that this is to say that even in the case that I am mad, the Cogito will “escape” madness by not actually escaping it, but by overcoming it. In such a case, certainty, the target of Descartes’ itinerary, “need not be sheltered from an imprisoned madness [as Foucault argues], for it is attained and ascertained within madness itself” (2005, 67), the subject does not need to exclude madness, because the latter will be overcome by the very act of thinking. In the end, seemingly following Foucault’s way of exposing his ideas, Derrida also summarizes his view on the Cartesian excerpt in an illustrative motto: “Whether I am mad or not, Cogito, sum.” (2005, 68)

IV. Foucauldian counterarguments

At this point of my essay, I shall try, in order to strengthen my thesis, to present the way Foucault answers Derrida’s observations. To begin with, Foucault accepts Derrida’s idea according to which the

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30 “If we were to remain at the naïve, natural, and premetaphysical stage of Descartes’s itinerary, the stage marked by natural doubt.” (Derrida 2005, 63).
31 “Madness […] will spare nothing, neither bodily nor purely intellectual perceptions”, Derrida emphasizes (2005, 64).
32 “It can no longer literally be said that the Cogito would escape madness.” (Derrida 2005, 67).
dream has some advantages over madness, he accepts that the dream could be a preferable example, but he believes that these advantages are “of a quite different order”: “[dreams] are frequent, they happen often; my memories of them are recent, it is not difficult to have access to these vivid memories which they leave.” (Foucault 1998, 396).

Dreams, having the property of happening often, give birth to a series of possibilities: dreams are a “immediately accessible experience”, and this “experience is not only a theme for meditation: it is really and actually produced in meditation”; I consider that the point of the latter expression is to emphasize that supposing he is asleep does not prevent the Cogito from going further in his meditation, quite the contrary. Once these specifications being presented, Foucault will compare the experience of dreaming to the experience of madness.

According to Foucault, there are four points that mark the distinction between the dream example and the one of madness. The first of these points is regarding “the nature of the meditative exercise” and targets the used vocabulary. Foucault points out that in the paragraph that refers to the madness example it is used a vocabulary of comparison, and in order to strengthen his point of view, Foucault quotes the Latin version of the Cartesian text (“si quod ab iis exemplum ad me transferrem” meaning “if I applied to myself some example coming from them”) while in the dream-paragraph we can find “a vocabulary of memory”:

33 By comparison to Derrida’s view and also to a certain “logical and demonstrative order”; see Foucault, 1998, 395.

34 “By means of this meditative exercise, thinking about dreaming takes effect in the subject himself”, and “in modifying him [the thinking subject], [...] thinking about dreams does not disqualify him as meditating object: even though transformed into a «subject supposedly asleep», the meditating subject can safely pursue the progression of his doubt.” (1998, 398).

35 “In the madness paragraph, [there is] a vocabulary of comparison”: “if I wish to deny that «these hands and this body are mine» [“these hands themselves, and this whole body are mine”, in Michael Moriarty’s version], I must «compare myself to certain deranged people » [“I were to compare myself to one of those madmen”, in Michael Moriarty’s version], [...] but I would be extravagant indeed «if I followed their examples»” (1998, 399).

The dreamer: that which I remember having been; from the depths of my memory rises the dreamer that I was myself, that I will be again. (Foucault 1998, 399)

I consider that the main point of this comparison is to show that, according to Descartes’s text, the Cogito can speak of himself when he approaches the dreams problem, but, when he approaches the madness problem, he can not speak of himself any longer, being forced to adopt a kind of exteriority, a type of a observer-to-object view. In other words, Foucault shows, at this point, by means of a textual analysis of the Cartesian excerpt, that Descartes conceives the madman as an alter, he excludes him, while the dreamer is an instance of the self.

The second point concerns “the themes of the meditative exercise”. These themes, Foucault specifies, “appear in the examples that the meditating subject proposed by himself”. The two examples are, as I mentioned so far, the example of madness and the one of the dream. Among the themes of madness we can count “thinking one is a king when one is poor; imagining one’s body is made of glass or that one is a jug”, and among the dream-related ones we can find themes like “being seated (as I am at this moment); feeling the heat of the fire (as I feel it today); reaching out my hand (as I decide, at this moment, to do)” (1998, 399). From here Foucault will extract an idea similar to the one enunciated at the first point: “Madness is the entirely other”, whereas “dream-imagination pins itself onto present perception at every point” (1998, 399). Madman is an alter, the dreamer is part of the self.

The third point is represented by “the central test of the exercise”, consisting in “the search for difference” between the madness-related state, respectively the dream-state, and the meditation of the Cogito. At this moment, Foucault also addresses the question: “can I seriously wonder whether my body is made of glass, or whether I am naked in my bed?” (1998, 399). Foucault will firstly interrogate himself with respect to the difference between the dream-state and the Cogito’s meditation-related one, concluding that “what I supposed was the

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I think that it is conceivable that the observer can also be, to some extent, the object of his observation, but the idea it is that it is not the case in this example; here the object is different from the observer.
criterion of difference (clarity and distinctness) belong indifferently to both dreams and waking perception; so it cannot make the difference between them” (1998, 400). In the case of the difference between the madness-related state and the one of the meditative Cogito, Foucault will point out that “there is, in fact, no question of trying to take myself to be a madman who takes himself to be a king”, and that “what is different with madness does not have to be tested [as it is the case of dreams], it is established” (1998, 400), which, I believe, simply means that one can not suppose that he is not thinking in the very moment of making a supposition, because making a supposition is a moment of thinking. Anyway, and somehow more generally speaking, Foucault invokes once more the same idea: madness is excluded from the possibilities of the Cogito, while the dream is taken into consideration.

The last point Foucault brings into discussion in order to delimit the dream-example from the madness one refers to “the effect of the [meditative] exercise”. Such an effect is visible “in the decision-sentences, which end both passages” (1998, 400): “But just a moment – these are madmen”\(^{38}\) it is used the third person, plural, *isti*, and a conditional is added (“I should be no less extravagant if I followed their example”\(^{39}\)), while phrases such as “I am quite astonished”\(^{40}\) and “my astonishment [...] is such that I am almost capable of convincing me that I am asleep”\(^{41}\), which are to be found in the dream case, show us that it’s me who “in this uncertainty [of the dreams] [...] I decide to continue my meditation.” (400) The same emphasis is made by Foucault: madness is exterior, dreams are interior to the Cogito.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{38}\) Michael Moriarty’s translation: “But they are lunatics”.

\(^{39}\) Michael Moriarty’s translation: “I should seem no less of a madman myself if I should follow their example in any way”; John Cottingham’s translation is even more illustrative for Foucault’s standpoint: “I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.” (Descartes 1988).

\(^{40}\) Michael Moriarty’s translation: “I am stupefied”.

\(^{41}\) Michael Moriarty’s translation: “this very stupor comes close to persuading me that I am asleep after all”.

\(^{42}\) Another way to emphasize this aspect is to say that here are “two parallel but different exercises: that of the *demens*, and that of the *dormiens*” (1998, 401), which also has the function of referring to two distinct spiritual exercises.
Afterwards, Foucault will introduce a distinction that appears in the original Cartesian text, but which Derrida does not take into account: *demens-amens/insani*[^3]. When Descartes characterizes the madman through the implausible imagination, the term “*insani*” is used, which would rather signify “to take oneself to be what one is not, [...] to be the victim of illusions” and which belongs not only to a current vocabulary, but also to a medical terminology (402); however, when Descartes wants to say that we should not follow the madman’s example, he uses the pair “*demens-amens*”, notions “that are in the first pace juridical, before being medical, which designate a whole category of people incapable of certain religious, civil, and judicial acts” (402). Moreover, “*dementes do not have total possession of their rights when it comes to speaking, promising, pledging, signing, starting a legal action.*” (402) All of these, Foucault wants to show, mean that, in Descartes’ text, “it is in no way a matter of saying « one must be mad or act like madmen », but, « these are madmen and I am not mad »” (402), for I would be compromised, I would lose my right of speaking, if I admitted that I am insane, which leads us, once again, to the Foucauldian definition of madness and, as an implication, to the answer Foucault gives to Derrida’s observation according to which (in a way somehow inconsistent with his other observations), in Descartes’ text, there is not at all a matter of madness, not even a matter of madness as Foucault sees it, madness in itself. Also, if we are aware of these distinctions, we will find the answer Foucault gives to the first of Derrida’s observation, which argued that madness would be a poorly chosen example. Taking into account these distinctions, we are able to notice that madness could not be at all an example.^[4]

Now I will approach what I consider to be Derrida’s most powerful observation, the last and most skilful reproach addressed to Foucault: even if madness could be excluded at the moment of natural

[^3]: Cf. Derrida (2005, 55), where Derrida quotes a Cartesian excerpt that is significant to Foucault using the terms “*amentes*” and “*demens*”, but without referring to “*insani*”.

[^4]: Here we should notice that the fact that madness couldn’t be a proper example does not mean that in Descartes’ text there is not at all a matter of madness; in this text there could be a matter of madness, but only in order to exclude it.
doubt, it will certainly be taken into account at the moment of the
methodical doubt, an “artificial and hyperbolical” one, which means
that, in the Meditations, the possibility of madness is not excluded.
Foucault is aware of this critique and addresses himself a key-question:
“have you demonstrated that madness is well and truly excluded from
the progress of doubt? Does not Descartes refer to it again with reference
to the imagination? Will it not be a question of madness when he
discovers the extravagance of painters, and all the fantastic illusions they
invent?” (1998, 403), which is to ask whether madness is excluded when
it comes to the case of simple objects. One of Foucault’s answers is
based, once more, on a careful exegesis of the Cartesian text, which will
show that the excerpt that refers to color and painters, only to be found
in the French translation, is an addition made by the translator, and
therefore it is wrong to base an interpretation on this fragment, as
Derrida does. However, my opinion is that such an observation can only
show that Derrida did not read this text carefully enough, that he was
not such a skilled interpreter, but his point is still valid, because we can,
at we have already seen, replace the example of the colors with an
example regarding other simple objects (such as extension, quantity,
magnitude, number etc.). I shall then illustrate an alternative answer.
According to Foucault, Descartes’ text consists of two dimensions: a
demonstrative schema and an ascetic one (1998, 406) (or a demonstrative
order and an order of the Askēsis). As previously mentioned, the reason for
which it is not simple even for the philosopher to doubt his immediate
perception is not the demonstrative side of the Cogito’s itinerary, according
to which, once having established that perception deludes us, it should
be easy for us to doubt not only “about things that are little, or rather a
long way away” (Descartes 2008, 13), but also with respect to objects that
are very sensitive and situated in our immediate proximity (as it is the case,
in Descartes’ text, of the winter gown, the piece of paper, the fire, the
hand). The reason for all of these is the ascetic dimension of the Cogito’s
itinerary, the “existential density” of objects that can be found via

45 Or a demonstrative order and an order of the Askēsis, cf. McGushin 2007, 186.
immediate perception, dimension that asks for a habit of applying the method, aspect mentioned by Descartes:

But it is not enough to have realized all this, I must take care to remember it: for my accustomed opinions continually creep back into my mind, and take possession of my belief, which has, so to speak, been enslaved to them by long experience and familiarity, for the most part against my will. (2008, 16)

Due to this dichotomy, the (possible and hypothetical) exercise of madness is not merely an epistemological method, but also a pratique de soi (practice of the self) – I can not simply assume, once and for all, that I am mad\textsuperscript{48}, but I have to, so to speak, assume it several times – and thus one more difference arises: the dreamer would say “I shall take great care not to receive [through my exercise] any falsity into my belief” (McGushin 2007, 190), while “the madman receives all falsities.” (190).

“Madness binds one to a concrete representation which is taken as a reality, but which in fact is not real” (190), whereas the dream binds one to a concrete representation which is taken as false, but which is actually real.

This distinction shows why the hypothesis of madness is excluded: in this context, we will have to face a paradox, a contradiction\textsuperscript{49}: someone can not try to convince himself that he is mad, because this would mean he is not actually mad. “To assume that one is mad and therefore should doubt is to assume that one is not mad, it is to act as if one is not mad, but rather as if one is in control of one’s own thoughts” (2007, 190), as Edward McGushin also underlines, discussing Foucault’s answer. Therefore, not even in the moment of the methodical

\textsuperscript{47} I will also quote John Cottingham’s translation, in order for the reader to have a broader view on this ascetic dimension: “It is not enough merely to have noticed this; I must make an effort to remember it. My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom” (Descartes 1988).

\textsuperscript{48} Or rather that I am dreaming (the dreaming exercise), because, as we are going to see, we can assume that we are mad only at a discursive level, cf. McGushin (2007, 190).

\textsuperscript{49} See McGushin (2007, 190).
doubt, even if we are allowed to doubt mathematical truths, can we say that we are mad.

V. Conclusions

In conclusion, because of all these “discursive differences”50, all these differences between the dream-example and the madness-example which I have been trying to point out, alongside a definition of insanity that matches better the Cartesian text, the Foucauldian interpretation of the problem discussed in this excerpt of Descartes’ Meditations is at least preferable – if not the correct one – to the one given by Jacques Derrida; although the latter has a series of observation that seem more powerful in the more general context of the History of madness – but this is another itinerary. Having reached this conclusion, we may also say that a more general problem that arises from the Derrida-Foucault controversy has also been pointed out: insanity – or a broader correlative51, such as a too limited intelligence or a not enough developed memory – could be the cause of an error in the act of knowing. This insanity – or any other of its correlatives – is insurmountable; a spiritual exercise or an applied method can not compensate for its presence.

REFERENCES


50 See Foucault 1998, 405.
51 At this point I am discussing the problem at a by far more general level, without any specific reference to the two consulted authors.
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