

A Study of Derridian Reading of Descartes' Meditation

Joseph Penlong Nietlong

and

Gideo Kato

Abstract

This study is an examination of the Derridian reading of Descartes's Meditations, which is already itself an answer to, and in conversation with Foucault's reading of the same text. The thrust of this paper will consider the relation of Descartes's argument of doubt to fiction in the Discourse on the Method, and the redefinition of their relation in the hyperbolic doubt argument in the Meditations. This study will demonstrate how questions of doubt are resolved through the strategic use of fiction. The contention is that fiction, defined either in terms of feint in the Discourse, or explicitly figured through the persona of the evil genius in the Meditations, constitutes the ground of the debate both in the Cartesian text and the Foucault-Derrida debate.

Keywords: Meditation, Reason, Cogito, Doubt, Dreams

Introduction

Any discourse of Derrida's critique of Descartes in 'Cogito and the History of Madness,' is inseparable from the context of its debate, the argument between Derrida and Foucault. A critique of Descartes provides the groundwork for the elaboration of the debate between structuralism and post structuralism as posited by Foucault and Derrida, is by no means accidental. The issue is not only the question of interpretation of the Cartesian text. Rather, the Cartesian text functions for both as the central site of articulation of a moment that qualifies the essential shape of modernity, a turning-point towards metaphysics and the emergence of history. If, for Foucault, Descartes's exclusion of madness is instrumental in the foundation of reason, for Derrida, madness and dreams are

merely stages for the introduction of hyperbolic doubt, which through its figurative¹ function generates an excess that comes to define subjectivity in terms of a rational economy. Whereas for Foucault subjectivity is the production of an excess whose totality engenders the reflexive play of reason and its liminal definition as economy.

The interpretation of Cartesian text presents a different scenario of the foundation of Cartesian subjectivity and its legacy to modernity. For Foucault, the origin of reason is grounded in the historical exclusion of madness, for Derrida on the contrary, reason is constructed through the totalizing gesture of hyperbolic doubt, whose inclusive character extends the boundaries of reason and redefines its character as a rational economy. The similarity in both is the centrality of reason as an originary point whose strategic role determines concepts both of economy and of history, concepts that since Saussure have been seminal to the structuralist debate and the elaboration of a post-structuralist critique. Through a reading of Derrida's interpretation of the Cartesian text and his debate with Foucault, this study hopes to provide a new understanding of the questions posed by the Cartesian text, as well as to determine the legacy of its heritage to structuralism and to its post-structuralist critique.

This paper will attempt an analysis of the seminal terms of the argument of doubt in the *Meditations*, those of madness, dreams, hyperbolic doubt, and the fiction of the evil genius will be examined not merely as stages that document the passage from doubt to total doubt, but also as literary and rhetorical topics. By focusing on the rhetorical and figurative structure of this assemblage of terms, this study will address one of the major

¹. This can be seen in Jacques Derrida's critique of Foucault in 'Cogito and the History of Madness,' and in his allusions to Foucault in his later essay 'Sign, Structure and Play in the Human Sciences,' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976).

paradoxes of Cartesian philosophy as a discourse that attains certitude through the use of fiction, in order to posit truth as doubt in different contexts and by means of specific literary devices, this analysis will demonstrate the extent to which the very meaning of the Cartesian philosophical arguments is determined by literary and rhetorical practices.

First Meditation

The passages in the First Meditation, occupied such a heated debate between Derrida and Foucault.² The context of the passage is the leading topos of the Cartesian text, that of the effort to destroy all his previous beliefs in the effort to start all over again on an indisputable foundation, that is, certitude.³ However, this effort to make a tabula rasa of all his former opinions does not entail for Descartes the same problems that he has already dealt with in the Discourse. He no longer needs to reject as absolutely false everything in which he finds (imaginer) the least doubt. Rather, it now suffices to examine the principles, that is the founding premises that will bring about the ruin of the total edifice. The question of authority and legitimization that haunts the Discourse Part 2, involving Descartes's right to reform the edifice of philosophy by questioning the foundations of knowledge and his relation to the philosophical tradition, has now been displaced by Descartes's personal inquiry into the structure of his own beliefs.

If the Meditations no longer demand a provisional moral, that is, the question of legitimization and reform that haunts the Discourse has shifted from an external to an internal examination. The speaking subject of the Meditations will now authorize and define his own legitimacy as the founder of a philosophy that seeks absolute certitude, and hence must define itself as capable of

² Rene Descartes. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elisabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969), vol. 1.

³ *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Pg.101

attaining it and maintaining it. The First Meditation opens by considering the problem of doubt engendered by the senses, since they have proven sometimes to be deceptive:

All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain, I have learned either from the senses or through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived.⁴

The deception of the senses sometimes leads Descartes to a total denial of them, so that their evidence will henceforth be deemed absolutely false. However, as Descartes subsequently admits, the deception engendered by the senses is not as radical as the deception's interior to the mind as experienced passively either in sleep or in madness. Descartes goes on to explore the far more radical doubt that now involves questions regarding the interiority of the mind, as opposed to the exterior, sensorial and bodily doubt experienced in relation to the world.

The problem is not that we are deceived by the senses, but that we are deceived and not even know of it, as in the case of dreams and madness:

But it may be that although the senses sometimes deceive us concerning things which are hardly perceptible, or very far away, there are yet many others to be met with as to which we cannot reasonably have any doubt, although we recognise them by their means. For example, there is the fact that I am here seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown, having this paper in my hands and other similar matters. And how could I deny that these hands and this body are mine, were it not perhaps that I compare myself to certain

⁴ *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Pg. 145.

persons devoid of sense, whose cerebella are so troubled and clouded by the violent vapours of black bile, that they constantly assure us that they think that they are kings when they are really quite poor, or that they are clothed in purple when they are really without covering, or who imagine that they have an earthenware head or are nothing but pumpkins or are made of glass. But they are mad and I should not be any less insane were I to follow examples so extravagant.⁵

Foucault analyzes this passage in order to claim a fundamental imbalance in what he calls the 'economy of doubt' between madness and dreams and error. He claims that 'dreams or illusions are surmounted within the structure of truth; but madness is inadmissible for the doubting subject'⁶ Derrida responds to Foucault's claims about the exclusion of madness by pointing out that in doing so Foucault goes against the philosophical tradition of interpreting madness in the context of the argument of doubt in general. For him, Foucault is the first to have isolated madness from sensation and dreams, in order to explore its methodological function independently. For Foucault, however, the exclusion of madness is constitutive of 'the advent of a ratio,' whose purpose is to inter madness and silence its speech. This new way of defining thought is decisive for Foucault, in so far as its normative character, established at the expense of madness, outlines the very possibility of history, as a 'meaningful language that is transmitted and consummated in time'.⁷ Thus for Foucault, the necessity of madness defines the possibility of history -its 'historicity,' a question to which we shall return when we consider the relation

^{5.} *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Pg. 145.

^{6.} Michel Foucault. *Folie et déraison: L'Histoire de la folie à l'age classique* (Paris, Gallimard, 1966) Pg. 75.

^{7.} Michel Foucault. *Folie et déraison: L'Histoire de la folie à l'age classique* Pg. 34.

between concepts of economy and history.

Derrida observes, and as I shall demonstrate through the reading of the passage above, Descartes is not concerned here with determining the notion of insanity, but rather to ask questions regarding the general truth of ideas.⁸ As Derrida notes echoing Guérault: 'It is in the case of sleep, and not in that of insanity, that the absolute totality of ideas of sensory origin becomes suspect'.⁹ Derrida's claim relies not on the particular terms in which doubt is presented but on considering its function that is its economic and totalizing character. He understands madness to be merely one term, in a constellation of terms that include dreams and error, necessary to interrogate the totality of ideas of sensory origin. Descartes's reference to madness is thus framed by the larger question regarding the danger of deception that the subject experiences in dreams.

To better understand the purely rhetorical exclusion of madness in the inaugural passage of Descartes's First Meditation, the reader must also consider Descartes's recourse to fiction rather than madness in his initial presentation of the cogito argument in the Discourse. His effort to feign that all things are no truer than the reality of dreams, that is, that everything is false, leads to the necessary conclusion that he who thinks of these things must be something, in other words that he exists. Without even mentioning madness in the Discourse, Descartes goes on to make claims that are so extravagant as to even make madness appear reasonable. He goes on to feign that he has no body, that there is no world nor a place that he occupies, only to conclude that for all that he cannot feign that he does not exist and thereby establish the truth of the cogito as 'I think, therefore I am'.¹⁰ Thus the truth of the cogito's

^{8.} Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Allan Bass. Chicago university press, 1978, Pg. 51.

^{9.} Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, Pg. 51.

^{10.} *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Pg. 101.

existence is here established through the exercise of an impossible fiction, through a rhetoric of negation whose truth is based on the totalizing character of fiction and whose evidence relies on the power of representation to perform even its own negation, as if the credibility of subjectivity did not require the substrate of language, even when attempting not to speak. As Descartes himself later admits in the Second Meditation, 'I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it'¹¹, indicating an implicit recognition of the instrumentality of language.

It becomes clear going back to our analysis of the status of madness in the Cartesian text, that Descartes does not need to feign madness in order to 'dispossess' himself of his body, as Foucault claims, but can be through his feint in the Discourse more mad than madness itself, since he can represent himself as not having a body, there not being a world, and so forth. Foucault needs the hypothesis of madness in order to envisage the possibility of history itself.¹²

For Derrida, on the contrary, the contradictions that mark the emergence of Cartesian reason are the historical expressions of determinations prefigured within reason: 'It can be proposed that the classical crisis developed from and within the elementary tradition of a logos that has no opposite but carries within itself and says all determined contradictions'¹³. Derrida's concept of reason is not a virtual category that can exclude from itself madness as its other, rather for him reason carries within itself, within its language and multiple meanings, determinations that speak otherwise, that double and endlessly divide its unity, so that its speech can also say its own contradictions. Descartes's supposed

^{11.} *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Pg. 150.

^{12.} Michel Foucault. *Folie et déraison: L'Histoire de la folie à l'age Classique*, Pg. 34.

^{13.} Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, Pg. 42.

'act of force,' his internment of madness, in Foucault's words, would thus have to be reread simply the reconfiguring of reason in relation to the very terms in which it was constituted, those of the baroque tradition that precedes it. It is within the language of the baroque, obsessed with deception and 'trompe-l'oeil', that the maddening character of madness can be perceived as already speaking its history, its destiny of unreason.¹⁴ Once it is understood that madness is not a representative term, but merely one term in a constellation of terms that include dreams, as well as fiction and 'trompe-l'oeil', we can begin to understand the strategy of the Cartesian text, its necessary passage and trajectory from madness to dreams and to hyperbolic doubt.

Dreams in the Hyperbolic Doubt

This study will now focus on the context in which it is articulated in the Meditations, that of dreams and hyperbolic doubt. In the First Meditation, Descartes' subsequent analysis of dreams becomes the medium for Descartes' passage from natural to hyperbolic doubt. Descartes pursues his inquiry by noting that the problem of deception is even more pronounced in the case of dreams than in the previous instance when he chose to doubt the reality of all things. He observes that 'there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep.'¹⁵ The impossibility to make a distinction between these two states leads Descartes to the assumption that he may in fact be asleep: 'Let us assume that we are asleep...Derrida interprets the hypothesis of dreams as the hyperbolic exaggeration of the initial hypothesis that the senses may be sometimes deceptive: 'In dreams, the totality of sensory images are illusory'.¹⁶ This interpretation of the Cartesian strategy can be seen as an answer to Foucault's claim that dreams as opposed to madness are surmounted within the structure of the argument of doubt. The dream argument can thus

^{14.} Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, Pg. 44.

^{15.} *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Pg. 146.

^{16.} Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, Pg. 48.

be considered as the expansion of the rhetorical appeal to madness. But as Descartes observes, the dream as a representation may be fictitious but its substrate, in this case color by analogy with painting, is certain or real, that is to say intelligible.

This leads Descartes to conclude that two and three always form five whether he is awake or asleep.¹⁷ The preservation of intelligibility, which is neither sensory nor imaginative within dreams, functions as the bridge, as the ground that mediates the transition from natural doubt to hyperbolic doubt. Without the establishment of this index of intelligibility or mark of certitude within dreams, Descartes would be unable to pursue his inquiry. However, it is important to note that this moment of certitude refers to representation and defines the character of mathematical ideas, rather than settling the actual question of their possible existence, and more importantly, any certitude that the subject may reach about itself and its own agency. Although the dream as a composite fictional representation may preserve within itself the identity of other languages such as mathematics 'which only treat of things that are very simple and general,' this certitude arrived at through analysis in no way demonstrates their actual existence. Having identified even within the language of dreams a principle of intelligibility, Descartes is left to prove that this modality is operative within the modality of existence.

This bridge of intelligibility which Descartes situates within representation leads him to the search for the subject as its ultimate referent and existential support. Descartes now shifts to the third stage of the argument, that of hyperbolic doubt which involves the fiction of the evil genius:

Nevertheless, I have long had fixed in my mind the belief that an all-powerful God existed by whom I have been created such as I am. But how

¹⁷. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Pg.147.

do I know that He has not brought it to pass that there is no earth, no heaven, no extended body, no magnitude, no place, and that nevertheless I possess the perceptions of all these things and that they seem to me to exist just exactly as I now see them? And besides, as I sometimes imagine that others deceive themselves in the things they think they know best, how do I know that I am not deceived every time that I add two and three, or count the sides of a square or judge of things yet simpler, if simpler can be imagined?¹⁸

The certitude of mathematical truth can be maintained within the framework of natural doubt, but not within the of a total doubt in which the subject must question not only its own relation to representation but the theological principles that underlie it. Since Descartes's own authority cannot be found within the interiority of reason, he must do so by an appeal to a higher authority, that is to say, God as its ultimate author. Descartes is forced to conclude that although it is contrary to God's goodness that he constantly deceives himself, yet it is indubitable that he does 'permit me to be sometimes deceived'¹⁹ It is the indubitability of this occasional deception that leads Descartes to produce the fable of the 'double' of God - the evil genius whose role is to constantly and consistently deceive him. This fictitious being will now enact for Descartes from the outside the conditions that will allow him to prove the indubitability of his own existence.

Unlike in the Discourse where Descartes produced himself through the fiction of the conditions of his own existence that included the pretense of not having a body and there being no world, in the Meditations Descartes defines himself as the object of a fictive agency whose total deception will certify the validity of his

^{18.} *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Pg.147.

^{19.} *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Pg.147.

existence. Derrida summarizes the Cartesian stratagem in the following terms:

Now, the recourse to the fiction of the evil genius will evoke, Conjure up the possibility of total madness, a total derangement over which I could have no control because it is inflicted upon me - hypothetically-leaving me no responsibility for it. Total derangement is the possibility of a madness that is no longer a disorder of the body. ... This time madness, insanity, will spare nothing, neither bodily nor purely intellectual perceptions.²⁰

The suggestion that the fiction of the evil genius evokes the possibility of 'total madness' is intended as an answer to his debate with Foucault. But as I have already shown in relation to the Discourse, Descartes does not need madness in order to make the rhetorical claims that Foucault associates with madness.⁹ The fiction of the evil genius is no longer within the purview of madness, rather its totality is based on the figurative power of hyperbole, that is to say, the rhetorical appeal to fiction.

Thus, the creation of subjectivity in the Cartesian text is mediated by a special representation, that of the evil genius—a representation of fiction par excellence. Its totality is not in the order of derangement or madness, but rather in the hyperbolic leap of reason that creates itself through a self-reflective dialogue, the mirrored fiction of itself as another. Its truth belongs to the same order of intelligibility as mathematics: it is self-positing and self-defined. The figurative reach of the hyperbole becomes the basis of a contract that the subject enacts with the evil genius, its fictive counterpart, through the medium of rhetoric in order to posit its own existence as an originary point before all its determinations as particular modes of existence. The totalizing power of the hyperbole as a rhetorical gesture thus arches both beyond and

²⁰ Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, Pg.53

before subjectivity and becomes the index of its purely rhetorical existence. The hyperbolic audacity of this new subject embraces in its economy - its dialogue between infinity and finitude- the constellation of reason, dream, and madness as its determined forms. Descartes arrives through hyperbolic doubt at defining his existence as that Archimedean point, the lever with which one could aspire to move the entire world.

Through hyperbolic doubt Descartes arrives at a new definition of the cogito as a paradoxical point that exceeds determination and also precedes it. Produced through the economy of hyperbolic doubt, it also emerges as the point that defines its determined forms, that is to say, its 'history.' Derrida summarizes the philosophical function of these zero points, while mistakenly, as this analysis shows, equating it with the cogito:

Invulnerable to all determined opposition between reason and unreason, it is the point starting from which the history of the determined forms of this opposition, this opened or broken-off dialogue, can appear as such and be stated. It is the impenetrable point of certainty in which the possibility of Foucault's narration, as well as of the narration of the totality, or rather of all determined forms of the exchanges between reason and madness are embedded. It is the point at which the project of thinking this totality by escaping it is embedded.²¹

By insisting on the fact that hyperbolic doubt constitutes a point in excess of determination, as something that both precedes and exceeds its totality, Derrida begins to articulate via his reading of the Cartesian text his critique of Foucault and structuralism in

^{21.} For Derrida's critique of humanism, which elaborates Heidegger's critique, see 'The Ends of Man,' in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982), Pg. 109-36.

general. The hyperbole represents an excess beyond totality, which is possible 'only in the direction of infinity and nothingness' which for Derrida means an excess in the 'direction of the nondetermined'²². Thus the effort to reduce the hyperbolic project to a determined historical totality, as Foucault attempts to do in his *History of Madness*, risks to embed it as a term that defines economic exchange within its structure, while itself escaping economy, permutation, and transformation. The Foucauldian reading thus becomes an accomplice of the Cartesian text, since it attempts 'to conceive of structure on the basis of a full presence which is beyond play'²³. The Cartesian gesture is thus mirrored in the dilemma that haunts structuralism in general. As Derrida notes in his essay 'Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences':

Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within the structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The center is not the center.²⁴

The production of subjectivity in the Cartesian text, as a center established through the decentralizing reach of the hyperbole, positions it both within the structure and outside it, since the evil genius is also the double of subjectivity, the representation of its fictive powers. This explains why subjectivity cannot be located and identified in the *Meditations* as *cogito* other than as a determination of pure existence in the context of the sum argument as 'I am, I exist.' This lack of specificity of the subject defined as pure existence leads Descartes to wonder whether he

²². Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, Pg.56, 57.

²³. Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, Pg. 257.

²⁴. Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, Pg. 220.

might mistakenly 'take some other object in place of myself.'²⁵ This confusion regarding the identity of subjectivity reflects its paradoxical centrality, both within and outside the structure of thought, at once present and absent.²⁶ If the cogito is no longer present in the Meditations, this absence can only be explained by the redefinition of its position, no longer as subject of thought but rather as the point whose centrality exceeds its historical determination as thought.

We can understand why for Derrida everything can be reduced to a notion of historical totality, except hyperbolic doubt. The hyperbole is the rhetorical figure that makes possible the movement of supplementarity, constituting an excess in the order of the discourse of philosophy that is based on the uneconomic expenditure of representation: its metaphorical and rhetorical properties. Although hyperbolic doubt will establish in the Meditations the moment in the history of philosophy, which is identified with the emergence of modern 'meta-physics,' its own status cannot be defined solely within this history. Its 'historicity' is constituted otherwise, by a differential movement of philosophy and literature, that is to say, philosophy's use of the ruses of literature, feint, and the fiction of the evil genius through which Cartesian discourse founds its veracity as a metaphysical discourse.

Conclusion

As shown earlier, the Cartesian economy of reason can only be established by virtue of fiction, whose free play is engendered by its uneconomic character. The hyperbole in the Cartesian text, itself a supplemental device, is in fact the vehicle for the attempt to

^{25.} *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Pg. 150.

^{26.} For a historical analysis of the paradoxical centrality of God in Pascal, and man's place, see Lucien Goldmann's elaboration of *deus absconditus* in *Le Dieu caché: étude sur la vision tragique dans les pensées de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine* (Paris, Gallimard, 1959), Pg. 32-49,71-94.

foreclose and economize thought, thus gambling that the creation of its fictive limit will arrest the figurative play of language in general. The totalizing character of hyperbolic doubt thus emerges as the index of a metaphysical crisis that is but the expression of its effort to speak and economize its own finitude and thus secure philosophy as a whole. Descartes's use of hyperbolic doubt fosters the illusion that one could almost step out of philosophy, in order to provide its definition from a fictitious exteriority. The fiction of madness and of hyperbolic doubt foster the Cartesian illusion of a philosophical system that can define itself autonomously. Unable to account for the act of representation that is the mediating character of fiction and rhetoric, Descartes encloses philosophy in the closure and economy of its impossible determination as philosophy proper.

This Cartesian gesture is implicit, as Derrida suggests in his discussion of Foucault and his critique of structuralism as a whole, in all those who attempt to step out of philosophy and find themselves paradoxically secured within it, even at the moment when they seem furthest, that is 'hyperbolically' distant from it. Derrida holds: The step 'outside philosophy' is much more difficult to conceive than is generally imagined by those who think they made it long ago with cavalier ease, and who in general are swallowed up in metaphysics in the entire body of discourse they claim to have disengaged from it.²⁷ Philosophy does not pretend to distance itself from literature but rather celebrates them both when necessary.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. Pg. 284.